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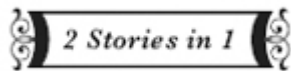
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LUCY MONROE started reading at age four. She loves to create strong alpha males and independent women. When she's not immersed in a romance novel—whether reading or writing it—she enjoys travel with her family, having tea with the neighbors, gardening and visits from her numerous nieces and nephews.

TRISH MOREY The moment Trish spied an article saying that Harlequin® was actively seeking new authors, it was one of those eureka moments—Trish was going to be one of those authors! Eleven years after reading that fateful article the magical phone call came and Trish finally realized her dream. Trish now lives with her husband and four young daughters in a special part of South Australia.



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The Greek Tycoon's Inherited Bride

Lucy Monroe

PROLOGUE

SPIROSPETRONIDES felt like he was drowning. His grandfather and Dimitri were speaking, but the words were muffled as his emotions fought with his integrity.

The last few weeks had been hard, but tonight was worse.

Tonight hope died.

He'd wanted to meet with Dimitri tonight. Spiros had intended to admit what he'd done with Phoebe on his last visit to the States. To ask his older brother's forgiveness. To ask Dimitri if he was sure he wanted to marry a woman he had seen only a handful of times since agreeing to join their lives permanently at some future date.

Apparently, that future date was now .

Theopolis Petronides had just made it clear that he would not be having a very necessary heart operation unless Dimitri agreed to finally tie the knot with Phoebe. Their grandfather wanted to dandle great-grandchildren on his knee before he died. That death would come sooner rather than later without the operation.

“But what if Phoebe doesn’t want to marry Dimitri?” Spiros asked.

His grandfather looked at him with disdain. “She is a good woman. A Greek woman, despite her American education. She made a promise. She will keep it. Just as my grandson here will keep his, heh?”

This time his look was fixed on Dimitri, and though it was not filled with disdain, it clearly expressed what he expected his grandson to say.

Spiros had spent weeks fighting his desire for Phoebe—until he finally couldn’t fight it any longer. He’d been so ashamed of his betrayal of Dimitri, and even their grandfather’s belief in him, that he’d tried to forget what he’d done. It had not worked. He’d been able to think of little else until he knew he had to do something about it.

He’d waited too long, though. His decision to come clean to Dimitri and ask his brother to bow out of his commitment to Phoebe was going straight to hell in a hand-basket. And his grandfather was sending it there.

“But what if she doesn’t want to keep it?”

His grandfather opened his mouth to speak, but Dimitri put his hand up. “Enough.” He smiled at Spiros. “I appreciate your desire to protect me, Spiros, but it is not necessary. I have every intention of marrying Phoebe, as planned. And if this stubborn old goat wants to force the wedding date, then so be it.”

“I may be an old goat, but at least I’m a smart one. You’ve waited long enough to get married, Dimitri.”

“I have.” Dimitri looked absolutely determined.

But Spiros had to ask. “Do you want to marry Phoebe?”

“Yes. Grandfather is right. She will make a very good wife.”

No mention of emotion—but then Spiros hadn’t expected there to be. He and Dimitri had learned the destructive side of so-called love too well and too early to dismiss that knowledge now.

As much as he might physically desire Phoebe, part of him was relieved Dimitri was so set on following through on his betrothal promise. Spiros never wanted to be as weak as his father, and he damn well was not going to be as deceptive as his mother. All in the name of love.

A tiny voice in the back of his mind warned him that with Phoebe he was at risk of doing both. But he was stronger than that. He had to be. Both for his own sake and that of his relationship with Dimitri.

Phoebe and he were friends, and that was all they could ever be.

He was ashamed of his weakness the last time he’d seen her alone, but that weakness would not be repeated.

Not ever.

## CHAPTER ONE

EXCITEMENTlacing every movement of her limbs, Phoebe walked into the reception area for her father's office. It was a new day for the Leonides clan. She could not wait to hear what her father had to say.

His secretary, a severe-looking woman in her fifties, who Phoebe knew from experience had a surprisingly soft heart, looked up. "Good afternoon, Miss Leonides. Your father is in a teleconference, but it should be ending any moment. Would you like to have a seat while you wait?"

"Yes, thank you." Phoebe sat in a chair facing the window of the Athens high-rise and looked out at the familiar view.

Thrilled that her father had called her into the office to meet with him, she practically vibrated with anticipation. She was the first woman in her family to attend university overseas, and one of the few to attend university at all. Her father had been surprisingly supportive, not only of her request to go to university in America but of her desire to major in Business. She was almost positive he had set up this meeting to offer her a job at Leonides Enterprises. Why else would he request their discussion happen here, at the headquarters of the company?

It was a new era for the women in her family and Phoebe was beyond happy to be a part of it. Now if she could just convince Papa to dissolve the archaic agreement he and Theopolis Petronides had made when Phoebe was barely eighteen, she'd be ecstatic.

There was no way she could marry Dimitri Petronides. She barely knew him, despite how close their families were. It wasn't like with his younger brother, Spiros. The gap in age between him and Phoebe had never stood in the way of their friendship, but the additional three years between her and Dimitri was an insurmountable distance. At least it felt like it.

Dimitri was a total ice man. There was no way she could wed someone she couldn't imagine kissing.

She felt nothing for the older Petronides—unlike her feelings for his younger brother. She could not only imagine kissing Spiros, but doing a whole lot more. Of course it wasn't all imagination, was it?

She was sure Dimitri would be just as happy to dismiss the arrangements made by their elders as she would. After all, it wasn't he who had come to see Phoebe during the four years she had attended university in the States. Not once.

It had been Spiros.

Her friend and...after the last visit...more. Inner warmth and a series of tingles throughout her body suffused her as she remembered that visit. She had learned beyond the shadow of a doubt that the attraction she had felt for him for so long—the attraction she had always believed to be hopeless—was returned.

She had not seen him since her return to Greece, but that was because his honor would not allow him to do so. Not with that ridiculous agreement in place—an agreement she was set on dissolving.

Regardless of how close the two families were, marriage between her and Dimitri was not the way to cement that connection. Frankly, it should never have been considered. A multigenerational friendship was not a compelling enough reason for two people with so little in common to join their lives. That kind of thinking had gone out with the Industrial Revolution, or at least it should have.

She suspected the agreement had less to do with the creation of a family legacy than with two men still grieving the losses of their dearest friends. Her father and Dimitri's grandfather had been looking for a way to compensate for those losses.

Theopolis Petronides had been best friends with her grandfather. Their sons had continued that tradition. Aristotle Leonides and Timothy Petronides had been as close as any brothers. A generation later, she and Spiros had drawn just as close.

When his parents had died, the story was that Spiros had refused comfort from everybody. However, he would spend hours playing with the year-old baby girl who adored him even more than her own parents.

Phoebe.

He had returned the favor of being the only solace she could accept when her beloved grandfather had died eight years later. By then Spiros had been a young teen, who was much too cool to hang out with a little girl still in pigtails, but that hadn't stopped him. She thought she'd probably fallen in love with him then. Though at the time everyone had said she had a bad case of hero-worship.

Her feelings for him had grown as she'd got older, and deepened into something much more intimate along with her burgeoning womanhood.

By the time she'd reached eighteen she'd been riding the rollercoaster of unrequited romantic love for more than three years. Spiros had been a good friend to her, but that was all, and watching him with his girlfriends had grown more painful than she could bear. It was a story as old as time, but she'd known that for her there would be no miraculous happy ending.

As far as her childhood hero was concerned, Phoebe might have been his sister. In fact, when she'd asked her father why he and Tio Theo wanted her and Dimitri to wed, rather than her and Spiros, he had said Spiros was too much like her brother. It would almost be incestuous. Her secret fantasies disagreed, but she couldn't argue the fact that Dimitri was the oldest—and the better prospect because of it.

Her elders' attitudes, along with the evidence of her own eyes, had made Phoebe realize once and for all that her love for Spiros was hopeless. Spiros was very popular with women—gorgeous, sophisticated, experienced women. Women Phoebe, an often shy, totally innocent teen, had had no hope of competing with.

Phoebe's agreement to the suggested merging of their two families by an eventual marriage between herself and Dimitri had been an admittedly foolish attempt to do one of two things. Either get over her fixation on Spiros, or catch his attention and make him see that she was indeed a woman. If she was old enough to become promised to his older brother, she was old enough to be of interest to him.

Predictably, neither outcome had come to pass. Though it could not be denied that Spiros did see that she was a woman now, the agreement was in the way, not a catalyst.

The first time he'd come to see her at university she'd been feeling extremely homesick. It must have

shown in the e-mails they'd been exchanging, because he'd showed up at her dorm two days after her latest e-mail, devastating smile in place.

He'd taken her to dinner and kept her up late talking. When she'd asked him what he was doing in the country, he'd said he had business interests he was seeing to. He'd made similar excuses to come by and see her at least twice a year. In between times they'd e-mailed one another almost daily, and he had called her at least once a month.

He'd often made the joke that he was looking after Dimitri's interests—while she had fruitlessly wished the interests were those of Spiros himself.

She'd seen him whenever she was home from university for holidays as well. In fact, she saw him way more than she ever saw Dimitri. The older man couldn't be bothered to spend time with her. He'd made no effort to get to know her better, and was rarely in Greece when she was. It wasn't possible that he really wanted to marry her, and she didn't understand why he had agreed to the future nuptial plans either.

For goodness' sake, there were even rumors he had a girlfriend in Paris. Everyone thought she was too naive to know about it, but she wasn't. And the very fact it didn't bother her was all the indication she needed that she had no feelings for Dimitri in that regard. It about killed her every time she saw a gossip rag story about Spiros and his latest flame, though.

There hadn't been any stories of that nature since his last trip to visit her in America, which gave her hope. Lots and lots of hope.

The view of Athens's business district in front of her faded as her mind went back to that eventful night...

Phoebe sat with one leg curled under her and the other dangling over the kitchen chair. Studying for finals wasso not her favorite thing to do. Even worse when she had a bad case of spring fever. Spiros had made noises about maybe coming to see her before graduation in his last e-mail. She'd been unable to settle since.

Both families would be coming for the graduation ceremony itself. Well, everyone but the man she was supposed to marry. Dimitri had too many business commitments to attend her university graduation and, frankly, Phoebe didn't mind at all.

How could she have been dumb enough to agree to that whole marriage thing in the first place? Dimitri might only be three years older than Spiros, but as far as she was concerned he was completely out of her stratosphere. She flipped to the next page of her notes, guiltily aware that she hadn't soaked in a single word from the one before it.

She had to get her focus off a possible visit from Spiros and back onto her studies. Going to university was a big deal in itself—her mother hadn't gone, after all. But coming to the States and studying here had been a true concession on her parents' part, and she was determined to do them proud. As it stood, she was slated to *graduatemagna cum laude*, and she wasn't about to mess that up by flunking her finals.

Biting on her lip to redirect her thoughts firmly to what was in front of her, she was soon immersed in world economic theory.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been studying when the sound of someone pounding on the door of her small student apartment broke through her concentration. Phoebe stood up and promptly fell right back down. The leg she'd been sitting on had fallen asleep. Needles of discomfort shot up from her painfully tingling foot to her thigh. She gasped, but, holding onto the table for support, forced herself to stand again. The knocking resumed. This time an impatient tattoo that rattled the old door.

"Just a second," she called as she limped across the room.

She flung it open and found Spiros on the other side. All six feet four inches of masculine gorgeousness of him. His dark hair, usually slicked back in a conservative style for business, lay in tousled curls around his face. Unlike her dark brown eyes, his had golden lights that sent butterflies dancing through her insides. His business suits had never been able to hide the muscular definition of his body, but in his current jeans and silk T-shirt he made her mouth water.

"Spiros," she squeaked in shock. She'd been trying so hard not to think about him that his arrival had taken her completely by surprise.

His signature smile was missing, replaced with a severe frown. "What were you doing?" he demanded.

"Studying. What do you think? I told you I had finals."

"You looked startled by my presence."

"I was."

"You did not look through the peephole to see who it was before you opened the door. Who were you expecting, to fling it wide with such abandon?"

What in the world...? "I forgot to check who it was. I'm not expecting anyone else."

"But you should have been expecting me. I told you I would come."

"You implied it, you didn't say when. Sheesh, Spiros, get over yourself." She turned and limped back toward the table.

Strong arms lifted her from the floor after she'd only taken a few steps.

She screeched. "Spiros! What are you doing?"

"What is the matter? Why are you limping? Have you hurt yourself?" The questions came out with the speed of automatic rifle-fire.

She had no hope of answering them.

"Well?" he prompted, looking down at her with concern in that golden-brown gaze.

"Can I get a word in edgewise?" she teased.

He snapped his mouth shut with a look of chagrin.

She patted his chest. "My leg fell asleep. Nothing serious."

"Are you sure? It is not normal for a limb to simply fall asleep."

"Man, I never knew you were such a worrier." She found herself grinning. His concern felt good. So did her hand, which she had left resting on his sculpted pec. "It's perfectly normal when you've been sitting on said limb for—" she looked over at the clock on her wall "—um...for more than two hours without moving."

"This is not good. You should not get so involved with your studies that you are not watching out for your health."

She almost laughed, considering how hard she'd found it to concentrate at first. But, since that lack of ability had been directly related to him, she had no intention of telling him about it. "A sleepy leg is not exactly on a par with the plague, Spiros."

"Nevertheless, it is obviously time for you to take a break."

"Sounds good. You going to take me out to dinner?" she asked with a grin.

He was back to looking positively forbidding. "You have not eaten yet?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. I've never quite gotten the hang of eating on American hours. I still prefer my last meal of the day to be closer to eight."

"It is almost nine."

"Have you eaten?" she asked, disappointed in advance. Since he was making such a big deal of it, she was pretty sure he already had.

"Actually, no."

"Then you can take me out to eat."

"You are spoiled."

"And whose fault is that? You are the one who takes me for a meal every time you come to visit. Can I be blamed for having certain expectations?"

"You are a minx."

She laughed. "That's me. Phoebe Leonides...otherwise known as the shy one...a minx."

"You are never shy with me."

"You're my friend. I'm not shy with my family either."

"You are shy around Dimitri."

She frowned. "Don't bring up your brother. You'll ruin my good mood."



Oh, now he looked truly offended. "There is nothing wrong with my brother."

"Except that us marrying each other is the dumbest idea my father and your grandfather have ever had. And I bought into it," she said, with a healthy dose of exasperation directed at herself.

"You do not want to marry my brother?"

"Please, Spiros, you know me better than anyone else. Don't tell me you are surprised."

"But I am shocked,byba . You made a promise."

She loved it when he called her baby girl. "So did he. But where is he now? Not here."

"I am here, seeing to his interests."

"He has no interest in me."

"That is not true."

"And you are here because you are my friend." She twisted in his arms and tickled vulnerable ribs. "Admit it."

He laughed out loud and almost dropped her. "Watch it,byba . You are going to end up with a sore bottom rather than a sleeping leg."

"You'd never spank me." And she would never tell him about the zing of erotic pleasure that went through her at the thought of being bottom-up in his lap.

"Someone should have spanked you when you were younger."

"You would have thrown a fit if they had."

"I was naive then...a foolish boy who thoughtbyba mou could do no wrong. Clearly I was deceived as to the sweetness of your character."

"Are you saying you don't think yourbyba is sweet?" she asked, with a pout she'd perfected just for him.

A look came over him that sent erotic pulses pinging through her. "More sweet than is good for me."

"Are you sure, Spiros?" Was that husky voice hers? "I think I amvery good for you."

He closed his eyes for several seconds of silence and then opened them. "I thinkyou need to change if I am going to take you out."

"You don't want to be seen with me wearing my sweats?" she asked, making no move to leave her secure perch.

"I refuse to take you where others might see that band of flesh between your top's hem and the waist of those too provocative bottoms."

“My sweats are not provocative.”

He lowered her so she was standing in front of him and then fingered the waistband of her zebra-striped velvet bottoms. “These? They cling to your perfectly shaped derriere and could stand to go further up your torso.”

He thought her butt was shaped perfectly? Another smile broke over her face. “I’m no Urkle wannabe. I have no intention of wearing my pants up around my armpits.”

“Who is Urkle?”

She forgot that he hardly ever watched television—and never the American programs. “A nerdy character in an old sitcom.”

“And she wears her sweats above her belly button?”

“It’s a him and, yes, way above...but don’t think for a minute I’m going to. This is the style.”

“If you bend over, I will see the swell of your bottom.”

“You think?” He was being circumspect, but he meant the crack of her bottom, and she could not let that statement go unchallenged. She spun and bent over. “Well? See anything?” She knew darn well he didn’t. She wasn’t a tramp, and didn’t dress like one.

But Spiros did not answer.

She looked back over her shoulder and her breath locked in her chest. He was staring at her in a way she had only ever dreamed of. With a dark hunger that called to something deep in her womb.

She straightened. “Spiros?”

He stared at her. “You should not have done that.”

“Why?” she asked, her brain refusing the evidence of her own eyes as impossible.

He couldn’t want her. She’d loved him for too long, getting nothing but friendship back in return, for things to have changed like this. It was wishful thinking on her part. It had to be.

Only he was still looking at her as if she was a feast and he the starving man.

“Because,” he said, in a tone she had never heard from him before.

“Because why?” She was nothing if not tenacious.

Anyone who knew her at all knew that. And he knew her better than most.

He didn’t smile at her childish prompting as he had always done in the past. His jaw was too rigid for even a facsimile of one. But he stepped forward.

She had the craziest urge to step back. Crazy because close to him was where she wanted to be. It always had been—even before she’d known she was in love with him. Only right this second he was

almost a stranger. A dangerous stranger.

But he would never hurt her. She knew that. No matter how intense he was acting right now. And if by some miracle his attitude meant what it seemed to mean, she wanted it. She knew she did.

So why did those internal reminders fail to dispel the weird sense of fear trying to take hold? She was strong enough to stand against it, though.

And she would.

He took another step forward, and another...and then he was so close she could feel his body heat in the scant bit of air between them. His scent was different up close. Not merely the expensive aftershave he wore, because she'd been buying it for him since she was ten, but another spicy fragrance that could only be him. It was warm, like his body...how could a smell be warm?

But it was. And it was good—oh, so good. She wanted to lean forward and nuzzle her nose in his neck and just revel in it.

She'd smelled him before, but there was a quality to his personal scent that was different now...a musk that sent a sharp ache deep into her womb. Her legs felt weak and she swayed a little, her face doing that nuzzle thing of its own accord.

He took in a sharp breath even as she inhaled his scent.

She throbbed in that hidden place between her legs. She'd never felt like this, even when she'd lain in her bed at night and thought about him. It was so different. Scary, but totally delicious too.

Which was exactly how the odd fear felt—kind of yummy. And that was really odd. Fear wasn't yummy, or fun. At least it never had been before. But this sensation wasn't one she wanted to end immediately. How weird was that?

Her disjointed ruminations ceased as she became acutely aware of how he filled her senses. His body heat surrounded her. Everything beyond him fuzzed in her vision, as if her eyes wanted to focus wholly on him. And his scent reached out to her, drawing her closer with an undeniable pull.

He didn't say anything as she rubbed her nose very lightly in the hollow of his neck. This close, she could smell the difference in where she nuzzled and his face, where his aftershave left a stronger impression. She'd always loved that cologne—that was why she bought it for him—but right now she wanted his essence. She needed to imprint him on her sensory memories.

He didn't move. Not to get away, not to get closer. He remained utterly still.

She met his silence with one of her own, not wanting this magical moment to end. If she never had anything else from him, no one could ever take away this moment. The first—and maybe the only—sensual encounter between two friends closer than most family.

Taking a deep breath, she inhaled more of him, and shuddered as her breasts came into contact with his chest. He made a sound like a growl, but still no words.

Her nipples ached behind the thin layers of her bra and her top. She pressed more firmly into him, trying to relieve that ache. It didn't work. She only wanted more. She needed...something from him...but she

didn't know what. She'd read about this kind of thing, talked it over with her friends. She'd even tried experimenting. But she didn't like kissing other men when all she could think about was the one she loved. Even if she couldn't have him, her body had never allowed her to have anyone else either. No matter how hard she'd tried.

The fact that she wasde facto engaged to his brother had prevented her from dating more than a few times anyway. She always felt so guilty, though she shouldn't have.

It wasn't as if Dimitri wanted her, and she was positive he wasn't celibate. She'd seen pictures in the paper of him with a French model, though she'd never mentioned them to anyone else. He was good at keeping his name out of the media, so she saw no reason to stir trouble about the couple of times he hadn't been able to.

She doubted his family even knew.

But what was she doing thinking about Dimitri when his brother—the man she loved—was standing right here? She would groan at herself if she could get enough air into her lungs. You'd think with the way she kept taking in his scent she'd have plenty of air, but she felt light-headed anyway.

And that was her only excuse for what she did next.Lack of oxygen to the brain.

## CHAPTER TWO

SHEcurled her hands around Spiros's lean hips and then she flicked her tongue out to taste the skin tantalizing her senses so thoroughly.

Salty.

Sweet.

Warm.

Addictive.

She tasted him again, this time letting her tongue linger just a bit longer.

Suddenly one of his hands was buried in her hair, pressing her face into his neck. "Bite me."

The guttural voice vibrated through her and made disobedience or even a question out of the realm of possibilities. She delicately nipped at his skin, sucking a little, taking more of the wonderful flavor into her mouth.

He growled, a sound at the same time animalistic and intensely masculine.

Then that big hand was pulling her head back, and his own was coming down. Their lips were touching. They kissed. At first carefully, as if neither could believe this was actually happening. Then they were devouring each other. Lips and teeth moving, clashing...claiming. She'd never been kissed like this. She'd never kissed this way either.

So erotically—like they were having sex with their mouths. Making love as surely as if they were both naked and writhing together on a bed.

So possessively—like they were marking each other for life, claiming the taste, feel and scent of one another in a molding of mouths as intimate as any other act of love.

So intently—like nothing and no one else existed in their universe.

She couldn't get enough of the feel of his lips against hers, of the taste of his mouth. Of anything.

It was all so very wonderful...amazing...unexpected.

Soperfect .

She'd had so many dreams of this moment, and none of them even came close to the overwhelming sensuality of his actions or her own.

Strong hands grasped her bottom and lifted her until her body was not only flush with his, but the apex of her thighs cradled an unmistakable hardness. Her own hands had been forced to let go of his hips as she was lifted, so she locked them behind his neck.

The bunching of muscles against her and a sense of disorientation told her they were moving, but she was so focused on the kiss she couldn't be bothered to lift her head and find out where. Then the hard wall was against her back, and that hardness was being thrust against her in a way that sent jolts of electric pleasure zinging through her.

One right after another. Until she felt like she was going to explode any moment in a shower of sparks.

And still the kiss went on. And on. And on.

He tasted her; his tongue dominated the interior of her mouth; his teeth rubbed against her own. It was hot...passionate. Completely astonishing.

Spiros was always so suave, so laid back. She hadn't known he had this inside him. Or, frankly, that she had it inside herself. However, the shock coursing through her in no way impinged on her passion.

His hard body held her against the wall, and despite the heat he emanated she was shivering with reaction. Desperate little noises came out of her mouth—muffled by his lips and tongue, but there all the same.

She needed more.Oh, please . Just a little more.

Her body tried to tell him what she needed, since she couldn't do so with words. Her pelvis pressed against him in an instinctive move she had never practiced before. Her legs spread, making room for him to press against her feminine center more fully. And he did.

The sensation was so intense she screamed into his mouth, her body racked with shudders. The pleasure built and built. She was sure she was going to shatter into a million pieces any second. But she didn't. And the ecstasy did not abate either. It got bigger and bigger. She couldn't possibly hold it all in.

What was happening to her?

It was so intense, so much.

The man she loved was doing this...shewas doing this. This was so much more than a kiss. This was a melding of their souls.

The thought sent the stars inside her exploding into a supernova of delight so consuming that the world went black around the edges and then disappeared altogether.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she woke. But her eyes did not open. Her body felt languid. Not tense, like she usually was during finals week. As she lay there she tried to make sense of where she was—whenit was. She had been studying. Spiros had come. Images flashed through her mind. Then memory came flooding back in a tidal wave, accompanied by remembered pleasure, and she moaned.

“Phoebe,byba , are you all right?”

She opened her eyes to see a nervous-looking Spiros hovering beside her bed. He was frowning, his hair a tumbled mess of curls around his face. He’d obviously been running his fingers through it.

She smiled, though it was an effort. She was wrecked. If a kiss could do that to her, how would she ever survive making love completely?

She realized she’d asked the question aloud when Spiros’s frown got darker. “You are overtired from studying too many hours and not eating. You must take better care of yourself.”

“Trust me when I tell you that today is the not the first time I missed my dinner. And I’ve never passed out like that.”

“Naturally not. You are promised to Dimitri. You are not kissing other men.I should never have kissed you.”

She wasn’t getting into her attempts to overcome her feelings for Spiros. He would never understand. He truly considered her engaged to Dimitri, even though no formal announcement had ever been made. And now was not the time to discuss her differing perspective on the subject. He looked so miserable.

She pushed herself into a sitting position. “I started it.”

“You are an innocent,” he said dismissively. “You did not know what effect your small touch would have on me.”

That was true. She’d had no idea her touch could affect him at all—small or otherwise. “But it is not something I regret.”

“And you should not. It was not your fault. You must forget about it. Get past it.” He was babbling.

Spiros, Mr. Sophistication himself, was prattling on like a new student on orientation day.

It would be endearing if he wasn’t trying so hard to pretend nothing of import had happened between them.

She looked down at her clasped hands and said softly, “I don’t think I can forget.”

How could she forget the best moments in her life? She didn’t evenwant to.

“Please, byba, you must try. For the sake of our friendship, for the sake of our families. I know I should not have kissed you. It was wrong. I cannot believe I did such a thing. I have more integrity than that.” His voice had grown husky and he had to clear his throat. “For those moments I was not myself, and I took you to a place neither of us should have gone, but we do not have to allow the last twenty minutes to have a permanently tarnishing effect on our honor.”

He sounded desolate, more hurt than he’d been in her memory. And there was no mistaking the self-loathing lacing his voice. It tore at her heart.

Oh, man... A Petronides in full guilt mode could be scary. Really, truly frightening. She’d seen it before. Not often, mind you. The men in that family were fanatical about not letting others down. If she didn’t do something soon, it was going to get out of hand.

“It was not your fault. I was with you all the way.”

If anything, his expression turned more pained. “Do not say that,” he instructed her fiercely. “You are years younger than me, and inexperienced. I take all the blame.”

“For what? It was a kiss... with unexpected results, maybe, but still just a kiss.”

“Yes. Only a kiss. Remember that. You have nothing to reproach yourself for.”

She wasn’t regretting anything, but she knew he definitely did not want to hear that. She’d never seen him so distraught.

She stood up and tugged at the hem of her T-shirt. “Okay. No tarnished honor. For either of us.”

Now was not the time to discuss her breaking off things—such as they were—with Dimitri. That was something she had to do on her own anyway. Right now she had to get things back on an even keel with Spiros. She loved him too much to watch him beat himself up like this.

Their parents had done a real number on both Dimitri and Spiros. Not that either had ever admitted it, but how could they help being impacted by a mother who’d been a serial adulterer and a father who had loved her too much to refuse to take her back when the latest affair had ended. Like they always had.

Phoebe had been a baby, but she knew the stories as well as anyone in the two closely knit families.

The pattern had been repeated right up until the end, when the couple had been killed in an accident while trying to return to Greece together. Timothy had followed his wife and her newest paramour to a ski resort, to beg her to come home. What that must have done to his Greek honor Phoebe could only guess, but his behavior and that of his wife had certainly impacted their sons.

Dimitri was glacier-cold in the emotions department. Spiros was warmer, but he had an overdeveloped sense of honor and a fear of being like either parent that was as obvious as glowing neon to someone like Phoebe, who knew him so well. She figured both men’s attitudes could be laid squarely at their parents’ dead feet.

“No more thinking or talking about the kiss,” Phoebe said now in a brisk voice.

“Good. Yes. Right.”

Okay, it really was endearing to see him like this, but it also tugged at her compassion. “Go wait in the living area and I’ll change so you can take me to get something to eat.”

“I do not know if that is a good idea.”

“You would prefer I missed dinner altogether?” She knew it was blatant manipulation, but sometimes a girl had to do what a girl had to do. “Or we could order something in?”

He vehemently shook his head. “No. I will...” He sucked in a deep breath and let it out. “I will take you out to eat.”

“Thank you.”

She didn’t want him drawing into himself, or going off on a private Petronides guilt-fest.

Spiros kept his distance the rest of the night, but by the time he dropped her off at her apartment the self-disgust lurking in his eyes was gone and he even teased her about her study habits. Only he neglected to give her a kiss on the cheek goodbye.

She didn’t lament it too much, though. Her memories of the earlier real kiss were far too strong for her to worry about one small lost opportunity. Frankly, it would have surprised her if he had done it. And she wasn’t sure if she was prepared for any level of physical intimacy herself—even something as simple as a kiss goodbye.

The earlier kiss had done more than send her physical reactions haywire. It was still playing major havoc with her emotions and her thoughts. She had been so sure after so many years of unrequited love that Spiros could never have those sort of feelings for her. Now she knew irrefutably that he could.

It was hard to take, and even more difficult to trust...

Phoebe returned to the present, renewed in her determination to speak to her father about dissolving the promise between her and Dimitri. The only question in her mind was: would it be better to wait until after she and her father had discussed her job with the company?

Phoebe looked up when she heard her name spoken.

“You can go in now,” the secretary said.

Phoebe jumped to her feet and just barely remembered to keep her pace at a sedate walk as she crossed the reception area and knocked once before entering her father’s inner sanctum.

Aristotle Leonides came around from behind his desk to take her in a hug and give her a kiss of greeting on both cheeks, which she returned affectionately.

“So, how is my beautiful, educated daughter today?” he asked, with obvious paternal pride.

She grinned. “I am well. Thank you for inviting me to your office.”



His smile slipped and he nodded. "Yes. We need to talk, pethi mou."

She nodded too, and made an effort to simulate his serious air, despite the happiness bubbling inside of her.

"Here—have a seat." He guided her to a chair in front of his desk, and then went back around it to sit in his own executive chair.

She allowed herself a small smile. "I've always thought you looked like you ruled the world, sitting there."

Sadness came over his features. "I only wish. In fact, if you cannot see your way to helping out the company, I will soon not be in charge of anything at all."

She leaned forward earnestly in her seat. "You know I will do anything I can to help at Leonides Enterprises."

His shoulders seemed to relax just a little. "I only hope that is true."

"Of course it is, Papa. You have always been good to me, and the company is important to all of us."

"I am glad to hear it. I told Theo I thought that would be the case, but it is good to hear you confirm your love and loyalty. I am a blessed man to have such a daughter."

Tears pricked her eyes. Now was not the time for maudlin sentiment, but her father's words meant so much. Though he had been more supportive of her dreams than many Greek fathers of their acquaintances would have been, he was still very traditional in some ways. He reserved most of his verbal approval for her younger brother.

"Whatever job you want me to do, I will do it," she reaffirmed.

"While some women consider marriage a chore, I am not sure I have ever heard it referred to as a job before," he said, with a return of some of his humor.

"Marriage?" What was he talking about? "I don't think I understand."

Again Aristotle's demeanor became very serious, almost guarded. "This is not an easy thing for me to talk about. You understand?"

"Of course." Though she didn't. Not at all. She had no idea what he was referring to. But he needed her confirmation so she gave it.

"I have made some bad choices these past two years...they have affected the company in very detrimental ways."

She began to understand his somber air. It would be difficult for most people to admit these kinds of mistakes, but even worse for a man as proud as her father. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, I am also. Your grandfather—he wasn't one for insurance. It was one of the few things he and Tio Theo used to fight about." Aristotle let out a tired sigh. "It was an area I followed your grandfather's example in. We've had setbacks—severe ones. This past year especially. And no insurance to cover the

losses.”

“What does this mean for the company?”

“Without the infusion of a significant source of capital, there will no longer be a company.”

“How significant?”

He said a number that made her eyes widen and her hands go clammy. “How can we possibly raise that much money? Unless you want to go public?” It was something she’d talked about with him before, but he had always been adamantly opposed.

His expression of distaste now said that his opinion on that issue had not changed. “Going public saves the company, but not our family’s role in it. We might as well close our doors, for we would no longer be Leonides Enterprises.”

“I’m sure the hundreds of employees who work for us would not feel the same.”

Her father’s eyes flashed. “I do not dismiss my responsibilities so lightly.”

“I never said you did.” And she hadn’t meant to imply it either.

“My desire to save your brother’s birthright may be old-fashioned, but it is not wrong.”

“What of my birthright?”

“You are a Leonides. It is your birthright.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“We are talking in circles.”

“I am sorry.”

“As I said, we need a large infusion of cash.”

“But how are we going to get it?” She could not see even Theo Petronides loaning such a large sum to her father with no surety, and other than the company—which they were trying to save—they had nothing worth so much.

Her parents were wealthy, and lived as such, but this was beyond personal riches. This type of money only changed hands on a corporate level. At least in her experience.

“Theo Petronides has agreed to a merger of sorts.”

“A merger? Like Leonides-Petronides Enterprises?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is a family merger.” Her father tried for a smile, but it was strained. “Of a sort. With a single stipulation.”

A very ugly sense of impending doom came over her. “What stipulation?”

“It is nothing bad, pethi mou. He simply wishes to see our families joined prior to the business merger and the transfer of funds. Understandably, he could not make such a large single investment with a mere friend, but family is a different thing.”

“Our families joined?” she asked faintly. “In marriage?” She wasn’t stupid. She’d finally figured out where this was leading. “I should have realized you weren’t inviting me here to offer me a job. After all, it’s Chrysanthos’s birthright, not mine.”

His mouth twisted in a grimace at her last words, but all he said was, “I wish it was something so simple.”

“I don’t want to marry Dimitri.” It was one of the hardest—no, definitely the hardest thing she had ever had to say.

“He will be a good husband, Phoebe. He is a good man.”

“How can you say that? He doesn’t love me. He doesn’t even like me.”

“Of course he likes you, child. And love can come later.”

“You loved Mama when you married her.”

“We were lucky. But I would have married her even if I had not.”

“That is so easy to say, but you were never put in this position.”

“It is not a bad situation for you.”

“According to you.”

“Yes. According to me.” He said it as if his word should be final.

But this was not the Middle Ages. “I am not you.”

“No, you are my daughter. My loyal daughter. Your love for our family and our company is too great for you to put your own personal feelings ahead of everything else.”

He was right, but that didn’t mean she was going to marry Dimitri. “There has to be another way that does not involve selling your daughter to the highest bidder.” She knew it was more complicated than that—that she had made a promise four years ago she should never have made. But still.

“I am not selling you,” her father said in freezing tones.

“What would you call it?”

“Ensuring your future.”

“You mean your future and that of your heir.” But, again, it was far more complicated than her bitter words allowed. There were generations and multiple decades of family pride in the business at risk, her mother’s lifestyle, as well as her father and younger brother—and those hundreds of employees she had mentioned earlier.

“I will not dignify that comment with a response.”

That did not surprise her, and in a small way she felt she deserved such a reaction. But in another way...not.

“What about Spiros? Couldn’t I marry him instead?” she asked a little desperately.

“He is like a brother to you,” he said, repeating the sentiment he had expressed four years ago.

“He is not my brother. We’re not related even distantly. We’ve never lived together in the same house. We aren’t siblings. We’re friends and I would rather marry him.”

Her father looked singularly unimpressed with her words. He really did see her and Spiros as almost siblings, but they weren’t. “You agreed to the promise four years ago, Phoebe. You agreed to join our two families through marriage to Dimitri. It is time to make good on that promise.”

“I was too young to be making such a commitment, and you should have known that.” Heck, as much as she loved him, her father had no doubt taken advantage of that fact.

“Nevertheless, you did make it. And, lest you forget, your mother was only two years older than that when she married me.”

“Two years can make a big difference. I knew by the time I’d turned twenty that I’d made a mistake agreeing to the proposed future marriage with Dimitri as well.”

“Yet you never said anything.”

“Neither did you...about me following through on it.”

“We were waiting for you to finish your education.”

“Why bother? You clearly had no intention of me ever using it.”

“Do not take that tone with me.” He stood up and paced over to the window, looking out. Unlike his usual almost military-like bearing, his shoulders were stooped, and an air of defeat clung to him. “This situation is difficult enough for me as it is, without having my daughter turn on me.”

“I’m not turning on you.”

He turned to face her, his complexion pale, his eyes pleading in a way she knew he never would with words. “So you agree to keep your promise?”

She wanted to agree. She did. And if that kiss had never happened she knew she would be agreeing right now. But she had one final chance at her heart’s dream and she had to take it. “I want to talk to Spiros.”

“You are always welcome to talk to him. He is your friend and your champion. But it is Dimitri you must work to love, Phoebe.”

“What if I can’t?”

“You must.”

She did not quite have the courage to tell her father of her love for Spiros. Like the man she loved, Aristotle was bound to see it as a betrayal of her honor. But it wasn’t. No one should have pushed her into the promise of future marriage to Dimitri to begin with.

Her intended could care less about her. He couldn’t possibly want to marry her. Dimitri was not the right man for her. And she was not the right woman for him. Her loving his brother was not a bad thing.

She stood up, knowing that she needed to speak to Spiros as soon as possible. He would help her sort through this mess. He had to. She crossed the office in record time.

“Phoebe?” her father said as she reached the door.

She didn’t turn around, but placed her hand on the knob. “What?”

“The money will not come from Theo...it will come from Dimitri.”

She spun to face her father. “From Dimitri? But I thought you said it would come from Tio Theo.”

“It is better this way.”

“For who?” Did Spiros even have that kind of money? Would his brother loan it to him?

Even more troubling—if it was already arranged, then had Dimitri agreed to the marriage? And, if so, why?

Maybe Spiros wasn’t the only one she needed to talk to.

“I need to go,” she said, her sense of desperation almost choking her as it grew.

“What are you going to do?” her father asked, his own desperation in no way hidden from her.

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t because she wasn’t sure. She wanted to be—oh, how she wanted to say she was going to marry Spiros and everything would be fine. But she couldn’t say the words with absolute conviction.

If his brother insisted on making good on her four-year-old promise, Phoebe very much feared that Spiros’s sense of familial obligation would not allow him to gainsay that.

Her throat clogged with tears, she wondered how her bright and shiny future had come so quickly under clouds of such doom.

“Phoebe...?” her father prompted.

But she merely shook her head and, saying nothing, left her father's presence for the first time without giving him the courtesy of a goodbye.

### CHAPTER THREE

SPIROS pressed the disconnect button on the intercom with his secretary. He'd asked her to tell Phoebe he was on a conference call. Phoebe had said she would wait for him to finish.

And why not?

When had she ever shown up at his office, at his home, even when he had been at university, and he had not made time for her? The answer was never. So it should be no surprise she assumed he would do so now.

The only problem was that for the first time in their lifelong friendship the last person he wanted to talk to was Phoebe Leonides. He should have been prepared for this visit. He had certainly expected it...only sooner. She'd been back in Greece for five days. Before his spectacular act of stupidity, that would have been four days longer than it usually took her to call him and arrange to see him.

And he had never minded before. Phoebe had always been one of the best parts of his life. But now she was the worst. Because she represented his loss of honor, his betrayal of his brother—something he had never believed himself capable of.

Even worse, he feared she could represent a similar loss again. He had to be stronger than that for both his brother's sake and that of his grandfather's health. The old man was putting off surgery until the engagement was announced formally. Dimitri's agreement wasn't enough.

Stubborn old goat was right.

The most painful realization for Spiros was that he wasn't entirely sure he could be as strong as he needed to.

He'd asked...begged...Phoebe to forget the kiss. But he never would. He never could. He would never forget her taste, or the passion that lay secreted in her untried body.

He should never have tasted that passion before his brother. He should never have tasted it at all.

He was not like his mother. He was not morally weak. He did not let his libido dictate his actions, nor did he convince himself he was in love with everybody he wanted to sample.

He was not like his father either—willing to compromise his own personal sense of integrity for the love of a woman.

Timothy Petronides had lost his life for the sake of an obsessive love. Spiros was determined never to succumb to anything of the like. The affection he had for Phoebe had never fallen into that realm. It had always brought out the best in him, made him strive to be a better boy and then a better man. Until now.

This hiding from her was only another indication of a moral weakness he refused to harbor within himself.

He straightened his shoulders, buzzed his secretary, and told her to show Phoebe in.

A few seconds later the door slammed open, revealing a distraught-looking Phoebe to his secretary.

"Where is Ismene?"

For a second Phoebe looked confused by the question. Then she shrugged her fine-boned shoulders. "I showed myself in. I knew the way."

He waited for Phoebe to tell him why she was there. His hands curled into fists as his body tensed with conflicting emotions.

She stared at him, her dark brown eyes worried. "Is everything all right, Spiros?"

"Yes, of course. By your dramatic entrance, I would say that you appear to be the one with the problem."

"Yes, I do...I am. I just...This isn't like you."

"What, exactly?" As if he did not know.

She started to speak. Stopped. Then started again. "You know me so well." She paused and started pacing, wringing her hands as she walked a path to his window and back again. "Better than anyone else, I think. Even my parents."

"That is possible." Before the kiss he would have assured her that, yes, she was right, but he had to distance himself from her, taper off the level of their intimate friendship.

He owed it to Dimitri. He owed it to his grandfather, the one constant in his life. He owed it to his own honor.

She stopped pacing and stared at him again.

"There you go...doing it again."

"Perhaps you should get to the point of your visit?" he said, not asking again what "it" was. Safety lay in maintaining surface ignorance.

"No...not if you're upset about something." She looked around, obviously distracted, her expression so troubled he was tempted to pull her into his arms for comfort. But he was smart enough to withstand the urge. She seemed to notice the still open door and moved to close it. Then she turned to face him again. "Maybe we're worried about the same things."

"Perhaps we are." She was trustworthy and very loyal. She wouldn't want to betray Dimitri or their two families any more than he did.

"I...it's just...usually when I'm upset you know."

"Yes."

"But then I guess you did notice. So that's normal. Only this isn't." She frowned at him.

Again he refrained from asking what “this” was. He knew. She knew. The way he was holding himself back from asking what was wrong. The way he was holding himself back, period. He could not fix it. To do so would be to invite further intimacy—intimacy they could no longer afford.

She chewed on her bottom lip for a count of four seconds. Yes, he kept track. That lip tasted like ambrosia, and he had to force himself to stay on his side of the desk.

“You know usually...I mean every other time. When I come to you upset, you notice. Then—well, then...you ask me what is wrong and what you can do to fix it. I mean, that’s just what you do. Every time. But you’re not doing it now. And I need you to do that now, more than ever.” The last came out as an agonized whisper.

Again he had to force himself to refrain from going to her. It was not easy. In fact it was almost impossible. Which further underlined the unacceptable intensity of their friendship.

Looking back over the history of that friendship, he realized she spoke the truth. But only now did he see how dangerous that kind of behavior was. It had led to expectations she should have of Dimitri, not Spiros.

“I hope that I am always here for you, Phoebe, but you are an adult. You must handle your own problems.” The words were harsh, and it hurt to say them, but they had to be spoken for both their sakes. He did not bring up Dimitri because for some reason he could not make himself do so.

“I am an adult?”

“I just said that.”

“You think there is something wrong with me coming to you for help?” she asked, sounding and looking hurt.

He manfully ignored the pain in her voice and her gaze and gave a small sigh. “Not wrong, precisely, simply not appropriate.”

“Why would it be inappropriate for me to come to the man I—to my best friend for help?”

“As I said, you are an—”

“Adult,” she said, interrupting. “Yes, I heard that part. But even adults sometimes need help.”

“So what exactly do you need help with?”

“I wish I knew why you are acting so weird,” she said, instead of answering, her eyes suspiciously moist.

Do not cry, he silently begged her. This was difficult enough.

“I’m sorry you think my behavior is abnormal, but I assure you everything is fine.” Or as fine as it could be with him lusting after his brother’s intended fiancée.

“Okay. If you say so. I guess that’s good. I...um...”

Again he waited without comment.



Finally she continued. "My father. He invited me to his office to talk. I thought he was going to offer me a job."

"He did not?" Spiros asked, genuinely surprised and more than a little relieved that she had come about something so mundane.

Not about the kiss. Not about emotions and desires that had no place in their lives.

He could fix this easily. He would talk to Dimitri about offering her a job.

"No," Phoebe replied. "He said he had something more important to discuss." Phoebe's eyes glistened with unmistakable tears now. "He's broke, Spiros...on the verge of losing the company."

He had not realized things had got so bad. His grandfather had said nothing. But then since the night his grandfather had extracted that promise from Dimitri to set a wedding date, Spiros had been avoiding them both. "Your father is a strong businessman. I am sure something can be done."

"He won't take the company public."

"Naturally not."

Phoebe made a rude sound that implied she did not agree with his or her father's views on that particular topic. "There is only one other way to raise the sort of funds he needs to save it."

"As I said, he is a smart man. I am not surprised he has already discovered a way out."

Phoebe shook her head, her obvious distress once again nearly breaking his determination not to touch her.

"What has you so upset?" he asked instead, unable to help himself.

"It's the way he's seen fit to fix the problem." She took a deep breath that came back out in a short sob. "He wants to sell me."

"What?" Spiros yelled.

"To your brother. I...I can't do it, Spiros. Not after our kiss."

Spiros's agile brain whirled with the implications of what Phoebe was saying. Apparently her marriage to Dimitri played some role in saving Leonides Enterprises. And she had a problem with that because of their kiss. He could not allow that to remain an issue.

It was all so damn complicated. But he had to do the right thing. And there was only one right thing here, wasn't there?

"Of course you can marry Dimitri. I told you to forget the kiss."

"I can't."

"You must try."

“Have you?” she challenged. “Forgotten, I mean?”

And for the first time in their relationship he lied to her. “Yes.”

Her eyes widened, as if she had not expected that answer.

“I kiss a lot of women, Phoebe.” That at least was the truth.

“But I thought...I mean...why can’t I marryyou ?” she asked, all in a rush.

Spiros felt like she’d knocked the air out of him. “You are promised to my brother.”

“But you’re the one I kissed.”

“As I said, I’ve kissed many women, but I have never ended up married to one of them.”

“But...”

“But what? Phoebe, it was a moment of weakness on both our parts. You should not let guilt drive you into doing something rash.”

“It’s not guilt.”

“What else could it be?” he asked. But he had no intention of giving her a chance to answer. He couldn’t afford to. If she said the words, they were both in trouble. “Love? I don’t think so. You’re as close to being my little sister as it is possible to get without sharing a blood relationship.”

That was also true...just not the whole truth. He felt nothing like her brother. Though he did feel like her friend. Her best friend. And, as such, it was his job to do what was best for her...what was best for all of them.

“So the way you kissed me—it meant nothing?”

“It was pleasant.” Another damn lie. It had been world-shattering for him.

Were these lies necessary? Was any of this necessary? Then he remembered the ashen tone of his grandfather’s skin due to his heart condition. Spiros reflected on Dimitri’s determination to marry Phoebe. In this situation he—Spiros—had no rights. He had to remember that as well.

But it was so hard.

“Pleasant?Our souls connected. You had to have felt it.”

Now, that was not something he was willing to admit—even to himself. “You are an innocent...your reaction overwhelmed you. You must trust me when I say it was simply a kiss. As I have said, I have kissed many women and never proposed to one.”

“Dimitri has never proposed to me either,” she said, as if that were some insurmountable obstacle.

“I am sure he will get around to it, but until then Grandfather has acted in his stead.” He assumed that

was what had happened. It was perhaps a bit old-fashioned, but certainly not beyond the realm of permissible.

Awfully cold, though. He would have to speak to his brother at the earliest opportunity. And if the thought of advising Dimitri on how best to treat Phoebe made the bile rise in Spiros' stomach, that was his own problem.

"That is positively draconian."

"Hardly."

"Dimitri does not care about me."

"He is willing to marry you, of course he cares."

"He's never kissed me, never looked out for me. You always have, and your kiss... it was more than you are willing to admit. You can deny it all you want, but I remember what you were like, and you did not kiss me like a brother!"

"It was a one-off thing. It will never happen again and, since you will be marrying my brother, I would appreciate it very much if you never mentioned it either." Even as he spoke the words he wondered if he was right to do so.

Phoebe deserved better than what Dimitri had given her so far. Perhaps Spiros should speak to both his older brother and his grandfather... But if he did that, would it precipitate the heart attack they all feared? What mattered more here—his grandfather's health and family honor or Phoebe's feelings?

It felt like a betrayal of the worst sort against his lifelong belief in himself and his sense of right and wrong when he could not decide.

She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing with no sound coming out, her eyes dulling with a pain he could not stand to see.

His resolve broke in the face of it. He started to move around the desk, but she was backing up toward the door.

"You really want me to marry Dimitri, don't you?"

He couldn't answer. Too many thoughts and feelings roiled inside him, reminding him of the days of emotional chaos when his parents were still alive. That chaos paralyzed him.

"I guess my personal happiness doesn't matter to anyone else but me," she whispered, as she opened the door and backed out of it.

Spiros stood there, stunned, unable to process the words she had just spoken. When had he ever not cared about her happiness?

Was she saying that she would be miserable married to Dimitri? Of course she was. Hadn't she implied as much before? But she wouldn't. His brother would treat her well. Dimitri was a good man.

But he wasn't Spiros, that annoying voice whispered.

No, damn it. He wasn't. And she was scared. Spiros should have recognized that. She was hurting and frightened, and he'd been so worried about his responsibility to his family he'd dismissed what she needed from him.

He had not been there for her like he usually was. Out of his own fear. Because of his inadequacy. He needed to go after her, to talk, to make her see that it was all going to be all right.

He ran out of his office and headed for the elevators, hoping she hadn't made it onto one yet, but she was nowhere to be seen when he got there.

He noted from the light that the elevator was already halfway to the ground floor. He hit the wall and then stabbed the button.

Phoebe held control by a thin thread that threatened to snap with every breath she took.

The kiss had meant nothing to Spiros. An act that she had believed had changed her life and opened the possibilities to her most deeply held dream had been nothing more than one in a long line of similar moments for him. Considering how it had ended—with her blacking out from the pleasure and him getting nothing more out of it—he probably didn't even have fond memories. No wonder he wanted to forget it.

She wished she could.

The pain was so intense she felt like she could not breathe. Nothing was as she'd believed it to be when she'd come back to Greece.

Her father did not want her working with him. He saw her as little more than a commodity to barter for the livelihood of the family company. A company he intended to leave to her brother. It was Chrysanthos's birthright...not hers.

But her father's betrayal was nothing compared to how much it hurt to realize the truth about Spiros. She'd been weaving daydreams around that kiss until she'd been almost sick with happiness. Now her heart bled from a million pricks made by the leftover shards of those dreams.

The elevator door opened and she rushed outside, running to her car as if being chased by demons. And in a way she was. Personal demons she knew from experience she could never outdistance, but that didn't mean she had to let everyone see her cry.

She made it to her little car and got inside, started it and pressed on the accelerator, yanking the wheel and forcing the car into traffic amidst the cacophony of honks and rude words shouted at her. She didn't care.

She came within inches of smashing into another car and told herself she didn't care about that either. But even in her current state she could not stand to be the cause of someone else's trauma.

She pulled into a parking garage, following the narrow lane to the very top floor. She guided her car into a spot far from the few other cars that had come to this level to find parking. With a vicious twist of her wrist she turned off her car, then leaned forward on the steering wheel and wept.

Spiros did not love her. Not like she needed him to. How could she have been so stupid as to believe otherwise? He was not even attracted to her. Not really. He saw her as a little sister. Nothing more. He wanted her to marry Dimitri.

Everyone wanted her to marry Dimitri...everyone except her.

But what difference did it make? Spiros was never going to fall in love with her and she was never going to love anyone else. Dimitri might be a good man, but he was also a man who kept a mistress. If he married another woman he might hurt her with his infidelity. Phoebe didn't care, though. Him keeping a lover wouldn't hurt her. It simply did not matter.

Nothing mattered.

Why should it?

She saw that all her fantasies about the future had been without substance...a mist easily dispelled when exposed to the burning light of reality. Impossible. All of them. But maybe she could save another woman from having her dreams shattered.

Certainly agreeing to marry Dimitri would preserve Phoebe's father's hopes for the future. It would ensure her little brother his birthright. It would maintain her mother's standard of living—Basila's sense of her place in the world.

Phoebe could not stand to see her father broken, as he would be if he lost the company. Nor could she allow her mother to be shamed, as she would be if that were to happen.

She knew what she had to do. She had to be the adult Spiros had reminded her she was. But she let herself grieve the loss of her own dreams, crying until she was empty of emotion and numb to the pain.

Then she drove home, sneaking in the back way so no one would see her with puffy eyes and streaks of mascara down her cheeks.

That evening she told her father that she would marry Dimitri.

He thanked her and told her he'd known she would not let the family down, that it was for the best. She did not disagree, but she remained stiff when he embraced her.

It was not anger that kept her so, but apathy.

He announced the upcoming wedding to her mother and Chrysanthos over dinner. Her brother made a joke about getting married right out of university. A few hours ago it would have stung. Thankfully, now she was too numb to be affected.

Basila immediately began making wedding plans, asking Phoebe her opinion on this, that and the other. Only Phoebe didn't have an opinion. She simply didn't care. She agreed to anything her mother wanted, smiling when her mother wanted her to smile and assuring Basila that she could have free rein with the preparations.

"You young women today—you have no sense of romance," Basila lamented.

Phoebe just shrugged, studiously avoiding the odd looks her father kept sending her. She didn't see

anything remotely romantic about an arranged marriage, but maybe that was just her.

She liked the numbness, though. It was better than pain and disappointment.

It even made it easy for her to answer Spiros's many messages, left on her voicemail while she had been purging her emotions through tears earlier.

"Phoebe! Are you all right?" Spiros asked.

"Yes, of course."

He was silent for a second. "Byba...we need to talk."

"No, we don't."

"I should have asked what was bothering you...I should not have remained so aloof in my office."

"It does not matter."

"Of course it matters."

"As you said, my problems are not your responsibility. I'm a grown woman and it's time to put my childish thoughts behind me." She had a duty to her family and she would fulfill it.

"Uh...Phoebe...?"

"I don't need a shoulder to cry on." And if she did she would never again go to him. He was off-limits. She wanted to remain numb, but more than that she wanted to stop loving him, and their friendship had only fed her feelings. It was time to starve them. "I told my father tonight that I would keep my promise to marry Dimitri."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"I...uh..."

"You will be my brother for real." For a moment the numbness was pierced, and agony made her almost bend double, but she forced herself to straighten and pushed the pain away to that place deep inside where it could not make her cry anymore.

"Phoebe? Are you okay?" He sounded like he really cared.

"My mother is already making wedding plans," she said, rather than answer that question again.

It didn't really matter what she said, did it? Her father had asked her the same thing after dinner. But if she said no would it make any difference? She knew it wouldn't. Both her father and Spiros would simply feel compelled to convince her what a good man she was getting in Dimitri. Why it was "best for her" to go through with the wedding. And really? She didn't want to hear it.

"Is she?" Spiros asked, his voice tinged with something odd she made no effort to decipher.

“Yes.”

Another short silence. “You should probably expect Grandfather to put his oar in as well.”

“He and Mama will have to battle it out.”

“Not you too?”

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you care what your wedding is like?”

“No.” It wasn’t her wedding. It was a business merger...a wedding others wanted...and she was going along with it, but it wasn’t hers. It could not be hers and have the groom be the eldest Petronides brother.

“Phoebe—”

“I need to go. Mother has more plans she wants to go over.” She was sure that was true, but was even more certain she had to get off the phone. Talking to Spiros was too detrimental to the sense of detachment she needed so badly to get her through the next few weeks.

She did not think her father or Theopolis Petronides would want a long engagement.

“I’ll talk to you later.” Funny...he sounded as numb as she did.

It must be a trick of her hearing. “Goodbye, Spiros.”

He didn’t know it, but she was saying farewell to a lot more than a simple phone call. She clicked the phone shut before he had a chance to answer or say anything else. It was time to start her campaign to rid herself of a love that had caused her far too much pain and brought not nearly enough pleasure.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SPIROS left Phoebe yet another voicemail and then clicked his phone shut. For the past two weeks she had either ignored his calls or kept their dialogues short. She responded to one out of three e-mails with pithy notes that did not encourage further correspondence. Apparently she had decided to cool their friendship.

He should be glad. With the attraction he felt toward her, it was no doubt for the best for them both. But he missed her. More than he’d thought possible. And every day that drew them closer to her marriage to Dimitri, Spiros hurt more.

He couldn’t stand talking to or about Dimitri, he was so envious of what his brother had. Phoebe. So he avoided his family as assiduously as Phoebe avoided him.

He was worried about her.

She refused to discuss anything personal. He’d tried, wanting to somehow fix everything going wrong with and around them. But she’d refused. The one time, in desperation, that he’d brought up the kiss, she’d hung up on him and ignored any attempt to communicate for three days after. She was missing the

spark that was so much a part of who she was and he didn't know how to bring it back.

When he asked how the engagement plans were going, she told him they were fine as far as she knew. As if her marriage to his older brother had nothing to do with her. He couldn't be nearly as sanguine.

Phoebe might say she was fine with the merging of their two families, but she obviously wasn't. And there was nothing he could do about it. She shut him down when he tried to talk to her, refusing to acknowledge anything was wrong, and had managed to imply that her emotional state was none of his business.

He knew it was his own fault, but that didn't make it hurt any less. For the first time since she was a year old he felt disconnected from her. He had never realized before how much he relied on their relationship, how much it meant to him. It all left him feeling helpless.

Something he had vowed to himself would not happen again after the death of his parents. He had been helpless in the face of his mother's behavior, which had torn at the moorings of his family. Then death had snatched away the two most important people in the world to him.

Since then he had not wanted to give anyone the power to hurt him. He had maintained a certain emotional distance, even from his older brother and grandfather. But Phoebe had climbed the walls around his heart as surely as she had climbed his body like a jungle gym when he was a boy and she just a toddling baby girl. No matter how much distance she thought they needed, this was too much.

The prospect of her hurting and him having no way to fix it made him cranky as hell. His secretary hid from him, and the managers under his authority walked a wary path around him right now.

He was not used to getting this sort of treatment. Of the two of them, he had always been more personable and approachable than his brother. But he'd overheard one of his employees saying she would happily transfer to Dimitri's division just yesterday.

Spiros sighed. Now, that was as good an indication as any that he was on the slippery slope to the most overbearing of Petronides male behavior.

And damned if he could do anything about that, either.

Phoebe read the announcement of her upcoming marriage to Dimitri in the society section of the paper. Everything about it was in order... was exactly as it should be, in fact. The only abnormality in the situation would not show up on the printed page. Though readers might find it odd that two individual pictures of the parties involved had been included rather than a joint one. Since she had yet to see Dimitri since agreeing to go forward with the marriage, that small anomaly could not be avoided.

It was strange to her how the people around her acted like this should be a huge celebration, as if her and Dimitri's marriage was the romance of the century. When in fact it couldn't be further from that. Her mother and Theopolis Petronides were planning a wedding fit for royalty in one of the largest Greek Orthodox cathedrals in Athens. And though it felt like such a farce to her, she simply didn't care.

It was not her fault that a ceremony that should be sacred was going to be conducted for the sake of business.



It wasn't the first time such a thing would happen and it would not be the last. She would play her part, but she would not pretend to the role of blushing bride when she was simply a form of barter—surety on a loan, the connection of two old and powerful business families.

Her plan to starve the love from her heart was in full swing.

She'd done a pretty good job of avoiding Spiros, keeping busy working with her father. His request that she work on the recovery package for Leonides Enterprises was no doubt an attempt to make up to her for selling her into marriage in order to save the company. But she found the work challenging, and felt a measure of gratitude for having it to keep her occupied.

Not only did it make a good excuse to avoid Spiros, but she had immersed herself so completely in spreadsheets, industry research, meetings and the like that she had managed to duck out of almost all of the wedding plans. She'd also spent minimal time with her family in the past two weeks, eating only one dinner at home and leaving for the office before even her father did so.

Papa had chastised her once for neglecting her family. She had apologized, and then continued on as she had been doing. Her mother had tried to get her involved in the wedding plans, but Phoebe refused to engage. Though she was very careful not to hurt her mother's feelings, she refused to pretend like everyone else that this was her chance at happiness.

Her life was forfeit for the well-being of her family, and while she did not begrudge them that—she loved them, after all—she would not buy into a fantasy that had no basis in reality. She had done that with Spiros, and would never again set herself up for the kind of disappointment she had experienced upon her return to Greece.

Phoebe walked into the very exclusive and equally elegant restaurant. She had come directly from the office, taking a few minutes to freshen up before leaving the Leonides company headquarters.

Her father and mother were at the table already. Her mother was beaming; her father wore the stoic expression he had begun to adopt the last week or so. He was under a tremendous amount of pressure—more than she could have envisioned, having only academic experience in business. But she understood what had gone wrong, and how a couple of poor decisions could lead to the decline of an otherwise solid company if those decisions were big enough. Papa's had been.

He carried the weight not only of bringing the company back, but of knowing he was directly responsible for the place it had gotten to. She did not envy him.

Her brother was here as well, and he smiled with a typical teen look of borderline cynicism when he saw her. She smiled back, glad that he seemed unaffected by the stress pressing down on her and Papa.

Her gaze scanned the others at the table, her smile sliding from her face. Spiros was there. Images and remembered passion swirled through Phoebe's mind and body and she fought to tamp them down. How could the wall she'd fought so hard to build around her memories crumble so easily?

He chose that moment to look up, his eyes catching hers. He was trying to convey something with his, but she refused to attempt to decipher what it was. She simply nodded in greeting, then went to say hello to her family, giving each one the traditional kisses on cheeks. Her brother, characteristic of his age, was less than enthusiastic in his teenage affection for an older sister.

Just to torment him a little, she chose to sit beside him, so he wouldn't be able to avoid all the hoopla dinner was destined to be.

"I do not rate a real hello?" Spiros asked from a couple of seats away on the round table.

"Good evening, Spiros."

His eyes narrowed, letting her know he was aware she knew exactly what he'd meant by ahello , and it had not been the word. But she wasn't doing physical affection with this man. Just seeing him was putting her hard-won composure at risk. She was not putting it to further detriment.

"Have you heard from Dimitri?" Spiros asked. "He and Grandfather were coming together."

"I haven't spoken to Dimitri in nearly a year. I would not expect him to call me and explain his tardiness to his engagement dinner."

Spiros looked shocked. "You have not seen him since...since...?"

"Since the last time our visits to our home country coincided."

"But that was last year!"

"Yes." And she was perfectly aware that Dimitri had been in Greece for the past few days, but he'd made no effort to contact her.

Spiros looked furious. She couldn't imagine why. Her relationship with his brother was nothing to him.

Her mother patted Phoebe's hand. "I am sure he will make up for his inattentiveness now that the engagement has been announced."

Phoebe smoothed her napkin in her lap. "It does not matter."

Spiros muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Like hell it doesn't." Then he frowned at her. "You have been very busy these past weeks."

There was no mistaking the censure in his tone.

She shrugged. "I have been working."

"With your father?" he asked, looking genuinely interested.

"Yes. I'm sure I told you that." She had mentioned her temporary position at Leonides Enterprises during one of their few phone calls. Hadn't she?

"So he offered you a job after all?"

"Of sorts," she said noncommittally.

Clearly if she moved to Paris to live with Dimitri she could not continue to work at Leonides Enterprises. They did not have an office in the City of Lovers. Her mouth twisted at the thought of that name for her

future home. She was not even sure she would be sharing Dimitri's bed. It was something they would have to discuss.

She might very well be the first married Greek woman to die a virgin, but she had no intention of allowing Dimitri access to her body if he kept a mistress. She also did not intend to tell him to get rid of the other woman. Every time she thought of having sex with the ice man, bile rose in her throat. So she avoided thinking of that aspect of her upcoming nuptials as much as possible.

Spiros looked bothered about something. Phoebe reminded herself that, whatever it was, it was of no concern to her. She was marrying his brother.

For the first time in two weeks the numbness of her soul was pierced, and the mental reminder of her future caused unwelcome agony deep in her soul. She looked away from Spiros and toward her brother, intending to ask about how school was going, but she couldn't make the innocuous question come out.

Not while she was screaming inside. How was she supposed to marry Dimitri when she loved Spiros? How could she spend family holidays with him while intimately tied to his brother? Even if it was in name only?

Before the kiss Phoebe might have been able to do it, but now she felt like she would shatter at the mere thought.

She would simply have to avoid family events in future. Dimitri would have to understand. If he didn't—too bad. She wasn't putting herself through that kind of hell on a regular basis. And maybe as time went on it would get easier. It had to.

Unreturned love could not live forever.

She forced her mouth to form words, asking her brother the question she'd meant to, only to receive a very teenage roll of the eyes. "We aren't in school right now, sis."

"Oh. I guess I'm out of the loop, huh?"

"Only a little," he said, with humor-filled sarcasm. "Don't sweat it. Mama says you are working like a slave at the company."

"Not a slave...but a lot of hours, yes."

"Will Papa expect the same of me right out of school?" Chrysanthos looked disturbed at the prospect. "I'm the son, and it'll be worse, won't it?"

"There are some things going on right now—hopefully nothing like it will be happening when you finish school."

"You think so? I really wanted to do some traveling before buckling down to my destiny, you know?"

She smiled. "I understand. You could always attend college overseas, like I did." He was due to start university the following year.

"You don't think Papa would be disappointed if I don't attend hisalma mater?"

"I think you have to do some things for yourself. You never know when that opportunity will no longer be open to you."

"Like you, you mean?" he asked shrewdly.

Her heart stuttered. "What do you mean?"

"You think I don't know what's going on, but I'm a teenager, not an idiot." He gave her the most serious look he ever had. "If you are doing it for me, don't."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek with spontaneous affection. "Don't worry about me, little brother. I'm a grown-up. I can take care of myself."

"Just so long as you aren't sacrificing yourself to take care of everyone else."

Her brother's concern when there had been nothing of the kind from her parents was almost enough to destroy her cool facade, but she took a deep breath and bucked up her resolve. "Thank you, but I will be fine."

They had been speaking in whispers, and when she looked up she caught a speculative look on Spiros's features, the same stoic expression on her father's, and a slightly worried frown on her mother's.

Phoebe pasted a smile on her face. "Has anyone phoned Tio Theo to find out what the hold-up is?"

"I will call Dimitri," Spiros said, and got up from the table to make the call.

He returned moments later, looking pale and shaken.

"What is the matter?" she asked, before she could think better of it.

"It is Grandfather. He's had another heart attack."

"Another?" Phoebe asked with dismay. She loved that old man like family. "I did not know he had one before."

Her father looked guiltily away, while Spiros merely shook his head as if trying to clear it. "You were studying... learning of it would only have distressed you. He would not have had another if he had agreed to have the bypass surgery when the doctor recommended it."

"But he didn't?" she asked in shock.

Anger flashed in Spiros's golden-brown eyes. "The stubborn old man refused until Dimitri promised to marry and give him grandchildren."

Thank goodness she was sitting down. Because if Phoebe had been standing her legs would not have held her up. Dimitri had had to be blackmailed into this marriage too? No wonder he had not contacted her. But how on earth did their families expect them to have any kind of happiness together when both the bride and groom were marrying against their will?

She turned to her father and asked in an angrier voice than she had ever used with him, "Have you and Tio Theo lost your minds? Did nothing but family legacies mean anything to you?"

Her father had the grace to look abashed, but it was far too little and far too late. Her own father was setting her up for the marriage from hell and he did not even care. The only thing that mattered to him was his precious company and his equally important—to him—pride.

She said a word that had her mother gasping her name.

Spiros looked like he'd been thinking the same one. "I have to go to the hospital."

And, despite everything that had happened, she could not let him down in his time of need. "I'll come with you."

"We all will," her mother said. "After all, Phoebe is practically family."

"Mom! Sheesh!" Her brother's exasperated exclamation almost made Phoebe smile.

Almost.

After arranging transportation for everyone, Spiros led Phoebe to his car. No one said anything about her not riding to the hospital with her own family. Why would they? As far as anyone else was concerned Spiros and Phoebe were still the best of friends.

And honestly? She couldn't fathom leaving him to his own devices at a time like this.

Theopolis Petronides had raised his grandsons after the death of their parents and his own beloved wife. Neither Spiros nor Dimitri were outwardly demonstrative, but there was no doubt how devoted they were to that old man.

Spiros's tightly clenched jaw and white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel spoke eloquently of how worried he was.

"He's a strong man. He will be fine," Phoebe said into the tense silence of the car.

"I pray that is true." Spiros downshifted and ran a red light. "Stubborn old man," he said, as cars honked and Phoebe prayed for more than his grandfather's health.

She wanted to ask about the deal Theo had made with Dimitri. She wanted to know why Spiros had not told her the truth of it. She wanted to know so many things. But right now was not the time to ask.

For the first time since the meeting with her father, Phoebe spared some real sympathy for Dimitri. Both of them had been pawns in an older generation's dreams. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. And she still saw no way out for herself.

She was not naive enough to believe that an emergency operation on his grandfather would compel Dimitri to renege on a promise made under duress. If she knew Petronides males, he would be even more set on following through than beforehand.

It was their way.

Personal and family honor above all.

Dimitri was in the waiting room when she and Spiros walked in. He looked up and she gasped. He was gray with stress, his eyes haunted.

Spiros crossed the room and took his brother in a bear-hug.

“It’s my fault,” Dimitri said in tormented tones when Spiros stepped back.

“It is his own fault for not having the surgery when he was told he should.”

“No... I upset him.”

“You two argued? This is nothing new. Again, I say, if he had had the surgery—”

“I told him I would not marry Phoebe,” Dimitri said, interrupting Spiros.

This time Phoebe’s knees wobbled, and she fell back into one of the waiting chairs. Dimitri’s words were so unexpected she desperately sought proof this was not some strange dream. The antiseptic air of the hospital provided it. Dreams didn’t have smells, did they?

Dimitri’s gaze connected with hers for the first time since she had arrived. “I am sorry, Phoebe.”

She nodded, totally clueless about what to say. That it was okay? That she didn’t mind? That she was relieved? She definitely was. But that made her feel guilty. How would her father save Leonides Enterprises now? And her relief was at the cost of Tio Theo’s health.

“What do you mean, you told him you refused to marry Phoebe?” Spiros asked, fury sharply edging every word.

“Some things are more important than promises.” Dimitri looked incredibly tired, but absolutely certain of that statement.

Then the story came out, and Phoebe listened in rapt fascination while Spiros glared like a bad-tempered guardian angel. Dimitri had a mistress, just as she had surmised. What she had not realized—and neither had he, apparently—was that he loved the other woman. Enough to break his vow to his grandfather and marry Xandra if she would have him. It was obvious that Dimitri felt deadly remorse for the way he had treated both Xandra and Phoebe.

Phoebe could not find it in her heart to blame him. She only wished they had talked before. Maybe together they could have come up with a solution.

Now everything was tangled in a Gordian knot she had no idea how to unravel.

Most disturbing, though, was the revelation that the other woman was pregnant and that she had disappeared without a trace. Dimitri had the best detective agencies in the world working on finding the French model, and so far nothing.

“You kept a mistress the entire time the understanding existed between our two families regarding your eventual marriage to Phoebe?” Spiros asked in a chilling voice.

Dimitri stood straighter, putting his shoulders back as if preparing to take whatever came his way. "Yes."

Spiros's fist connected with his brother's jaw in a resounding crack.

Phoebe yelped, and Dimitri crashed backward into the nondescript waiting room wall. He righted himself, but made no move to return his brother's gesture of anger.

## CHAPTER FIVE

SPIROS looked ready to take another swing at him, and that had Phoebe surging to her feet.

She grabbed his arm. "Stop it! That whole understanding was stupid, and apparently only Dimitri and I realized it."

Spiros glared down at her. "You didn't take lovers while you waited for my brother."

"I was not waiting for your brother—and, frankly, if I could have taken a lover and enjoyed it, I would have!"

Spiros looked like she had hit him. "You don't mean that."

"I don't know," she admitted. "And I don't care, either. Dimitri has a right to happiness, and none of you has the right to try to steal it from him. Not with emotional blackmail or guilt trips."

She was talking about herself too, but that didn't matter. Her chance at happiness had been a fleeting thing, and she wasn't going to spend the rest of her life lamenting her lot. Somehow she would help her father save the company, and one day she would get over Spiros.

But right now someone had to stop the two brothers from becoming enemies. And it looked like that someone was her.

"I am not trying to steal his happiness."

"Aren't you? Your brother has fallen in love with a woman who carries his child. She's disappeared because he let his duty to his family supersede his obligations to her. He's hurting. She's no doubt hurting." Everyone was hurting—was she the only one who saw that? "Dimitri needs your support, not your condemnation, and if you can't give it, you aren't the man I know you to be."

Dimitri's hand landed on her shoulder. "Thank you, Phoebe. I do not deserve your championship."

"Wrong." She turned and hugged him fiercely. "You did the right thing, telling your grandfather you could not marry me. I respect that choice and admire your courage. Never believe any different."

"I cannot believe this," Spiros muttered with disgust.

Phoebe turned to glare at him.

But he did not look repentant. "You do realize that you just hugged my brother for the first time in my memory? After you have both agreed that you will not marry."

"So?"



“So I should have seen how poorly suited the two of you are a long time ago.” Spiros still looked disgusted, but maybe it was not merely with his brother. “We all should have.”

“Yes, we should have,” her father said from behind her.

The sound of his voice surprised Phoebe as much as the words. Not that they meant anything.

Two weeks ago those words would have given her joy, but they were nothing but empty syllables now. Her future had not changed from an hour ago. Except for the unknown identity of the man she would have to marry. The company still had to be saved.

Without acknowledging either man’s comment, she returned to the seat she’d practically fallen into earlier. She looked at Dimitri. “How long do they anticipate the surgery taking?”

He answered—and from there the conversation moved away from their failed engagement. Spiros sat down beside her and she took his hand, holding it in silent comfort. He spared her a grateful glance filled with a mixture of other emotions she could not decipher.

Then he turned to engage his brother in a more detailed discussion of his grandfather’s health. Her father asked questions, and was the first to congratulate Dimitri on his upcoming parenthood.

Her mother had gone home with Chrysanthos, which was why it had taken her father so much longer to reach the hospital than Phoebe and Spiros.

“I will have to tell your mother to stop the wedding preparations,” Aristotle said when there was a lull in the conversation.

“I apologize for not knowing my own mind sooner,” Dimitri said somewhat stiffly.

Her father shrugged. “It is the way of life,” he said philosophically. But as the evening wore on it became obvious it was not only his old friend’s health he was worried about.

The survival of Leonides Enterprises lay heavily on him. And on Phoebe too. As much as she hated being the sacrificial goat, she knew as well as her father that something had to be done. She’d felt responsible before, but now, after working so closely with her father on the recovery measures, the knowledge of how dire was the situation was even more acute for her.

Her family’s livelihood and that of hundreds of employees hung in the balance.

Spiros swung back and forth between civility and borderline hostility with his brother. He had not forgiven the slight on family pride as easily as Phoebe had forgiven his behavior against her.

But she had no grudge to hold onto. Dimitri loved. And if Spiros had been willing to take his place she would have broken her promise without a second’s hesitation. That their kiss had meant nothing to Spiros had nearly destroyed her, but she was honest enough to admit to herself that she would have let Spiros make love to her even when the promise to Dimitri had stood. If he had encouraged her she would have gladly given him anything.

But Spiros did not see that side of things. All he saw was how his brother had let him down...like his parents. Phoebe hurt for them both.



So much pain and no end in sight...not with Xandra missing, tormenting Dimitri with “what ifs”. Not with Theo in surgery and at risk. Not with Spiros so set on family pride that he was blind to love himself. She was grateful that he was ignorant of her love, but she pitied Dimitri that Spiros was so blind to brotherly love right now, and to the deep feelings Dimitri had for his former mistress, how much they were tearing the older man apart.

Dimitri got up to check at the nurses’ station for any news, and Aristotle went to stretch his legs in the hospital courtyard. Phoebe turned to Spiros in the waiting room, now empty but for them. “You need to give him a break.”

“Who?” he asked, as if he didn’t know.

She glared at him. “Dimitri needs you right now. This is hard enough for him without you going all judgmental. He doesn’t need a family rejection as well.”

“He should have thought of that before...before...”

“Before what? Giving in to love and sully the Petronides name?” she asked with sarcasm.

“You think that is why I’m so angry?”

“Yes.” Why else would he be so mad at his brother?

“If Dimitri had told the truth to begin with—both to himself and to his girlfriend—this whole mess could have been avoided.” He looked away and then back at her, his gaze burning into hers. “You would have been saved a lot of pain.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I know I messed up that one time in my office, but, damn it, Phoebe, where do you come off thinking I care nothing for your feelings?”

“You wanted me to marry Dimitri.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“You told me you did. Don’t lie to me now.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.”

And maybe the moon had fallen from the sky. She just gave him a look. “We can discuss this another time. We need to discuss your problem with your brother now—before there’s an irreparable rift between you.”

“He did dishonor our family name, Phoebe.”

That was more what she’d expected, but somehow he’d said it with not nearly the conviction she’d thought he would. “Are you saying that your family name means more to you than your brother?”

“No, but the family name should mean something to him as well.”

“It does, and he wants to give it to his child. How can that be wrong?”

“That is not wrong. It is very right. But it is the way he went about things up to this point that is so wrong.”

“Like you have so far to talk.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve hardly been celibate this past four years.”

“It is nothing the same. I had no promised fiancée.”

“Only because you are younger than him. If you’d been the oldest you would have been the one in that ridiculous agreement.”

“Had I been, I would have honored it.”

“That is so easy to say, Mr. Casanova, when you didn’t have to live like a monk for four years.”

“Dimitri did not.”

“No, and you of all men should understand why.”

“Why me?”

“As you told me, Spiros, you have kissed many women—and done more with them—but you haven’t married anyone yet. What does that say for your sanctimonious judgments?”

He stared at her in shock, as if he could not believe she would take him to task. “The women I took to my bed understood there was no commitment involved.”

“That is so sad, Spiros...and I bet Dimitri thought Xandra understood the same thing.”

“She got pregnant. What are the chances?” His tone was more tired than judgmental, though.

“I don’t know, but I certainly consider it a blessed gift from God, and that you don’t does not speak well of you in my eyes, old friend.”

“I never said I didn’t. You take a lot of things for granted, you know that? And you have not treated me like a friend these past two weeks.” Hurt shadowed his beautiful eyes.

She steeled herself against it. “Ditto.”

“I have called you many times. You only respond infrequently.”

“You knew the truth about Dimitri being blackmailed into marriage to me.” Her heart stung with humiliation. As if this situation was not detrimental enough to her pride—and her heart. “Yet you didn’t tell me. That is not the action of a friend.”

“I thought telling you would only cause you more pain.”

“Do you think he and I could have built a marriage on that kind of foundation?” she asked in disbelief.

Spiros shook his head tiredly. “What does it matter what I think? You’ve refused to discuss anything of a personal nature with me since you ran from my office.”

“You’re the one who pulled away from me.”

“I made a mistake.”

“No. If I had ended up married to your brother that distance would have been necessary,” she was compelled to admit.

“But intolerable.”

She wanted to believe that. She really did. But right now trusting anything, even in his lifelong affection for her, was pretty hard. There had been too many disappointments, too many betrayals...too much pain lately.

She stood up. She was suffocating in emotion and she just wanted it to stop.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going home,” she said, making a snap decision. “My father can bring news.”

“Don’t leave, Phoebe.”

She clenched her hands. “Why?”

“I need you now.” His shoulders hunched. “You are my best friend.”

She could not deny that need—was not sure she would ever be able to. “I need some caffeine. Do you want anything?”

He stood. “I’ll go with you. We can bring drinks back for your father and Dimitri.”

Okay, so that scuttled her plans of some time alone. But, true to her see-sawing emotions tonight, she didn’t mind.

She slipped her hand in his again and squeezed. “All right.”

The sound of her mother’s voice laced with hysteria drew Phoebe away from her original course. She had intended to get something to eat now that she’d woken. She’d slept quite late after getting home in the wee hours of the morning. They had all waited until Theo’s surgery had been pronounced a success and the doctors had assured the Petronides brothers that the old man was on the mend.

She walked into the drawing room and found her mother pacing back and forth, practically yelling into the phone. Tabloid and more reputable newspapers were strewn over the sofa as well as the coffee

table. The thing they all had in common was that each one was graced with pictures of Dimitri with a woman Phoebe assumed must be Xandra.

Some pictures showed them sitting together at a café table. Some showed them in an obvious argument. Next to these images—and it appeared to be in every single paper—was a photo of Phoebe from her university yearbook.

She picked up one of the tabloids and started to read. The lurid headline had nothing on the baseness of the article itself. It implied everything from her being a duped innocent to being a participant in a sleazy ménage à trois. She picked up another paper and read its article. This one focused on Xandra's "supposed" pregnancy and her recent disappearance. Foul play was alluded to, and the reporter couldn't decide if Phoebe or Dimitri was the most likely culprit.

Several of the articles speculated about the monetary aspect of her merger with Dimitri, and some went so far as to suggest her father's company might not be as solvent as it appeared. Since it was not a publicly held company no one had been able to get any firm numbers to back up the theory, but that didn't stop them from guessing.

She had no doubt her father's pride was taking a severe beating today. Her mother was almost incoherent in her upset, but Phoebe couldn't tell if it was on her daughter's behalf or simply her own. Obviously the articles were embarrassing for everyone involved. Including poor Dimitri—and he was carrying a big enough burden of Petronides' guilt as it was.

She really pitied him. But judging from her mother's continued haranguing of her father things weren't going to be cherries and ice cream around here either.

"I can't believe you didn't warn me," her mother said in an aggrieved voice, several decibels down from when Phoebe had first entered the room. "You told me there wasn't going to be a wedding, but not about this. It is a disgrace."

Phoebe didn't stick around to hear more of the same. If the knowledge that his grandson was backing out of the marriage had sent Theopolis Petronides into heart failure, she couldn't imagine what these news stories were going to do. She needed to call Spiros.

Spiros stared at the ringing phone, but could not make himself pick up. The caller I.D. said it was Phoebe's cell phone. He'd wanted to talk to her for the last two weeks, but not right now.

Right now he was trying to deal with his fury at his brother for making such a mess, and with his own out-of-control emotions. The news articles were bringing back so many bad memories.

The Petronides name had been dragged through this kind of foul-smelling refuse by the media by his mother. She had not been discreet in her liaisons, and had been ignorant or simply uncaring of the effect her indiscretions had had on her family.

He remembered listening to his grandfather and father having shouting matches about it. Grandfather had not approved of Timothy taking his wife back after every infatuation burned itself out. He had argued that for the sake of their sons his own son needed to stand firm as a man, and if not divorce his wife at least separate from her.

Papa had countered with the argument that he loved his wife, tacking on as an afterthought that he might not have full access to his children if he separated from her. This last was what had always swayed his grandfather, however. To Timothy's claim of love he had always replied that he'd loved his wife more than life itself, but would never have tolerated her behaving in such a dishonorable way.

The thing about Mama was that she had not been a witch...she'd been lovable, and her sons had loved her. In spite of everything they had missed her when she'd left with her paramours, and prayed for her to come back. The last time she hadn't...and neither had their beloved if ineffectual father.

Spiros had vowed never to treat his family with such contempt—and never to allow another to do the same to him. Now his older brother was doing it—and not just to him and their grandfather, but to Phoebe as well. He knew it was unintentional, but that wasn't doing much to mitigate his anger at the moment. Dimitri had been Spiros's hero his whole life. How could the older man have been so stupid in his dealings with women?

If Dimitri had not wanted to marry Phoebe he should have had the guts to say so and call the promise off. Instead he had allowed them all to believe Phoebe was spoken for...off-limits.

If Spiros spoke to Phoebe right now she'd probably yell at him for being too hard on his big brother. Only Spiros had been through hell for years, trying to keep his hands to himself where Phoebe was concerned. And he'd done it. For four long years. Only to be tossed into a whole other kind of purgatory when he'd betrayed his brother and finally kissed Phoebe so passionately.

He'd spent the last two weeks trying to figure a way out of the marriage between Dimitri and Phoebe for her sake, convinced he'd lost his one chance at having her himself.

He had always been Phoebe's protector and he had failed her. That day in his office and in the two weeks since. He should have told her about the blackmail. Maybe she would have understood better about his own position. Maybe she wouldn't have hated him so much.

And now there was only one thing that could right the wrong his family had done to hers. Marriage.

Certainly not between Dimitri and Phoebe.

She deserved better. She deserved a husband who would not be pining for another woman while taking her to his bed.

She deserved Spiros. But he was certain she no longer wanted him.

No doubt her father would only be too happy to agree to new terms—the company was still in deep water financially, after all. And her mother would be grateful for an action that would separate Phoebe's name from Dimitri's. But what would Phoebe think?

Somehow Spiros did not think she would be falling all over herself with thanks. In fact he had no doubt that he had his work cut out for him if he wanted to convince her to go along with the idea at all.

He wouldn't consider the possibility that he might fail. He'd spent enough time pining for Phoebe. Now he was going to have her. Somehow he would make it up to her so she was happy to have him too.

Not only was she not grateful, but his lifelong friend, the woman who had haunted one too many of his dreams lately, was as coldly withdrawn as a marble statue.

He'd never seen her like this. Not when she was angry. Not when she was hurt. Not when she was disappointed. But that spark that had been missing the past couple of weeks was still hiding, and in its place was an icy core that was nothing like his Phoebe.

"So you are offering to marry Phoebe in your brother's place?" Aristotle asked, with his own lack of warmth.

"That is correct. It will go the longest way to distance her from Dimitri's scandal, and stop speculation that she has something to do with Xandra Fortune's disappearance."

"What assurances do we have that you do not have your own floozy waiting in the wings somewhere?" Basila asked.

Phoebe turned her cold-eyed stare on her mother. "Xandra Fortune is not a floozy. She is the woman Dimitri loves, and I find it personally insulting that you refer to her in such a fashion."

Wow. She really stood up for what she believed. She always had, and Spiros couldn't help the spurt of pride that gave him.

Her mother, however, did not look impressed. Her mouth gaped like a hooked fish. Aristotle made a sound of displeasure, but Phoebe stared him down.

"It is not merely your name being bandied about, Phoebe Leonides. This scandal reflects on us all," her mother finally got out.

"Be that as it may, leave off making your digs about floozies. I knew about Dimitri's girlfriend. I would know if Spiros had one as well. He's never hidden his personal life from me."

"That is true...but this whole thing feels a bit incestuous, if you ask me," Aristotle said.

"While Phoebe and I have been as close as any two siblings for two decades, she is not my sister—nor do I harbor sibling-type feelings for her."

Aristotle nodded, as if taking Spiros's word for it, but Phoebe gave him an indecipherable look.

"Again, I need to ask what kind of assurances we have that you will not back out of the engagement as your brother has done?" Basila asked.

Spiros lifted his briefcase and unlocked it to open it. He pulled out a sheaf of papers. "This is a contract that stipulates I will supply the same capital investment my brother was going to provide. I am prepared to sign it before the wedding. Right now, in fact."

Aristotle nodded, his dark eyes gleaming with approval.

For the first time Basila stopped wringing her hands and looking ready to break down crying at any minute. "You are serious?" she asked.

"As serious as I have ever been in my life."

“Then we accept,” Aristotle said.

Phoebe stood up and looked at all of them with the same dispassionate stare. “Excuse me, Papa, but this is not the Middle Ages. You cannot accept a marriage proposal on my behalf. That is something I must do for myself, and I am not prepared to do so at this time.”

“What do you mean, Phoebe?” her mother asked shrilly.

“I need time to think.”

“How much time?” Spiros asked.

“A week.”

“Impossible,” her father stated. “If we want to alleviate more scandal it must be done at once.”

“Tomorrow?” Spiros asked Phoebe, recognizing the stubborn look tightening her features.

“Forty-eight hours, and that is as much of a compromise as I am willing to make. Surely you cannot begrudge me that much time to be sure of my future? We are talking about the rest of my life, and how it is to be lived and with whom, you know.”

“Of course. I...” Basila looked older than her years and very vulnerable. “We want you to be happy, Phoebe. We do.”

“Then give me some time to decide if I can be...with Spiros.”

Aristotle sighed. “If two days will give you time to adjust to your circumstances, then take it.”

He made it sound like Phoebe’s decision was a done deal. Probably for him it was. After all, Phoebe had agreed to marry Dimitri, who she had voiced numerous concerns about. She was now being asked for the sake of both their families to marry the man who up until two weeks ago had been her best friend. And as far as her parents knew he still was.

Spiros knew differently, and he could only hope her parents’ confidence was not misplaced.

Phoebe didn’t respond to her father, but simply shook her head and walked out of the room.

Spiros stood to leave as well. “Again, I am profoundly sorry for the effect my brother’s actions have had on your family. I will wait to hear from you.”

Both Aristotle and Basila hugged him before he left.

## CHAPTER SIX

PHOEBE bumped into a tall, wiry body as she left the drawing room.

“Ooph...you’re more solid than you look,” her brother complained as he grabbed her shoulders to steady her.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No problem. You look like you could use a break. Come with me—I’ve got just the thing.”

Before she had a chance to say yes, no or maybe, she was being steered outside to Chrysanthos’s waiting car.

“Get in. It’s safe,” he said, as she hesitated at the open passenger door.

“Uh...”

“She’s a classic, not decrepit. I did all the renovations myself.”

“Papa let you?” Phoebe asked in shock as she allowed herself to be guided into the seat.

Her brother waited to answer until he had gone around the car and climbed into the driver’s seat. “He didn’t know I was doing them until it was finished.”

“But...” Hadn’t her father offered to buy her brother a car, the same as her? Or had things been tighter in their personal finances than she’d realized?

“He never brought up buying me a car, and neither did I.”

“I bet he regretted that when he saw this.”

“She’s a beaut.” The car certainly sounded healthy, purring to life as her brother started it.

“I’m just amazed you did this... I had no idea your strengths were in this direction.”

“Oh, it’s just a hobby. A guy’s gotta have ’em, you know?”

She smiled for the first time in days. “Sure.”

“So, I was listening at the door when Spiros was talking to you all.”

“Didn’t Mama teach you better?”

He just snorted. “Please. I’m no mushroom.”

“You don’t like being kept in the dark?” she guessed, doing her best to translate his teenspeak.

“Would you?”

She thought of all the things her father should have told her over the past four years but had not—and the things Spiros had kept from her as well. “No. I don’t like it at all.”

“So what’s the big deal with this marriage thing?”

“You said you were listening.”

“I was. I got that Leonides Enterprises is in trouble and we need a lotta money, yeah?”



“Yes.”

“But how did Papa come to the conclusion that selling you was the way to do it?”

It was what she’d accused her father of, but it sounded so much worse coming from her brother’s mouth. “I don’t think he sees it that way. He wanted our families joined all along. That’s why he and Theo pushed Dimitri and me into making the promise we did four years ago. The fact that the marriage itself was a way of digging the company out of a very deep hole was a side benefit.”

“If that’s true, why is he pushing you to marry Spiros now?”

“Same reasons.”

“He still wants our families connected?”

“Yep. Too bad Dimitri and Spiros don’t have a younger sister, isn’t it?”

“Bite your tongue. I’m so not ready to get married.”

“I wasn’t four years ago.”

“Are you ready now?”

“I don’t have much choice.”

“You do. You don’t have to marry Spiros.”

“Then the company goes under.”

“No. Then Papa has to take it public.”

“We may be past where that would help. The situation gets worse the longer the infusion of capital doesn’t happen. It wouldn’t look that good to investors right now, and Papa would probably end up losing control at this point.”

“So we start over.”

She loved her brother’s attitude, but she couldn’t share it. “I think it would kill Papa and Mama.”

“Really kill...like a heart attack?”

“Or something. Tio Theo isn’t the only one who works too hard and hasn’t exercised enough in the last ten years.”

Chrysanthos headed into the city, his expression sober. “So you are going to marry Spiros?”

“Probably.”

“Why did you agree to the promise with Dimitri in the first place? You didn’t know we needed money then.”

“I wanted to get over someone else...make him see me as a woman.”

“Did it work?”

“Not the way I planned.”

“You aren’t over him?”

“No.”

“Doeshe see you as a woman?”

“Yes. But my promise got in the way of him doing anything about it.”

“Was it Spiros, then?”

She laughed. “How did you get so smart?”

“Hey, I’ve managed to go my whole school career without getting twisted around some girl’s finger. You can’t do that without being aware of what’s going on around you relationship-wise.”

“Everyone else thinks Spiros and I are like brother and sister.”

“People see what they want.”

“You don’t see it that way?”

“You make the guy crazy, Phoebe. You have for a while. And the way you look at him...it’s all heated. Not a sister look. And those I know, being your brother and all.”

He was right.

Chrysanthos took Phoebe to a popular dance spot, and she spent hours dancing with her brother’s friends and perfect strangers. It was fun, and it did exactly what her brother had promised it would. It got her mind off Spiros and the whole marriage thing for a while.

She exhausted herself physically and was able to fall asleep when she got home late that night. The next morning she felt strangely at peace when she woke.

The old adage that sleeping on something made it look more bearable in the morning had proved true. This time. What had helped as well were Chrysanthos’s words about Spiros. Her brother had said she’d been making him crazy for a long time. Okay, so the comment had been highly embarrassing when he’d made it, but, looking back, it gave her hope.

Apparently Spiros had been attracted to her for a while. She hadn’t noticed. But she’d convinced herself it was never going to happen. So she hadn’t been looking for the signs.

When they had kissed in her tiny student apartment his passion had been too overwhelming for her to blind herself to it. But then later he had dismissed the kiss as nothing special.

Now she had to wonder. Had he played down its impact on both of them because he refused to compromise his integrity? She had been promised to his brother, and Spiros had made it more than obvious that he placed the highest priority on keeping promises. He would not have wanted to compromise her ability to do so.

But this was all speculation.

There was only one way to find out if he wanted her. The question was, did she have the courage to push the issue? Could she face another rejection if she was wrong?

When faced with a loveless and passionless marriage as a possibility if she didn't, she knew she had no choice. Better to deal with rejection now than a lifetime of marriage to a man she loved but who didn't want her. What she could have tolerated with Dimitri—a marriage of convenience—would be pure torture with Spiros. And she couldn't do that to herself. Not even for the salvation of Leonides Enterprises.

Spiros let himself into his apartment, checking the voicemail on his mobile phone as he did so. Still no word from Aristotle or Phoebe. It had only been the better part of a day, but that didn't prevent his impatience from growing. He wanted to know if Phoebe would agree to be his.

He poured himself a whiskey and took a sip just as the buzzer for downstairs went off.

He pressed the intercom button. "Who is it?"

"Phoebe."

What was she doing here? Had she come to tell him her answer in person? He pressed the unlock buzzer and then waited for her to arrive.

Her unmistakable knock sounded on his door and he let her in, scrutinizing her features for clues as to what she had decided. She looked...resolute.

Was that good or bad? And what was he? A woman, that he should be so worried about all this?

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked as she sat on the edge of the butter-yellow leather sofa.

It was very comfortable, but he still wasn't sure about the color. But it went with the rest of the room and, according to the decorator who had done his apartment, that was what mattered.

"What are you having?" Phoebe asked.

"Whiskey."

She scrunched her nose in a wholly adorable way. "Maybe a wine cooler?"

"We're in Greece, Phoebe. Not the States."

"So? Mix some wine with club soda and juice."

He left and returned a few minutes later, carrying a glass full of a pale pink beverage. He'd made it for her before, but gave her a hard time about it as a matter of course. He handed it to her. "Your wine cooler."

"Thank you." Her smile was not up to its usual wattage, but it was better than nothing.

"You ever hear the term high-maintenance?"

"Yes." A mischievous glint shone in her dark eyes. "I've looked it up, even, and one of the definitions just said Greek men."

"I think not. Here I sit, drinking a simple whiskey, while you ask for a concoction of three different beverages."

"Is it a Scotch or a malt whiskey?" she asked, all innocence.

"Malt." He'd been in the mood.

"How old?"

He frowned, guessing where this was going. "Old enough."

"And expensive enough too, if I don't miss my guess. You had to go through a special supplier to get it, didn't you?"

"Naturally."

"Whereas my drink is made up of three easy-to-come-by, not so expensive ingredients. I rest my case... High-maintenance, thy name is Spiros."

Warmth went through him, and some of the tension he'd been feeling drained away. "It is good to have you teasing me again, by the way."

"I haven't felt much like joking about anything lately."

This he had noticed. "I am sorry for that."

"I'm relieved Dimitri backed out." She looked down, no longer willing to meet his eyes. "I know Papa and Mama are very upset, but I'm glad. I am not a good daughter."

He could not believe what he was hearing. "You are a very good daughter. You were willing to marry a man you believed would make you miserable in order to maintain their livelihood and lifestyle."

"I wouldn't have been miserable. I just wouldn't have been happy," she said in a low voice.

And suddenly the thought of her less than perfectly happy was too much for him to bear. "Thankfully, you face neither fate."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"We have been friends for years, and other than the last two weeks we have always gotten along."

“We fight.”

“Yes, but we also make up. It would not be good to marry someone with whom you were not comfortable disagreeing.” The truth was, he was more comfortable with her on every level than with any other woman he had ever known—more than anyone, even his brother and grandfather.

“That’s true.” She was looking at him again, studying him like she was trying to see something.

“What?” he asked.

“There’s more to marriage than being compatible as friends.”

“It’s a start.”

“Yes, but for it to work there has to be more.”

“What more exactly are you talking about, Phoebe?”

“Sexual compatibility.”

He choked on his whiskey, and nearly dropped the heavy crystal glass. “What?” he gasped out between wheezing breaths, while the alcohol burned his throat in a way it had not since his first drink.

“I want to test our sexual compatibility.”

Impossible. He had not heard those words out of his bya’s lips. “You did not say this to me.”

“I did.”

“No. I did not hear it.”

“Stop being stubborn. You heard me.”

“You want to test our sexual compatibility?”

“Yes.”

She was serious. After what had happened in her student apartment, how could she doubt their compatibility in this way?

This was ridiculous.

“No way. I won’t do it.”

She put her drink down and stood, that expression of determination back. “That’s unfortunate, because I won’t marry you if I’m not sure we can satisfy one another in the bedroom. You’ll have to find another way to redeem your family’s honor.”

She turned to leave, and he was so shocked by her words that he let her get all the way to the door before he barked out an order for her to stop.

She faced him and waited by the door.

“You can’t be serious, Phoebe.”

“I am.” And, damn it, she looked it.

“Surely after that kiss in your apartment you cannot doubt we share a suitable rapport?” Damn it. He sounded like a politician, not a man hot to share her bed. And he was. Very hot.

She winced, and he figured she agreed. “That was very one-sided.”

“I was more turned on than I have ever been,” he admitted, refusing to hide behind euphemisms any longer.

“Yet you found it so easy to dismiss the encounter as meaningless.”

“You were promised to my brother.”

“So you pretended something profound had meant nothing?”

“Yes.” If she wanted the truth, he would give it to her.

“You lied to me?”

“Yes.” And he was not proud of that fact.

“Your lie hurt me.”

“I am sorry.”

She shrugged, as if his apology meant nothing, and that stung.

“You do not believe I am sincere?”

“I believe you put more importance on family honor than on not hurting people who are supposed to matter to you. You hurt me. You hurt Dimitri. If you had been Dimitri you would have married me and left the mother of your child in the cold.”

“I would not have gotten another woman pregnant,” he said through gritted teeth.

Phoebe looked at him for several seconds of silence. “I believe you.”

“Then believe me when I say that we are in perfect accord physically.” He was still reeling from her accusations of hurting the people he cared about, but he could not allow himself to get sidetracked from their initial discussion.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean that this is not a negotiable point.”

“It should not be a point at all. You already know the answer—there is no need for further testing.”

“So you say.”

“Yes.” And his word should be good enough. Besides, she had been there. The true surprise was that she had believed his denial of how powerful it had been.

But she had believed, and she had been hurt—and there was only one way to make up for that. If she would let him.

“How can I know you are telling me the truth now?” she asked, proving her mind was traveling along the same path.

Only she had a different destination in mind.

“Because I am.”

“Not good enough. You lied to me once, according to you...and you could do it again. And I wouldn’t find out until it was too late to rectify the problem with anything but a divorce. Mama is upset enough about the current scandal. That would unhinge her completely.”

“There will be no divorce,” he bit out. How could she even suggest a thing?

“That is my hope as well. But if there is not love between us at least we need to know we are a good match sexually. We can build on that.”

“You love me. You said so.” Okay, she’d stopped herself from saying it completely, but he knew that was what she’d meant.

She flinched, but then she shrugged. “My feelings, or lack thereof, are not up for discussion right now.”

“Phoebe, I have always loved you.”

She looked both sad and happy at that. “I know. As a very dear friend—probably the most dear friend in your life. But you still turned me away when I needed you most. You aren’t in love with me, but if you truly want me I think we can make a marriage work.”

The fact she believed he had abandoned her when she had needed him most was a shard of pain lodged deep inside him. “I was trying to protect you.”

“It didn’t work.”

“Of that I am aware. I knew I’d made a mistake after you had gone. You would not talk about it later, though.”

“There was nothing to discuss any longer. I was engaged to your brother.”

“Yes.”

“Regardless of why, you did not want to marry me. Now you do. For reasons I find personally hard to trust. I need other assurances.”

“You are saying if I make love to you, you will marry me?”

“I am saying that if we make love and it is good it will help me make a choice in your favor.”

“But surely you know...sometimes these things take more than one effort to establish.”

“You mean our sexual compatibility?”

“Yes.” What else had they been discussing these past ten minutes?

She cocked her head to one side. “Do you doubt your ability to please me?”

“Of course not.” He’d given her so much pleasure with a kiss that she had blacked out.

“Then it’s my ability to satisfy you that you doubt. To be honest, that has me worried too. Which is why I’m here.”

“That’s not what I meant, either.”

She looked at him like he’d lost some of his marbles in the last few minutes. Hell, maybe he had. “There are only two options.”

“I’m just saying it doesn’t always go smoothly the first time. I don’t want you turned off from sex and thinking you don’t want to get married because the loss of your virginity is painful.”

“So it is your performance that has you concerned?”

“No, damn it.”

“Prove it.”

“This is ridiculous,” he felt compelled to say, though his resistance to the idea had dwindled to almost nothing.

“No more so than a twenty-first-century father selling his daughter to save his company.”

“I am not buying you!”

“What would you call it?”

“Marriage. Families supporting one another.”

“But you wouldn’t give the kind of support outlined in the contracts you brought to the house if you didn’t marry me.”

“I would if you asked me to.”

She stared at him, her expression stunned. “You mean that?”



“Of course.”

“But my father would not accept without our marriage.”

“I think he would.”

“Then why didn’t you just offer the money?”

“Because I want to marry you.”

“Why?”

“I need you in my life. If nothing else, I have learned that lesson over the past weeks.”

“Okay.”

“So you will marry me?” he asked with cautious optimism.

“I meant okay I believe you. But I still want to make sure we’ve got both sex and friendship going for us. Is that really so much to ask?”

He looked down into her beautiful but troubled dark eyes and shook his head. No, it was not too much to ask. She had been through so much in a short period of time, and she was feeling very out of control. In essence, she was simply trying to take some of that control back.

And, like every time but one when she had come to him for help, he could do nothing but assure she was given what she needed.

The truth was, if he’d helped that one time as well, none of the subsequent public scandal would have been caused. Dimitri’s girlfriend would not have gone missing and his grandfather would have had his surgery under less life-or-death circumstances.

He wasn’t going to screw up that way again.

“Come here, Phoebe.”

Phoebe couldn’t believe he was going to make love to her. But she could see from the serious expression in his golden brown eyes that was exactly what he had planned. Coming here tonight had not been a mistake.

Spiros understood, even if he did not agree. And he’d told her he wanted to marry her irrespective of the money deal between their families. Even if it was only because he’d realized how important their friendship was to him, that was still good to know.

His eyes burned over her with the same flame of desire she’d seen that night in her apartment. They were going to make love. She was so keyed-up by the prospect she could barely breathe.

Her body drawn by a relentless invisible cord, she moved toward him.

He reached out when she was close enough and pulled her the rest of the way, his mouth coming down toward hers even as their bodies came together.

“Never doubt that I want you.” He spoke against her lips in a low but firm voice.

“Show me,” she challenged.

“Oh, I will.”

Then he kissed her. The caress against her lips did not last long, but it touched her to the very marrow of her being.

“Your mouth is perfect, so kissable,” he murmured against the very lips he was praising.

“I couldn’t imagine doing this with Dimitri.”

“You are not to try to imagine doing anything with him ever again.”

She almost laughed at the possessive growl, but had a feeling he would not share her amusement. “You were the one who told me I had to marry him. That you wanted me to.”

“I believed it was the only way.”

“And now you think the only way for your family’s pride to be salvaged is to marry me yourself?” There was no bitterness in her voice, only awe at his unswerving sense of right.

She had known her whole life she could count on Spiros, and he only bolstered that fact with his actions. What she had not realized before was that her ability to trust his integrity implicitly superseded her ability to trust him emotionally. Perhaps one day that would change.

After all, she had not believed he could ever want her. But that had changed.

“It is not something I regret.”

“Are you sure?”

He didn’t bother to answer, simply renewed the kiss, his lips staking a claim that she knew he would be intent on keeping this time. His honor demanded it.

His hands traveled down her body, as if memorizing the dips and valleys that made up her figure. Then he was swinging her high against his chest and carrying her down the hall toward his bedroom.

Only he did not stop at his bedroom door, but carried on to the oversized balcony at the back of his apartment. He had removed all of the wall except the support beams that separated the back bedroom from the balcony, and created an extra-large outdoor living space right in downtown Athens. He’d even installed a small spa in one corner.

He didn’t take her to the spa, though. He took her to the double lounge that she’d shared with him many times—only in a very different capacity. It was designed to lift at opposite sides, so they could face each other in a lounging position, which they’d done many times in the past while sharing a rousing game

of cards.

But right now it was completely flat, making it the size of an oval-shaped double bed. He laid her onto the cushions. They were covered in a polished cotton upholstery of such a fine weave that it felt like silk against her heated skin.

“You look so perfect there.” He stepped back and began to undress. “I cannot believe you doubt the chemistry between us. I have wanted you for a long time, pethi mou .”

“You hid it from me.”

“Too well, apparently.”

“So fix my misconceptions now...”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

But he'd already fixed one. Phoebe didn't have to be intimately acquainted with male anatomy to see that he was aroused.

Especially when he unzipped his pants.

Nervous, but determined to match him, she reached for the hem of her top.

“Stop,” he ordered.

“Why?”

“Because I want you to.”

“But...”

“I will undress you for this first time. It is both my right and my privilege.”

“Oh.” She didn't know why it mattered to him, but the concept made her feel cherished, and lent an air of specialness to what they were doing. She wasn't about to argue with that.

This was a special moment. Not only because it was her first time, but because she was finally making love with the man she had been in love with for years.

Letting her hands fall to her sides, she watched him finish undressing. She had seen him in swim trunks before, so his perfectly sculpted muscles were no surprise, nor was the golden tone of his skin, or the curly black hair on his chest, thinning as it traveled down his stomach.

But seeing those things in this situation had a profound impact on her. Heat suffused her body, while she felt a tremble work its way from her core outward.

“You are incredibly beautiful,” she whispered,

He stopped in the act of pulling off his silk boxers and stared at her, nonplussed. “Men are not beautiful, pethi mou .”

“You are.”

He laughed a little, shook his head, and then laughed again. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

“I am glad to hear my body pleases you.”

“It always has.”

He nodded and pushed the boxers off, allowing that part of him that made him so intensely masculine to surge upward. It was big, and pulsingly alive. A darker color than the rest of his skin, his sex stood out proudly from his body in testament to the desire he claimed to have for her.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“My friends at university told me that the pictures of men in magazines were not representative. That the average man was not nearly so...um...happily blessed in his nether regions.”

Spiros shrugged. “This is true. Are you disappointed?”

“No...I...um...I...don’t think you are the average man.”

Once again he laughed, but this time more fully. “I do not measure myself against other men.”

“Liar.”

He winked. “Perhaps once or twice I have eyed the competition, but a man must learn how to make love to a woman, not merely have the tool to do so. It matters not how one measures in comparison without that.”

“Even if that measurement is very impressive?”

“Be careful, or you will make me blush.”

“Maybe I’d like to see that.”

“I think you would rather feel right now, byba. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know...would I?”

He came down on the double lounge, his hot body above hers. “Trust me, you would.”

“I do trust you, Spiros. More than anyone or anything.”

“I am glad to hear it, Phoebe.” He leaned down and kissed her again, then started divesting her of her clothing. “Let’s get rid of these, shall we?”

“If you insist,” she tried to joke, but her voice came out too breathy, and just a little high.

“Oh, I do.” His voice was sultry, and sensual as sin. Wow. Justwow . And maybe darn.

His fingertips traced her skin as he removed her clothing, sending shivers throughout her body as he removed one article of clothing after another. She’d expected him to spend extra time on commonly accepted erogenous zones, was even preparing herself for it. What she was not prepared for was the way he found nerve-rich centers in the most unexpected locations and spent time with his hands and mouth playing to her sensitivity.

Places like the arch of her foot. And just behind her knee. And the small of her back. The nape of her neck. And the underside of her chin. Yes, her nipples were responsive, achingly so, but by the time he got to them she was so aroused she cried out in pleasure as his mouth closed over one hardened bud. When he sucked, she bowed up off the lounge, feeling the cataclysm she had felt once before at his touch building inside her again. And he brought her to it without giving her a chance to catch her breath or touch him or anything. Building, building, building, until her whole body went rigid and then convulsed in ecstasy.

She lay there, a boneless heap, and thought at least this time she hadn’t passed out.

He wasn’t finished with her yet, though. In fact, from the rigid hardness pressing against her, he was a long way off from it.

He started touching her again—this time his hands going between her legs, his fingertip slipping inside her, pressing massaging...making her ache all over again. He added another finger to the first as he started speaking to her, telling her how beautiful she was, how much she excited him, how different it was with her than any other woman he had been with, how she was made for him.

She didn’t think he knew what he was saying...she’d heard of sex talk...but she liked it. She didn’t care if he didn’t mean it. Hearing those things while he touched her so intimately made the experience absolutely right.

He built the ecstasy again, slowly but inexorably, until she was shaking underneath him and begging him with little whimpers to complete his possession of her body. When he did it, there was a stinging pain that made her cry out and try to push him off her.

But he didn’t move. At all . He just waited, talking in that low, seductive voice right in her ear. Telling her it would get better, that the pain was natural, inevitable in one so innocent. And he was right...it did get better. She made an experimental wiggle and an arc of enjoyment shot through her.

He began to move, and she realized the pain wasn’t gone completely, but pleasure was there too. And it was so special, so incredibly intimate to have him inside her, that she would not wish him anywhere else.

He reached between them, carefully touching the bud of her pleasure as he continued to talk to her between kisses, coaxing her body into the response he wanted. And when he climaxed with a shout, the pulse of warmth, the swell of his flesh inside her at the last moment, sent her over the edge again. This time she collapsed back onto the lounge, just barely with it enough to notice the sting as he withdrew slowly.

“Does it hurt every time?” she asked.

“No. But we need to let you heal before we repeat this experience.”

“Oh.” Healing sounded good. The experience had been awesome, putting all her fears about him not being truly attracted to her at rest, but she was going to be feeling it for a while, she could tell.

He cuddled her for a long time, before bathing with her, keeping constant physical contact, but he wouldn't let her spend the night because it would upset her parents, he said.

His insistence that she leave heightened her certainty that she had to go through with the proposal for him and her father she had been working out in her head over the past twenty-four hours. She was pretty confident of their physical relationship, but there were still some assurances she needed.

They made plans to meet in her father's office the next afternoon, and then she drove herself home, sure that if he loved her she wouldn't be spending the night alone—not after they had made love the first time.

Spiros watched Phoebe come into the room with a foreign hunger. It was more than simply being turned on by her presence. He was hungry for her, not just her body. He'd missed her over the past weeks, and last night had only brought into sharp relief how much.

He'd hated sending her home after their time of intimacy. But he would not be responsible for her parents getting angry with her or denigrating her actions.

In some ways he understood her need to test their compatibility. He'd done too good a job of convincing her that their first kiss had meant nothing to him. And he had hurt her. Something he would not easily forgive himself for and a reality he would do his best to make up for.

He had never reacted to a woman so strongly. On any level. At first he had believed the difference was their close friendship, but he was beginning to wonder if there wasn't more to it. Love.

Could he have fallen after spending a lifetime determined to avoid the emotion?

“Good afternoon, Father. Spiros.” Phoebe did not smile, and she was dressed as if they should be in a boardroom.

Although, looking around the older man's office, Spiros considered that perhaps discussing their upcoming wedding here was little better. It was why he'd taken the contracts to the Leonides home the first night. For him, this was not merely a business proposal.

“Good afternoon, Phoebe,” Aristotle said. “I called your office earlier, but you were not there.”

“No, I wasn't.”

The older man frowned at the non-answer.

Spiros stepped forward and gave Phoebe a traditional greeting. She was stiff in his arms, but she did not reject him. Was she shy now, in front of her father? Worried he would know what they had done?

Aristotle indicated a seating area surrounding a low table over by the window. “Let's sit over there. Though I still think we should have at least met at a restaurant.”

“Why?” Phoebe asked as she moved across the plush carpet in her Italian heels. “This is a business

meeting—business I prefer will have no chance of being overheard by a passing waiter or fellow eater.”

“You have a point,” the older man said heavily.

Phoebe sat down in a chair, leaving either end of the couch for Spiros and her father. Both men sat.

“I take it you are now willing to agree to the marriage?” Aristotle asked.

Fully expecting an unqualified agreement after their activities of the previous night, Spiros was struck dumb by Phoebe’s next words.

“If certain conditions are met, yes. But there are stipulations I will not be moved on, and I don’t know how open either of you will be to fulfilling them.”

It was a good thing he couldn’t speak, or the words whirling furiously in Spiros’s mind would have revealed his and Phoebe’s secret in no uncertain terms.

Her father was not so impeded. “What are you talking about? What kind of conditions? You think to hold me hostage with my company’s well-being?”

“Isn’t that what you’ve already done with me?” Phoebe asked, without a tremor of emotion in her voice.

Aristotle flinched as if struck. “That was not my intention.”

“But it is the reality. So let’s dispense with false protestations and get down to establishing bargaining positions. The way I see it is this—Spiros wants to redeem his family’s honor.”

Spiros nodded. That much he could do at least—though she was certainly oversimplifying his reasoning.

“Father wants to save his company.”

Aristotle nodded.

“Neither of you would feel your needs were met simply by a large loan being tendered by Spiros.”

“No,” the two men said in unison.

While he had offered that option, he had also told Phoebe he needed her. Did she remember that?

“That is what I thought. The family merger being via marriage is almost as important as the other issues.”

Again the two men spoke in accord. “Yes.”

“I too want to see the company saved, and for Spiros to be at peace with his brother—which I don’t think will happen unless he is given an opportunity to right the wrongs he perceives.”

“Yes,” Spiros agreed.

“The only thing hanging in the balance is the rest of my life.”

“Mine too,” Spiros said.

“Yes,” Phoebe acknowledged.

“You said you had requirements for the marriage to take place?”

“I do.” She handed a sheaf of papers to each man and kept one for herself.

Spiros looked down at his. The top page was a simple contract—not legal so much as a formal acknowledgment of certain things. Things that she should not feel the need to spell out. He flipped to the second page before he let the growl of irritation past his lips.

The following pages were a formal contract that guaranteed Phoebe two things to do with the company. The first was a seat on the Leonides board of directors. The second was half of whatever interest in the company was granted to Spiros because of his investment. Again, that should go without saying. She was to be his wife. Half of all he had would be hers.

Funnily enough, there was no prenuptial agreement spelling that particular truth out.

Aristotle was silent until he got to the last page of the documents, and then he started to splutter.

Phoebe clasped her hands in her lap and stared at both men. “I do not think my stipulations are unreasonable.”

“You want to sit on the board of directors? You are not even twenty-five yet.”

“It’s my life being sacrificed to save the company, I believe that gives me a place regardless of my age or experience.”

“These other requirements...they are an insult.”

“I presume you are discussing my contract with Spiros?”

“You know that I am.”

“So you think it insulting that I retain a real and material interest in the company?”

Aristotle just glared. “It is not necessary.”

“In your opinion.”

“I am your father.”

Phoebe said nothing, but the look in her eyes said an important facet of father-daughter trust had been lost between them. And the stubborn tilt of her chin said she wasn’t budging, regardless.

“I have no problem with the contract you want me to sign, but I agree that the terms are insulting to me,” Spiros said.

“I am sorry it offends you, Spiros. Truly.” And her expression was as sincere as her words. “But I have my reasons.”



“They are not reasons you will discuss in front of me,” her father slotted in, faster than Spiros could take a breath.

“I will not agree to the marriage until he signs the contract,” Phoebe said with intransigence.

“I will sign.” But he would make her explain her so-called reasons to him later.

“Good.” She turned to Aristotle. “And you, Father? Will you sign your contract?”

“It requires both my signature and Spiros’.”

“I am aware of it. But he has already said he will sign.”

The older man sighed, looking every one of his years. “Yes, I will agree to your terms.”

“Perfect. Then I think we can go out to lunch to celebrate,” Phoebe said, as if a business negotiation had gone well.

Aristotle shook his head as he signed all three copies of the contract relating to the company. “I need to go home and speak to your mother. Informing her of stipulations three and five on Spiros’s personal contract is not something that should be done over the phone.”

“You aren’t going to make me break the news to her?” Phoebe asked, sounding shocked.

“It is the least I can do,” her father replied gruffly.

Phoebe stood and gave an impulsive hug to her father, which he returned with a great deal of strength—a Greek man obviously bordering on emotion he was hoping not to show. Not that Greek men were as afraid of showing their feelings as some, but men like Aristotle would never be comfortable with that sort of thing. Regardless of their heritage.

Phoebe waited for Spiros to bring up the contract over lunch, but he seemed content to chat about inconsequential topics.

Her nervousness grew with each minute that went by without the subject being raised, until finally she blurted, “I’m surprised you signed the contract without argument.”

“Would you have compromised on any of the points?”

“No.”

“Then I made the right call.”

“But you didn’t even try.”

“Your father did not want to know your reasoning, and I knew to do so would be an exercise in futility. So I opted not to waste any of our time.”

“How could you know?”

“Do I really need to answer that?”

“You think you know me inside and out.”

“I do. Just as you know me.”

“There are still things neither of us know...about feelings, memories we don’t share and haven’t discussed.”

“Naturally. But you knew that even if I did argue, I would sign that damned contract—just as I knew you would not compromise on the elements.”

“You’re not happy about it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You tell me.”

“No.”

He sighed. “Fine. I’m angry you felt the need for the contract at all.”

“Your pride has been offended?”

“Yes.”

Looking into his golden-brown eyes, she saw something else. “You’re hurt too.”

He didn’t answer, but his lack of denial was enough.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a low voice, feeling her own emotions roil. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know that.”

“You don’t know everything.” Sometimes he could be so exasperating.

“Nor do you, it would seem.” He took a sip of the champagne they had ordered with their celebratory lunch.

Before she could ask what he meant, their gazes caught.

“You did not need to ask for any of those things.”

“Right. Like you were planning on proposing,” she said, mentioning the first requirement on her list.

“You are so sure I was not?”

“Dimitri didn’t.”

"I am not Dimitri."

"Thank goodness. I didn't want to marry him."

"But you do want to marry me?"

"I'll take the fifth."

"That's an American Constitutional provision, not a Greek one."

"You know what I mean."

"I do."

"And you seriously expect me to believe you were going to agree to a small wedding?" The man was Greek, and it would have been his grandfather in total cahoots with her mother over a wedding that would never be now.

"I want to save you further censure in the public eye, not cause it. And I know you were not looking forward to all the hoopla our families had planned. You are far too introverted for that."

"So we are agreed on a civil ceremony?"

"I did not say that."

"I do not want a blessed ceremony."

She'd managed to shock him with that one. "Why not?"

"To say vows before God means making promises we don't mean and cannot break."

"This marriage is for life."

"You say that now, but you might fall in love... I might want out someday. I don't want us to promise love when we don't mean it." By now she meant him, but she wasn't going to say so and lay her heart bare.

He was silent for several seconds, and she wished she'd been more specific on stipulation five. His eyes narrowed in thought and he said, "Leave it to me."

She took that as acquiescence, just glad he hadn't dug further into her reasoning. "So, you really are okay with all my requirements?"

He sighed. "I can see we will not have peace until we have discussed each one. One, yes, I will propose—but when will be at my discretion. Two, I have no problem with you having a career. I cannot imagine you not using the education you fought so hard to attain. But I would prefer you take a job with my company rather than your father's," he said, ticking each point off on his fingers as he went.

"Agreed." Her father's willingness to sell her life for his company would take a long time getting past. She didn't particularly want to work for him any longer.

“Three, no children for five years. You realize I will be jealous of my brother’s fortune until you agree to share that joy with me, but I will not push.”

She nodded, a lump forming in her throat so she could not speak. She’d put that stipulation in so that if they did divorce down the road no children would be affected. And she didn’t want to work full-time once she had a baby. However, she had a feeling she would be craving a child with him long before her stipulated time restraint was over.

Lucky for her that she was not in the fertile part of her cycle, because they had not used protection the night before.

He smiled, reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “All will be well,byba . You must trust me on this.”

She wanted to blurt her love out right then. He was looking at her with such tender care—like so many times in the past. “You are a good man,” she said instead.

His smile was brilliant. “Thank you. Shall we continue?”

“You’ve already covered the lack of a big wedding.”

“But I did not mention number four.”

The promise for total fidelity.

“I...You...” She felt the need to explain, but words were deserting her.

He waited patiently, his expression unreadable.

“You said you’d been with a lot of women. That you hadn’t married any of them.”

“I said I’d kissed many women I did not end up married to.”

“But I knew what you meant.”

“And you assumed I would continue?”

“No, I thought you might get bored,” she said, all in a rush.

“After last night, you thought this?” He shook his head, his expression only too easy to decipher now. Total disbelief marked his handsome features. “Impossible!”

“It’s not. It can’t always be that good.”

“You are right.”

She swallowed another lump of emotion.

“It will be better,” he said with absolute conviction. “I want no other woman but you. I have not since I kissed you the first time.”

“Is that true?”

“I do not make it a habit to lie.”

“Only when you are trying to protect yourself from betraying your honor,” she said in wonder.

“Yes. But it did not help and I will never do it again.”

“Good.”

“So we are in agreement?”

“Yes.”

They toasted their fully discussed deal with a glass of champagne.

He proposed that night, over a candlelight dinner in his apartment. Then he made love to her again, and he had been right. It was better.

Once again he made her go home—but told her to be ready to travel early the following morning.

Their flight on the Petronides jet was short. Her best friend from college was waiting at the airport.

She led Phoebe to one of the two limousines waiting on the tarmac. “No wonder you’ve been gaga over that guy for so long. He’s a total romantic.”

“What do you mean?” Phoebe asked with only partial attention as she noticed Spiros getting into the other car.

“Wait until you see.”

Her friend had not been overstating the case. Phoebe was taken to a castle in the hills of Southern Italy. The room she was led to could have belonged to royalty. And the wedding dress her friend helped her don was totally over-the-top gorgeous. By the time they made it down the grand staircase and to the beautiful chapel that smelled of roses and old wood Phoebe was in a state of shock. Her family was there, so was Spiros’s, but no one else except Phoebe’s friend was in attendance.

She stared at the priest, and then turned to Spiros. “You agreed to—”

He leaned down and kissed her. Right there, in front of all their family. When he lifted his head his eyes were suspiciously moist. “I agreed to a small wedding. But we will make vows we both mean—promises neither of us will break in this life.”

“But...”

“I love you, Phoebe. I always have. You thought I was angry with my brother because of family honor, but my fury was because his promise and subsequent agreement to the marriage plans kept me from you.

I fought my love, I fought my need to beg him to give you up so I could have you. I lost on both counts. I was ready to do my begging the night of the betrothal dinner. Now that I have you, I will never let you go.”

Tears threatened her eyes, and her heart swelled to bursting. He meant every word. She could see it in his eyes. “Never?”

“Never.”

“I love you, Spiros. So much. I always have.”

“I know.”

She laughed through her happy tears, and then they said their vows.

Promises of love and commitment they both meant to the very depths of their souls.

Vows that would indeed last a lifetime.

BACK IN THE SPANIARD’S BED

Trish Morey

CHAPTER ONE

NOBODY walked out on Alejandro Rodriguez. Not business tycoons or CEOs or poker-faced politicians. And definitely not women. Leah Mitchell was just going to have to get that through her head.

He watched her working through the window of her small dressmaking shop from his vantage point across the narrow street, her head down, totally focused on the task at hand, her fingers nimble and quick as they worked the fabric through the machine.

He remembered those fingers, long and slender like the woman herself, and he remembered how they’d once worked their skilful magic on him...

He missed them.

He growled, low in his throat, a familiar thumping demand building below. Soon, he knew, soon he would feel her hands weave their magic upon him once again.

All of a sudden those same fingers stilled and she looked up, her eyes alert, searching the streetscape outside, the passing pedestrians and traffic, almost as if she’d sensed his presence. He smiled as he flipped the collar of his coat up against the unseasonable November cold. So she wasn’t over him? He’d suspected as much.

And he’d enjoy proving it to her.

He’d make her wish she’d never left him, make her beg for more.

And then he’d unceremoniously dump her.

The peak hour Sydney traffic was bumper to bumper along the narrow one-way street, but somehow Alejandro forged a path through, parting the sea of cars as if he had a God-given right, the tails of his long black coat swirling in his wake like the wings of a manta ray.

He was oblivious to the sound of car horns, oblivious to the calls from irate drivers to get off the road. Because right now his focus was on one thing and one thing only—Leah Mitchell, and how he was going to get her back into his bed.

Leah rolled her head, trying to relax her neck and shoulders, trying to dispel the crazy feeling that someone was watching her. It was nerves, she told herself, crazy nerves following the panicked phone call from Jordan, informing him that the bank had given him a week to pay them back or they would foreclose. She'd hardly eaten in the two days since, desperately trying to work out how she could help him while surviving on nothing more than coffee and dry crackers. No wonder she was jumpy.

She'd barely turned her attention back to the garment she was altering when a movement outside caught her eye. Nothing more than a flash of black, but enough to set every hair on the back of her neck to prickling awareness. There was something about the way that dark shadow had moved—something that had rippled through her on a wave of dread and taken her right back to another time, another place.

But it couldn't be him.

Not here.

Not now.

And then the door opened, the ancient bell above tinkling. An incongruous sound, given the man who had just entered. A man, it occurred to her, who should more likely be accompanied by a thunder clap or heralded by a blast of trumpets, not the mere tinkle of a tiny bell.

Nor even the desperate thumping of her heart.

He stood there across the small room like some kind of gunslinger ready to draw, looking simultaneously more dangerous and yet more handsome than any man had a right to.

'Leah,' he uttered, and heat infused her veins, his deep Mediterranean voice filling all the places in the room that his sheer presence didn't already occupy. She rose behind her machine, refusing to dwell on the ripple of pleasure that had accompanied hearing her name spoken in that rich accent once again, desperately wishing she was wearing heels instead of her workaday flats, so she felt at less of a disadvantage.

Yet there had never been a time when she hadn't felt at a distinct disadvantage where Alejandro Rodriguez was concerned, even wearing the highest heels or when done up to the nines. It wasn't just his height, or the span of his shoulders. Only in bed had she ever felt anywhere near his equal, and even there just the force of his dark personality had always been enough to make her feel inconsequential.

And then there were his eyes.

Dark and fathomless under a dark slash of brow, and framed in lashes women would kill for, those eyes stared at her now, pinning her to where she stood. There was still traffic outside. She was vaguely aware

of the bustle and movement of a city in motion. But all that shrank in her ears under the thump of her beating heart and the questions that framed themselves so jaggedly in her mind.

‘What do you want?’ Her voice sounded unnaturally tight in the tiny shop—but how could it sound anything else now that he was absorbing all the space, effectively shrink-wrapping the room? She’d heard not a word from Alejandro since she’d left his home in Spain two months ago, and the look in his eyes before she’d done so had been no less unforgiving than it was now. Clearly nothing had changed.

He paused. Or was it just that time slowed in the air that hung heavy and thick between them, in the dark laser glare he directed her way?

‘My dear Leah,’ he said at last, holding out his arms as he made a move closer. ‘Is this any way to greet an old friend?’

Her eyes narrowed, along with her thoughts. Alejandro wanted something. Friendship had been the last thing on his mind that fiery day two months ago, when she’d walked out of his villa and out of his life, his savage parting words still stinging in her ears. ‘Get the hell out,’ he’d yelled after her. ‘There are plenty more where you came from.’

And she’d known what he said was true. Hadn’t she lived with that fact hanging over her head every day of their six-month liaison? She’d known from the very beginning that she was only one more in a long line of mistresses. She’d been reminded of that fact every time she was out in public with him and women jostled to get close, flashing him white-toothed smiles and perfectly angled décolletages. Because they’d known it just as much as she had. Her position as mistress to Spain’s hottest property was tenuous. Short-term. Temporary.

And after half a year her time must have been nearly up.

And that was why she’d fled. While she still had her pride, if not her heart. Before she’d crashed and burned like so many others before her.

‘Why are you here?’

He frowned and drew closer, until there was barely a metre and her ancient sewing machine between them, the look in his eyes almost wounded. ‘You sound so suspicious.’

She wasn’t taken in for a moment. She crossed her arms over her chest, needing to feel together—whole—when her world seemed to be unravelling by the minute. But he was too close for her to think. So close she could breathe in his exquisite cologne. So close she could have reached a finger out and touched the dark curls kissing his collar. So close she could all but taste the salt on his skin.

Distressed by her body’s betrayal, she edged away, moving deeper into the narrow shop, not stopping until she had the solid counter between them. She clutched onto the counter-top like a lifeline. ‘You haven’t answered my question.’

He smiled then, and his dark beauty just got better. The sensual slash of mouth suddenly more passionate, a dimple transforming his jawline from ruthless businessman to lover in an instant. My God, she thought. She’d turned her back and walked away from this man. How the hell had she managed that?

‘I came to give you something.’



She blinked and tried to focus on his words. She'd left something behind? She turned her thoughts back to those frantic few hours after she'd made her decision, haphazardly throwing her few scant belongings into her suitcase, trying to shut out Alejandro's orders that she stop—orders that had soon turned to demands that she get out when it had become clear there was no way she would change her mind. She'd left nothing, she knew. Only the trappings of her mistress life, the gowns and shoes and jewels, and those had never really been hers.

Only those, and the heart she'd had no choice but to leave battered and bleeding behind. 'I left nothing,' she lied. 'So what is it?'

The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile that missed his eyes completely. 'I came to offer you a second chance.'

For just a moment it felt as if her heart had stopped beating, until the thumping kicked in again, louder and more insistent than ever, and her lungs demanded to be filled with air, demanded it now! How many nights had she lain awake, wishing he would call, wishing he would tell her he missed her, wishing more than anything that he might discover he loved her after all? But not once had he bothered to contact her. Not once had he even bothered to get in touch. She'd long ago given up hope that he would. And yet he was here now...

Had she given up hope too soon?

She searched his eyes and her hopes were dashed anew.

Not a chance.

Just one look at the hostility emanating from those dark depths and common sense prevailed. Alejandro had the look of a man who wanted to do someone some serious damage, and right now she was the only one standing in the line of fire.

She shivered and shifted nervously away, wanting to get out of range, knowing there was nowhere in the small shop that would afford her sanctuary. "I don't understand what you're offering? A second chance at what, exactly?"

'I will take you back as my lover. All will be forgiven.'

This time she laughed out loud. He was forgiving her? Did Alejandro's arrogance know no bounds? And to think that for a half-second she'd imagined he'd come back because he'd suddenly discovered he loved her.

'You're forgetting something, Spaniard. I left you. I neither need nor want your "second chance".'

Her laughter had been bad enough, cutting through the tense atmosphere and leaving jagged edges, but to refer to him as if she couldn't even bear to mention his name... His teeth ground together, his jaw jammed tightly closed. Things had not been that bad between them. Of that he was certain.

'You would not have me believe you have forgotten my name? A name you cried out so frequently and with such passion?'

'You know I wasn't trying to insult you. I was trying to keep this conversation impersonal.'

‘But it has always been personal between us. Or should I say—’ he hesitated, daring her to turn her eyes away ‘—intimate.’ He caught her reaction, the widening of her eyes, the kick of her chin as she swallowed back on her shock, and he knew she hadn’t forgotten. ‘We are good together. Why would you throw that away?’

‘Because I’m perfectly happy with my life just the way it is.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘And I don’t care what you believe. You can take your second chance and go home.’

His eyes took her in, scanned her like radar, swallowing her whole. ‘You’ve lost weight.’

‘I’ve been busy.’

‘Too busy to eat?’

She shrugged and averted her eyes, but not before he caught the clouds rolling across them. Money problems could do that to people, he knew, but she would soon find her money problems were a thing of the past. ‘I would make sure you ate.’

She snapped her head around. ‘And what would you expect in return?’

‘Nothing you wouldn’t want to give me. Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t miss our lovemaking.’

She turned away, throwing her hands out wide. ‘Look, what’s the point of this? Whatever we had is over, and it’s pointless to try and reignite it.’

‘I don’t have to reignite anything. I can see the fire burning now in your eyes, no matter how much you try to deny it. You’ve burned for me ever since I walked through that door.’

‘I left you...’

‘You left before we could extinguish the flames!’

I left to save myself from burning up completely.

Behind Alejandro the tiny bell tinkled, and a burst of cool air swirled into the room before the door was jammed home. A customer entered, smoothing down the grey tendrils escaping from the tight twist behind her head as she stood to one side in her navy-coloured corporate attire, oblivious to the tension in the room, patiently waiting her turn.

Leah had never been so grateful for an interruption in her life. ‘Your trousers are ready, Mrs Turner,’ she said, reaching for the package like a lifeline.

The customer looked from Leah to Alejandro, who had angled himself towards her. ‘I don’t want to push in...’

Alejandro smiled and gave a small bow, holding out one arm to her, suddenly all Latin charm. ‘Please, I would be honoured if you would be served. I am not exactly a customer—more a friend visiting for old times’ sake. It is a pleasure to meet a friend of Leah’s.’

The woman's cheeks bloomed as if someone had flicked a switch, her hand automatically returning to her hair. His smile was enough to do that, Leah knew, but coupled with an accent that seemed to vibrate its way right into your bones, the woman had no defence. She wouldn't have been surprised if the customer had melted into a puddle right then and there.

The woman only took her eyes off Alejandro for the barest second, to exchange a high-denomination note for the parcel Leah pressed into her hands.

'Allow me,' Alejandro said as the older woman headed for the door, and Leah could have sworn she heard the customer giggle.

'Mrs Turner,' she called out from the cash register. The woman turned her head slowly, as if reluctant to drag her eyes away from him, even for one brief moment. Leah held out her hand. 'Your change.'

The customer's eyes shot open wide and she giggled again, her cheeks flushed, hugging the parcel to her chest. She hurried back and collected the money before lingering where Alejandro stood ready to hold open the door. 'Thank you,' she whispered breathlessly, before launching herself into the street.

He pressed the door home behind her. 'You see,' he said, turning back to Leah, 'not everyone seems to find my company so intolerable.'

'Don't I know it! That's why I can't believe you're here. When I was with you there was a line of women who would have gladly scratched out my eyes if it meant they could replace me. Surely you couldn't have got through them all that quickly?'

He shrugged in his couldn't-care-less way as he checked the lock. 'Where is the key for this door, Leah? We cannot talk if we're going to be constantly interrupted.'

'I can't lock the door. I'm trying to run a business here.'

'This is no place for you.'

'I like my job.'

'Working as a seamstress? Taking up other peoples' hems?'

'It's an honest job. Maybe not up to the dizzy heights you're used to, but not all of us are power-hungry megalomaniacs.'

His midnight eyes glinted dangerously as he came closer, moving around the counter as silkily and purposefully as a shark moving through the depths, all power and dangerous beauty. Her back stiffened as he drew alongside her, trapping her against the counter with his arms, his height forcing her to look up at him to meet his gaze—a gaze that turned her body's thermostat to a slow sizzle. His dark eyes were suddenly so searching she'd swear he could see right into her soul.

'I have hunger, I agree, but right now it's not for power. I want to make love to you, Leah. Right here. Right now.'

Shock transfixed her to the spot. That and the primitive thrill that zipped along her spine and bloomed through her flesh in a rush of heat. Trust Alejandro not to play fair. She clamped down on her body's

reaction, doing her best to ignore the masculine scent that seemed to curl around her and tighten like a noose. 'We can't always have what we want.'

'Oh, but I can.' He lifted one hand and touched the backs of his fingers to her cheek, running them down the side of her face, and it was all she could do not to lean into his strong hand.

She squeezed her eyes shut. 'Alejandro...'

'Ah, so now, you see, you remember my name. Likewise you must remember how good we can be together. Would you like to make love to me now, as I would like to make love to you?'

Beneath her bra and fitted shirt her nipples peaked and strained for release. Beneath her denim skirt the heat was already pooling, heavy and insistent. She swallowed and battled a body determined, it seemed, to betray her. 'Look...this is crazy. It's not even five o'clock in the afternoon—'

'And when has the clock ever stopped you before? Don't you remember how you used to inflame me, no matter what time of the day it was or where we were, and the more risk of being discovered, the more risk someone would happen upon us, the better? Do you remember how much you enjoyed it?'

Did he really think she could forget? Her face grew hotter as the memories of their sensual adventures, only shallow-buried in the recesses of her mind, were laid bare, all the more sharp-edged and powerful for their exposure. In their time together Alejandro had flicked some kind of switch inside her and turned someone who had never been taken with the sex act into a tigress. She'd matched his unrivalled appetite, sometimes even taking him by surprise by her own hunger.

But still she couldn't answer him. Dared not. Lest he see how much she was moved, how much she was tempted.

'Or was that the real reason?'

She swung her head up, something in his tone alerting her, making her suddenly suspicious. 'The real reason for what?'

'For not locking the door.' An avaricious smile lit his features. 'So we could make love here, now, with the door open, the windows uncovered. We could make love right here in this room, separated from the city of Sydney by just one glass door. Would you like that, my perfect Leah? Is that what you had planned all along?'

Arousal coursed like liquid fire through her veins. Arousal that welled up and threatened to consume her. Arousal that promised to bring her undone. 'Alejandro,' she said, battling to stay sane, battling to shore up a resolve that was fading fast. 'What we had...it's over.'

And he smiled again. 'That's where you're wrong, querida. You and I, we are only just beginning.'

## CHAPTER TWO

SHE knew he was going to kiss her. Knew it before he'd dipped his head and angled his face in her direction. Knew it before his hand curled had around her neck, drawing her closer to him.

Knew it and didn't move a muscle to get away.

‘Alejandro...’

‘You already said that,’ he whispered, so quietly against her lips that she wasn’t sure if she’d heard the words or merely read them on his breath.

And then his mouth found hers and she didn’t care, for his taste was no longer just a distant memory, his touch was no longer just a dream. He was here and real and he was kissing her, his mouth moving over hers gently, his fingers stroking her neck in a massage so sensually inviting that it was impossible not to kiss him back.

And his lips were smooth and warm, inviting her participation, smoothing her objections. If Alejandro were a fabric, she decided as she melted into him, he would be silk, the finest quality Italian silk, black and rich and lustrous, moving like shadows in the light.

Her fingers bunched in his shirt, once more itching to be let loose on the firm-packed skin that lay so close beneath. He took advantage of her complicity to pull her deeper into the kiss, and she went with him into a kiss that was utterly magic and so infinitely sweet that her heart squeezed tight on the question—why couldn’t it have always been this way?—before two fat tears spilled unbidden down her cheeks.

Damn him! Two tears were more than enough to bring her to her senses. It was bad enough that she cared, but letting him see her tears—letting him know that she cared—would be suicidal.

‘I don’t want this,’ she said, finding untapped reserves of strength, taking him by surprise as she pushed at his rock-solid chest. She spun away, her hands swiping at her cheeks, obliterating any trace of tears before she was game enough to face him again. ‘I told you. I don’t want you back.’

As if a mask had dropped, his features were suddenly harsher, all unforgiving angles and damning planes, every trace of her silken seducer banished. From across the room he regarded her coolly, his eyes like polished stones, hard and unrelenting. ‘I don’t believe you.’

She crossed her arms over her chest, keeping herself together—centred—in a world that was in danger of lurching out of control. ‘I’m afraid you’ve wasted a trip, Spaniard,’ she said, not caring this time if she was rude, determined not to make the mistake of mentioning his name again. It was distance she needed right now. Distance, and to be once more left alone.

‘You will come back to me,’ he said, taking a step closer.

‘Not a chance.’

‘You will be my lover again.’

‘Don’t tell me what I will do! This is my city, my world. Here, I decide.’

‘And I tell you now, you will decide to come back to me.’

She crossed to the door on knees that threatened to buckle beneath her, opened it and let the noise of the outside world in. It was a welcome intrusion, loud and full of the pulse of the city, a reminder that the world didn’t begin and end with Alejandro, whatever he thought. ‘I think it’s time you were leaving.’

His passage to the door took much less time than hers but he didn’t exit as she’d hoped. Instead he

stood in the doorway, regarding her solemnly. 'I will go,' he said, with such an air of finality that part of her wanted to weep. With relief, she tried to tell herself. But her nerves were too jangling and raw, and the thought that Alejandro might blow out of her life just as quickly as he'd blown in was somehow too much to come to terms with.

'My car will pick you up at six o'clock. Don't keep the driver waiting.'

So close to achieving her goal, his words were like a punch to the gut, sending her already scattered emotions further into disarray. 'I don't believe you. Haven't you heard a thing I've been saying?'

'I heard, but it makes no difference to me.'

'This isn't about you!'

'No? Perhaps on that point we can agree. What if it was about your brother?'

She reeled back. 'What do you know of Jordan?'

His eyes gleamed like a fisherman who'd just landed the first catch of the day. 'We will discuss it tonight.' He turned and made a move to comply with her request to leave. Except now she couldn't let him.

She reached a hand out and latched on to his lean forearm, his muscled power evident even through the fine merino cloth of his coat. 'Alejandro!'

He turned, his eyes sweeping enquiringly up from her hand to her face.

'Please,' she said, dropping her hand, knowing that it would be madness to meet him tonight, knowing the more time she spent with him, the more he would whittle down her shaky defences. 'Tell me now.'

'We will discuss it over dinner. I will take you somewhere to eat.' His eyes flicked mercilessly over her. 'You need filling out.'

'Tell me now, or I won't come.'

'Oh, I think you will.'

And of course he was right. There was no way he was going to tell her until she complied with what he wanted. It was the way Alejandro worked, she knew. Never giving the opposition a chance. It was the reason he was so successful in business. It was the reason he was so successful in everything. Why should he treat her any differently? But a meeting was one thing. Going out for dinner with Alejandro was something else entirely.

She glanced down at herself, taking in her well-worn shoes, her denim skirt and casual shirt. Alejandro was not the type to eat at fast food chains, and that was all she was dressed for. 'I can't go out like this. I'll go home first, get changed.' Into what, she had no idea. She'd left the glitz and glamour of her mistress lifestyle in her dressing room at his villa.

'You will not go home. You will come as you are. Just be ready when my car arrives.'

'But—'

‘Six o’clock,’ he said.

‘Look, just so we understand each other. I’ll have dinner with you. I’ll hear what you have to say about Jordan. But I’m not changing my mind. I won’t come back to you.’

He looked down at her knowingly. ‘We’ll see,’ he said, and then he was gone.

She closed the door behind him and leaned against it, watching him slice his way through the crowded sidewalk, beautiful and black and oblivious to the stares and head-turns his passing generated. She watched him until he was absorbed into the city.

She sighed and rested her forehead against the cool glass. Jordan was up to his eyeballs in debt, just days away from the deadline to repay the money he’d borrowed—days away from who knew what disaster if he didn’t? And the last person she wanted to see, the man she’d broken ties with to save herself, Alejandro, was here, insisting she come back and press-ganging her into seeing him again.

Could things possibly get any worse?

He burned for her. His car banished, his stride ate up the Sydney streets. The wind whipped around him, but it couldn’t banish his heat; it couldn’t consume his need. Nothing could. He wanted her, and after seeing her he wanted her more than ever.

And he could have had her.

If she hadn’t pulled away, telling him she didn’t want him—lying to him—he would have had her there and then. Once more he would have felt her sweet tightness embrace him as no other woman could. Because she wanted him, he knew. He had known it from the first moment he had walked into her store, had read her own hunger in her eyes.

She needed him, no matter how much she pretended otherwise. He looked around for a street sign, getting his bearings. A woman caught his eye, smiled up at him. He scowled back and veered right.

But he had been right to come. Mentally he applauded the board’s decision to expand its casino operations into Australia. Tomorrow he was due in Queensland. And tonight he would get Leah back in his bed.

Soon her resistance would fall away. Soon she would have every reason to comply with his demands. And victory would be all the sweeter for the wait.

But right now he burned.

And he would not wait long!

Leah had never travelled to or from work in such style. She felt ridiculous, being ushered into the black limousine on a bow from the uniformed driver as if she were someone special instead of just another no-name, struggling for existence and survival in the big city. If it weren’t for the fact she needed to find



out what Alejandro knew about Jordan, she would have refused pointblank to get in the car.

Especially for a six o'clock dinner. Not once in all the time she'd been with him had they eaten so early. What was the rush?

Fifteen minutes later the car pulled up at one of Sydney's top hotels, making her feel even shabbier. She poked some stray tendrils that had escaped from her ponytail behind her ears as the driver came round to open her door, and took a couple of deep breaths, trying to quell the butterflies that had taken possession of her stomach at the prospect of seeing Alejandro again.

A smiling woman in a white fitted uniform met her as she alighted, holding out her hand. 'Ms Mitchell? I'm Belinda from the beauty spa. Would you like to come with me?'

Leah looked to the driver, but he merely tipped his hat at her before curling himself into the driver's seat. 'I thought I was meeting Mr Rodriguez.'

Belinda smiled. 'We have orders to deliver you to his suite no later than eight p.m.—which means we'd better get started. He's ordered you the works.'

'Has he?' Leah bristled as she fell into step behind the woman. So, not only did he consider her scrawny and needing feeding up, now she needed a makeover before he'd be prepared to be seen in public with her. How very flattering.

Then again, anything that put off her meeting with Alejandro couldn't be a bad thing. And a session in the beauty spa need not only be for Alejandro's benefit. Anything that improved her self-esteem and made her feel at less of a disadvantage could only help her own cause.

She handed over her clothes for laundering in exchange for a fluffy robe, and surrendered herself to 'the works'. It had been months since she had experienced anything like it—months since such pampering had been part and parcel of the package of being Alejandro's love interest—and her body lapped up a luxury she could now ill afford. A scented oil bath and hot rock massage was followed by pedicure and manicure while someone else applied a facial. Finally her hair was cut and blow dried, then gathered into a style that pulled most of it up behind her head and left trailing coils down her neck. Professional make-up was the final touch.

Leah had to hand it to the team as she gazed at her reflection. They obviously knew their stuff. She felt more feminine than she had in weeks, with the dark circles around her eyes banished, letting her blue eyes sparkle, her formerly overdue-for-a-haircut hair now sleek and tamed, her cut-short-for-work nails now tapered and glossy red.

'How do you feel?' Belinda asked over her shoulder as the team surrounded her and surveyed their work.

Like a princess. 'Wonderful,' she said, and it wasn't just their work she was applauding. Their skilful artistry had paid dividends, but there was something else she hadn't noticed before. A resilience, a firmness in her chin that shone through and told her she didn't have to be afraid. She'd walked away from Alejandro once before. She could handle whatever he had in mind. And now she was ready to prove it. 'Where are my clothes?'

'They've been sent up to the suite already. There's a private lift that will take you direct to the penthouse. I'll let the concierge know you're ready.'



Leah swallowed back on a tinge of panic. She was expected to ascend to his room wearing nothing more than a fluffy robe? Alejandro certainly expected things all his own way. But she refused to let it undo her resolve as Belinda led her to the lift and bade her a good evening. She was up to whatever he threw at her. Hadn't she just convinced herself of that?

There was no lobby. The lift doors opened directly into an expansive living room, decorated in golden hues and sprinkled with antique furniture. A grand piano held pride of place in one corner, a massive chandelier hung from the ceiling, and the scent of fresh flowers from numerous arrangements perfumed the air.

But all these things were incidental when it was the body sprawled so seemingly casually into a chair, one foot propped up on a footstool, that held her interest. For there was nothing casual about him. He looked ready to spring from his chair like a jungle cat, all grace and dark power, beauty and danger, wrapped up in one irresistible package. That she would resist! He watched her over steeped fingers, his gaze dark and penetrating. She refused to shrink back, although she did tighten the belt around her waist.

'They said my clothes were sent up here.'

His head moved the merest fraction—his concession to a nod. 'Not that you will be needing them.'

He rose from the chair in one languid movement that emphasised the lean power of his body. 'Forgive me,' he said, 'for forgetting my manners. I was deep in thought, and then you emerged from the lift looking like a goddess. I was simply struck dumb.'

All her senses were on red alert as he came closer. Not just because of his silken words, but because he looked so good himself. He'd showered recently, she could tell. His hair was curled and damp at the collar of his stark white shirt—a shirt that emphasised his rich olive skin and made him look even darker and more dangerous.

'Lucky for me I scrub up well,' she tossed into the ring, wanting to show him she was not bothered by his presence, while desperately trying not to be bothered by the clean scent of him curling into her senses.

He circled her—the jungle cat back at work, sizing up his meal. 'Indeed you do, querida.' His voice rumbled through her. 'You "scrub up" very well.'

'I assume if we're to go to dinner I am to wear something?'

He came to a standstill in front of her and smiled. 'If you are not to drive all the men wild with lust and their women wild with jealousy, it would be wise, yes.'

'Perish the thought,' she said, trying to lighten the mood in the room, though her skin prickled under her robe, her temperature rising. She was immune to his hyperbole—for the most part it washed over her—but as much as she wished it were so, there was no way she was immune to the man. The way he looked at her, the way his eyes sought hers and held on, tempting her, teasing, promising things he couldn't deliver—she should know better, but how did one gain immunity from the man one loved?

'So, what am I to wear?' she asked, impatient with the game. The sooner she got dressed, the sooner they could go to dinner—and the sooner she could find out what he knew about Jordan's situation.

'Through here,' he said, leading the way through the vast suite to an elaborate bedroom dominated by a

massive four-poster bed. She hesitated when she realised where he was leading her, but he turned and smiled. 'If I were going to seduce you, querida, do you not think I would employ a more subtle method than leading you straight to my bed?'

Knowing Alejandro as she did, she had to concede he was right.

'Your dress,' he said, waving in the direction of a swathe of sapphire-blue silk lying on the bed. A pair of diamante-studded high heels sat below on the floor. 'And I am assured these will be a perfect fit.'

She moved closer, letting her fingers slide over the silk as she took in the stunning halter design, the fabric gathered at one hip to fall gracefully to the floor. It was complexity designed to look simple. 'It's beautiful,' she said.

'No more beautiful than you. I shall leave you to it.'

She had turned to thank him when another thought occurred to her. She shifted the dress, scanned the bedcover, but there was nothing more to find than a small clutch purse.

'Alejandro?'

He paused, the door halfway closed behind him.

'There's no underwear.'

He nodded, the merest hint of a smile tugging at his lips. 'I know.'

### CHAPTER THREE

HE HAD to be joking! 'But, Alejandro—'

'Don't you remember that time you surprised me? The time you shocked me with your brazenness?'

Never had she been happier to be adorned with the very best camera finish make-up as heat flooded her face. How could she have forgotten that night? Alejandro had been suddenly called away on business for two nights, and had only just made it back in time to collect her for a promised night at the opera. Ensnared in their private box, she'd leaned over and whispered in his ear just as the curtain was going up, and he'd spent the entire evening trying to insinuate himself closer to her, trying to discover if what she'd told him was true and driving her wild with his need when he had.

Before the opera was over he'd finally manoeuvred her into the shadowed recesses of the box and they'd come together in a heated rush. It had been wild and daring and reckless, and all of those things that had made their lovemaking so passionate and satisfying.

'That was before,' she whispered, trying to suppress the once familiar thrill of risky sex with a man made for it.

'Indulge me,' he said, so huskily and suggestively that it was all she could do to resist her insides melting, 'for old times' sake.'

After what they'd done before, how could she not be tempted? But giving in to him would hardly help her cause. She lifted her chin, determined to make her case plain. 'It makes no difference. I won't sleep

with you.'

'Have I asked you to?'

'Well, maybe not in the last five minutes, no.'

'Relax, querida,' he said with a shrug. 'You have told me you do not wish to become involved with me again. Why must you keep repeating it? Who are you trying to convince?'

'Bastard,' she muttered, with some satisfaction as he pulled the door closed behind him. She felt herself being sucked deeper and deeper into his dark plans, but that didn't mean she had to go along with them. Immediately she crossed to the bank of wardrobes that lined one mirrored wall, sliding open the doors, searching for the clothes she'd been promised had been returned to the suite. She pulled open every drawer, searched every space, but there was nothing of hers, only Alejandro's impeccable clothes gracing the wardrobe. She flopped down on the bed, her heart heavy in her chest.

She cursed him again—yet even as she did, even though she knew she should feel incensed by his actions, she couldn't dispel the heavy coiling ache building inside her, the inexorable buildup of excitement that came with being with this man. He wanted to make love to her. He'd made that plain.

But damn him! She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he was affecting her. And if she needed a reason to be all the more determined to resist his advances, this was surely it.

Reluctantly she abandoned the voluminous wrap in which she'd once felt so exposed, and slipped the dress over her head, the fabric falling like a waterfall, sliding over skin in a silken kiss. She zipped it up, thankful that the halter offered some kind of support, and never before more grateful for lining. But still the fabric caressed her skin, sensitising it, and even as she strapped on the glittering sandals she could feel her breasts swelling, her nipples hardening at the sensual caress of silk against skin—and the knowledge that Alejandro would know exactly how little she was wearing under it.

She gathered up the clutch purse and opened it, surprised, but realising she shouldn't be, that someone had transferred from her handbag the very items that she might need tonight. As she straightened and turned she caught her reflection in the wall of mirrors. Just as he'd asserted, the dress was a perfect fit, accentuating curves she'd thought she'd lost, its length lapping at the ground behind her like the waves lapping at the shore as she moved.

And the way the fabric draped across her hips nobody would know she wasn't wearing a stitch underneath.

Nobody except Alejandro. But no way would she give him the satisfaction of knowing it bothered her.

She opened the door to join him, doing her best to ignore the feel of a lover's caress on her skin as she moved, and plastering a supremely confident look on her face she had no right to claim.

He stood with his back to her, pouring champagne into two gold crystal champagne flutes. Reflected in the mirrored back of the sideboard she could see his look of concentration, his expression and every part of his bearing showing his aristocratic upbringing. Leah's feet came to a halt, the madness of her situation defying understanding. For even after she'd had the best in beauty treatments, was now wearing haute couture clothes, the gulf between them had never been more obvious to her. They were worlds apart. He was a nobleman from a noble family, practically royalty in Spain, and she was no more than a humble seamstress who knew more about money problems than she cared to.

She was denim to his superfine merino. She was rags to his riches.

So why was he here? Why would he want her back? Unless it was to toy with her like a cat did with a mouse? He could get what he'd got from her from anywhere, with just one click of those aristocratic fingers.

Those fingers closed now around a flute, and he turned to her then, a glint lighting up his black-as-night eyes, sparking them to a slow burn that seemed to see right through her gown. 'Dios, but you are a beautiful woman, Leah.'

She closed her eyes as the tremor hit, his voice so low, so husky, that it was impossible not to be moved as it vibrated its way into her body, zeroing in on those sensitive places she'd rather not have left uncovered. And when those feelings were under control she opened her eyes and he was there, standing before her, with ten times more beauty than she would ever possess. It was part of him—a raw, natural beauty that permeated his bone structure, his colouring, his muscled flesh, elevating him above the mere mortal and rendering him almost god-like.

No, they had nothing in common. They had only ever been equals in bed, and that would never have lasted. That would never have been enough.

She took the glass he offered, took a sip of the fine wine. 'Thank you,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady. 'And thank you for your generous gift at the beauty spa.'

'There is no improving on perfection,' he murmured, dismissing his luxurious gift with a shrug, 'merely window-dressing.'

She turned away, feigning interest in the city lighting up outside the windows, not wanting to hear more of his smooth words, and far more concerned to put some distance between them. Because it was impossible to remain impassive towards him when the fabric of her dress reminded her every time she moved of her nakedness beneath. And it was impossible to remain impassive when faced by such potent masculine sexuality. At this rate she would never last the evening.

She swung back, impatient already. 'When will you tell me what you know about my brother?'

'And give you a reason to leave before we've had dinner?'

'You expect I will leave once you tell me?'

'You have made it plain that you would rather not see me again. Right now the only reason you are here is because you want to know what I know. Is that not true?'

'You know it's true.' But inside a tiny voice said liar. It wasn't the only reason at all. But she quickly stamped down on that tiny seed of truth.

'Then why would I risk cutting this evening short?' He joined her at the window, sending her skin once again to prickly awareness. 'Are you hungry?'

She tried to remind herself he was talking about food. 'A little.'

'Then I should not make you hunger any longer.'

And she wondered if he was.

‘Come,’ he said, relieving her of her barely touched flute, ‘I have made a reservation in what I am assured is one of Sydney’s top restaurants. I am hoping it will live up to its reputation.’

He took her elbow in his hand, and the electric shock of his hand on her bare skin sent ripples straight to her breasts. Her bodice felt suddenly snuggler, the fabric straining as her nipples hardened and firmed, and the tender flesh between her thighs was acutely sensitive as he led her to the door, making even just walking a sensual torture.

She bit down on the sensations. One evening with Alejandro she had to endure. Just one evening. And just as soon as he told her what he knew about Jordan she’d be free to go. She’d walked out on him once before. She could do this.

The restaurant more than lived up to its reputation. Perched on the end of a small spit on the North Shore, amidst lawns and park land, it was intimate rather than stuffy, welcoming rather than pretentious, despite the clearly well-heeled clientele.

Along one side a wall of windows gave an unparalleled view over the water, taking in Sydney’s premier sights from one vantage point. At night the green-lit Sydney Harbour Bridge managed to look both formidable and yet ghostly, and the sails of the Opera House were all sublime elegance and architectural splendour, the lights of the city towers making a spectacular backdrop.

But, while the views were magnificent, it was the menu—featuring the freshest seafood and the most tender grain-fed steak—that set the restaurant apart. After an afternoon when Alejandro had set her empty stomach on spin cycle, Leah found the choices almost overwhelming, finally settling for the simplest seafood dishes she could find.

Their order was taken, water delivered to the table and glasses filled, and it was all so civilised, the ambience so calming, that it was impossible not to relax. Mood music played softly in the background and Leah tuned in, turning her attention out of the window while Alejandro discussed wine choices with the waiter.

The view was stunning. Living in the depths of a Sydney suburb meant she rarely got a chance to appreciate the attractions of the harbour. ‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ she said as the wine waiter departed, taking in the view of the Opera House jutting into the dark waters of the harbour at night and finally feeling herself unwind a little. It didn’t hurt knowing that Alejandro could hardly take advantage of her in the midst of a public restaurant.

‘You are,’ he said. ‘Very beautiful.’

The words washed over her in a heated caress that set her nerves right back on edge again. She swivelled towards him, to set him straight, and their knees collided under the table in a tangle of heat. She angled her legs away, tucking them tightly behind one leg of her chair.

‘Please don’t say those things.’

‘Because the truth hurts?’

‘No. Because even if it were true it’s not your place to say it. Not any more.’

‘Since you walked out on me, you mean?’

The glimmer of ice in his charcoal eyes didn’t go unnoticed. It surprised her. She’d been the one to decide to leave the relationship, sure, but he’d made it crystal-clear as she’d fled that the feeling was mutual.

‘Since we separated and went our own ways, yes. So maybe we should find something else to talk about. Like my brother, for instance.’

The waiter arrived, proudly bearing the wine and expertly performing the uncorking ceremony. The wine had been tasted, judged perfect and poured in the space of less than a minute.

‘Maybe you’re right. We should change the subject,’ Alejandro agreed as the waiter disappeared as quietly as he’d arrived.

Leah looked up, surprised but encouraged that he wasn’t going to argue with her.

‘Maybe,’ he continued, ‘we could talk instead about that party in Monaco on Howard Finlayson’s boat. You were hot, you said, and needed some fresh air on deck.’

She looked from side to side, judging their distance from other diners and finding it wanting, despite the soft cover of the music. ‘I don’t think...’

He took her hand, sandwiching it between his own, and kept right on talking. ‘You were so hot you were on fire. I’d barely got outside that hatch and you were begging me to make love to you—demanding it—even though anyone could have discovered us at any moment. And so I did...’

It wasn’t just the words, it was the lazy circles his fingers were tracing on the top of her hand. Lazy circles triggering a response in her body that was anything but. ‘Alejandro! Stop.’

‘...so I hitched up your dress and we made love in the open air, right there against the railing, with nothing but the stars above and the lights of Monaco twinkling in the distance. And when you came, you called my name out so loud I had to plunge my tongue into your mouth and silence you with my kiss. Do you remember that?’

His shocking reminiscences should have made her livid. She should have been incensed. But the memories were too vivid, his sensual massage adding a tactile element to his words, and instead of feeling shocked she felt his words deep inside her in an aching, desperate need. A need she’d battled to keep a lid on ever since he’d walked back into her life. A need that was building even now like a pressing demand. And in that instant she knew without a shadow of a doubt that if she stayed even a moment longer she’d be lured back down that slippery slope into his sensual world.

Once that happened, would she ever have the strength to escape again? She’d already lost her heart, left it battered and bleeding when she’d turned her back on Alejandro the first time. If she didn’t keep her head now, she was on track to lose what was left of her pride. She had to get out of there.

She rose slowly from the table, trying unsuccessfully to tug her hand out from under his without creating a scene. ‘I don’t think there’s any point continuing this conversation. I want to go home. I’ll get themaitre

d' to call me a taxi.'

His eyes glittered dangerously across the table from her, his hand refusing to let her go, even tightening around hers with a slow intent that told her he meant business.

'You're leaving before you've eaten?'

'I'm not feeling very hungry any more.'

'And before we've even discussed your brother?'

'Why should I stay, when you've made it plain that once you tell me you expect me to leave anyway?'

'No, I said you could go. The choice would always be yours.'

'And why should I choose to stay?'

'Because you love your brother and you don't want to see him get hurt.'

Disbelief was her first reaction, closely followed by outrage. 'What are you suggesting?' she fired at him in a whisper. 'That if I don't sleep with you, you'll break Jordan's legs? No wonder you thought I would leave once you told me. I knew you were ruthless, but even I didn't realise you could stoop to those depths.' She tugged on her hand, still imprisoned within Alejandro's. 'Let me go! I've heard enough.'

His jaw was set as if it had been chiselled from granite, his eyes unrelenting. 'I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about the people he owes money to.'

'What people? He told me he'd got a bank loan.' She blinked, the feeling of foreboding she'd been carrying around all week becoming a chill that jagged down her spine and threatened to buckle her knees. She dropped back into her seat before she fell down, her mind fitting the pieces together: the panicked phone calls asking if he could borrow money, his increasing anxiety as the date for the repayment of his loan approached. 'Oh, God, please don't tell me he went to a money-lender?'

Across the table, Alejandro nodded, and her heart fell like a stone. She'd been trying for days to think up ways of appeasing the bank, of trying to work out some schedule of repayments. But it wasn't a bank they were dealing with. She swallowed. She'd seen reports in the papers about people who had fallen foul of money sharks. She could not let that happen to her younger brother. Not when she knew it all came down to her.

'This is all my fault,' she said, staring unseeing over the ever-changing reflected lights on the darkened harbour. 'I should never have stayed away so long. I should have come home and helped him with the business like he wanted.' Instead she'd fallen for a Spaniard with flashing eyes and a too easy charm, who in a chance encounter on a brief Mediterranean holiday had swept her off her feet and into his bed in a heartbeat. And now they were both suffering the consequences...

'Your brother is a man. Old enough to make his own decisions.' Alejandro's voice was rough, unforgiving. 'He should not need his sister's help to avoid such foolhardiness.'

'But if I hadn't left him alone—'

'Then it might be both your names on the loan documents instead of just his, and the thugs who loaned



him the money might have you too, in their sights.'

She shuddered with the knowledge of what might be in store for her brother. She'd known Jordan was certain he was on a sure thing with his internet used-car trading scheme, but how could he have been foolish enough to have succumbed to such apparently easy cash?

'I have to call him,' she said, half rising once again from the table. 'Talk to him, make sure he's all right.'

'There is no need. He is safe. I have made sure of that.'

'You have? I don't understand. What's going on here? How do you know all this?'

He smiled then, a smile that warmed its way all the way into her soul, and just for a moment she felt her resistance to him crumbling, felt the once familiar warmth of his smile and the tug of sensual heat that came with it. How she'd missed that look!

'You knew me for six months,querida . You watched me at work, you watched me at play. You must know I never embark on either without doing my homework.'

Business—always business. It was just what she needed to banish those unwanted stirrings, to force them back into a bottle and ram the stopper in tight. She couldn't afford to let herself be swayed by his potent sexuality. Not when there was so much at stake.

She forced her head away, brushing aside the uncomfortable knowledge that he'd had her brother's financial affairs investigated—and no doubt her own as well—if only because now she was getting some clue as to Jordan's real financial circumstances. Goodness only knew when Jordan had been planning to tell her the whole sorry tale.

'He told me he'd borrowed forty thousand dollars. But if he got that from a money-lender...' She frowned, her teeth making tracks in her lipstick. Easy money came at a high price—but how high, exactly? Her tiny bedsit wasn't worth a lot, but maybe she could borrow enough against it to help Jordan out. 'How much does he now owe?'

Alejandro reeled off the balance—a six-figure sum that had Leah thinking she'd misheard, blowing all thought of covering it with a second mortgage. 'Oh, my God! There's no way I'll ever get that amount together in forty-eightdays , let alone in forty-eight hours.'

He let the full impact of her dilemma sink in, his fingers idly spinning the stem of his wine glass, not needing to drink the fine vintage when victory was almost at hand and tasted so much better. 'There is, of course,' he said at last, pausing for effect, 'oneway.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE words hung in the air between them, heavy and dripping with unspoken meaning, while cold fingers tracked a spidery path up her back. She sat there, her spine rigid, facing a man so good-looking he could be the devil himself. Was this, then, the moment she was required to sell her soul?

'Which is?'

'Reconsider your decision. I will bail out your brother if you agree to come back to me.'



Leah squeezed her eyes shut. Of course. That was what this was all about. She'd been a fool to think that Alejandro would let her walk away again—a fool to think that Alejandro would let her off the hook. If she'd thought for a moment that he cared, that he felt something for her, it would be so different. But there was nothing in his words or his actions so far that indicated he thought of her as anything but an object he wanted and couldn't have. And with Jordan's financial troubles he'd found the chink in her armour, and he intended exploiting it for all it was worth.

'So that's what this charade of a meal is all about—drip-feeding me information about my brother's situation, letting me know what desperate straits he's in, so ultimately you can blackmail me into coming back to you, regardless of the fact it's the last thing I want to do.'

His eyes grew cold, his gaze unrelenting as he pushed himself back in his chair. 'Consider it a business proposition, if you will. Your services in exchange for your brother's debts, paid in full.'

A business proposition. How very Alejandro that was.

'You seem to conveniently forget I have my own business to run. Just how long would my "services", as you so charmingly put it, be required?'

One side of his mouth lifted, as if sensing victory. 'It's a considerable amount of money. I should think it will take as long as it takes.'

Everything was loaded Alejandro's way. Every damn thing and he knew it. And now he expected her to fall in with his plans like the good little mistress he wanted in his bed.

Well, damn him, he wasn't going to have everything his own way. She would not be blackmailed into going back to him—as much as she wanted to help her brother, and as much as the prospect of an easy fix held a certain appeal. She could not go back to Alejandro. She just couldn't.

She'd find another way to help Jordan. She didn't know how, but she still had forty-eight hours to come up with something, and until she'd exhausted the banks and legitimate finance companies, had scraped up anything she could against her bedsit, and hocked every last piece of her jewellery, she wasn't giving up. She'd raise the money somehow.

She squared her shoulders to deliver her verdict, feeling more empowered than she had all day. 'I'm sorry, Alejandro, there is nothing to reconsider. Our time is past. I'm not coming back to you.'

He made a sound like a growl, deep down in his throat, his eyes boring into hers like a predator held back from its kill, unable to give up the carcass that was his. A tremor moved through her, but whether it was from the intensity of his gaze or the realisation of what she'd just done, she didn't know. His eyes narrowed.

'You turn down the only lifeline your brother has? You yourself have just said that there is no way you can get the money together. I thought you cared for your brother.'

'I do care about Jordan.' But she cared about herself too, and self-preservation was a powerful motivator. She hadn't spent the two months since leaving Alejandro, telling herself—convincing herself—that she was becoming stronger and more independent by the day to give it all away now. There had to be another answer to Jordan's money woes, one that didn't involve her becoming some rich man's plaything, and she'd find it. 'But I'll work out a solution. I'm certainly not about to be railroaded into one that suits you.'

‘You have no time!’

‘I said I’ll find a way!’

His eyes glinted at her dangerously as he contemplated her over his swirling wine glass, before downing the contents. The crystal base hit the table with a thump. ‘Why do you make this so difficult? All I’m doing is trying to help you.’

‘No, you’re not. You’re trying to help yourself, like you always do. You don’t care one bit about me or my brother, otherwise you’d offer to pay off his loan with no conditions, no ties. It’s not like you can’t afford to.’

He brushed her words aside. ‘My wealth has nothing to do with this.’

‘It does if you use it to blackmail me.’

He stared at her for some seconds, his fury at her refusal to accept his deal vividly portrayed on his features, turning his olive Mediterranean skin even darker. ‘Perhaps you are right,’ he growled at last. ‘Perhaps it is better this way. Please excuse me while I make this call.’ He snapped open a mobile phone, pressed a few rapid-fire buttons, and held it to his ear.

Something about the change in his mood struck her as wrong, setting off a new round of concerns. Alejandro would never admit she was right.

‘Who are you calling?’

‘I’m simply calling off my dogs. You don’t require my protection for your brother any more. You have a better idea. Isn’t that right?’ He turned his head away, as if focusing on the call, waiting for it to connect.

A spear of panic skewered her thoughts, setting her senses into disarray. She’d wanted him to realise she was more than just another pawn on his corporate chessboard, another mere provider of ‘services’, but the knowledge that her brother would lose his protection made her stand look all the more rickety. ‘So you would abandon my brother—throw him to the wolves—just like that?’

His head swivelled back until his eyes locked once again on her own. ‘That’s unfair. I don’t think it’s me throwing your brother to the wolves, do you?’

‘But you could keep your people there, just long enough...’

‘It’s not necessary.’

‘But what if—?’

‘Someone comes looking for their money a little earlier?’ he finished for her. ‘Surely you’ve already factored that into your decision-making?’

‘You can’t suddenly leave my brother unprotected!’

‘I can,’ he said. ‘But can you?’

Whoever he was calling obviously picked up, and Alejandro started talking in his own language so rapidly that she could only make sense of the odd word or two. But she heard her brother's name, and she had no reason to doubt he was doing exactly what he'd threatened he'd do—he was calling off his men and leaving Jordan to the criminals he'd been foolish enough to borrow money from. Her heart was beating too fast for its own good, her hands were clammy and cold, and the moral victory that had left her feeling so superior just seconds ago had turned to dust.

'You bastard,' she muttered as he continued the one-sided conversation. Why hadn't he simply let her go when she'd exited his life so recently? Why did he have to come back now, when her brother was so vulnerable and she along with him? And why, after everything he'd done, after every conniving trick to get her back in his bed, did she still want him so badly that it physically hurt? 'I hate you.'

He covered the phone with his free hand, his head angled towards her. 'You said something?'

She sent him a look that by rights should have melted the phone clear out of his hands. 'I've changed my mind.'

His head tilted, his brows drawing together, and there was a gleam in his eyes that hadn't been there for a while. A gleam of victory that made her feel sick to the stomach. 'I didn't hear you. What did you say?'

She swallowed, but it did nothing to quell the thumping of her heart or the churning in her gut. 'I said I've changed my mind. There's no need to call off your security. Tell whoever it is that you're paying off Jordan's debt and I'll do whatever you want. I...I'll come back to you.'

He barked a brief set of instructions into the phone and snapped it closed. Their entrees arrived in the silence that followed, their glasses were topped up and the odd word was exchanged with the waiter, while all the while his eyes never left hers. Success coursed around his bloodstream like a drug, powered by a thumping heart and fuelling his body, kicking his libido into overdrive.

He had her!

And his victory was all the sweeter for the frustrations of the quest. Why had she resisted him so much? Why had she fought off his advances for so long, pretending she didn't want him? For it had been clear from the moment he'd entered her small shop that she still burned for him, still felt that powerful kick in the guts on seeing him that he felt on seeing her, that kick that had led to the best sex he'd ever had.

And would now enjoy again.

Better still, this time he would be the one to decide when it would end.

'To us,' he said, raising his glass to her in a toast. 'To successful negotiations.'

She held up her glass, her fingers white-knuckled around the stem, but she didn't sip from it. 'Successful blackmail, you mean?'

He allowed himself a laugh, admiring her spirit even after such a marathon struggle. It had taken longer, much longer, than he had imagined it would to convince her to come back to him. The barriers around her were like the defences of a walled city, seemingly impenetrable, almost impossible to breach. It had taken his own version of the Trojan Horse to get through those defences, but once it had the city had fallen and the prize—Leah—was his.

‘Don’t waste your energy on fighting,’ he told her. ‘You will need your strength later tonight.’

Tonight? So soon? The muscles in her thighs clamped down tight. Oh, God, had she really agreed to this? ‘But surely you can’t expect me to fulfil my end of the bargain yet?’ she countered, searching for something to cling to, searching for anything that might delay the inevitable. For a moment she thought she had. ‘Until I have proof that Jordan’s debt has been paid off. And I need to hear it from him.’

He surveyed her over the rim of his swirling glass. Then he nodded. ‘Si, of course you are right. I will have your brother call you to assure you everything has been taken care of.’

She scoffed, shaking her head. ‘That’s not possible. It’s already past nine o’clock. Even if you wanted to, there’s no way you can fix this tonight. Nobody’s going to do business with you at this hour.’

‘May I remind you,’ he suggested as he snapped out his phone again and thumbed in a code, ‘that the people your brother is entangled with are not your regular businessmen? One sniff of getting their money back and they will come running.’ Another rapid-fire instruction was directed into the phone, another all too confident smile was directed her way before he put the phone down.

‘And now, in the meantime,’ he added, gesturing towards her plate, ‘eat.’

The delicate Asian scent of ginger and herbs had been wafting up from her plate of succulent fish cutlets, tantalising and enticing, but still she couldn’t bring herself to do more than toy with her food, barely registering the subtle and expert combinations of flavours. Alejandro was so confident he could pull this deal off tonight. How could he be so sure? And how could she think about food when so much was at stake? Not just Jordan’s future. Her future.

Scant moments later his mobile phone rang. Leah sat stiffly, her neglected entree forgotten, while Alejandro excused himself and took the call, his eyes fixing on hers. ‘It’s your brother,’ he said, handing over the phone. ‘He wants to tell you something.’

Leah grabbed the phone as if it was a lifeline and turned away from the searing gaze opposite. ‘Jordan, are you okay?’

Her brother’s easygoing voice sounded down the line. ‘Sis, of course I’m all right. Alejandro just saved my skin.’

‘You mean the loan is paid off—the whole thing?’

‘It’s all settled. Hey, sis, that guy must really have the hots for you to do what he did. I thought you guys were through?’

Leah dragged in air and squeezed her eyes shut, resting her head on her hand. They had been through. They still were. But somehow things had got so complicated...

‘Give Alejandro my thanks,’ she heard her brother say, and it was too much.

‘Maybe you should tell him that yourself,’ she battled to get out, finally thrusting the phone back into Alejandro’s hands before her voice gave way entirely.

So it was official. She’d made a deal with the devil and now there was no going back. Now it was time for the devil to collect his due.

‘Eat,’ Alejandro urged again, when he’d terminated the call. And she knew that she needed to, and that he was right. But how could she think about her stomach when she knew that later tonight she would once again be making love with him?

Making love with Alejandro.

Anticipation crashed over her like a wave, leaving her skin tingling, her breasts aching for release from their silken halter. She was wearing nothing underneath, not a stitch of underwear, and never had she been more aware of it as the fabric caressed her skin, never had her desire been more acute. Because she could admit it now, could admit the one thing she’d been denying, repressing, the one thing she’d been lying about.

She still wanted him.

And now there was nothing stopping her. Now everything she’d bottled up tight and contained was let loose, unfurling inside her like a genie escaped from a bottle, promising her all kinds of magic and all manner of wicked pleasure.

How was she supposed to think about eating when her body was focusing on other more sinful pleasures?

‘You don’t like your fish?’

‘It’s perfect.’ And it probably had been long ago, when it was served, and likely was still so, the tiny slivers of ginger and spring onion coiled artistically over the plump white fish, drizzled with a sesame oil and soy glaze. If only she could eat it.

‘Mine is superb,’ he said of his plate of Moreton Bay bugs. ‘Here—try one.’ He removed a chunk from one of the miniature crustaceans with his fork and lifted it to her mouth.

‘It’s okay,’ she said, still thrown by this latest development and attempting to brush away his offer with one hand. ‘You have it.’

‘Try it,’ he pressed, holding the fork to her lips, and there was suddenly something so compelling in his eyes, something so insistent in his tone, that she had no choice but to acquiesce.

She opened her mouth and received the seafood, closing her lips over the morsel as he slowly withdrew the fork—his fork. She shuddered at the intimacy of the gesture as she bit into the tender seafood, the combination of chilli and lime dressing complementing the sweet white meat.

He smiled, his eyes alive with pleasure, the kind of pleasure that kicked her pulse into overdrive. ‘You see,’ he announced, his eyes never leaving her own. ‘Superb.’

‘It’s very good,’ she agreed, her senses buzzing. He was playing the game he played so well. Smooth seduction and potent masculinity all combining into the promise of sex. He was a master at it.

‘Yours?’ he asked, his intention plain.

She forked a piece of the white flesh and lifted it towards him, aware his eyes were aimed at her the whole time. He surprised her by cupping her hand with his own, an electric touch that sparked heat way

low down in her belly, and guiding her hand to his passionate slash of a mouth. She'd always loved his lips, their sweep of curves and sculpted points, their ability to portray emotion. Most of all she'd loved them for the way they felt upon her skin. And right now those lips parted, accepting her gift, and she could just about feel them, could all but taste them. Could feel herself wanting to...

'Perfection,' he declared, without letting go of her hand.

But she'd had enough of playing his games. Anticipation was one thing. The act itself infinitely preferable. And now that she knew Jordan was safe, Alejandro's part of the deal satisfied on that score, there was nothing to stop her satisfying hers. It was time to throw out her own challenge.

'Better than sex?'

He smiled, a knowing smile that set off a chain reaction inside her. 'You know better than to ask that of me,' he said, relieving her of the fork and dipping his mouth to her wrist, pressing its warmth to her skin, reading her pulse with his lips. 'Nothing is better than sex.'

If he'd been attuned, she thought, if he'd been able to read her heart with his mouth, he would know he was wrong. Because for all the wonders of sex there was one feeling more potent, one emotion worth more. There was nothing better than love.

And yet nothing worse.

But her path was clear, the decision she'd been forced to take tonight having given her the green light. If she couldn't have his love she'd take the sex. At least it was something.

She smiled, and for probably the first time tonight really meant it. 'So what are you waiting for?'

Something swirled across his blacker-than-night eyes, and then he was on his feet, pulling her out of her chair. 'We're leaving,' he said, thrusting a wad of notes at the flustered maitre d'.

'You have barely touched your entrees,' he protested. 'Was something wrong?'

'Everything was perfect,' Alejandro assured him, bundling her towards the exit, a man on a mission. 'I have business to attend to.'

'What business is this?' she joked breathlessly as he wrenched open the door. His acceptance of her challenge had taken her unawares, but it was the speed at which he'd moved that fed the thrill of knowing it wasn't just her that burned.

He spun her bodily against the wall, his hands either side of her head, his face a study in light and shadow and his eyes glinting with need. 'Important business.'

He cupped her jaw with one hand, and then his mouth was on hers, punishing and yet sweet, firm and yet so utterly gentle, a marauder and yet simultaneously a seducer.

Her heart sang as she gave herself up to his pleasure, as she gave herself up to him. Her Alejandro. And even though she knew he could never really be hers she had him now, she had him for tonight. And, with the deal she'd brokered with him, she'd have him for as long as he wanted her.

She would live to regret it, she had no doubt. She would wake up and be disgusted with herself that she

had practically thrown herself at him when she had done so well escaping from him the first time.

But that was later. Right now one thing motivated her and one thing only. And it wasn't her brother and the knowledge that he would now be saved from the retribution of the money-lenders. Right now it was more important that Alejandro was going to make love to her. And she might hate herself afterwards, she might wish she'd been stronger and figured out a way to save Jordan all by herself, but it would be worth it!

His hand scooped down her throat, lingered over one tight breast and down over the flare of her hip. Fire scorched a trail in its wake. 'Dios, I want you,' he muttered, his voice grating as his fingers bunched in her skirt, the tension obvious in his clawed fingers. 'I cannot wait for the car to get us back to the hotel.'

And neither could she. Not when she could feel his hard length pressing into her belly. Not when she wanted to take him inside, to wrap herself around him and never, ever, ever let go.

'We don't need to wait,' she whispered, and his growl told her it was the response he most wanted.

Almost by instinct they melted silently away from the lights and into the shadowed recesses of the garden. A trellised rose arbour framed with trimmed hedges shielded them from view from the restaurant on one side, while the harbour glistened under the moonlight and the reflections of the city lights on the other. Ferries and other watercraft cut their way through the water, jostling with people heading home, going places—busy people.

But here in the scented garden there were only two.

A gentle breeze stirred the leaves above, winding the sweet fragrance of roses around them. He spun her back into his arms, holding her so close she could barely breathe, and even when she did it was only to capture the scent of him, one more part of him inveigling itself into her senses.

His hands were everywhere, sliding down the length of her arms, firing up the naked skin of her back and capturing her breasts, caressing them, kneading them with an urgency that fed into her wants and needs. His hands were everywhere, and yet never anywhere enough. She angled herself closer to him and he groaned, his hands going to her hips and pulling her close against him, grinding her against his own need.

'I want you,' she told him, because there was no need to lie, no need to hide the truth any more. It was the truth and, besides, he'd know damn well she was lying if she told him anything else. 'Make love to me, Alejandro. Make me come.'

He gave her no time to change her mind, even if she'd had half a mind to. He hustled her hard against the back of a timber park bench, cupping her behind with his hands, his heat like a brand on her skin, before lifting her, sitting her atop the bench. She felt the cool kiss of air as he smoothed the silk skirt of her dress up her legs. She trembled, her back arching, as his fingers neared their goal, brushing against her curls, teasing her.

'Are you cold?' he murmured as he nuzzled against her neck.

Far from it. She was burning up with desire, aflame with need. Then he touched her—there—and her world almost came apart. 'Alejandro!' she pleaded, as his fingers tested her control, her arms anchored tight around his neck, her fingers splayed desperately in his hair. 'Now!'



His hands left her as he prepared himself for a space of time she knew to be only seconds and yet which seemed an eternity. And then he was back and butting against her, seeking entry to her very core, holding himself there as if all the waiting, all the anticipation, had distilled into this one crystal-clear moment. And it occurred to her right then and there, as he hesitated on that knife-edge, that this coupling had been as inevitable as night following day, that her fate had been sealed the moment he'd walked into her shop. It had been inevitable that she should end up back in the Spaniard's bed.

And then with a cry, half-groan, half-victory, he was inside her.

Bliss!

That sheer bliss of the moment of joining, the feel of him inside her, filling her, stretching her. There was nothing like it in the world. It was everything she ever wanted. And then he moved, slowly withdrawing, only to fill her again, and her bliss was magnified tenfold.

She wrapped her legs around him, holding him tight to her even when he pulled back, keeping him locked in her embrace and welcoming him back inside when he returned to her, always wanting him deeper, wanting more.

And he answered her demands. He gave her deeper and he gave her more, until there was no more to give, nowhere left to go for either of them. She felt herself come apart as he pumped into her, shattering into a myriad twinkling particles that scattered on the wind and merged with the stars and the harbour lights around, before drifting slowly earthwards again.

Limp in his arms, drained of energy and her breathing ragged, she rested her head against his chest, his heartbeat thumping loud in her ears. I love you, she mouthed against his chest, as tears squeezed silently from her eyes.

She was his again, and she had never felt better, had never driven him to such heights merely by welcoming him into her body. He rested his head on hers, kissing her hair, feeling her breathing steady and calm.

Beyond their private enclave the world slowly came into focus again—the sounds of music and laughter wafting from the restaurant, the hum of harbour and city traffic. He eased himself away, supporting her while he slid her down, holding her tighter when she swayed on landing.

She was his again, and vulnerable, the walls she'd built up around herself laid to waste. It was worth the price, getting her back, even if it was only to ultimately cast her off. He would certainly get his money's worth in the interim.

He'd lifted her chin with one hand to kiss her when he saw the glistening on her cheeks. He touched a finger to her skin, felt moisture, and felt something inside himself stretch tight. 'I hurt you?'

She shook her head and brushed her cheek with the back of one hand. 'It's nothing. We should go, the car will be here by now.'

She turned away and he let her slip out of his arms, perplexed. Given his plans for her, why had it even occurred to him, let alone mattered? He shrugged. Short answer—it didn't.

He caught up with her, his mind already turning to more pressing matters. He'd enjoyed their unexpected



entree immensely. Now it was time to get her back to the penthouse and rediscover what other delights were on the menu.

## CHAPTER FIVE

‘How long will it take you to pack?’

They were naked on his endless bed, amid a tangle of Egyptian cotton sheets, Leah half asleep and lying face down amongst the plush pillows, her head turned to one side, while Alejandro lay propped up on one elbow, tracing lazy patterns on her back with his fingers.

It was long past midnight. The curtains were drawn back and letting in the city night lights, bathing an abandoned room service trolley, its platters and domed covers in disarray, in an unearthly glow. To one side sat a crystal ice bucket where leant a forgotten bottle of champagne in a cold water bath, the ice long melted.

She’d lost count of how many times during the night they’d made love, then dozed and woken to eat, only to make love all over again. It had been a night of pure hedonism, a feast for the senses, and yet still her Spanish lover kept coming back for more, still she responded as if it was the first time. It was almost as if their desire and passion for each other had been banked for the months they’d been apart, and now they were making up for lost time.

But to ask a question about how fast she could pack without even a hint as to where they were going or for how long? It was a stark reminder of her place in this relationship, a reminder that eventually this night and their bedroom equality would end, and that once again he would be the one calling the shots. Once again she was reminded that she was just his temporary lover, no more than a mere accessory to his busy life.

‘Where are we going? Back to Madrid?’

‘No,’ he declared without a pause, only for his fingers to suddenly still. ‘Or at least not just yet.’ Just as abruptly his fingers resumed their travels, trailing lower, this time pushing the bunched sheet down over her rump so that he could extend his range.

She squirmed a little, shoving aside any deliberations over why he had been so adamant at first that they would not be returning to Spain as his massage moved from the soothing to the erotic in a heartbeat. It shouldn’t be possible for a body to become aroused and find completion so many times in one night, and yet somehow Alejandro knew the magic, knew the key to her body that would set her aflame.

She squirmed into the pillows, not ready to give in to the demands of her body just yet. ‘Then if not Spain...?’

‘There is a half-built casino development in Queensland with plans for an entire resort. The developer has gone bankrupt. It sounds promising.’

Her silken arousal turned to sawdust.

‘So that’s why you’re here in Australia? To check out this casino?’

She detected rather than saw the shrug of his well honed shoulders, through the hand placed on her back and the slight movement of the mattress. ‘Why else?’ he rattled off easily.

It shouldn't hurt. She should know better than to let it hurt. But it still did. She buried her face deeper in the pillow and arched her back, pretending a response to his ministrations rather than his words. Why else, indeed? And, seeing he'd had to come to Australia, he'd figured he'd catch up with a convenient bed partner—someone he could blackmail into the job one more time for old times' sake.

She sniffed, and brought her arms up under her chin as his hands kneaded her buttocks. What was the point of torturing herself about it? He hadn't come to find her because he'd suddenly decided he loved her; she'd known that would never happen. And he certainly wouldn't have bothered to come all this way merely so he could blackmail her into his bed. Which was exactly where she was, come to think of it, totally naked under his expert hands. It was hardly time to get precious about her pride.

'Whereabouts in Queensland?'

'Caloundra,' he said, his fingers softer now, more sensual, as they circled her hips, tracing the hollow between her legs, teasing. 'If it suits our purposes it could become a launching pad for the Casino de Diamante group in the Asia-Pacific region.'

Leah squirmed, involuntarily pushing herself towards his delicious touch. She knew Caloundra. Or she'd known it years ago, when she'd spent some time there on a holiday trip with some girlfriends. Once a sleepy town on the beautiful Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane, the area was booming and fast becoming the new Gold Coast. No wonder it was attracting the likes of casino and resort developers.

'So when do we leave?'

'Eight a.m.'

She lifted her head to glance at the bedside clock and panicked. It was almost three now. 'I'd better go,' she said, pushing herself up on her arms. 'I have to organise things for the shop, and I'll want to call Jordan before we leave.'

'You can't go yet.'

'Why not?' She rolled over, and the question became redundant. He was magnificent, kneeling there alongside her, his olive skin shadowed, his black hair swept back and falling free to his shoulders, his dark eyes intent. But it was the erection he proudly bore that took her breath away. Long and thick, as hard as steel and yet with a velvet kiss, it bucked and twitched even as she watched. She reached out a hand, touching a fingertip to its tip, and slowly circled, skating on satin. This time it bucked harder.

He grabbed her wrist, pulling it away. 'See what you do to me?' he said, his words coming through gritted teeth. 'You cannot leave me like this.'

There was no way she intended to. Not when her prize would be to have that—him—inside her. She let him push her hand down onto the sheets alongside her, watching him climb over her, spreading her legs with his knees.

Between them his erection swayed like a promise. He was beautiful, her Spanish lover. For all his faults she could not deny him that. He was magnificent. Superb. Insatiable.

And for the next however long he was once again hers, if only in bed.

She'd take it.

He kissed her then—her eyes, her lips, her throat. He suckled her nipples, rolling them with his tongue, grazing them with his teeth, devouring them before moving lower, blazing a trail of silken kisses south.

'Alejandro,' she protested, but he offered her no respite from the exquisite torture, no relief. His chin brushed her curls and she cried out again, her fingers tangled in his hair. But still he didn't listen. He spread her wider, his tongue delving into her most secret places, circling that tight but tender bud, dipping into her honeyed depths, before returning his attentions to that swollen flesh.

There was nothing she could do, no place she could go but up, and he took her there—all the way. Launched her into orbit and sent her spinning, spiralling out of control. And then he was inside her, pumping into her, arresting her slide and sending her higher still. She closed tight around him, wanting to take him with her, wanting to never let go, wishing it could be for ever.

And then with a cry he came, a shuddering thunderclap of a climax that sent her plummeting into the abyss once again.

He watched her while she slept, her head nestled against his shoulder, her body tucked tight against his own, one leg nestled between his own. It was nearly five. He'd have to wake her soon, if they were going to get away on time, but right now he was content to watch her in the moonlight, to watch the steady rise and fall of her chest, to feel the fan of her breathing against his shoulder.

She was falling in with his plans perfectly—performing her duties in the bedroom beyond expectations, and dropping all hint of wariness or suspicion around him. It was just as it had been before she had left him. It was as it should be. She was his for the taking.

He hauled in a breath, letting it out on a long exhale. But would the time he had to spend in Australia be enough? Yes, she was his again. More his than ever after that last mind-blowing encounter. Was there any need to terminate things so soon? The sex was good. Better than good. And the longer he kept her around, the more he could enjoy what she had to offer—and, meanwhile, the more she'd think she was on her way to becoming permanent. Then, when the end eventually came, it would pack more of a punch than ever.

He rolled the idea around his mouth, tasting it, testing it for weakness. It was appealing, no question, but that would mean taking her back to Madrid with him, and that came with complications.

No, it was swift and sudden retribution he was after. He would just have to make the most of her here. A few days, surely, would be more than enough to take the edge off his needs, and then he would cast her away as easily as she'd walked away from him.

A few days would be more than enough.

Caloundra had grown up since Leah's last stay. As the private jet circled the sky before landing, it was clear the beachside town had turned into a thriving city. Apartment blocks lined the magnificent Pacific coastline, luxurious canal housing developments signalled the birth of a new generation of millionaires—millionaires ripe for the picking. No wonder Casino de Diamante saw this as a perfect

opportunity to break into the Australasian market.

The plane banked, and the view through her window changed, sprawling suburbs giving way to a verdant subtropical hinterland from which rose the spectacular Glasshouse Mountains, a cluster of eroded volcanic plugs rising hundreds of metres out of the plain.

‘You’ve chosen well,’ she said, leaning across to Alejandro, who was also taking in the view. ‘A growing region and a busy tourist destination. Your casino should do well here.’

He turned his eyes from the window and regarded her solemnly, almost as if she had crossed some kind of threshold by talking business with him.

‘Si,’ he said at last, breaking the silence and eye contact at the same time, as he returned his gaze to the window. ‘That is what we are hoping. The next few days will be busy ones for our team.’

‘Your team?’

He turned back to her, a wry smile lighting his features. ‘Expansion into Australasia is not a decision I can make alone. There are legalities, endless applications and regulations. And that is if the development is indeed deemed suitable for our purposes.’

‘I assumed you were quite sure.’

He shrugged, pushing himself back in his seat as the plane touched down on the runway. ‘What looks good on paper can look quite different in real life. The structure is half built, and has been left to the elements a long time while parties argued over who was to blame. It may already be too late either to save it or to alter it to our purposes. There are a dozen of our people on their way here now, to evaluate all the angles. We will meet with them, and the vendors and the government officials, this evening at a reception.’

‘So we could be here some time, then?’ she said, trying to get a handle on her immediate future as they taxied towards the small airport. ‘A few days to a week or more?’

He turned to her again, and something unfathomable moved across his eyes. ‘I’d say a week will be more than sufficient.’

His words and his cold delivery made her shiver, even long after she’d stepped from the air-conditioned comfort of the private jet into the warm subtropical air outside.

## CHAPTER SIX

THE beachside restaurant was theirs for the evening, turned over exclusively to the meet-and-greet party for the Casino de Diamante team. Leah and Alejandro were late arriving. Guests were spilling out onto the deck enjoying the balmy evening by the time they arrived, already sipping on champagne and nibbling on hors d’oeuvres to the crash of surf on the adjacent beach.

They should have been on time—would have been on time if Alejandro hadn’t decided that the spa was a much more attractive option than the shower for a pre-function freshen-up and lured her in. Not that it had taken much luring, she recalled guiltily, her body still humming from the slippery pleasure. Being fashionably late had never held such appeal.

But it was obvious the assembled crowd had been anticipating his arrival. His entry was turning heads. He handed her a drink from a passing tray as they moved slowly through the room, and introduced her to various members of his team, making himself known to others he'd come to meet. Leah had never seen so many Spanish people in one place outside of Spain. His so-called 'team' more resembled an army, with financiers, lawyers, architects and designers. If this project had any chance of working, Alejandro would make it so.

But that was how he did business. Why merely invest when you could take over? And why merely take over when you could conquer?

And the way he worked the room—treating everyone, no matter how briefly, as somebody special, somebody integral to the team—only supported the respect she already held for his business acumen.

From across the room she heard a tinkle of laughter that set her nerves on edge.

Surely not?

She turned her head, caught a flash of red silk in the midst of a nearby group, and her heart sank. Alejandro hadn't mentioned that his sister would be part of the team, but there she stood, Catalina Rodriguez, holding court over a cluster of men and looking more dazzling than usual.

Somehow Catalina had been cursed with the dominant Rodriguez features—the strong nose, the angled jawline—and yet somehow still managed to turn those features into a blessing, giving her femininity a strength one wasn't used to seeing worn so blatantly on a woman. Yet on Catalina it worked, lending her a regal, unapproachable air. And tonight, in a red toga-style dress, diamonds encrusting the tiara in her upswept dark hair and flashing on her arms and fingers, she looked more beautiful and more haughty than ever. In her simple white gown, with her hair bundled into a quick up-do and unfussy silver accessories, Leah felt pale and uninteresting by comparison.

At that moment Catalina turned her head, as if awaiting Alejandro's approach, and for a moment her eyes lit up with recognition, a smile curving that passionate red-slicked mouth—until she took in his partner for the evening and the cold fires of hell consumed every hint of warmth in her face. Leah shivered. Absence had failed to make Alejandro's sister's heart any fonder, that was a certainty.

'Alejandro,' she gushed, rattling off a line in Spanish in greeting, and ignoring Leah as if she were no more than blighted fruit. She wrapped one arm around his neck and pulled him in tight, kissing his cheeks and keeping her arm there. Possessively? Leah couldn't help but think so as his sister angled him ever so slightly away. 'Why couldn't you have waited for us to travel down together? It is such a long way. We missed your company on the flight.'

He returned the greeting. 'You had company enough. I had a few things to attend to.'

Briefly Catalina's attention returned to Leah, her disapproval of Leah as one of those 'things to attend to' obvious.

'Hello, Catalina,' Leah offered, refusing to be cowed by the woman in spite of her enmity. 'I didn't realise you'd be here tonight.'

The darker woman arched one eyebrow. 'Why wouldn't I be here? I am part of this business. Whereas you...'

She suddenly tossed her head and gave a little laugh, patting Leah on the arm as if it didn't really matter, as if bygones could be bygones and she'd already put such differences aside, as if she'd already effectively made her point and so had no need to say more. And she did have no need to say more—at least not to Leah.

She took her brother by the arm, blood-red talons on designer wool, drawing him away from Leah and into her circle. 'What is more important is that you meet Jack Riverstone, the original architect for the project. You'll want to hear his vision for the casino.'

'You go,' Leah assured Alejandro as he looked over his shoulder. 'I'll be fine.' But she noticed he'd already turned away before she'd had a chance to smile.

Business, she thought with a rueful smile as she turned away. Casino de Diamante was all about business. Which was why she would never fit in. She hadn't needed Catalina's blunt reminder. She wouldn't be here now if it weren't for her brother's lack of business acumen, and she certainly wasn't here for her own benefit, whatever Catalina clearly thought.

He knew exactly where she was. The speeches of welcome had been made, the introductions performed, the formalities taken care of, and he'd known where she was every second of every minute of that time.

He'd followed her with his eyes as she'd circulated. He'd seen her ready smile and her easy manner as she'd engaged in conversation, looking more like a goddess in that dress than a woman. He'd seen other eyes follow her around the room, and it had taken all his resolve to concentrate on the task at hand of building the bonds that would lubricate any deal and not sweep her away from their hungry eyes.

But now the party was winding up, the guests peeling away to prepare for the round of meetings and consultations and negotiations that would start first thing tomorrow. Now she stood on the deck, gazing out over the sandy beach to the white line of foam that marked the edge of the dark sea. Now it was time to reclaim her for his own.

He picked up two fresh glasses of champagne and turned towards the doors.

A hand on his arm halted him, the red nails biting deep. 'What's she doing here?' His sister's furtive question in their own language came with a toss of her head in Leah's direction. 'I thought you were through with her? Papa thought you were through with her. How can you let her back in your life after what she did?'

Catalina unhooked her fingers from his arm and slid them around one champagne flute. He let her take it, not needing right now to be reminded of their father and his wishes, needing to be reminded even less that he had ever admitted to Catalina that Leah had walked out on him. 'She means nothing to me. We merely have—unfinished business.'

She arched one eyebrow high and pointed the flute at disapproving red lips. 'You know Papa is eager for you to settle down. He was hoping to announce a match with Francesca de la Renta on your return.'

'Papa can keep on hoping. I told him that I will choose who and when I marry. It is his dream to head up a dynasty, not mine.'

Her hand found his arm once again, this time more tender, and her expression was one of sympathy. 'Alejandro,' she soothed, 'Papa is not well. Of course he wants to see you settled with a wife and an heir. And Francesca is so beautiful and sweet. She will be the perfect wife.'

'Papa is strong as an ox!'

'You know that's not true. Otherwise he would be here with us now, barking out orders, telling us all what to do.'

Catalina was right. Their father had been a bear of a man once, but those days were gone—and, deny it all he might, each day his father's illness drained a little more of his strength. Was he wrong to deny him the dynasty he desired? He could do much worse than Francesca. She had the perfect blood connections, and her father was an international hotelier. The benefits of the union to their combined operation would be immense. And with her sheltered upbringing and finishing school education she would make the perfect wife for a businessman. A meek and obedient hostess and a dutiful mother to his children, practically invisible.

'You know it's time,' Catalina crooned. Then her head jerked towards the deck again. 'So how long will it take to finish this "unfinished business" of yours?'

He looked out to where Leah stood at the railing, the loose tendrils of her hair floating on the breeze, the long white folds of her gown shifting, revealing artful slits that gave tantalising glimpses of the perfect legs beneath—legs that had been slippery with soap and bubbles and wrapped around him so deliciously just hours ago.

He gave a wistful sigh. It was such a shame he didn't have longer before he had to dump her. But it could not be helped. He would just have to make the best use of what time he had. Starting tonight.

'Not long,' he said. 'I have a score to settle.'

Catalina smiled conspiratorially as she drained the glass and handed it back to him, her eyes once again hard. 'Make sure you do.'

'She doesn't like me, does she?'

'Who doesn't?' He'd traded the glasses he was holding for fresh ones and joined her at the railing. He had no doubt who she was referring to.

'Catalina. I saw you talking together, and I saw the way she looked at me. She can't bear the thought that a humble seamstress is somehow tangled up with her brother.'

He shrugged, not wanting to get into a discussion about who might be worthy of him when right now he just wanted to get her back into his bed while he still had the chance. The next few days would be full-on with meetings. He would have to make the most of the nights. 'Catalina has always had a strong sense of family, especially since our mother died. She wants the best for me, naturally.'

'And she makes it clear I'm not the best. That's fine. Anyone would think I actually wanted to be here.'

He halted, his glass halfway to his lips, knowing something was wrong. 'But you do want to be here,' he



said, moving from defending his sister to defending himself. 'Aren't you enjoying being with me?'

'You know why I'm here, Alenjandro. Maybe you should let your sister know that I didn't come crawling back to you—that I had no choice and that it was you who blackmailed me back into your bed!'

'I saved your brother.'

'And now you're exacting payment! Why don't you tell Catalina that? Tell her that I have no designs on you, no wish to upset her perfect plans for her baby brother and his perfect wedding and his perfect life.'

His teeth ground together. 'Nobody makes plans for me.'

'No? Well, maybe you should tell your sister that.' She handed back the glass. 'I've got a headache. I should go.'

'I'll take you.'

'It's only next door. I'll be fine. You stay and do whatever it is billionaire businessmen do. I'll go and play with the scullery maids.'

'Then go! But when I come back you'd better be ready for me.'

'Of course,' she hissed. 'You paid for it. You take what you want.'

He watched her leave, a goddess on a war footing, marching out of the restaurant as if she was somehow in the right.

Maybe Catalina was right after all. Maybe marrying Francesca wasn't such a bad idea. Francesca would never stand up to him. She would be meek and mild and utterly obedient, and he would be able to concentrate on work without any distractions. It would make a pleasant change.

He turned to find somewhere to put down the glasses—right now he needed something stronger than champagne!—and caught a flash of red across the emptying room.

Catalina was smiling at him, a look of victory emblazoned across her bold features.

Mierda!

She shouldn't have argued with him. Leah stood in the bathroom, a robe having replaced her gown, while she took off her make-up. What was the point of arguing with Alejandro? What could she possibly achieve? But Catalina had made her so angry—the poisoned looks, the heated discussion going on just a few feet behind her. Had his sister not realised that she could understand some of the exchange, enough to know that it was her they were discussing?

She slammed her hands down on the marble counter-top.

Dammit!



She didn't know how long Alejandro expected to keep her around to pay off her debt to him, but she didn't want to spend it fighting.

She was ready to climb into bed when she heard the apartment door to the living room open and slam shut. She braced herself for his entry, and the continuation of their earlier hostilities, but there was nothing but the bump of cupboard doors being thrown open and closed and the tinkle of glass against glass. Eventually all was quiet, apart from the rhythmic whoosh of the waves crashing onto the beach below.

Eventually she gave up on sleeping and padded out to the living room. She found him on the sofa, his head slumped to one side, a half-filled tumbler in his hands tilting at an alarming angle, and she allowed herself a smile as she eased it away. So Alejandro was mortal, after all. The curtains were open along one windowed wall, and he'd obviously fallen asleep watching the waves rolling in along the shore.

For a moment she just looked at him, his dark face beautiful in repose, his lashes curled long and thick over his closed eyes, before finding him a pillow and a cover.

The night was still warm, without a hint of the chill there'd been further south, but he would need it later on.

It had been a long three days of doing nothing. Alejandro had been involved in wall-to-wall meetings with architects, builders and government officials, and Leah had been relegated to the role of 'little woman' and packed off to wander the boutiques and cafes, instructed to 'keep herself busy'.

She had—for as long as she could. She'd found a new pair of bikinis and a matching tie skirt, and that had consumed all of an hour of the first morning. She'd bought a book and read it from cover to cover by the pool. But the idea of aimless shopping and doing little more, when she should have been back in Sydney running her shop, held little appeal. And not being there for Jordan bothered her too. He'd got himself in trouble last time while she was away. Sure, he was an adult, but he was still her younger brother. Someone had to look out for him.

But, if the days were filled with aimless nothing, at least the nights had proved productive. Alejandro had woken on the sofa some time during that first night and slipped under the covers of her bed, slipping simultaneously under her defences. They'd made love without words, then drifted back into sleep and done it all over again upon waking. And the nights had just got better since then.

But the days. The days were endless. She stood now on the terrace of their apartment, watching the ever-changing view. On one side lay the Pacific Ocean, the crashing waves, the surfers and beachgoers, and beyond them, out to sea, the shipping lanes busy with enormous vessels ploughing along the coast.

From another terrace she could see the northernmost tip of Bribie Island, a thin, narrow scrub-covered spit that ended at Caloundra, where Pumicestone Passage emptied into the sea. And from another she had a magical view across the city to the hinterland, with the majestic Glasshouse Mountains often shrouded in mist or spearing passing clouds.

It was beautiful. It was a charmed life she was living. But it wasn't enough.

Because every time she made love with Alejandro, she loved him just a little bit more. Every time he pushed inside her, pleasuring her, taking her to new heights of passion, she lost more of herself to him.

And soon he would undoubtedly decide she'd paid off her debt in full and depart, leaving just a broken and empty shell behind.

He should never have come back.

She was doomed, she was edgy and she was resentful, and it was all Alejandro's fault. Why couldn't he have just left her alone?

Half a dozen times today she'd been tempted to just ring up the airline and book the next available flight back to Sydney, to escape this constant pressure cooker existence, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She'd made a bargain with Alejandro to save Jordan's hide, and for all she knew of the thugs who ran those money-lending operations he probably had. She at least owed him something for that.

If only it didn't come at such a personal cost!

It was after seven by the time Alejandro finally returned to their suite that night, looking surprised to find her standing on the balcony in shorts and tank top, even though she'd left the building before nine this morning to walk with him on his way to yet another round of meetings.

'What have you been doing today?' he asked, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her bodily towards him for a kiss.

'Nothing.'

He smiled as he headed towards the drinks cabinet, as if she were talking rubbish. 'Nobody can do nothing all day.'

She followed him inside, shaking her head when he held up a bottle. 'And nobody can shop twenty-four-seven. It tends to lose its appeal rather rapidly.'

'You surprise me,' he said, pouring a slug of Laphroaig into a glass. 'I thought all women loved shopping.'

'Apparently not. Especially when they could be doing something useful, like running their business.'

He put the bottle and glass down and surveyed her through narrowed eyes. 'Your business is not being ignored. You have someone to take care of that for you. Besides, you are doing something useful. You are here to service my needs.'

She scoffed. 'You make me sound like some kind of livestock!'

'I thought you enjoyed the sex?'

'You know I do.'

'Then what are we arguing about?' He glanced at his watch. 'We have a dinner tonight, but there is still time...'

There was a hunger in his eyes that fed straight into her bloodstream, setting it fizzing and steaming when it was supposed to be her temper that was steaming. But he was right. She loved the sex, and right now that was all she had—all she would ever take out of this deal. It wasn't love, but she would settle for it.

The best sex ever. It would have to be enough.

She swallowed as he came closer, her nipples already peaking, her thighs already thrumming.

‘How would you like it?’ he asked, unbuttoning his shirt as he joined her on the terrace, pulling off his shirt and exposing that olive expanse of chest she loved so well. ‘Or maybe I should ask where?’

‘Right here,’ she heard herself say. ‘On the terrace.’ She yanked off her top, letting her unrestrained breasts fall free, feeding on the flames she saw flare in his eyes as she walked towards him. He thought she was going to kiss him, but instead she surprised him by dropping to her knees. Her hands went to his belt, feeding the leather through the straps, while his hands seared her back, radiating his need like a brand.

‘Leah,’ he groaned, as she unleashed him into her hands, took his silk-coated shaft between her lips and told him how much she loved him without uttering a single word...

## CHAPTER SEVEN

‘CRISTO!’

Leah walked out of the bathroom the next morning to see Alejandro wrenching off a newly laundered shirt.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ he insisted, ‘that Housekeeping can’t fix.’

She picked up the shirt, brushing the fabric smooth, noticing the problem immediately. ‘You’ve lost a button.’

He was already picking up the phone, jabbing at a button. ‘I haven’t lost anything. I’ll get somebody to take care of it.’

‘I can fix this,’ she said, cutting the connection with her finger on the cradle before anyone could pick up.

He glared down at her, all bare-chested Spanish indignation. ‘I need a shirt. With all the buttons intact. In two minutes or less.’

‘You could have had more time,’ she said innocently, ‘if you hadn’t insisted on accosting me in the shower when you knew time was already short.’

He took a playful swipe at her and growled. ‘Time was the only short thing going,’ he said, and she laughed, dodging around him as she reached for her bag and the tiny sewing kit she carried with her everywhere.

The needle was threaded, the button sewn on, secured, and ends snipped in less than thirty seconds. ‘There you go,’ she said. ‘Try that on for size.’

He frowned, his brows tugging together as he considered the shirt, the look in his eyes strangely confused.

‘You did that for me?’

She gave a nervous laugh. What was the big deal? ‘It was just a button.’

Was it? He mumbled his thanks as he took the shirt, slipping it over his shoulders and turning away from her as he buttoned it up, wondering what it was that was bothering him. The visual of her fingers sending the needle flashing through the fabric with such precision was still vivid in his mind.

People didn’t do things for him. Not really. People were paid to do things for him. It was the way things worked. It was the way he liked it. It was the way he’d got Leah back in his bed when she’d made it clear it was the last place she wanted to be.

Given her enthusiasm for the activities of the last few nights, he wasn’t so sure about that any more. But considering what he had to do to her tomorrow, before he left for Spain, he wasn’t sure he was comfortable with her doing things for him now.

Just a button? He wasn’t entirely sure.

It was scarily light for five-thirty in the morning, the early sun already warm on the terrace, the birds loud in the trees and the breeze nothing more than a promise. And now the deal was all but stitched up, with Caloundra set to become the first foray into Australasia by the Casino de Diamante group. It had been a productive few days.

Alejandro stretched in the morning air, and his gaze strayed towards the bed where she lay still sleeping, half covered by a sheet, her hair streaming across her pillow.

Not to mention a productive few nights.

But last night had been their last.

There was time, he knew, to have her again before they needed to have breakfast and meet the launch that was taking his team on a tour up the coast. There was time to take her in his arms and bury himself in her welcoming depths. Time to forget what he was going to have to do.

But his gut churned, twisting itself into knots, clamping down so tight he could barely breathe. He turned away from the bed—away from her—and leaned against the railing, trying to force air into lungs there was suddenly no space for in his chest.

This was what he wanted, what he had planned. He had her right where he wanted her. She owed him. She was his for the taking.

And for the discarding.

It was no more than she deserved. She’d walked out on him, chosen a life scraping together an existence with a sewing machine over a life of luxury with him. It made no sense to him, but if that was what she preferred then he would happily send her back there.

He pushed himself off the railing and paced the terrace, looking for answers in the push-pull of the ocean’s edge below. If only he had more time. But there was no time. He had to return to Spain. He’d

been away from the business long enough as it was. And he could hardly return to Madrid with Leah and risk her pulling a similar stunt again. What was to stop her, when he didn't know what it was that had driven her away in the first place?

He had no choice. He had to get in first.

And then he could return home, the slate wiped clean, justice having been done.

Maybe he needed that wife after all. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. A wife would get both Catalina and his father off his back, and would have the bonus of taking his mind off Leah. Francesca de la Renta was pretty enough to provide a distraction. It would be no chore to introduce her to the delights of the bedroom. Maybe in time she might even become as adventurous and provocative as the woman in his bed. Maybe she might surprise him.

'Alejandro?'

He turned at the husky early-morning voice to see her watching him, her sleepy eyes blinking against the light, her breasts swaying enticingly, an invitation in stereo.

'What are you doing up so early?'

'Just thinking.'

She patted the empty space alongside her. 'Come back to bed. You can think here.'

That was the trouble. He couldn't think in bed. Not once Leah was in his arms, blinding him to everything else, blanking out his mind to logic and reason and reducing him to lust. But it was their last morning, and the last thing he needed was to alert her that anything was wrong. So he went, sliding between the sheets and stretching out an arm under her head.

She nestled into his shoulder and settled her body in close to his, one leg over his thigh and resting between his, her eyes closed. She took a deep breath and sighed, pressing her lips to his throat. 'You smell good.'

Did he? He gazed up at the ceiling and tried to ignore the turmoil going on in his gut. He'd played his hand well. She wasn't merely his mistress any more. She was playful and affectionate, and now she was even doing things for him. Thoughtful things like sewing on buttons. She wouldn't have any idea that he was about to pull the rug right out from under her feet.

It was perfect.

So why did he feel so bad?

The sleek launch was waiting at the end of the Diamond Head jetty, its deck crowded with the smiling Spanish team, their white teeth flashing in the sun at the prospect of a wind-down day after the hectic negotiations and plans of the last few days and before, for some of them, the long flight home.

The waiting staff moved between them, offering sparkling water and nibbles as the crew prepared the launch for departure. And Catalina was there among them, dark glasses hiding her eyes, but failing to

disguise the smirk that adorned her red lips when Alejandro swung Leah on board.

‘Planning to enjoy your last day, Leah?’ she enquired, all saccharine sweetness.

Alejandro shot his sister a look that told her to shut up, and, while Leah smiled, he could see the tightness around her eyes and mouth. ‘Hello, Catalina. I’ve been looking forward to it.’

Catalina’s smile widened measurably. ‘I’m sure Alejandro is going to get a big kick out of it. We all will.’

He took a warning step closer. ‘Catalina!’

She backed away, one hand held upright, long acrylic tips spearing the air. ‘I’m sorry, Alejandro. You must excuse my enthusiasm. It’s just I’ve been so looking forward to this day.’

And suddenly he didn’t want his last day with Leah to be filled with his sister’s poison. He’d brought Leah here to pay her back for what she’d done to him. It had nothing to do with his sister.

He grabbed the arm of a passing waiter. ‘Where’s the skipper?’

Ten minutes later they were standing on the jetty, watching the launch disappear through the heads.

‘What was that all about?’ she asked. ‘I thought we were going with them?’

‘I had a better idea. Come with me.’

On the other side of the jetty bobbed a small dinghy the crew had organised, with a cooler and other gear stashed under cover. He stepped in, bracing his feet wide, and held out his hand. ‘Come on—but watch out. It’s not as stable as the launch.’

‘You want me to get in that?’

‘Why not?’

‘Where’s the engine?’

‘You’re looking at him.’

‘You row?’

He put his hands to his chest. ‘You mortally wound me. Did you not realise I was in a crew that won a rowing blue at university?’

‘No,’ she said, and paused. ‘No, you never told me that.’ But then he’d never told her anything of his past, of his growing up or his life before taking over the reins at Casino de Diamante. He’d never given her so much as a glimpse of the boy who’d become a man.

She took his hand, feeling his confidence as his strong fingers wrapped around her own, and stepped down into the dinghy, sitting on the bench at the back of the boat. He untied and pushed away from the jetty, sitting down opposite her and fixing the oars in the gates. He certainly looked as if he knew what he was doing.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Across the passage to the island. I hear the beaches there are the best.’

She looked over his shoulder. ‘That must be five hundred metres away at least.’

He just smiled and started to row. ‘At least.’

The dinghy cut through the water to the sound of the gates creaking, the slap of the blades on the water and the cry of seabirds whirling overhead. It was beautiful on the water, the boat gently rocking over the swell as they left the land and the city behind, but nothing was more beautiful than the view she now enjoyed.

The wind in his black hair, he was smiling. His eyes were obscured by sunglasses, but he was watching her watching him as he worked the oars, his arms out wide, his rolled-up cuffs flapping as he planted the blades into the water and drove them forward. A slice of olive-skinned chest tantalised, giving her a hint of the muscles working beneath, and she could tell the amount of pressure he was applying so seemingly effortlessly by the cording of his forearms as he powered the boat through the water. Beauty and strength. It was a heady combination—especially now, with that smile that warmed her to her toes.

‘Where did you go to university?’

‘Oxford.’

‘What did you study?’

‘International Law and Economics.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘Why so many questions?’ He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder, not bothering to let her answer. ‘You see that small sandy beach over there?’

She looked around him and found the spot he was talking about amidst the scrub. ‘I see it.’

‘That’s where we’re heading. It’s your job to keep me on course.’

‘Ha! Like anyone could ever give you directions.’

He laughed, his concentration lapsing, and one blade didn’t dig in deep enough, catching the surface and showering her with spray. She squealed, the water ice-cold on her skin after she’d been sitting in the sun. ‘You did that on purpose!’

He grinned. ‘Then don’t give me any cheek.’

She raised one hand to her forehead in a salute. ‘Aye-aye, Skipper.’

They made it across, due more to his rowing abilities than her navigation skills, pulling the boat up on the sandy shore and tying it to a tree trunk.

‘What now?’ she asked, as he hauled the picnic basket and beach gear out of their stowage.

‘Now we walk.’

The scrub closed in around them, a narrow sandy path taking them through ferns and shadowed bush. Butterflies flitted across the path in front of them, and tiny birds darted from tree to tree. Over the gentle sounds of the scrub was overlaid the distant roar of the nearing ocean. There was a small rise, a sandy dune, and then they were there at the top, the Pacific Ocean rolling in to shore before them in an ever-changing display of white foam.

To the right there was nothing but an endless stretch of sand and surf, curving into the distance. To the left more pristine beach stretched to the northernmost tip of the island, with the mainland jutting out in a headland just beyond. The air was clean and fresh and she just wanted to drink it in. And the best thing of all was that there was absolutely nobody else there.

‘It’s magic!’

And she wasn’t only talking about the view. Something was different today. Something had changed on some indefinable level, and Alejandro was suddenly more relaxed towards her than he’d ever been—certainly since he’d walked back into her life barely a week ago. For today there was no sign of the ruthless businessman who’d demanded her return to his bed in exchange for paying off her brother’s debts. And while logic told her that it could just be his relief after a few intense days of negotiations and contracts that the casino deal was coming together, inexplicably, illogically, she wanted to believe there was more.

He smiled at her and took her hand. ‘Come on.’ They jumped down onto the beach, shrugging off their sandals and digging their toes into the warm white sand. They walked a short way down the beach until they found a grassy spot at the edge of the bush, sheltered from the sun, where he spread out a picnic blanket. Leah dropped to her knees and dug out the sunscreen.

‘Where is everybody?’ she asked, unable to believe such a beautiful beach so close to the city could be so empty. She stripped off her T-shirt to apply another layer of sunscreen.

Alejandro took the tube from her and knelt behind her, squeezing the cream into his hand and smoothing it onto her back in slow circular movements, more like a sensual massage than any casual application of cream, his fingers tracing her ribcage, caressing her shoulders. ‘Without a four-wheel drive or a boat you can’t get here.’

‘I like it,’ she said, turning towards him, placing an arm around his neck, her fingers splayed in his thick curls at the base of his neck. ‘Thank you for bringing me here.’ And she kissed him.

It was a small kiss of thanks, no more than a brief meeting of their lips that had ended almost before it had begun. She was already pulling away when he grabbed her arm, holding her there, the look of turmoil in his eyes a frightening thing.

‘Alejandro?’

He shook his head and closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, whatever she’d seen there was gone. He smiled and let her go. ‘How about a swim before lunch?’

He stood, peeling off his shirt and shorts to reveal his black swimming trunks. Leah felt a tremor of



excitement. He looked magnificent in black, his lean hips and natural endowment accentuated by the band of black Lycra. But here they were on a deserted beach. And there was one thing Alejandro wore even more magnificently...

She rose to her feet, sliding her shorts down her legs, feeling his gaze sear a trail down with them. He was about to take her hand when she moved them both out of his reach, behind her.

‘What are you doing?’ he growled, as she pulled on the end of her bikini tie.

‘There’s nobody here but you and me. And there’s something I’ve always wanted to do.’

She dragged the bikini top over her head, letting it fall to the rug below. His eyes let it go, his attention riveted on her breasts.

‘I didn’t put sunscreen there,’ he growled.

Then her thumbs hooked into the sides of her bikini pants and his gaze headed south.

‘If someone comes?’

She smiled wickedly across at him. ‘Bring it on.’

The band of black around his hips grew tighter as she pushed the garment down her hips, letting it slide down her legs. ‘Are you coming?’

He uttered something, a sound like gravel, but she was already running across the beach, her feet squeaking on the sand as she bolted for the surf.

It met her in a cold rush that sucked the air from her lungs as it tugged around her legs, but still she ploughed on, diving through a crashing wave that turned the water around her to foam. She jumped up high, gasping and exhilarated, her body feeling more alive than ever as the cool Pacific water discovered every part of her.

The sea erupted alongside her. Alejandro, bursting from the sea like some fabled sea creature, dark and sleek and glistening in the sunlight.

He captured her in his arms and pulled her in tight, slick skin against slick skin, his mouth hot against hers, his erection pressing into her belly. The water swirled and sucked around them, holding them in its own embrace. A wave caught them, sent them tumbling, and she spun away, diving into the foaming depths to escape him. But his hand found her ankle and he hauled her back for another heated kiss, another glimpse of paradise.

Then his mouth was on her breasts, sucking the salt from her, rolling first one nipple around his tongue then the other, heated and desperate, while she clung to him, her fingers laced in his hair as he devoured her.

‘Do you have any idea what you do to me?’ he groaned against her breast, his breathing ragged and coarse.

‘Show me,’ she said, arching her back, pushing her nipple further into his mouth, her whole body tingling, her thighs aching in anticipation.

The waves crashed around them, and the blood crashed in his ears, and somehow the two were in time, an endless symphony, spurring him on to another inevitable union.

He cast one scant look towards their clothes, to where he'd left protection, before he decided that there was no time. The moment was now. He moulded her to him, lifting her, wrapping her legs around him, feeling for her core as his mouth sucked the salt from her throat.

She was ready for him, slick and hungry, and he fed her, inch by agonising inch, until he was buried to the hilt and could go no further. He held her there, locked in his embrace, locked as one, his feet planted wide as the waves tried to claim them. A moment to be savoured, a moment like no other. Then, with a rush like the outgoing sea, he pulled out of her. Her gasp of loss turned to one of delight as he lunged into her again.

She was liquid in his arms, salt and surf and part of the sea, but part of him now too. And the waves crashed around them as he crashed into her, deeper and harder, searching for a sweetness that defied the salt.

And the waves built inside him, and all around, and where she held him, in her tight embrace. And he knew the exact moment she left him, knew the instant she'd come apart, knew it and couldn't help but follow her into the crashing foam.

They tumbled and rolled, spluttering and laughing and still locked together, finally coming to rest breathless on the sand, the receding waves leaving them in the shallows.

The salt was sticky on his skin, the sand felt gritty in his hair, and his skin stung where they'd grazed the sandy bottom. And yet he'd never felt better in his life.

He wiped a tendril of hair from her face, stroking her forehead with his thumb. Her blue eyes looked up at him, her plump lips parted as her breathing calmed.

'You're beautiful,' he told her. 'Crazy and beautiful.'

She looked up at him and made to say something, but then her lips stalled and turned into a smile. He wondered what it was she'd been going to say. Wondered what she'd thought better of.

And he wondered how long he had before he had to tell her he was leaving without her.

A few hours at most.

And suddenly he didn't feel good any more. The sand and grit and salt and the knowledge he'd risked everything by not using protection all combining into one irritating package. If she were pregnant with his child...

'Do you still have your IUD?'

She blinked and frowned.

'It was my fault,' he said. 'It seems you caught me, as you like to say here, with my pants down.'

Her eyes widened as the truth dawned. 'Oh, of course.' She shook her head, and for just a moment he

thought she was going to say she was unprotected. 'No. It's okay. There's no chance.'

And yet instead of the relief he was expecting his mood got inexplicably darker. He swiped at his sand-coated skin. 'I have sand everywhere.'

But she just laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck, dragging him down for a kiss. After a moment he let her. If they only had a few hours, he wasn't going to waste them feeling bad.

They washed in the ocean, letting the wave action work its magic in tearing the sand away, then dried off under the shade of their tree, picnicking on cold chicken and fresh tropical fruit and chilled white wine. And afterwards they lay down on the rug and watched a lone falcon perform lazy loops over the water's edge, ever watchful for its next meal.

The sun tracked lower, their shade moved, and she took the tube of sunscreen and squirted some into her hands, getting Alejandro to roll over. She rubbed it into his shoulders and back, her fingers trailing down his arms.

He turned suddenly and captured both hands in his own. 'Do you remember how we met?' he asked.

She looked at her hands in his and remembered the chance meeting in a cafe on the Costa del Sol that had exploded into an affair that very night.

'It was your hands,' he said. 'You were beautiful enough, but you were sewing something and it was your hands that drew me to you—the way they worked, the way they moved. I knew I had to have you from that very moment.'

He was so intense, so sincere, that it was impossible not to feel the impact of his words in the answering beat of her heart. He held out her hands, holding them palm up in his own, examining them as if searching for their secret.

'They are just hands, and yet your fingers bewitched me in that very first moment. How is that possible?'

His accent was stronger, as if he was struggling with what he had to say, struggling to express himself. His words washed over her, drenching her in a new hope. Was he bewitched? Was that the reason he'd come back for her? Was this faint hope unfurling in her heart founded in something other than just wishful thinking?

'Why did you leave me?'

The question came so softly, so unexpectedly, that she didn't think she'd heard it right. But then she lifted her eyes to his and read the question there too.

'Leah?' he prompted. 'Why?'

Her heart was thumping so loudly it drowned out the sound of the seabirds and the crashing surf. As it drowned out the tiny voice in her head that told her not to be foolish enough to admit the truth. Besides, she told herself, if she couldn't tell him on this special day, after all they'd done and all they'd shared, she could never tell him.

'Because I fell in love with you.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS clearly the wrong answer. He stared at her for a moment too long—the same moment in which she realised her mistake. Then he let her hands fall as he suddenly rose, looking skywards to the sun before searching about for his clothes. ‘It’s time we were leaving.’

‘Alejandro?’

‘Get dressed! It’s time to go.’

She sat there, too stunned to react, unable to assimilate the sudden change from caring to cold. She’d thought that today she’d seen a glimmer of something in him, sensed the tiniest spark of something deeper than mere desire. She’d opened her mouth and told him the truth, and she’d ruined everything.

What the hell had she done?

In the time she took to don her bikini and shorts and locate her sandals Alejandro had stashed the remains of their picnic away and swept up and shaken the sand from the rug. He threw his towel over his shoulder. ‘Ready?’

She grabbed her things and stumbled after him along the beach. ‘You did ask,’ she protested. ‘Why did you ask if you didn’t want to know?’

He didn’t answer. Because he didn’t know why he’d asked or what had prompted him. The question had emerged from his mouth fully formed. He only knew that never in a million years had he been expecting her to say what she had. If she’d said she’d had enough of the sex, if she’d said she was sick of the hours he worked or was homesick for Sydney, those reasons he could have coped with. He might not have believed her, but those reasons he would have understood. Those reasons would justify what he had to do.

But for her to say that she’d walked out on him because she’d fallen in love with him? It made no sense. No sense at all.

‘What does it matter why I left?’ he heard her cry out behind him. ‘Sooner or later you would have grown tired of me anyway and cast me off. You would have traded me in for another model as easily as you’d trade a car.’

He spun around. ‘That was my decision to make!’

She stopped following him, her eyes sheened with moisture. ‘Can’t you just forget I said anything?’

How he wanted to. He turned and crashed his way along the path, scattering birds and butterflies, sending them for cover, and all the time wishing he could forget. But how could he forget those words and how they’d sounded? And how could he forget the look in her eyes when she’d told him?

She’d fallen in love with him and then she’d walked out on him. And now he had forced his way back into her life so he could take his turn and leave her high and dry. If he dumped her now she’d think it was because she’d admitted falling in love with him.

It shouldn’t matter!

But for some reason it did.

He'd wanted to get even with her. Had hungered for it. But he'd never expected that getting what he wanted might ultimately taste this bad.

Mierda!What a mess.

The tide was higher when they reached the dinghy, the tiny beach all but covered, and the wind was up, turning the waters of the passage bumpy. He stashed the basket and towels away and untied the boat, telling Leah over his shoulder to jump in as he pushed it out. He wouldn't look at her. He couldn't. Not if it meant looking into those eyes again.

But once inside the boat he had no choice.

She sat there, her hands planted firmly on the bench either side of her, her jaw set, her hair twisted into some kind of quick-fix hairdo that looked as if it was about to come undone at any minute. He pulled hard on the oars, using the exercise for therapy, wishing the pain in his muscles would overshadow the pain in his twisted gut, wishing that the creak of the oars in the gates would blot out the sound of her words playing over and over in his head. "Because I fell in love with you."

She wasn't supposed to fall in love with him. That had never been part of their arrangement. She'd been just another in his long line of women companions, with a similar list of necessary attributes.

She was beautiful.

Convenient.

And, best of all,temporary .

The blades dug deep as the swell caught them, the boat lurched and tilted, but still she sat there, unflinching.

She'd been too temporary. Why couldn't she have waited until he was finished with her? It would have happened. It always had before.

Until Leah.

The injustice grated on his senses. He hadn't had time to grow tired of her. She'd left him before he was ready to let her go. And now he had forced himself into that very same position of losing her once again before he was ready. But this time the circumstances were entirely of his own making.

It was more than a mess. It was a nightmare.

He glanced over his shoulder, checking his direction, noting that the launch was back and disgorging its passengers. Good. They would be long gone by the time he made it back. He didn't want to talk to anyone now.

He leaned forward, ready to dig in with another stroke, but this time it was the words of his old rowing coach he heard, and once again he was eighteen, his muscles screaming and cramping with pain, his gut lurching in rebellion as he sat in the stroke seat of the eight. The coach had followed them in his motorboat, issuing instructions to their coxswain and driving them on, further and further, as they raced

towards some imaginary finish line he'd promised them. Ten more strokes. Then another twenty. Up the rating. Dig deeper. Harder. And with lungs bursting, muscles burning up, they'd kept up the pressure and pushed through the imaginary line.

"Dig those blades in," he'd yelled through his loudspeaker. "Never stop rowing until you cross that finish line. Until then the race isn't over."

In all his years at university it had been the best advice he'd received. In all the years since it had served him well. Because of that coach he'd set his targets way beyond everyone else's and kept on rowing, kept on working towards winning the entire length. The lesson had paid dividends through all the years since he'd taken over the running of Casino de Diamante. He was always looking for the extra mileage that could take him further, seeing the competition falter far behind.

He dug the blades into the choppy water and dug down into himself, looking for reserves, seeking new sources of strength. The finish line was out there somewhere. There had to be a way to get there if he only dug deeper.

This race wasn't over yet.

Leah felt empty. Where earlier her heart had been so full, now there was nothing but a raw, gaping hole, left all the emptier for the joy that their blissful afternoon together had generated. Joy that in the blink of an eye had somehow turned to grief.

And she'd done it. She had nobody else to blame. She'd opened up her heart and she'd let him rip it right out of her.

But how could she ever have seriously imagined that Alejandro would react to her confession in any other way? He was the head of one of the most prestigious and well-respected casino businesses in Europe, a ruthless businessman used to mixing it with the best. Whereas she was just a lowly dressmaker, scraping out an existence in the suburbs of Sydney, trying and not succeeding very well to keep her wayward brother out of trouble.

She'd known her love was wasted months ago, and she'd walked away rather than admit she'd lost her heart to him. Why had she been so foolish as to think anything had changed now? Because with a few smiles and some easy banter he'd seemed different from the man who had stormed his way into her shop and back into her life, demanding she return to his bed in exchange for rescuing her brother? The sun must have truly fried her brain today.

For he was the same man.

Right now he sat there like a man on a mission, powering the small dinghy through the choppy water, his expression brooding, his eyes impenetrable, closed off. Clearly he couldn't wait to get to the other side, to get away from her as fast as he could.

Who could blame him? Discovering that the woman you'd taken to be your temporary bed companion has been harbouring secret wishes and desires must be every man's nightmare.

There was no way he would want her to stay now, regardless of the deal he'd brokered to get her back. He'd heard enough; he'd want to be done with her as quickly as possible.

Which suited her right down to the ground.

He steered the boat towards the jetty, pulling in the nearside oar as the dinghy bumped alongside. Two of the crew from the launch met them, pulling the boat in and keeping it steady, offering his sullen passenger a hand out. She took it, stepping onto the jetty as if she couldn't wait to be gone. Fine.

But a second later, after he'd thrown a hasty instruction to the crew to take care of their things, he noticed her walking down the jetty, her back ramrod-straight. He stiffened, the blood thickening in his veins. He'd seen that walk once before.

'Leah!'

She hesitated the merest fraction of a second, but she didn't turn around, she kept right on going.

He caught up with her where the jetty met the beach. He took her arm and spun her around. 'Where are you going?'

Her eyes shone back at him, glacial blue, cold and unyielding. 'Where do you think I'm going? I need a shower. And then...' She jagged up her chin. 'Then I need to pack.'

Something wild and angry surged inside him. 'You're not going anywhere.'

Her eyes turned momentarily colder before she sighed and they changed, softening, a sudden sadness filtering their blue. 'Release me,' she pleaded. 'I don't belong here—in your world. Let me go home.'

'No!' he roared, the beast inside him clamouring for release.

She put a hand over his where he clung to her arm, prising his fingers loose and letting his hand drop away. 'You don't want me. Not now. You haven't ever really wanted me. Please let me go. I'll find a way to repay you for Jordan's debt. I'll pay you back every last cent.'

'I don't care about the money!'

She smiled. 'No. But I do. You saved my brother from financial ruin. And, considering the sharks he was swimming with, you might well have saved his life. I have to find some way to repay you.'

'That's not what I want!' On that one point he was clear. He didn't care about the money, didn't care about being repaid. But as to what he wanted... The blood was pumping through his body, thumping at his temples, the creature inside him struggling in turmoil. None of it made sense. Nothing was clear.

She smiled then, a little sadly. 'I guess we can't always have what we want. If you give me half an hour I'll clear my gear out of the apartment and be gone before you get back.'

And out of the tumult, out of the confusion of his thoughts and the mayhem of his mind, one thing was crystal-clear. He could not let her go. He could not lose her again. 'No. You can't do that. You can't move the finish line. It's not over—'

'Goodbye, Alejandro.'

She turned and walked away. And something inside him snapped. At first it was the same thing that had happened the first time she'd left him—the same anger, the same fury. But then it was different. This was a pain that felt as if his chest had been ripped open, the beast tearing its way out from the inside, arranging words and thoughts into new ways—ways that he could understand, words that told him more of the things he didn't want and didn't need, more of the things he did.

And it was all so obvious. Why hadn't he seen it before? He didn't want to go back to Spain alone. He didn't want to marry Francesca de la Renta or anyone like her. He didn't care about her, and he didn't care about spawning a dynasty.

Because he cared about Leah.

She was all that mattered.

Because he loved her.

Anguish followed the revelation. Anguish that he could have treated her so cruelly, that he had trampled on her honest declaration, that she might once again leave him.

'You can't go,' he called as she walked away. 'You can't leave me—not like this.'

His voice fractured on the last word and she stopped, taking her own sweet time before she turned around, a time that felt to him like an eternity.

Even across the metres that separated them he saw the moisture sheening her eyes, the tears clumping her lashes, and his heart squeezed tight. He knew that he had done this to her, was determined that he would do all in his power to make things right. Starting now. He took a deep breath and, for the first time since arriving in Australia, knew he was telling the truth.

'I love you,' he said.

She blinked, her blurry vision now seeming to affect her hearing too. 'What did you say?'

He walked up to her, the tails of his white shirt flapping in the breeze and his salt-stuck hair making him look more of a pirate than ever. 'I said, I love you.'

She shook her head, not believing, too afraid to encourage the answering call, the tiny quaking tremble inside that signalled the return of her heart.

'You can't love me. I'm just a nobody. You don't want me to love you.'

'I can't lose you again,' he said, taking her hands. 'I don't ever want you to leave me. Marry me. Come back to Spain as my fiancée.'

'Marry you?' His hands wrapped their warmth around hers as his words found their way into her heart. 'I...I don't know what to say.'

'Say yes,' he said, wrapping her in his arms before dipping his mouth to hers.

## CHAPTER NINE



HAPPINESS was infinitely better, she decided, when you were coming from the depths of despair. She hummed to herself as she removed the last few things from the wardrobe and folded them into her suitcase. Colours were brighter, the air was sweeter, and nothing and nobody could make her feel bad.

And love? Love was the most wondrous thing of all, shiny and precious, a gift from the gods.

As Alejandro surely was.

And Alejandro loved her.

Life couldn't get any more perfect.

Her skin felt so good it glowed, and her body still hummed from their latest encounter. He'd brought her back to their rooms and filled a spa bath for two, and let her know just how much he loved her. And the suspicion, fed by his veiled hints, that he'd gone downstairs in search of something to formalise their new relationship, made her senses buzz.

The phone rang and she answered it to hear Alejandro's richly accented voice greet her. Even that was enough to trigger a jump in her pulse-rate.

'Meet me downstairs in the lobby,' he told her. 'There's something I want to show you.'

There was a jeweller's store in the lobby. A very expensive, very exclusive jewellery store. Her heart skipped a beat. It was real. Alejandro loved her and wanted to marry her. It wasn't just a dream. It was happening.

She wasted no time getting to the lift, punching the button, bubbling over with joy, hardly able to wait to see Alejandro again. But the lift halted on the very next floor, its doors sliding open.

Catalina stood there on the brink, dressed for cocktails in a low-cut dress that made the most of her considerable assets. Leah shrank back to the wall as she entered, noting that the woman didn't bother with a smile this time.

'Well, well,' she said, punching the button for the mezzanine restaurant level. 'If it isn't our seamstress. I thought you would have run off home by now, with your tail between your legs.'

'And why would I do that?'

'Once Alejandro spat you out, what else could you do?'

Leah turned away, preferring to stare at the floor numbers displayed, wishing them to fall faster. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Then obviously he hasn't done it yet. But don't take it too hard. You did walk out on him. It's only natural a man like Alejandro would feel the need to get even.'

She flashed her eyes back at the older woman, who was busy pretending to check the paint job on her nails. 'That's ridiculous.'

'Is it? Then why do you think he bothered to look you up while he was here, if it wasn't for the chance

to take his revenge? Do you think he actually enjoys slumming it with you?’

A sliver of fear worked its way down Leah’s spine. She didn’t believe the woman for a moment, but he had been so angry when he’d turned up that day at her Sydney shop. Angry, and determined not to take no for an answer. Prepared to blackmail her back into his bed if that was what it took. Prepared to humiliate her into the deal.

But that had been before. He would not have come back to her at all unless he loved her; Leah believed that with all her heart. She had to believe it. That was her trump card, and it was going to blow Catalina’s bitchy efforts to pull her down sky-high.

‘I don’t know why you’d say such things, Catalina, other than because you’ve always made it plain you don’t consider me good enough for your brother. So be it. But you’re way off base. Alejandro loves me. And he’s asked me to marry him. I’m on my way right now to meet him, to choose an engagement ring.’

The Spanish woman’s eyes grew wider, as if she were strangely delighted with the news. ‘He loves you?’ She moved closer conspiratorially, until perfumed air surrounded Leah like a poisoned cloud. ‘Then you really are a fool. Alejandro is going to marry Francesca de la Renta. Their betrothal is to be announced the minute he sets foot back in Spain.’

Francesca de la Renta.

She remembered seeing the fine-boned hotel heiress at various functions she’d attended with Alejandro. She was petite and pretty, with big doe eyes, and her father had accompanied her everywhere, almost as if he were guarding her.

And she remembered hearing her name that first night, when Catalina had been hissing some Spanish poison at Alejandro. Had she been reminding him of his obligations then? Maybe that explained Catalina’s aggression towards her, if she thought her brother was risking a connection between two powerful families. Hotels and casinos. What would be a better match? But for Alejandro to toy with her when he was already thinking about marriage with another—it was unthinkable.

‘Then why would he ask me to marry him?’ Try as she might, it proved impossible to ask the question and still keep the defensive quality out of her voice.

‘Who knows? He was planning to ditch you today.’ Catalina gave a shrug. ‘Maybe he didn’t think you were ready.’

Ice-cold fingers crawled down her back, needle-sharp and determined to do damage. ‘What do you mean, ready?’

Catalina stepped back against the wall of the lift and watched the display, as if bored with the conversation. ‘Maybe he wanted to suck you further in, to make you really believe in fairytales, before he dumped you and smashed those silly dreams of yours to pieces. Oh, at last—my floor. Choose something expensive, won’t you? It may be your last chance.’

The woman was evil, a total bitch, but, whatever the truth, Leah couldn’t let her go thinking she’d had the final word. ‘Alejandro isn’t like that,’ she countered, her words as shaky as her legs. ‘He would never do that to me.’

Catalina turned her head and gave a knowing smile. ‘And yet it seems he already has.’

The lift doors closed, blotting out the vision of the woman's snide smile, but nothing could blot out the damage her toxic words had wreaked.

What she'd said of Alejandro, it was too ugly to contemplate. But could Catalina be right? Could Alejandro's talk of love and marriage be just more lies to suck her in? Could he be so hell-bent on revenge that he would do that to her simply because she'd walked out on him?

With a shiver his words came back to her—the words he'd uttered with such frustration on the beach, when she'd asked him why it mattered why she'd left him, because he would have grown tired of her some day.

'That was my decision to make!'

Had it really mattered so much to him? Had her leaving him enraged him to such a degree that he would pursue her, trap her into coming back to him, simply so he could in turn dump her?

It didn't seem possible.

But what else had Catalina said—that he had planned to finish with her today? And her comments on the launch about Leah enjoying her last day—what had they been but a hint of her doom? And Alejandro had done nothing to deny it. Nothing!

But then Leah had got in first, asking him to release her from their deal and foiling his plans to dump her.

The lift bumped gently to a halt, and with a shudder it hit her. He hadn't told her he loved her until she'd told him she was leaving him—again. So he'd upped the stakes, telling her the only thing he'd known would reach her, the only thing that would lure her back to him so that he could complete his plan for revenge.

Alejandro's marriage proposal was a sham. Just as his love was clearly a sham. Surely his reaction to her confession as to why she'd left him was proof enough of that? He hadn't been ready to hear her declaration of love. He'd been shocked senseless by it, his revulsion at the very concept apparent. So he was hardly in any position to declare his own.

Numb and shell-shocked, she stepped out into the lobby. She turned her head and caught her Spaniard standing there, his back to her, as he scanned the busy lobby, waiting impatiently as ever for her to arrive.

No, she corrected herself, not her Spaniard. He had never really been her Spaniard. Only in her dreams. And those dreams had been proved to be just that. Dreams. Empty bubbles. Bubbles that had now been well and truly pricked.

And if happiness was better when you were coming from the depths of despair, then despair was ten times deeper when you were coming from the dizzy heights where she'd been such a short time ago. Such dizzy heights. Such a long, long way down.

Blindly she turned to go back the way she'd come. But the lift doors had closed behind her, the elevator gone. Another opened alongside, spilling its jovial passengers into the warm Caloundra evening.

In a panic to get away unseen, she dived in after them, punching the 'close doors' button for all it was worth.

Back in the apartment the last few things were thrown into her suitcase, organisation swept aside in her desire to get out of there as soon as she could. It was still early enough. She could be away and gone from Caloundra before nightfall. There had to be a flight to somewhere she could take. Anywhere would do. Anywhere that took her away from Alejandro...

The phone beside the bed rang. She stopped, the suitcase zipper only halfway around its track. If that was Alejandro, down in the lobby wondering where she was, then she still had time to get away. She ignored the ringing phone, snapped closed the bag and left the apartment, aiming for the stairwell rather than the lift without a second glance. She had never belonged here with him. Never.

It was just as well she'd discovered the truth now—before she'd gone with him, before she'd believed his lies. Because she'd wanted to believe them. With all her heart and all her soul. And Catalina, for all her faults, was right about one thing. It would have hurt her more than ever to arrive in Madrid and discover that Alejandro's proposal had been nothing but a sham.

She was gone. The apartment was empty—of her, of her clothes, of her suitcase. Every last trace of her was gone.

And the roar that erupted from his lungs consumed every last place she'd been.

She couldn't be gone.

Not now.

Not again!

She had left him not once but twice. Walked out on him for a second time. And for a second time the rage threatened to consume him, the fury that she could do this to him turning his blood to steam.

How could she do that to him now? After he'd told her he loved her. After he'd asked her to marry him. What kind of woman did that?

In a moment of clarity, a tiny glimmer of hope amongst the rage, he phoned Reception. Maybe he was wrong? Maybe he'd missed her and she was waiting for him downstairs? Maybe there was an explanation for her missing luggage? Only to be told that she'd taken a car to the airport ten minutes ago. His fury intensified, spreading like a cancer through his body, turning solid in his gut.

Somehow she'd eluded him. Somehow she'd avoided him. Clearly that had been her intention.

He strode out onto the terrace, his hands closing tight on the railing while the endless ocean rolled in below, crashing in waves upon the shore before sucking out again.

She'd done that. She'd come into his life like a wave, beauty and form in motion, before crashing over him, all energy and power and passion.

And then she'd left, sucking him dry.

Nobody walked out on Alejandro Rodriguez. Not business tycoons or CEOs or poker-faced

politicians. And definitely not women. But Leah Mitchell had. Twice.

And he would not give her the opportunity to do it again.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE sky over the Sunshine Coast Airport was clear and blue and went on for ever. Alejandro's mood was dark and foul, and began and ended in the same black hole. His team sensed it, keeping their distance, keeping their voices low around him, as if not to provoke his wrath.

This short flight to Brisbane to connect with their international flight was an inconvenience he didn't need. Catalina's late arrival for the flight even more so. He wanted to be gone from this place and this country as soon as possible. Gone from the memories and the pain. Until the casino opened he would not have to return, and that would be at least eighteen months away. He would not miss it.

Finally a car pulled alongside the plane, and he watched his sister emerge, unhurried, the cabin attendant holding a stash of shopping bags and ushering her up the stairs. At last.

'What took you so long?' he growled as Catalina took the seat across the aisle, a cloud of scent following her.

'A girl has to shop,' she said with a shrug as she did up her safety belt. 'I couldn't go home without a gift for Papa.'

He grumbled his displeasure. A new casino wasn't gift enough?

'Oh,' she said, scanning the seats up and down the plane, 'we seem to be missing somebody.'

'No,' he grunted, as they finally closed the door, wishing they were already gone. 'Nobody.'

He could feel her eyes on him, feel their false pity. 'Never mind. I'm sure it's all for the best.'

He shifted in his seat, turned his gaze out of the window. Dios! What was taking so long? Why couldn't this plane just take off?

Someone answered his prayers. The whine of the engines grew louder; the plane started crawling towards the runway.

'It wasn't like you were really going to marry her.'

His head swung around, something live crawling under his skin. 'What did you say?'

She gave a thin laugh, looking suddenly uncomfortable. 'Just stating the obvious.'

'What do you know of it? How do you know we even talked of marriage?'

She was shaking her head. 'Alejandro, what is this? She must have mentioned something. I can't remember the details.'

'You saw her? Leah told you? When?'

The only time they'd been apart he'd been in the jewellery store, selecting a ring he thought she'd love, and the last time he'd spoken to her she had been on her way down to meet him. Something had happened between that phone call and her leaving. And with a chill he realised that that something had to be Catalina.

'What did you tell her?'

Sydney's city air was heavy and dull after Caloundra, the traffic and grime a stark contrast. His car double-parked outside her shop and he jumped out, his heart thudding, his blood rushing like an express train. She had to be here!

He swung open the door of the empty shop, the tinkling bell above heralding his arrival. 'Leah?' he called.

A small, wiry woman emerged from behind a curtain, a cup of tea in one hand, the teabag's tag dangling over the rim, a spoon in the other.

'Where's Leah?'

She eyed him suspiciously. 'She's gone away. I'm not sure when she'll be back. Can I help you with something?'

The blood in his veins turned to mud. He'd come here first, thinking she'd flee to somewhere safe. But if she'd gone somewhere else... 'Do you know where she's gone?'

Her eyes narrowed. 'You're not one of our regulars, are you?'

The door behind him opened and stayed open. He turned and froze.

'No,' the newcomer said, her voice flat. 'He's not one of our regulars.'

Her eyes were dark-rimmed and suspicious, her skin pale, her clothes assembled as if she didn't care—and yet still she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. 'Leah.'

She let the door fall shut, skirting the wall of the tiny shop to avoid getting anywhere near him, setting a course for the older woman. 'Sorry, Beryl. I had a sudden change of plans. I tried to call your flat to let you know not to bother coming in today, but only got the answer machine.'

'It's lucky you turned up when you did. This bloke was just asking for you.'

Sheer dumb luck. He was the last person she'd expected to see any time soon—the last person she wanted to see ever. 'You don't have to stay if you'd rather go.'

The older woman gathered up her bag without hesitation. 'Only if you're sure? But I could use the time...'

Leah assured her she'd be fine. Besides, she didn't want anyone here to witness whatever was going to happen next.

The door closed with a click, and the tinkle of the bell finally died away.

‘What do you want?’

‘I came to find you.’

‘Well, congratulations. You found me. And now you can do me a favour and just unfind me.’

He took a step closer. ‘Leah—’

But she held up one hand. ‘Don’t you understand, Spaniard? I just want you to go!’

‘And I want you back.’

‘Why? So you can dump me, the way you planned? So you can exact your revenge on me for daring to leave you?’

‘Leah, it wasn’t like that.’

‘Wasn’t it? You mean you didn’t come back here and blackmail me back into your bed specifically so you could dump me when you were through?’

He turned his head to the ceiling. ‘Mierda! I was so wrong. But I was crazy. Nobody had ever walked out on me before. And I wanted you so badly.’

‘Only so you could pay me back. When the Caloundra deal came up, it provided you with the perfect opportunity. You could exact your revenge and have your night-time entertainment taken care of at the same time. How convenient.’

‘It wasn’t like that.’

‘I think we both know that’s a lie.’

He put his hands atop his head, then brought them down in a rush, holding them out in supplication towards her. ‘I’m not proud of what I did. But don’t you see? I had to get you back.’

‘And you couldn’t drop me a line and tell me you missed me or ask me to reconsider?’

‘You must understand. I am a proud man, and you had struck at my very core by walking out on me. Some questions I find hard to ask, especially when I suspect the answer will be no, and, given the vehemence of your exit, how could I expect you to say anything else? I had to find a way to convince you to say yes.’

‘You might have tried!’

She spun around, pushing back her hair with one hand. But he was probably right. Unless he’d professed his undying love for her she would have said no, and love had never been in his vocabulary until, it seemed, very recently. But he might have tried. Instead his actions had been carved with one thought in mind, whatever he claimed. He’d wanted revenge and he’d set out to get it.

She dropped her chin to her chest, shaking her head as she turned. ‘It doesn’t matter. It’s over.’



‘How can you say that? You confessed that you love me. You agreed to become my wife.’

She laughed. ‘In my defence, that was before I knew you were practically betrothed to another woman. I know you’re a man of large appetites, but I’d say two wives might be one too many—even for you.’

‘I am not marrying Francesca, whatever Catalina thinks. Why should I want a simpering wife when I could have a passionate woman beside me? A passionate woman who knows what it takes to make me burn?’

She swallowed. Had he moved closer to her while her back was turned? She could swear she could feel the heat emanating from him, making her burn. ‘Because she’s an heiress and I’m a nobody.’

‘You have never been a nobody.’

‘Catalina—’

‘Is jealous of you.’ This time she saw him edge closer, closing the gap between them until he was close enough that she could pick up his own individual scent, the combination of soap, tangy cologne and testosterone rolled into one dangerous package. ‘Because you have more skill in your two hands than she will ever have in her entire body. So she puts you down. You should not let her. You are more than a match for Catalina and any number of Spanish heiresses.’

He reached out a hand towards her and she watched it, mesmerised. She felt his fingers brush through her hair. Felt the kiss of his skin on her throat. Felt herself waver.

She stepped away, putting more distance between them, circling him. ‘But you had no intention of marrying me. That was a lie.’

He turned with her, following her as she tracked around him. ‘Did Catalina tell you that too?’

She swallowed. ‘Not in so many words. But it all made sense. I foiled your plans to dispose of me by asking you to release me from our deal. So you had to find another way to keep me dangling on your string. And what better way to do it than by telling me the one thing I most wanted to hear—the only thing that would stop me from leaving you? So you told me you loved me and wanted to marry me. When all you wanted to do was keep me close. Lure me back so that you could do the job properly next time.’

‘Leah, I have so much to answer for, but I would never do that to you. I asked you to marry me because I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.’

His eyes were so deeply charged, so earnest, and she wanted to believe him, wanted to believe the words he spoke to her. ‘And you discovered this suddenly? In the space of time it took me to tell you I was leaving you? Not before, on the beach, when I confessed to falling in love with you, when I admitted to leaving you because I was afraid of what might happen to me? Surely that was the time to discover you loved me? But instead you pushed me away. Made me feel that I had lost you again. And all the time it was you who had lost something—the chance to get even!’

Unshed tears stung her eyes. Reliving the trauma of the past twenty-four hours was too much to bear. She spun around, not wanting him to see her agony, but he was there, holding her shoulders, his hands supporting her, his lips on her hair.



‘I didn’t know what to do.’ His voice sounded like gravel. ‘All I knew that day was that I didn’t want to share you with anyone. I wanted you all to myself. And I battled with what I thought I had to do because I wanted still to keep you. And that’s why I asked you why you’d left me. Because I had to understand what drove you away so that I could get angry all over again. But you told me you’d fallen in love with me...I had no answer for that.’

She sniffed. ‘You did get angry with me.’

‘Because I didn’t understand. And it wasn’t until you asked me to let you go that it all became clear. I couldn’t let you go because I loved you. It was the thing I had been struggling with all week—wanting to remain angry with you, but feeling something for you that blotted out the anger, took it all away. You have to believe me, Leah, I love you.’ He pressed his lips to her hair and she shuddered.

‘How can I trust you? How can I possibly believe what you say? Holding my brother to ransom so that you could blackmail me back into your bed was bad enough, but discovering what you had planned...How can I ever trust you?’

‘I know,’ he said, sounding sad, and dropping his hands from her shoulders so she felt suddenly bereft. ‘I know. I don’t know if it helps, but I wanted you to see this.’

She heard the rustle of paper and turned slowly around. ‘Here’, he said, handing her some papers.

She took them reluctantly. ‘What is it?’

‘Read it.’

She scanned the documents, noticing her brother’s name and the details about his loan, doing her best not to reel when she saw just how large the settlement figure had been. She’d been prepared for a six-figure sum after Alejandro’s warning, but a part of her had always been in denial, assuming Alejandro had wanted to put a bad spin on things. These documents proved otherwise. And yet why should it matter? Hadn’t she already paid her debt in full?

She shrugged. ‘It’s the loan discharge document. What are you trying to prove? I already know you paid off his loan. You had Jordan call me at that restaurant to tell me.’

He nodded in the direction of the papers. ‘Look at the date.’

She searched them then, turning frantically from the first to the second page until she found it. The date on the contract meant nothing until she counted back. ‘Hang on—this is the daybefore you arrived, before you made that deal with me.’ An uncomfortable tremor rumbled down her spine. She looked up, confused. ‘These papers are dated the day before we had dinner together and made that deal! You’d already paid off my brother’s debts, and still you held me hostage, letting me think you’d arranged everything that night.’

He nodded, his eyes shuttered. ‘It is true.’

‘But I spoke to Jordan that night I agreed to your terms. He must have known. Why didn’t he tell me?’

Alejandro lifted his shoulders. ‘How could I risk you knowing? I asked him not to. Under the circumstances, he was more than happy to comply.’

She shook her head, none of it making sense. 'But why did you do it? You made out that if I didn't do what you wanted you'd walk away, leave him to the mercy of the money-lenders.' She waved the papers in her hand. 'But you'd already paid them off!'

'Guilty,' he admitted. 'And I've asked myself the same question. But he was your brother, and he was in trouble. There was no way I couldn't help.'

'And if I'd refused to come back to you?'

'I know how much you love your brother. I cannot imagine what it must be like for him to have such a sister. God knows, I cannot imagine Catalina doing the same for me.'

She paused. The truth was starting to filter through, but she was still too fragile to believe it. 'I don't understand. You saved my brother because of me, before I'd even agreed to your deal?'

It was his turn to hesitate. 'Si. I didn't want you hurt, and I knew how much you would be hurt if anything happened to your brother.'

And suddenly new hope burned fierce in her heart, growing, spreading, overwhelming her doubts. 'You cared about me?'

'Apparently.'

'Even in the midst of blackmailing me?'

He had the grace to look uncomfortable, if only for a moment. 'It is an awkward truth. I am not usually so inconsistent.'

Her teeth bit down on her lower lip so hard she knew this wasn't just the dream she'd wanted to have last night, where everything would come right in the end. This was real.

'You loved me, even then?'

'I should have recognised it earlier. It would have made things much less painful. I have much to ask your forgiveness for.'

'No,' she disagreed, planting her hands on his cheeks. 'Not if you love me. Never apologise for loving me.' And she pushed herself up on her toes and kissed him.

He wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him, the thumping of his heartbeat tangling with hers. 'Does that mean what I think it means? That you will become my wife after all?'

'Yes,' she laughed, throwing back her head, dizzy with excitement. 'I will marry you. Because I love you, my Spaniard.'

'"My Spaniard",' he said as he spun her around. 'I like the sound of that. I plan on being your Spaniard for ever. Te quiero con todo mi corazon.'

'What did you say?'

‘I said, I love you with all my heart.’

‘I like the way you say that.’

He smiled down at her, drawing her up to receive his kiss. ‘Then I will keep saying it—every day of our life together. Expect to hear it many, many times.’

Their lips brushed together, so gently, so fleetingly, tasting each other, sampling as if for the very first time.

And in a way it was. Their first time in a brand-new beginning.

She sighed into his kiss. ‘Alejandro,’ she whispered, liking the way his name tasted on her mouth, liking even more what he was doing with his. ‘My Spaniard.’

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THE LATIN LOVER

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