



ANNE McALLISTER

Breaking the Greek's Rules



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Аннотация

She might not be suitable for the throne...Matchmaker extraordinaire Jessica Carter arranges marriages that work. And that is exactly what Prince Drakos is looking for. The last thing he needs is someone as unsuitable as her...but none of the beautiful socialites paraded before him excite Stavros as Jessica does. But she can share his bed! Usually unchallenged, Stavros welcomes Jessica's defiance – his fingers itch to lower her prickly façade and discover what lies beneath. Will Jessica agree to his final request? One month to exorcise their smouldering passion, before he marries someone fit to be his Queen... 'Maisey Yates is always fascinating to the last paragraph. Definitely recommended!' – Polly, Events Coordinator, Derby

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MODERN™

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“You’re scared.”

“I am not scared! What’s there to be scared of?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” He cocked his head.

“Temptation, maybe?”

She shook her head adamantly. “I’m not tempted. I’m busy. I haven’t seen you in five years, Alex. I barely knew you. We don’t have a past to catch up on. Goodbye, Alex.” She turned away and started to go back inside.

But before she could Alex caught her arm and spun her slowly back—then did what he’d been wanting to do ever since he’d realized who she was.

He dipped his head and kissed her.

It was instinct, desire, a mad impetuous hunger that he couldn’t seem to control. It was a roaring in his ears and a fire in his veins. It was the taste of Daisy—a taste he’d never forgotten. *Never*. And as soon as he tasted her he wanted more.

And more.

For a second, maybe two, Daisy seemed to melt under the touch of his lips. She went soft and pliable, shaping her mouth to his. And then, in another instant, it was over.

She jerked away from him, stared at him for one horrified moment. Then she pulled out of his grasp and bolted back inside the foyer.

“Daisy!”

The door slammed in his face.

About the Author

Award-winning author **ANNE MCALLISTER** was once given a blueprint for happiness that included a nice, literate husband, a ramshackle Victorian house, a horde of mischievous children, a bunch of big, friendly dogs, and a life spent writing stories about tall, dark and handsome heroes. ‘Where do I sign up?’ she asked, and promptly did. Lots of years later, she’s happy to report the blueprint was a success. She’s always happy to share the latest news with readers at her website, www.annemcallister.com, and welcomes their letters there, or at PO Box 3904, Bozeman, Montana 59772, USA (SASE appreciated).

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Breaking the Greek's Rules

Anne McAllister



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For Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

ALEXANDROS Antonides studied the crumpled receipt, the one with the hastily scrawled name, address and phone number on the back, and was tempted to stuff it right back in his pocket.

Or better yet, throw it out.

He didn't need a matchmaker, for God's sake!

His fingers crushed the already frequently crumpled piece of paper and he stared out the window of the taxi as it headed north on Eighth Avenue. They weren't out of midtown Manhattan yet. It was nearly five-thirty. He should just tell the driver to forget it.

But he didn't. Instead he made himself lean back against the seat and, just as he had done a dozen or more times before, he smoothed out the paper against his palm.

Daisy Connolly. His cousin Lukas had scribbled down her name and address a month ago when he and Lukas had met up at the family reunion out at Lukas's parents' place in the Hamptons. "She'll find you the perfect wife."

"How do you know?" he'd asked Lukas, letting his voice carry his obvious doubt. He'd looked around pointedly, noting Lukas's complete lack of not only a wife, but even a date for their family reunion.

"Seen her do it," Lukas said frankly. "I went to college with her. She did it then. She does it now. She has some uncanny sense of who belongs together." He shrugged. "Who knows how she

does it? Hocus-pocus? Tea leaves? Beats me. Give her a call or go see her.”

Alex had grunted, not a sound meant to convey agreement.

“Unless you really don’t want to get married.” Lukas had cocked his head, considering Alex. Then, “Maybe he’s chicken,” he had said to his brothers.

One of them had made a clucking sound.

Alex had masked his irritation and rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he’d said curtly. “If I get desperate enough, I’ll look her up.”

“I’d say you’re already desperate,” Lukas had said, grinning. “How many fiancées have you gone through?”

“Two,” Alex said through his teeth. “But Imogene doesn’t count.”

Imogene had been perfect. She hadn’t loved Alex any more than he’d loved her. When her long-time boyfriend had got cold feet faced with a lifetime commitment, Alex had grabbed her on the rebound. Unfortunately two days after she’d said yes to Alex, the love of her life had come to his senses and begged her to marry him.

“What can I do?” she’d wailed at Alex. “I still love him!”

The more fool she, Alex had thought. But he’d been polite and wished her good luck. He still did. If she was that besotted, she’d need it.

“I don’t know,” Lukas had said slowly, studying him. “Two fiancées in a little over a year ...” He’d arched his brows in speculation, then looked over at his brothers. “Sounds pretty

desperate to me.”

His brothers, Elias and PJ, had nodded sagely.

Alex had merely snorted. He didn't want a perfect wife, anyway. He just wanted a suitable one. He was thirty-five years old. Time to get married.

Of course lots of men would disagree. But not Antonides men. Antonides men married. All of them.

Not young, as a rule. Most all of them sowed their wild oats before settling down. But in the end, every last one of them took the plunge.

As a young man Alex had turned his back on the notion. He'd figured to be the exception to the rule. Besides, then the thrill of the hunt and endless variety had enticed him.

Now it often seemed more trouble than it was worth.

Sex? Well, that wasn't too much trouble. But picking up women who wanted a one-night stand seemed tawdry to him now. And while it was fine to play the field when they were young, Alex understood what every Antonides male understood—that there came a time to turn into a responsible, steady, dependable, mature man.

And that meant having a wife.

Elias might have been born responsible. But even PJ, who had been a beach bum for years, was respectably married now. In fact he had been secretly married for years. And Lukas, the youngest of them and definitely a free spirit, would get married, too.

Even Lukas knew it. It was just a matter of time.

Alex's time was now.

He had made up his mind last year. The hunt had begun to bore him and he found he preferred spending his time designing buildings than enticing women into his bed. It wasn't all that difficult, honestly. The difficult part was when he had to convince them he didn't intend to fall in love with them.

It would be easier and more straightforward, he decided, to find a woman he liked, spell out the rules, marry her and get on with his life.

It wasn't as if he had a lot of rules. Basically all he wanted was an easy-to-get-along-with, undemanding woman who wanted an easy-to-get-along-with, undemanding husband. He wasn't looking for love and he wasn't looking for kids. He wasn't looking to complicate his life.

He and his wife would share bed and board when they were in the same country and would attend each other's duty functions when possible. Presently he lived in an apartment he'd restored in Brooklyn above his offices, but it was a bachelor's pad. He wouldn't expect his wife to live there. They could get another place close to her work. She could choose it. He didn't care. He was perfectly willing to be accommodating.

So, really, how difficult could it be to find a woman willing to agree to his terms?

Harder than he thought, Alex admitted now.

His last three dates had seemed promising—all of them were professional women in their thirties. He'd met them at business

social functions. They all had high-powered careers, fast-track lives, and nearly as many demands on their time as he had on his.

They *should* have been perfect.

But the lawyer had treated their dinner date as a cross-examination about his determination not to have children. The dentist bored on about how much she hated her profession and could hardly wait to quit and start a family. And Melissa, the stock analyst with whom he'd had dinner with last night, told him point-blank that her biological clock was ticking and she wanted a baby within a year.

At least Alex had had the presence of mind to say just as firmly, "I don't."

But that date, like so many of the others he'd had since he'd decided that it was possible to marry without anything as messy as love complicating the relationship, had gone downhill from there.

Which brought him back to the receipt he held in his hand.

Daisy.

He stared at the name Lukas had scrawled on the crumpled paper. It brought with it flickers of memories, a frisson of awareness. Honey-blond hair. Sparkling blue eyes. Laughter. Gentle, warm words. Soft sighs. Hot kisses. He shifted in the seat of the cab. Once upon a time, for one brief weekend, Alex had known a woman called Daisy.

So maybe this was fate.

The hot-kisses, soft-sighs Daisy had wanted to marry him.

Maybe the matchmaking Daisy would find him a wife.

“Think of it as delegating,” Elias had urged him pragmatically when he’d balked at Lukas’s suggestion. “You do it all the time at work.”

That was true. Alex had a whole staff at his architectural firm who did the things he didn’t have time for. They did what he told them, checked availability, researched zoning and land use and materials, sorted and sifted through piles of information, then presented their findings and recommendations, and left him to make the final decision.

It was sensible. It was efficient. And Elias was right: a matchmaker could do the same thing. It would be smarter, in fact, than doing it himself.

He would be leaving less to chance if he deputized a disinterested employee to find appropriate candidates. And he’d be spared the awkwardness of future dinners like the one he’d shared with Melissa last night. With a matchmaker vetting the candidates, he would only have to meet the really suitable ones, then decide which one would make the best wife.

It suddenly sounded promising. He should have dropped in on Daisy Connolly before this. But Alex didn’t ordinarily get to the Upper West Side. Today, though, he’d been working on a building project in the West Village and, finishing early, he’d had a bit of time to spare before he headed back to Brooklyn. So he’d plucked the paper out of his wallet and hopped in a cab.

Twenty minutes later he consulted it as he got out again on

the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and the cross street on which Daisy Connolly had her office.

He hoped she hadn't gone home already. He hadn't made an appointment. It had seemed more sensible to leave himself the option of changing his mind if, when he saw the place, something about it made him want to walk straight on past.

But the street wore the New York City version of homey respectability. It was quiet, lined with four and five story brownstones, a few blocks north of the Museum of Natural History. The trees on either side of the street were all varying shades of gold and orange this early October afternoon, making it look like a photo op for an urban lifestyle magazine. Alex took his time walking up the block, the architect in him enjoying the view.

When he'd first bought a place to live in New York three years ago, changing his base of operations from Europe to this side of the Atlantic, he'd opted for an apartment in a high-rise about a mile south on Central Park West. Twenty-odd stories up, his aerie had given him a useful bird's-eye perspective of the city, but it had literally kept him above it all. He hadn't felt connected.

Two years ago, offered a chance to tear down a pre-war office building in Brooklyn not far from where his cousins Elias and PJ lived with their families, he'd found a purpose and a place where he was happy at the same time. He'd found another property on which to build what the owner wanted, and seeing a chance to make a useful contribution to the gentrification of

a neighborhood in transition, he had snapped up the pre-war building for himself. Now he had his offices downstairs and his apartment on the fourth floor. He felt more like he belonged and less as if he were soaring above it.

He got the same feeling here on Daisy Connolly's street. There was a laundry on one corner, a restaurant on the other. Between two of the brownstones he passed an empty lot which now held a small local playground with some climbing equipment, a swing and slide. One brownstone had a small discreet plaque by the door of the garden floor apartment offering herbs and organic seedlings. Another had a small sign for a chiropractor's office.

Did matchmakers have signs? He felt an unwelcome flicker of awkwardness. When he found the address midblock, there was no sign. It looked like a version of all the rest—a tall, narrow, five story building with three stories of bay windows and another two stories above them of more modest windows—where once servants had dwelt no doubt. It was the color of warm honey, lighter than the traditional brownstone, and it sported lace curtains at the first floor bay windows making it look pleasant and professional at the same time.

Besides the lack of signs, there were no astrology signs or crystal balls in sight. No tiny fairy lights flickering in the windows, either. None of the “hocus-pocus” Lukas had mentioned. Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

He straightened his tie, took a deep breath, strode up the steps and opened the outside door. In the tiny foyer, on the mailbox

for apartment 1, he saw her name: *Daisy Connolly*. Resolutely he pressed the buzzer.

For half a minute there was no response at all. Alex shifted from one foot to the other and ground his teeth at the thought of wasting the end of an afternoon coming all the way to the Upper West Side for nothing.

But just as he was about to turn away, he heard the sound of a lock being turned. The door opened into the shadow-filled front hall and he could see the silhouette of a slim woman coming to push open the door to admit him.

She was smiling—until their gazes met. Then the smile faded and the color drained from her face.

She stared at him, stricken. “Alex?”

Honey-blond hair. Deep blue eyes. A memory of scorching hot kisses. “*Daisy?*”

Alex? Here? No!

No. No. No.

But all the time the word was banging around inside Daisy’s head, the truth—all six feet of his whipcord-lean, muscular, gorgeous male self—was staring at her in the face.

Why in heaven’s name couldn’t she have looked out the window before she’d answered the door?

The answer was simple: Alexandros Antonides was so far in her past she never ever considered that he might turn up on her doorstep.

She’d been expecting Philip Cannavarro.

She'd done a photo shoot with the Cannavarro family— Phil, Lottie and their three children—last month at the beach. A week and a half ago, they had chosen their photos, and Philip had called at lunch to ask if he could drop by after work and pick up their order.

So when the buzzer had sounded at twenty minutes to six, Daisy had opened the door with a smile on her face and an embossed portfolio of photos in her hand—a portfolio that the sight of Alexandros Antonides had let slip from her nerveless fingers.

“Oh, hell.”

Her heart hammering, Daisy stooped quickly and began gathering up the photos. Focusing on that gave her a few moments of time and a little bit of space to get her bearings. Ha. *What was he doing here?*

She hadn't seen Alex in years and she had never expected to ever see him again. Only the fact that he seemed as surprised as she was allowed her to breathe at all.

She stopped doing that, though, when he crouched down beside her and began to help pick up the photos.

“Don't do that. Leave them,” she said, trying to snatch them away from him. “I can do it!”

But Alex didn't let go. He simply kept right on. He only said, “No.”

And there it was—the same single word, delivered in the same implacable tone that he'd said five years ago—that one that had

pulled the rug right out from under her hopes and dreams.

Worse, though, was that his rough-edged, slightly accented, unconsciously sexy baritone still resonated all the way to the core of her exactly as it had from the moment she'd first heard him speak. It was as if he had been her very own personal pied piper of Hamelin. And foolishly, mindlessly, Daisy had fallen under his spell.

Then she'd called it "love at first sight." *Then* she had believed in the foolishness of such fairy tales.

Now she knew better. Now she knew the danger of it, thank God. There would be no falling under his spell again. She gathered the last of the photos, no longer in any shape to be presented to Philip Cannavarro, and got to her feet.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, stepping away as he rose to his feet, too.

He shook his head, looking as dazed as she felt. "You're Daisy?" He glanced at a piece of paper he held in his hand, then frowned. "Well, of course you are, but ... Connolly?"

Daisy lifted her chin. "That's right. Why?"

But before she got an answer, another man appeared outside on the stoop, just beyond the heavy front door and looked past Alex questioningly.

Daisy's knees went weak with relief. "Phil! Come on in!" He might as well have been the cavalry come to her rescue. She beamed at him.

Alex turned and stared over his shoulder, his brows drawing

down. “Who’s he?” he demanded as if he had more right there than her client.

Fortunately Phil was already pulling the door open, glancing in quick succession at Daisy’s relieved face and Alex’s scowl and finally at the photos in Daisy’s hands. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt—”

“You weren’t,” Daisy said quickly. “But I heard the bell. I thought it was you, not—” she gestured helplessly toward Alex who was standing so she could almost feel the heat of his body “—and I accidentally dropped your photos. I am so sorry.” She gave Phil a hopeful smile. “I need to have them redone.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’re probably just a little frayed at the edges,” Phil said cheerfully. “No problem.” He held out his hand and doubtless would have taken them from her, but Daisy shook her head and clutched them against her chest like a shield.

“No,” she said. “I guarantee my work. And I don’t give less than my best. You and Lottie deserve my best.” He and Lottie had been one of the first matches she’d made. Lottie had been a makeup artist she’d met when she first began working as a photographer after college. Phil used to do her taxes. She felt almost like their mother even though they were older than she was. And she wasn’t giving them less than her best.

“I’ll put a rush on it,” she promised. “You should have them in two days. I’ll have them couriered directly to your house.”

Phil looked doubtful. “We won’t mind,” he said. “Lottie will want ...”

“Take these then.” Daisy thrust them at him. “But tell her they’re just until the new ones come in. Tell her I’m so sorry. Tell her—” She shut her mouth, the only way to stop babbling.

Phil fumbled with the photos, too, then stuffed them in his briefcase, shooting Daisy worried sidelong glances. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

But she knew why he was asking. Phil and Lottie were used to the unflappable Daisy, the one who rolled with the punches, adjusted on the fly, never worried if life threw pitchforks in her path.

“Daisy always copes,” Lottie said. It was like a mantra.

Daisy wasn’t exactly coping now. Alex’s mere presence created an electricity in the air, a force field of awareness she could never manage to be indifferent to. Damn it.

“She’ll be fine,” Alex said smoothly now. “She’s just had a bit of a shock.” He stepped even closer and looped an arm over her shoulders.

Daisy nearly jumped out of her skin. At the same time, though, her traitorous body clamored to sink into his embrace. Muscle memory was a dangerous thing. Daisy held herself rigid, resisting him, resisting her own inclination.

“She’ll be all right. I’ll take care of her.” Alex’s tone was all reassurance as he smiled and somehow put himself between her and Phil, edging the other man toward the door, making it clear that Phil didn’t need to hang around.

Phil didn't hang around. He understood male territoriality as well as the next guy. "Right," he said, all smiles and cheerful bravado. "I'll tell Lottie."

And he was out the door and down the steps without glancing back.

"Thank you very much," Daisy said drily, slipping out from beneath his arm, which still managed to leave her with a sense that it was still there. She could feel the warm weight of it even though she'd stepped away. Instinctively she wrapped her own arms across her chest.

What was he doing here? The question pounded again in her brain.

"Daisy." The way he said her name was somewhere between musing and caressing. It sent the hairs on the back of her neck straight up. A slight smile played at the corners of his mouth. "It is fate," he murmured.

"What?" Daisy said sharply.

"I was just thinking about you." His tone was warm. He acted as if they were old friends. Well, maybe to him that was all they were.

"I can't imagine why," Daisy said, which was the absolute truth.

"I'm looking for a wife."

She stared at him, her jaw dropping.

He just smiled, expecting no doubt to hear her say, *Oh, yes, please! Pick me.*

Daisy hugged her arms more tightly across her chest. “Good luck with that.” She could have said, *You don’t want a wife. You made a huge point of telling me you didn’t want a wife!*

Now Alex raised his brows. The smile still lurking. “I wasn’t proposing,” he said mildly.

Mortified, Daisy said stiffly, “Of course you weren’t.”

She wasn’t going to bring up the past at all. It did her no credit. She’d been young and stupid and far too romantic for her own good when they’d met five years ago at a wedding reception.

Daisy had been one of her college roommate, Heather’s, bridesmaids, and Alex had been pressed into service as a last-minute substitute for a sick groomsman. Their eyes had met—something wild and hot and amazing had sparked between them—and to Daisy’s fevered romantic twenty-three-year-old brain, it had been one of those meant-to-be moments.

They had only had eyes for each other from the moment they’d met. They talked, they danced, they laughed, they touched. The electricity between them could have lit New York City day and night for a week.

So this was love at first sight. She remembered thinking that, stunned and delighted to finally experience it. She had, of course, always believed. Her parents had always told Daisy and her sister that they’d known from the moment they’d met that they were destined to be together.

Julie, Daisy’s sister, had felt that way about Brent, the moment she’d met him in eighth grade. They’d married right out of high

school. Twelve years later, they were still deeply in love.

Daisy had never felt that way—wasn't sure she believed it—until the day Alex had walked into her life.

That afternoon had been so extraordinary, so mind-numbingly, body-tinglingly perfect that she'd believed. It was just the way her parents had described it, the way Julie had described it—the sense of knowing, of a belief that all the planets were finally lined up, that the absolutely right man had come into her life.

Of course she hadn't said so. Not then. She'd just met Alex. But she hadn't wanted the day to end—and he hadn't, either. She was the bridesmaid who had been deputized to take Heather's car back to Manhattan after the reception.

“I'm coming, too,” Alex had said in that rough sexy baritone, and his eyes had met hers. “If that's all right with you.”

Of course it had been all right with her. It was just one more reason to believe he was feeling the same thing, too. Together they had driven back to Manhattan. And all the way there, they had talked.

He was an architect working for a multinational firm, but eager to strike out on his own. He had his own ideas, a desire to blend old and new, to create both beauty and utility and to design buildings that made people more alive, that spoke to their hearts and souls. His eyes had lit up when he'd talked about his goals, and she had shared his enthusiasm.

He had shared hers about her own professional hopes and

dreams. She was working for Finn MacCauley, one of the preeminent fashion and lifestyle photographers in the country. It was almost like an apprenticeship, she'd told him. She was learning so much from Finn, but was looking forward, like Alex was, to finding her own niche.

"People definitely," she'd told him. "Families, kids, people at work and play. I'd like to shoot you," she'd told him. She wanted to capture the moment, the man.

And Alex had simply said, "Whenever you want."

When they got to the city, she had left the car in the parking garage by Heather's Upper East Side apartment, then she'd taken Alex downtown on the subway to the Soho flat she was subleasing from a dental student on a semester's internship abroad.

On the subway, Alex had caught her hand in his, rubbing his thumb over her fingers, then dipping his head to touch his lips to hers. It was a light touch, the merest promise, but it set her blood on fire. And when he pulled back, she caught her breath because, looking into his eyes, she had seen a hunger there that was as deep and intense as her own.

It had never happened before. A desire so powerful, so intense just grabbed her—and it wouldn't let go. Daisy wasn't used to this sort of intensity. She didn't fall into bed at the drop of a hat, had only once before fallen into bed with a man at all. It had been fevered groping on his part and discomfort on hers.

With Alex, she'd tried telling herself, it would be more of the same.

But it wasn't.

His kisses were nothing like any she'd tasted before. They were heady, electric, bone-melting. They'd stood on the sidewalk nearly devouring each other. Not something Daisy had ever done!

She couldn't get him back to her apartment fast enough.

Once there, though, she'd felt suddenly awkward, almost shy. "Let me take your picture," she'd said.

And Alex had given her a lazy teasing smile and said, "If that's what you want."

Of course it wasn't what she wanted—or not entirely what she wanted. And it wasn't what he wanted, either. It was fore-play. Serious and smiling, goofing around, letting her direct him this way and that, all the way watching her—burning her up!—from beneath hooded lids.

He wanted her. He didn't have to say it. They circled each other, moved in, moved away. The temperature in the room rose. The temperature in Daisy's blood was close to boiling.

Then Alex had reached out and took the camera from her. He aimed, shot, posed her, caught the ferocity of her desire, as well. He stripped off his jacket, she unbuttoned his shirt. He skimmed down the zip of her dress. But before he could peel it off, she had taken the camera back, set the timer and wrapped her arms around him.

The photo of the two of them together, caught up in each other, had haunted her for years.

But at the time she hadn't been thinking about anything but the moment—the man. Within moments the camera was forgotten and in seconds more the rest of their clothing was gone.

And then there was nothing between them at all.

Alex bore her back onto her bed, settled beside her and bent his dark head, nuzzling her breasts, tasting, teasing, suckling, making her gasp and squirm.

And Daisy, shyness long gone, had been desperate to learn every inch of him. She'd prowled and played, made him suck in his breath and say raggedly, "You're killing me!"

But when she'd pulled back he'd drawn her close again. "Don't stop," he'd said.

They hadn't stopped—neither one of them. They'd driven each other to the height of ecstasy. And it wasn't at all like that other time.

With Alex there was no discomfort, there was no second-guessing, no wondering if she was doing the right thing. It had been lovemaking at its most pure and elemental, and so perfect she could have cried.

After, lying wrapped in his arms, knowing the rightness of it, she had believed completely in her mother's assertion that there was a "right man"—and about knowing instinctively when you met him.

She'd met Alex and—just like her parents, just like her sister and Brent—she had fallen in love.

They'd talked into the wee hours of the morning, sharing

stories of their childhood, of their memories, of the best and worst things that had ever happened to them.

She told him about the first camera she'd ever had—that her grandfather had given her when she was seven. He told her about the first time he'd climbed a mountain and thought he could do anything. She told him about her beloved father who had died earlier that winter and about the loss she felt. He understood. He told her about losing his only brother to leukemia when he was ten and his brother thirteen. They had talked and they had touched. They had stroked and smiled and kissed.

And they had made love again. And again.

It was always going to be like that, Daisy vowed. She had met the man of her dreams, the one who understood her down to the ground, the man she would love and marry and have children with and grow old with—

—until she'd said so.

She remembered that Sunday morning as if it had been yesterday.

They'd finally fallen asleep in each other's arms at dawn. When Daisy had awakened again it was nearly ten. Alex was still asleep, sprawled on his back in her bed, bare-chested, the duvet covering him below the waist. He was so beautiful. She could have just sat there and stared at him forever, tracing the strong lines of his features, the hollows made by his collarbone, the curve of muscle in his arms, the long, tapered fingers that had made her quiver with their touch. She remembered how he'd

looked, naked and primal, rising above her when they'd made love.

She would have liked to do it again. She had wanted to slide back beneath the duvet and snuggle up against him, to rub the sole of her foot up and down his calf, then let her fingers walk up and down his thigh, and press kisses to the line of dark hair that bisected his abdomen.

But as much as she wanted to do that, she also wanted to feed him before he had to catch his plane. She knew he had an early evening flight to Paris where he would be spending the next month at the main office of the firm he worked for. She'd hated the thought of him leaving, but she consoled herself by hoping that when he started his own company he would bring it stateside. Or maybe she would follow him to Paris.

Daisy had tried to imagine what living in Paris—living in Paris with Alex—would be like while she made them eggs and bacon and toast for breakfast. The thoughts made her smile. They made her toes curl.

She'd been standing at the stove, toes curling as she turned the bacon when hard muscled arms had come around her and warm breath had touched her ear.

“Morning,” Alex murmured, the burr of his voice sending a shiver of longing right through her.

“Morning yourself.” She'd smiled as he had kissed her ear, her nape, her jaw, then turned her in his arms and took her mouth with a hunger that said, *The hell with breakfast. Let's go back to*

bed.

But she'd fed him a piece of bacon, laughing as he'd nibbled her fingers. And she'd actually got him to eat eggs and toast as well before they'd rolled in the sheets once more.

Finally in the early afternoon he'd groaned as he sat up and swung his legs out of bed. "Got to grab a shower. Come with me?" He'd cocked his head, grinning an invitation that, despite feeling boneless already, Daisy hadn't been able to refuse.

The next half hour had been the most erotic experience of her life. Both of them had been wrung out, beyond boneless—and squeaky clean—by the time the hot water heater had begun to run cold.

"I need to go," he'd said, kissing her thoroughly once more as he pulled on a pair of cords and buttoned up his shirt.

"Yes," she agreed, kissing him back, but then turning away long enough to stuff her legs into a pair of jeans and pluck a sweater from the drawer. "I'll go out to the airport with you."

Alex had protested that it wasn't necessary, that he was perfectly capable of going off by himself, he did it all the time.

But Daisy was having none of it. She'd smiled saucily and said, "Yes, but now you have me."

She'd gone with him to the airport, had sat next to him in the back of the hired car and had shared long drugging kisses that she expected to live off until he returned.

"I'll miss you," she'd told him, nibbling his jaw. "I can't believe this has happened. That we found each other. I never really

believed, but now I do.”

“Believed?” Alex lifted his head from where he’d been kissing her neck long enough to gaze into her eyes. “In what?”

“This.” She punctuated the word with a kiss, then looked deeply into his eyes. “You. Me. It’s just like my mother said. Love at first sight.” She smiled, then sighed. “I just hope we get more years than they did.”

There was a sudden stillness in him. And then a slight movement as he pulled back. A small line appeared between his brows. “Years? They?”

“My parents. They fell in love like this. Took one look at each other and fell like a ton of bricks. There was never anyone else for either of them. They were two halves of the same soul. They should have had fifty years. Seventy-five,” Daisy said recklessly. “Instead of twenty-six.”

Alex didn’t move. He barely seemed to breathe. The sparkle in his light green eyes seemed suddenly to fade.

Daisy looked at him, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

He’d swallowed. She could remember the way she’d watched his Adam’s apple move in his throat, then the way he’d shaken his head slowly and said, “You’re talking a lifetime, aren’t you?”

And ever honest, Daisy had nodded. “Yes.”

There had been a split second before the world tilted. Then Alex had sucked in a harsh breath. “No.” Just the one word. Hard, decisive, determined. Then, apparently seeing the look on her face, he’d been at pains to assure her. “Oh, not for you. I’m not

saying you won't have a lifetime ... with someone. But ... not me."

She remembered staring at him, stunned at the change in him. He seemed to have pulled inside himself. Closed off. Turned into the Ice Man as she'd watched. "What?" Even to her own ears her voice had sounded faint, disbelieving.

Alex's jaw set. "I'm not getting married," he'd told her. "Ever."

"But—"

"I don't want to."

"But—"

"No." His tone was implacable. Yet despite the coldness of his tone, there was fire in his eyes. "No hostages to fortune," he'd said. "No wife. No kids. No falling in love. Too much pain. Never again."

"Because ... because of your brother?" She had only barely understood that kind of pain. Her parents had been gloriously happily married until her father's death a month before. And she had witnessed what her mother was going through after. There was no doubt it was hard. It was hard on her and on her sister, too. But her parents had had a beautiful marriage. It had been worth the cost.

She'd tried to explain that to Alex in the car. He hadn't wanted to hear it.

"It's fine for you if that's what you want," he'd said firmly. "I don't."

"But last night ... this morning ...?" Daisy had been grasping

desperately at straws.

“You were great,” he’d said. Their gazes had met for a moment. Then deliberately Alex looked away.

By the time they’d arrived at the airport, there were no more kisses, only a silence as big and dark as the Atlantic that would soon stretch between them. Alex didn’t look at her again. His fingers were fisted against his thighs as he stared resolutely out the window.

Daisy had stared at him, willed him to reconsider, to believe—to give them a chance!

“Maybe I was asking for too much too soon,” she ventured at last as their hired car reached the airport departure lanes. “Maybe when you come back ...”

Alex was shaking his head even as he turned and looked at her. “No,” he said, his voice rough but adamant.

She blinked quickly, hoping he didn’t notice the film of unshed tears in her eyes as she stared at him mutely.

“I won’t be back, Daisy. A lifetime is what you want,” he’d said. “I don’t.”

It was the last thing he’d said to her—the last time she’d seen him—until she’d opened the door a few minutes ago.

Now she dared to stare at him for just a moment as she tried to calm her galloping heart and mend her frayed nerves, tried to stuff Alexandros Antonides back into the box in the distant reaches of her mind where she’d done her best to keep him for the past five years.

It wasn't any easier to feel indifferent now than it ever had been. He was certainly every bit as gorgeous as he had been then. A shade over six feet tall, broad-shouldered in a pale blue dress shirt and a gray herringbone wool sport coat, his tie loosened at his throat, Alex looked like the consummate successful professional. His dark hair was cut a little shorter now, but it was still capable of being wind-tossed. His eyes were still that clear, light gray-green, arresting in his tanned face with its sharply defined cheekbones and blade-straight nose. And his sensuous mouth was, heaven help her, more appealing than ever with its hint of a smile.

"Why are you here?" she demanded now.

"Lukas sent me," he said.

"Lukas?"

Alex's cousin Lukas had been her official "other half" at the wedding where she'd met Alex. He'd insisted she stay by his side at the reception long enough so that his mother and aunts wouldn't fling hopeful Greek girls at his head. Once he'd established that he wasn't available, he'd given her a conspiratorial wink, a peck on the cheek and had ambled off to drink beer with his brothers and cousins, leaving her to fend for herself.

That was when she'd met Alex.

Now Alex pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and poked it in front of her face. "He said I should talk to his friend Daisy the matchmaker."

Yes, there it was—her name, address and phone number—in Lukas’s spiky handwriting. But she was more arrested by his words than what he was waving in front of her face. “You’re looking for a matchmaker? *You?*”

Alex shrugged. “No doubt you’re amazed,” he said easily. “Thinking I’ve changed my mind.”

She didn’t know what to think.

“I haven’t,” he said firmly. “I’m not looking for hearts and flowers, kindred spirits, the melding of two souls any more than I ever was.”

She wondered if he was being so adamant in case she decided to propose. No fear of that, she wanted to tell him. Instead she pressed her lips into a tight line.

“I want a marriage of convenience,” Alex went on. “A woman with her own life, doing her own thing. She’ll go her way, I’ll go mine. But someone who will turn up if a business engagement calls for it. And who’s there ... at night.”

“A sex buddy?” Daisy said drily.

Was that a line of color creeping above his shirt collar? “Friends,” he said firmly. “We’ll be friends. It’s not just about sex.”

“Hire a mistress.”

“I don’t want a mistress. That *is* just about sex.”

“Whatever. I can’t help you,” she said flatly.

“Why not? You’re a matchmaker.”

“Yes, but I’m a matchmaker who does believe in hearts and

flowers, kindred spirits, the melding of two souls.” She echoed his words with a saccharine smile. “I believe in real marriages. Love matches. Soul mates. The kind you don’t believe in.” She met his gaze steadily, refusing to look away from those beautiful pale green eyes that she’d once hoped to drown in forever.

Alex’s jaw tightened. “I believe in them,” he said harshly. “I just don’t want one.”

“Right. So I repeat, I can’t help you.” She said the words again, meant them unequivocally. But even as she spoke in a calm steady tone, her heart was hammering so hard she could hear it.

Their gazes met. Locked. And with everything in her, Daisy resisted the magnetic pull that was still there. But even as she fought it, she felt the rise of desire within her, knew the feelings once more that she’d turned her back on the day he’d walked out of her life. It wasn’t love, she told herself. It was something else—something as powerful and perverse and demanding as anything she’d ever felt.

But she was stronger now, and no longer an innocent. She had a life—and a love in it—that was worth resisting Alex Antonides.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she said, holding his gaze. “It was nice to see you again.”

It was, she hoped, a clear dismissal. It was also a blatant lie. She could have gone the rest of her life without seeing Alex again and died a happy woman. She didn’t need a reminder of the stupidest thirty hours of her life. But in another way, she was aware of owing him her unending gratitude.

That single day had forever changed her life.

“Was it?” he asked. His words were as speculative as his gaze.

He smiled. And resist as she would, she saw in that smile the man who once upon a time had melted her bones, her resolve, every shred of her common sense, then broken her heart.

She turned away. “Goodbye, Alex.”

“Daisy.” His voice stopped her.

She glanced back. “What?”

The smile grew rueful, crooked, far too appealing. “Have dinner with me.”

CHAPTER TWO

“WHAT? *No!*” She looked panic-stricken. Horrified.

Not at all like the Daisy he remembered. And yet she was so much the Daisy he remembered that Alex couldn't just turn and walk away. Not now. Not when he'd finally found her again. “Why not?”

“Because ... because I don't want to!” Her cheeks had grown red in the throes of passion. Her whole body had blushed when he'd made love to her. His body—right now—was already contemplating doing the same thing again.

Which was a profoundly stupid idea, considering what he wanted, what she wanted, considering the present—and their past.

“Do you hate me?” he asked. He remembered the way they had parted. She'd looked devastated, about to cry. Thank God she hadn't. But what she'd wanted—the hope of a lifetime of love—was his worst nightmare. It brought back memories that he'd turned his back on years ago. What had begun happening between them that weekend was something he wasn't ready for. Would never be ready for.

So there was no point in making her hope in vain. He regretted having hurt her when he'd left her. But he could never bring himself to regret that weekend. It was one of the best memories of his life.

“Of course I don’t hate you,” she said briskly now. “I don’t care at all about you.”

Her words were a slap in the face. But he supposed he had it coming. And it was just as well, wasn’t it, that she didn’t care? It meant he hadn’t hurt her badly after all.

“Well, then,” he suggested easily, “let’s share a meal.” He gave her his best engaging grin. “For old times’ sake,” he added when he could see the word *no* forming on her lips.

“We don’t have old times.”

“We have one old time,” he reminded her softly.

Her cheeks grew brighter yet. “That was a long, long time ago. Years. Five or six at least.”

“Five,” he said. “And a half.” He remembered clearly. It was right after that weekend that he’d made up his mind to stay in Europe, to buy a place in Paris.

It made sense businesswise, he’d told himself at the time. But it wasn’t only business that had made him dig in across the pond. It was smarter to put an ocean between himself and the temptation that was Daisy.

She was still tempting. But a dinner he could handle. “It’s just a meal, Daisy. I promise I won’t sweep you off to bed.” Not that he wouldn’t like to.

“You couldn’t,” she said flatly.

He thought he could, but emotions would get involved. So he wouldn’t go there, as tempting as it was. Still, he wasn’t willing to walk away, either. “We have a lot to catch up on,” he cajoled.

But Daisy shook her head. “I don’t think so.” Her smile was brittle. He saw none of the sunny sincerity he’d always associated with his memories of her. Interesting.

He studied her now, wondering what her life had been like over the past five years. He’d always imagined she’d found the true love she’d been seeking, had found a man who’d made her happy. And if the thought occasionally had made him grind his teeth, he told himself a guy couldn’t have everything. He had what he wanted.

Now he wondered if Daisy had got what she wanted. Suddenly he wanted to know.

“Another time then,” he suggested.

“Thank you, but no.”

He knew he was going to get “no” if he asked a hundred times. And the knowledge annoyed him. “Once upon a time we had a lot to say to each other,” he reminded her.

“Once upon a time is for fairy tales, Alex. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go.”

“Let’s,” he said readily. “I’ll walk with you.”

“I don’t mean go somewhere else,” she said. “I mean I have to go back inside. I have work to do. In my office.”

“Matchmaking?”

She shook her head. “Not tonight.”

“Photography?” He remembered the camera, how it had been almost a natural extension of who she was.

She nodded, smiling a little. It was a real smile.

“You’ve got your own business then?” he pressed.

“Yes.” She nodded. The smile stayed.

“Families? Kids? People of all shapes and sizes?” And at her further nod, he said, “Show me.”

She almost moved toward the door, almost started to invite him in. But then she stayed where she was, gave her head a little shake. “I don’t think so.”

“You took photos of us.” Sometimes he’d wished he had one. To take out and remember. But that was stupid. It was better to forget.

She shrugged and looked just a little uncomfortable. He wondered if she still had the photos.

“Why matchmaking?” he asked her suddenly.

She shrugged. “Long story.” And no invitation to ask her to tell it.

He lifted a corner of his mouth. “I’ve got time.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re scared.”

The color in her cheeks bloomed again. “I am not scared! What’s there to be scared of?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” He cocked his head. “Temptation maybe?”

She shook her head adamantly. “I’m not tempted. I’m busy. I have things to do. I haven’t seen you in five years, Alex. I barely knew you then. We don’t have a past to catch up on.”

“We had a hell of a lot.” He didn’t know why he was persisting,

but he couldn't seem to leave it alone.

“And we wanted to do different things with it. Goodbye, Alex.” She turned away and started to go back inside.

But before she could, Alex caught her arm, and spun her slowly back, then did what he'd been wanting to do ever since he'd realized who she was.

He dipped his head and kissed her.

It was instinct, desire, a mad impetuous hunger that he couldn't seem to control. It was a roaring in his ears and a fire in his veins. It was the taste of Daisy—a taste he'd never forgotten. *Never*. And as soon as he tasted her, he wanted more.

And more.

For a second, maybe two, Daisy seemed to melt under the touch of his lips. She went soft and pliable, shaping her mouth to his. And then, in another instant, it was over.

She jerked away from him, stared at him for one horrified moment, cheeks scarlet, mouth still forming an astonished O. Then she pulled out of his grasp and bolted back inside the foyer.

“Daisy!”

The door slammed in his face.

Alex stared after her, still tasting her. Jolted, intrigued, stunned. Aroused.

Five years ago Daisy had been like a siren he'd followed eagerly, mindlessly, hungrily. He'd wanted her on every level imaginable. And having her that weekend over and over hadn't assuaged his hunger. He'd only wanted more.

Leaving, thank God, had removed the temptation.

And now—within minutes of having seen her again—it was back. In spades.

It was the last thing he wanted. The last thing he needed.

Alex turned and walked down the steps, pausing only to drop the paper with her name and address in the trash.

She had been right to say no. He would be smart and walk away.

Ten minutes later Daisy was still shaking.

She sat at her desk, staring at the photo she was editing, and didn't see it at all. Eyes closed or open, she only saw Alex—older, harder, stronger, handsomer—in every way *more*, even more compelling than the younger Alex had been.

She shuddered and scrubbed at her mouth with her fingers, trying to wipe away the taste of his kiss.

But all the scrubbing in the world wouldn't do that, and she knew it. She'd tried to forget it for years. It hadn't done a whit of good.

She hadn't even tried to forget him. That would have been impossible. But as time passed, at least she'd managed to put him on a shelf in the back of her memory's closet. He was still there, but he couldn't hurt her.

But now Alex was here.

She'd just seen him, talked to him. Been kissed by him. Had almost, heaven help her, kissed him back. It had felt so right, so perfect, so exactly the way it had felt the first time.

But she knew better now.

He had come. He had gone. The other shoe had finally dropped. He wouldn't come back.

"And it wouldn't matter if he did," Daisy said aloud.

Because if one thing was completely obvious, it was that however much more he had become, in fundamentals, Alex hadn't changed a bit.

He might want to get married now, but he obviously didn't want anything more than "friends—with benefits." He didn't want love. He didn't want a real marriage. He didn't want a family.

He didn't want her.

For a nanosecond her traitorous heart had dared to believe he'd finally come to his senses, had learned the value of love, of relationships, of lifetime commitment.

Thank goodness, a nanosecond was all the time it had taken her to realize that there was no point in getting her hopes up.

Of course he had proved he still wanted her on one level—the one he had always wanted her on. She wasn't such an innocent that she didn't know desire when she felt it. And she had felt it hard and firm against her when Alex had kissed her and pressed his body against hers.

But physical desire was just that—a basic instinctive response. It had nothing to do with things that really mattered—love, commitment, responsibility, sharing of hearts and souls, dreams and desires.

It was nothing more than an itch to be scratched.

And she wasn't about to be a matchmaker for a pairing like that. If he was interested in nothing more than a woman to share his bed—but not his heart—he wouldn't be interested in the sort of marriages she believed in. So he wouldn't be back.

And thank God for that—because if her heart still beat faster at the very sight of him and her body melted under his touch, at least her mind knew he was the last person she needed in her life.

Not just in her life, but in the life of the person she loved most in all the world—the one who, at this very moment, she could hear pounding his way up the stairs from the kitchen.

“Mom!” His voice was distant at first, then louder. “Mom!” And louder still as the door banged open. “Mom! Aren'tcha finished working yet? It's time to go.”

Charlie.

Four and three-quarter years of sunshine and skinned knees and wet kisses and impatience all rolled up in the most wonderful person she knew.

He skidded to a stop in front of her and looked up at her, importuning. “Mom!”

“Charlie!” She smiled at him, echoing his tone, loving him with all her heart.

“Are you ready?” he demanded.

“Almost.” She turned back to close the file she hadn't done a thing to since Alex had shown up on the doorstep. “Almost,” she repeated, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, then shutting

the file.

She wished she could shut her memories of Alex down as easily. She couldn't. Particularly she couldn't right now—faced with the small boy staring up at her, all quivering impatience.

Impatience wasn't Charlie's middle name, but maybe it should have been. He'd been eager and energetic since the moment of his birth. Before his birth, in fact. He'd come almost two weeks early, right before Christmas. And he'd been taking the world by storm ever since.

He had a chipped tooth from a fall out of a tree back in May. He had a scab on his knee beneath his jeans even now. Daisy had told him last week she was going to buy stock in the Band-Aid company, and after he'd wrinkled his nose and said, "What's stock?" he'd listened to her brief explanation and said, "Good idea."

His stick-straight hair, the color of honey shot through with gold, was very close to the same shade as her own. But his light eyes were nothing like her stormy dark blue.

He didn't look like Alex—except for the shape of his eyes.

And after nearly five years, she was inured to it. She didn't see Alex in him every time she looked at him. She saw Charlie himself—not Alex's son.

Except today. Today the eyes were Alex's. The impatience was Alex's. The "let's get moving" was Alex down to the ground.

"In good time," she said now, determined to slow Charlie down—a little, at least. But she managed a smile as she shut the

computer down. And she was sure she was the only one who noticed her hands were shaking.

“You said we’d go at six-thirty. It’s almost six-thirty. The game’s gonna start.” He grabbed one of Daisy’s hands and began to tug her back toward the stairs.

“Coming,” Daisy said. But she straightened her desk, made a note to reorder the Cannavarro files, put her pencil in the drawer. All very methodical. Orderly. Step by step. Pay attention to detail. From the day that she’d learned she was pregnant, it was how she’d managed to cope.

Charlie bounced from one foot to the other until she finished and finally held out a hand to him again. “Okay. Let’s go.” She allowed herself to be towed down the stairs.

“We gotta hurry. We’re gonna be late. Come on. Dad’s pitching.”

Dad. One more reason she prayed that Alexandros Antonides didn’t darken her door again.

“Hey, Sport.” Cal dropped down beside Charlie on the other side of the blanket that Daisy had spread out to sit on while they watched the softball game.

They had been late, as Charlie feared, arriving between innings. But at least Cal, Daisy’s ex-husband, had already pitched in his half, so he could come sit with them until it was his turn to bat.

“We made a fire engine,” Charlie told him. “Me ‘n’ Jess. Outta big red cardboard blocks—this big!” He stretched his hands out

a couple of feet at least.

Cal looked suitably impressed. “At preschool?”

Charlie bobbed his head. “You an’ me could make one.”

“Okay. On Saturday,” Cal agreed. “But we’ll have to use a cardboard box and paint it red. Grandpa will be in town. I’ll tell him to bring paint.”

Charlie’s eyes got big. “Super! Wait’ll I tell Jess ‘bout ours.”

“You don’t want to make him jealous,” Cal warned. He grinned at Charlie, then over the boy’s head at his mother.

Daisy smiled back and told herself that nothing had changed. Nothing. She and Charlie were doing what they often did—dropping by to watch Cal play ball in Central Park, which he and a few diehards continued to do well after the softball leagues ended in the summer. Now, in early October, there was a nip in the air, and the daylight was already going. But they continued to play.

And she and Charlie would continue to come and watch.

It was the joy of a civilized divorce, Daisy often reminded herself. She and Cal didn’t hate each other—and they both loved Charlie.

“—you?”

She realized suddenly that Cal was no longer talking to Charlie. He was talking to her. “Sorry,” she said, flustered. “I was just ... thinking about something.”

“Apparently,” Cal said drily. Then he looked at her more closely. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She looked around. “Where’s Charlie?”

Cal nodded in the direction of the trees where Charlie and the son of another one of the players were playing in the dirt. “He’s fine. You’re not. Something’s wrong.”

“No. Why should anything be wrong?” That was the trouble with Cal. He’d always been able to read her like a book.

“You’re edgy. Distracted. Late,” he said pointedly.

“I didn’t realize you were timing me. I’ve got things on my mind, Cal. Work—”

But he cut her off. “And you’re biting my head off, which isn’t like you, Daze. And you must’ve come on the bus.”

“The bus?” she said stupidly.

“You always walk, so Charlie can ride his bike.” Cal looked around pointedly. There was no bike because, he was right, they hadn’t had time to bring it. Charlie wanted to ride his bike everywhere. It was the smallest two-wheeler Daisy had ever seen, but Charlie loved it. Daisy was sure he would have slept with it every night if she hadn’t put her foot down. Cal had given it to Charlie for his fourth birthday.

Daisy had protested, had said he was too young, that no four-year-old needed a bike.

“Not every four-year-old,” Cal had agreed. “Just this one.” He’d met her skeptical gaze with confident brown eyes and quiet certainty. “Because he wants it more than anything on earth.”

Daisy couldn’t argue with that. If Charlie’s first word hadn’t been *bike* it had been in the first ten. He’d pointed and crowed,

“Bike!” well before his first birthday. And he’d been desperate for a bicycle last winter. She hadn’t thought it would last. But Cal had insisted, and he’d been right.

Charlie’s eyes had shone when he’d spotted the bike that morning. And over the past six months, his love for it had only grown. Since Cal had helped him learn to balance and he could now ride it unaided, Charlie wanted to ride it everywhere.

Usually she let him ride to the park while she walked alongside him. But they had been late today because ... because of her visitor.

She was suddenly aware that Cal was watching her, not the game. “He doesn’t have to ride his bike every time,” she said testily. “And it’s nearly dark.”

“True.” Cal stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back, resting his weight on his elbows and forearms as his gaze slowly moved away from her to focus on the game, yelling at the batter to focus. Then, still keeping his gaze on the batter, he persisted quietly, “So why don’t you just tell me.”

He wasn’t going to leave it alone. She’d never won an argument with Cal. She’d never been able to convince him of anything. If he was wrong, he couldn’t be told. He always had to figure it out himself—like his “I can love anyone I will myself to” edict. He’d been as wrong about that as she had been about her “love at first sight” belief.

Clearly, when it came to love, the two of them didn’t know what they were talking about.

Now he stared at her and she plucked at the grass beside the blanket, stared at it. *Nothing's changed. Nothing's changed.* She tried to make it into a mantra so she could convince herself. But she was no better at lying to herself than she was at lying to her ex-husband. Finally she raised her gaze to meet his as he turned away from the game to look at her. "I saw Alex."

There was the crack of bat hitting ball. Whoops and yells abounded.

Cal never turned his head to see what happened. His eyes never left Daisy's. He blinked once. That was all. The rest of his body went still, though. And his words, when they came, were quiet. "Saw him where?"

Daisy ran her tongue over dry lips. "He came to my office."

Cal waited, not pressing, allowing her to tell the story in her own way, in her own time.

And she couldn't quite suppress the ghost of a smile that touched her lips. "Looking for a matchmaker."

"*What!*" Cal's jaw dropped.

Hysterical laughter bubbled up just as it had threatened to do when Alex told her. This time Daisy gave in to it. "He's looking for a wife."

"You?" Cal demanded.

"No. He was as surprised as I was when he knocked on my door. He didn't know he was coming to see me."

"Then how—?"

"Lukas sent him."

Cal's eyes widened. His teeth came together. "Lukas needs to mind his own business."

"Of course. But Lukas never does. Besides, he didn't have any idea what he was doing. He never knew about Alex and me. No one did." No one ever had except Cal—and only because when she'd discovered she was pregnant, she'd had to talk to someone. "Don't blame Lukas. He thinks he's doing me a favor sending clients my way. And he is, I suppose. Most of the time. Not this time," she said quietly.

"No." Cal stared down at his fingers plucking at the grass for a moment. Then his gaze lifted and went toward Charlie who was still playing with his friend in the dirt. The question was there, but unspoken.

"I didn't say a word."

"But he—"

Daisy shook her head. "No. That hasn't changed. He wouldn't want to know."

"Still?" Cal persisted.

"No. He doesn't want relationships any more than he ever did," Daisy said firmly. "He doesn't want a real wife—he wants a woman to take to social events and go to bed with. It will save him the effort of having to go out and find one, charm one."

"He charmed you," Cal pointed out.

Cal, of course, knew that. He knew the whole sordid story.

She had met Cal Connolly when she'd taken the job with Finn after college. Cal had been the photographer she'd replaced,

Finn's assistant before her.

Even after Cal hung out his own shingle, he had regularly come by Finn's to talk shop. Daisy had been included in the conversation. She learned a great deal from both of them.

Finn was brilliant, mercurial—and impatient. Cal was steadier, calmer, more methodical. He didn't yell quite as much. Finn had a wife and growing family. Cal was single, on his own. So it was Cal she began to spend time with. And while Finn had always remained her mentor, Cal had quickly become her best pal.

When she wasn't working for Finn, she had spent hours working with Cal, talking with him, arguing with him. They argued about everything from camera lenses to baseball teams to sushi rolls, from free will to evolution to love at first sight.

That had always been their biggest argument: did you love because—bang!—it hit you between the eyes? Or did you love because you decided who the right person was and made up your mind?

Because of her parents, Daisy had been a staunch believer in the “love at first sight” notion.

“I just haven't met the right person,” she had maintained over and over. “When I do, I'll know. In an instant. And it will be perfect.”

But Cal had scoffed at that. Ever the logical realist, he'd said, “Nonsense. I don't believe it for a minute. That makes you nothing but a victim of your hormones.”

“It’s not hormones. It’s instinct.”

But Cal had disagreed. “You can will whom you love,” he’d told her firmly. “It’s a rational decision.”

So when he’d proposed to her, he’d been determined to demonstrate just that. “Obviously your way doesn’t work,” he’d pointed out. “So we’ll try it my way now.”

And Daisy, because she did love Cal—just not the way she thought she loved Alex—had faced the truth of her own folly. And she’d said yes.

It turned out they were both wrong. But they’d given it their best shot. And Daisy still did believe in love—now she had a codicil: it was apparently for other people.

Now Daisy let out a sigh and wrapped a blade of grass around her finger where Cal’s wedding ring once had been.

“So, are you going to do it? Matchmake for him?” Cal asked.

“Of course not.”

He grunted. “Good.” He stared out across the field. “Was it ... the same? Did you feel ... this time ... what you felt before?”

It was all Daisy could do not to touch her tongue to her lips. Instead she pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, in full cocoon mode. “He’s still charming,” she admitted.

Cal had been watching the next batter swing and miss. But at her words he turned his head and shot her a sharp glance.

Daisy gave him a quick humorless smile. “Speaking objectively. Don’t worry. I’m not a fool anymore.”

“So I should hope.”

The batter swung and missed. Cal hauled himself to his feet to go pitch another inning. “You all right? Anything I can do?”

“No. He won’t be back.”

Cal cocked his head. “No?” He didn’t sound so sure.

“Why would he? I didn’t invite him in. I didn’t encourage him at all.” *I didn’t kiss him back!* “And he doesn’t want me. He wants some woman who won’t care.”

“And Charlie?”

“He doesn’t know about Charlie. I’m doing him a favor, really,” she said firmly. “He doesn’t want kids. He never did.”

“Because he doesn’t think he has any,” Cal pointed out. “What if he finds out he does?”

“He won’t.”

“But if—” Cal persisted. It was what she hated about him.

“Charlie is mine! And yours.”

She had always told Charlie—not that he understood yet really—that he had two fathers—a birth father who had given him life, and Cal, the father he knew. Charlie didn’t question it. Someday he would, no doubt. But by then it would be ingrained in his mind. There would never be a time when she had to “tell him” his father was not Cal.

Because in every way that counted, his father was Cal. Cal was the one who had been there for her. He’d been her husband when Charlie was born. Charlie bore his surname. He was the only father Charlie knew.

If someday he wanted to know about Alex, she’d tell him.

If someday in the distant future, Alex learned he had a child, perhaps they would meet. But not now. Now Charlie was a child. He was vulnerable. He didn't need a father who didn't want him.

“You don't know what he'll do, Daze,” Cal said heavily, “if he finds out.”

“He won't find out.” She would make sure of that.

Cal's smile was grim. “We hope.”

CHAPTER THREE

A DAY went by. Two.

Daisy still kept looking over her shoulder—well, out the window, actually—feeling skittish. Apprehensive.

She checked the caller ID every time the phone rang. Her breath caught whenever she saw a shadow on the front steps.

She actually dropped the kettle she was filling this morning, even though it was just the FedEx man bringing an order to Mrs. Kaminski upstairs.

Now she was filling it again for her friend Nell, who had just brought Charlie home from preschool and was staying for a cup of tea and regarding her curiously all the while.

“Something wrong?”

“No. I just ... dropped the kettle this morning. I’m trying to be more careful now.” Daisy set it on the burner and turned the gas on.

“Cal giving you trouble?” It was always the first thing Nell thought of because her own ex-husband, Scott, was a continual source of irritation.

“Cal never gives me trouble,” Daisy said. She glanced out the sliding door to the garden where Charlie and Nell’s son Geoff were playing with trucks.

Nell grimaced. “Lucky you. Scott’s driving me crazy.”

Daisy wasn’t glad to hear that Scott was creating difficulties

in her friend's life, but talking about it did avert Nell's further interest in Daisy's edginess. She gave Daisy an earful about her ex while they drank their tea and ate biscotti. Daisy made soothing sounds, but Nell was still grumbling when she decided it was time to go. She called Geoff in and they headed out the front door.

Relieved that her life was nowhere near as complicated as her friend's, Daisy was feeling much more sanguine when the phone rang as the door shut behind Nell and her son.

"Daisy Connolly," she said brightly into the phone.

"Daisy." The voice was warm, slightly gruff and instantly recognizable. The intimate tone of it made the hairs on the back of Daisy's neck stand straight up. Why hadn't she checked the ID this time?

"Yes. This is Daisy," she said crisply. "Who is this?"

"You know who it is." There was a smile in his voice as he called her bluff.

"Alex," she said flatly because playing the fool any longer wasn't going to help matters a bit.

"See. I knew you'd figure it out." He was grinning now. She could hear that, too.

"What do you want?"

"Are you married?"

"*What?*"

"I remembered you weren't Daisy Connolly back then. Wasn't your last name Harris? Morris?"

"Harris."

There was a brief silence. “So you did marry.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” she said firmly.

“And now?”

“What do you mean, and now?” Why did he have to ask? What business was it of his?

“Are you still ... married?”

What kind of question was that? Damn it. She wanted to lie. But she’d never been a good liar, and though her acquaintance with Alex hadn’t been long, it had been intense. She was sure he would be able to tell if she did.

“I’m divorced.” She bit the words out.

“Ah.”

Which meant what? Never mind. She didn’t want to know. “Alex,” she said with all the patience she could muster. “I’m working.”

“This is work.”

“No. I told you, I’m not matchmaking for you.”

“I got that. You don’t want what I want.” He parroted her sentiments back to her. “This is photography. Or are you going to turn me down for that, too?”

She opened her mouth, wanting desperately to do exactly that. But she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d rattled her. “What sort of photography?” she said. “I do family stuff.”

“And weddings. And bar mitzvahs. And some professional head shots. Some editorial. Recreation. Ice skating,” he added.

“Frisbee in the park. Baseball games.” He ticked off half a dozen scenarios that were all shoots she had actually done.

“How do you know that?”

“You have a website,” he reminded her. “The internet is a wonderful thing.”

Daisy, grinding her teeth, wasn't so sure. Her fingers tapped an irritated staccato on the countertop. Outside Charlie was making vrooming noises as he pushed his cars around the patio. Any minute he'd slide open the door and want a snack. To prevent it, she latched the sliding door and got some crackers out of the cupboard and cheese from the refrigerator, preempting his demand. “What did you have in mind?” she asked.

“I need photos. An architectural journal is doing a piece on me and some of the work I've done. They've got photos of my projects from all over the world. Now they want some of me on one of the sites.” He paused. “They said they could send a photographer—”

“Then let them.”

“But I'd rather have you.”

She wanted to say, Why? But she didn't want to hear his answer. Besides, asking would open a whole new can of worms.

“Not my line,” she said briskly as she slapped cheese between the crackers and made little sandwiches for Charlie.

“You do editorial. I've seen magazine articles.”

“Yes. But I don't traipse all over the world. I work in the city.”

“The building is in Brooklyn.” He gave her a second to digest

that, then added, "I seem to remember you cross the river."

They had crossed the river together coming back from the wedding on Long Island. Daisy felt the walls closing in.

"Yes, I cross the river. *If* I have time. I'm busy."

"Any time in the next two weeks," he said smoothly. "And don't tell me that every minute of your life is booked."

Daisy heard the challenge in his voice. It was just another way of saying, *I don't believe you're really over me at all. You still want me. And now that you're divorced you might not believe in that ridiculous "love at first sight" notion anymore. You might be glad for a roll in bed.*

And, if it weren't for Charlie, heaven help her, she might.

"Are you still there? Daisy?" he prompted when she didn't reply.

She drew a breath. "I might have something next week. Let me check." It was the only way she could think of to prove to him—and to herself—that she wasn't a weak-willed fool.

She put the cracker sandwiches on a paper plate, flipped up the latch and slid open the door. Charlie looked up and, at the sight of the plate, grinned and jumped to his feet.

Daisy put a finger to her lips to shush him before he could speak, grateful that she'd taught him almost since he could talk not to blurt things out where people on the phone could hear him. That way, she'd explained, he wouldn't have to have a babysitter as often if she could take calls as if she were in her office when, in fact, she was at home.

Charlie had learned quickly. Now he stuffed a cracker sandwich into his mouth, then carried the plate back to his trucks. For a moment, Daisy just watched him and felt her heart squeeze with love. Then quietly she slid the door shut and went to look at her appointment book.

“Where in Brooklyn? What sort of photos?” she asked as she flipped through the pages of her day planner.

“Park Slope.” Alex gave her the address. “It’s a pre-war building.”

“I thought you were an architect. Don’t you design new buildings?”

“Not this one. I built this one from the inside out. The outside is pretty much intact, except for the windows. I fixed the windows. The place was in really awful shape and the guy who owned it wanted it removed. He wanted me to put up a new building there. But when I got into it, I couldn’t see tearing it down. Structurally it was sound. And it had some really strong period architectural features. It fit the block, the surroundings. So I made him a deal. I bought it from him and he bought land a couple of miles away. Then I built him what he wanted there, and I kept this one for myself.”

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