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THE
SANTINA CROWN

THE GIRL NOBODY WANTED



LYNN RAYE HARRIS

Lynn Raye Harris

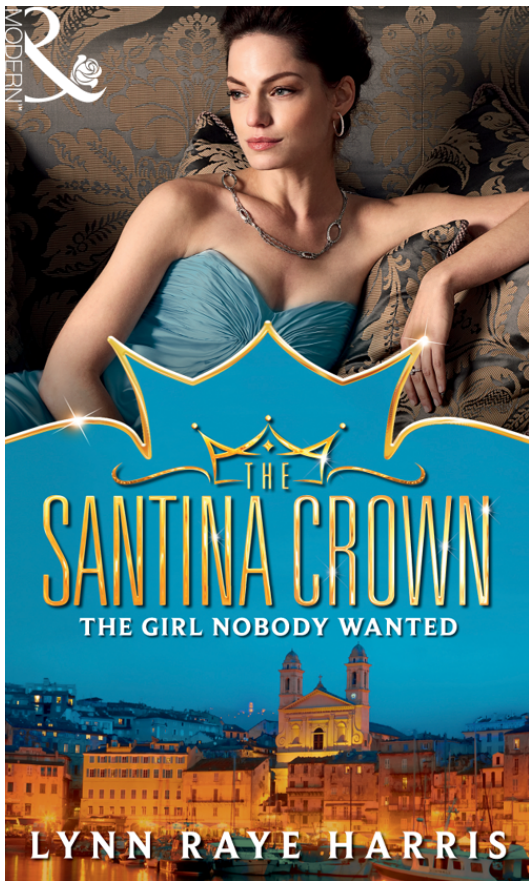
The Girl Nobody Wanted

Аннотация

Jilted Bride Stranded with a Notorious Playboy Anna Constantinides, publicly humiliated when her long-time fiancé announced his engagement to someone else, might have thought things couldn't get any worse... Until her private jet crash-landed on an uninhabited island, leaving her stranded with billionaire hotel magnate Leo Jackson! Renowned playboy Leo's reputation is legendary and, if the smouldering looks they were fighting to contain when rescued are anything to go by, there can only be one question on everybody's lips: just how long did it take wickedly sexy Leo to undress buttoned-up heiress Anna...?!

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‘Do I make you nervous?’ Leo asked from behind her. She could hear the laughter in his voice. Deliberately she turned, dropping her hand away from her neck. *Calm, cool.*

‘Of course not,’ Anna said.

He winked. ‘Good. Because I’m afraid the jeans are next, darling. I can’t abide wet clothing.’

Anna held her breath as his long fingers flicked open the button of his jeans. She couldn’t have looked away if her life depended on it. Her heart kicked up as his hip bones appeared, but she forgot all about it as the jeans slid down his long, strong legs, revealing tanned skin and acres of muscle. Anna couldn’t breathe.

Could this day be any more surreal? Just a few minutes ago, they’d been fully clothed strangers. And now they were marooned together and Leo was stripping out of his clothing.

‘Keep staring, darling, and the show is bound to get more interesting,’ Leo said, his voice a growling purr that slid over her nerve endings and made her shudder.

‘I’ve seen naked men before,’ she said with a sniff. ‘You can’t shock me.’

It was only a small lie.

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About the Author

LYNN RAYE HARRIS read her first Mills & Boon[®] romance when her grandmother carted home a box from a yard sale. She didn't know she wanted to be a writer then, but she definitely knew she wanted to marry a sheikh or a prince and live the glamorous life she read about in the pages. Instead, she married a military man and moved around the world. These days she makes her home in North Alabama, with her handsome husband and two crazy cats. Writing for Mills & Boon is a dream come true. You can visit her at www.lynnrayeharris.com.

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For my in-laws, Larry and Joyce Harris. Fifty years together is quite an accomplishment. You are proof that love can last forever. I'm so happy you're a part of my life, and I love you both.

CHAPTER ONE

ANNA CONSTANTINIDES stood at the edge of the gathered crowd and hoped the serene countenance she'd practiced before the mirror for the past week was holding up. Tonight was, without doubt, the most humiliating night of her life. Her fiancé—correction, former fiancé—was marrying another woman.

It would not have been so bad, perhaps, if her fiancé wasn't Prince Alessandro, heir to the Santina throne. She should have been his queen, yet she was currently the jilted bride.

A fact the media took great delight in reporting.

Again and again and *again*. She'd hardly had a peaceful moment since Alex had dumped her so publicly and humiliatingly for another woman. He hadn't even had the courtesy to inform her personally. No, he'd let her find out in the pages of the tabloids. Simply *mortifying*.

The pity she'd had to endure. The knowing looks—even, surprisingly, a hint of censure. As if it were *her* fault somehow. As if she were the one who'd been caught kissing another man while engaged to someone else, as Alex had been photographed with Allegra Jackson.

Anna wanted nothing less than to be at his engagement party tonight, but she'd had no choice. "Anna," her mother had said when she'd refused, "you must. Protocol demands it."

“I don’t give a damn about protocol,” she’d replied. And she hadn’t. Why, when she’d dedicated her life to protocol and duty and been so spectacularly punished for it?

Her mother took her hands. “Sweetheart, do it for me. Queen Zoe is my oldest and dearest friend. I know she would be disappointed if we were not there to support her.”

Support *her*? Anna had wanted to laugh, to shout, to rail against the unfairness of life—but she had not. Ultimately, she had done precisely what her mother asked because, for pity’s sake, she felt *guilty*.

Anna stiffened her spine as the king began to toast the happy couple. But she lifted her glass of champagne along with everyone else, and prepared to drink to the health and happiness of Alex and Allegra, the woman who’d turned her preordained life upside down.

At least, thank goodness, she could be certain there were no photographers present tonight. They would be waiting outside the palace gates, naturally, but for now she was safe.

And yet she still had to smile, had to pretend she wasn’t dying from embarrassment. She would have to endure the stories, the photos, the quotes from anonymous “friends” who claimed she was holding up well, or that she was fragile, or that her heart had shattered into a million pieces.

Anna sipped her champagne on cue. Only an hour more, and she was out of here. Back to the hotel where she would crawl into her bed and pull the covers over her head. The toast ended, and

then the ensemble began to play a waltz. Anna slipped her barely touched glass onto a passing waiter's tray and turned toward the doors to the terrace. If she could escape for just a few moments, she could endure the next hour with a great deal more fortitude.

"Anna," a woman called. "I've been looking for you."

Anna gritted her teeth and turned toward Graziana Ricci, the Amanti foreign minister's wife. The woman sashayed toward her, a bright smile pasted on her cosmetically enhanced face. But it wasn't Signora Ricci who captured Anna's attention. It was the man beside her.

An Englishman, she assumed, as there were so many who had descended upon Santina recently.

He was tall, dressed in a bespoke tuxedo like nearly every other man in the room, and quite striking. Handsome, in a boyish way that somehow wasn't boyish at all. No, it was devilish, as if he knew the temptation he offered merely by existing. Eyes the color of roast coffee glittered in a face that had been carved by Michelangelo. Somehow, the look in those eyes dared her to envision him naked atop a pedestal.

Anna shook herself. Perhaps he was a work of art, but he had not been carved by Michelangelo. How silly.

But he could have been. His face was a study in angles sculpted for the sole purpose of making the owner appear sinfully irresistible to the female of the species. Sharply defined cheeks, a blade-straight nose, firm sensual lips and a small cleft at the base of his chin that deepened when he smiled.

And when he turned that smile on her, her heart skipped a beat.

Several beats.

The picture that filled her mind at that moment was decidedly uncharacteristic of her. She had absolutely no desire to kiss this man, no matter what her mind conjured up. It was stress, pure and simple.

As were the skipped beats. *Stress.*

The man smiled and winked, and Anna very deliberately looked away. *Honestly, what was wrong with her?*

“Anna, this is Leo Jackson,” Signora Ricci said, and Anna instantly stiffened. The other woman didn’t notice as she giggled, hugging his arm to her surgically enhanced body. *Shameless hussy.* “Leo is Allegra’s brother.”

As if he could be anyone else.

“How nice,” Anna said frostily, her heart careening out of control with anger and helpless frustration. Allegra’s brother. As if his sister ruining her life weren’t enough, she now had to be faced with another Jackson when she quite simply wished them all to hell. Which wasn’t very polite or charitable of her, she knew, but it was how she felt right now. “Welcome to Santina, Mr. Jackson. If you will excuse me, I was just on my way to... to an appointment.”

It was a lie and her face flamed the instant she said it. Not because she cared that she’d lied, but because Leo Jackson arched one perfect eyebrow as if he knew she wanted to escape

him. His lips quirked, and the flame inside her burned hotter.

But was it embarrassment or something else?

Embarrassment, she decided firmly. There could certainly be no other reason for it. If not for his sister, she wouldn't be in this predicament now. She wouldn't be standing here enduring the humiliation of hundreds of eyes surreptitiously turning upon her every time Alex leaned in close to his new fiancée and whispered something in her ear.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Anna," Leo said, using her given name as if he had every right in the world. Arrogant man! But her skin prickled with heat at the way her name sounded when he said it. Soft, sexy, alluring. Not boring Anna, but beautiful, exciting Anna.

"Nevertheless," she said, standing as straight and tall as she could. "It is the case."

What was wrong with her? Why was she being fanciful? She was simply Anna. And that's precisely who she wanted to be. Anna was safe, predictable, quietly elegant. She was not bold or brassy. Nothing like Signora Ricci, thank heavens.

Signora Ricci's mouth turned down in an exaggerated frown. "This will not take but a moment. I had hoped you could show Leo around Amanti tomorrow. He is thinking of building a luxury hotel."

Anna glanced at Leo Jackson. There was something dark and intense behind those eyes, no matter that one corner of his mouth turned up in a mocking grin. A fire began to burn low in her

belly. She might be the tourist ambassador to the neighboring island of Amanti, but that didn't mean she had to personally show this man the sights.

It wasn't safe. *He* wasn't safe. She felt it in her bones.

Besides, his sister had stolen her future, and even if that wasn't his fault, she couldn't forget it if she were forced to spend time with him. No, she wanted nothing to do with this man—with *anyone* named Jackson.

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Signora Ricci. I have other things to attend to. I can arrange for someone else—"

The other woman scoffed. "What is more important than Amanti's economy? This would be good for us, yes? And you are the best for the job. What else do you have to do now that you have no wedding to prepare for?"

Anna swallowed her tongue as bitter acid scoured her throat. If she weren't a dignified person, a calm and controlled person, she might just strangle Graziana Ricci where she stood.

But no, Anna Constantinides had more dignity than that. She'd been raised to be serene, to be a perfect queen. She would not break because one woman dared to insult her on a day when she'd already been insulted by her ex-fiancé and the overwhelming media coverage of his new engagement. She was strong. She could handle this.

"If tomorrow doesn't work," Leo interjected, "the next day surely will." He pulled a card from his pocket and held it out. "My personal number. Call me when you are available."

Anna accepted the card because to do otherwise would be rude. His fingers brushed hers, and a tongue of fire sizzled along her nerve endings. She snatched her hand back, certain she'd find her skin blackened where he'd touched her. Graziana Ricci had turned away, distracted by an elderly matron who gesticulated wildly about something.

"I'm not sure when that will be, Mr. Jackson. It might truly be better for someone else to take you."

"And yet you are the tourist ambassador," he said with a hint of steel underlying the polite veneer in his tone. "Unless, of course, you do not like me for some reason?"

Anna swallowed. "I don't know you. How could I possibly dislike you?"

His gaze cut toward the front of the room where Alex and Allegra were currently standing close together and talking in hushed tones. "How indeed?"

Anna thrust her chin out. It was bad enough she had to endure this night, but for this man to know how she felt? It was insupportable. "Tell me about this hotel you propose to build," she said. "How will this help Amanti?"

His gaze slid down her body, heat trailing behind it. *Dangerous*, a voice whispered.

He took his time meeting her eyes again. "Have you not heard of the Leonidas Group?"

She was proud of herself for not showing her surprise. If the Leonidas Group wanted to build a hotel on Amanti, that could

be a very good thing. “Of course I have. They own some of the most luxurious hotels in the world and cater to the wealthiest of clients. Do you work for them, Mr. Jackson?”

His laughter was rich, rolling from him in golden tones that vibrated through her. “I own the Leonidas Group, Anna.”

Again with her name, and again with the prickle of awareness skimming along her nerve endings. “How fortunate for Amanti,” she said, because she could think of nothing else to say. She felt like a fool for missing the *Leo* in *Leonidas*, though it wasn’t an immediately obvious connection. But if he owned the Leonidas Group, he must be very wealthy indeed.

He leaned in closer. “Perhaps you will change your mind about tomorrow, then.”

Heat coiled tightly inside her. His voice was a delicious rumble in her ear, though she tried not to notice precisely how delicious. She was tired, that was all. He was just a man, and men were fickle. Unpredictable. Dishonorable.

She closed her eyes, her heart thrumming steadily. It was uncharitable to think of Alex that way, and yet she couldn’t help it. He’d made a promise, damn him!

“I will have to check my calendar,” she said coolly.

His smile made her heart skip a beat. Too, too charming. Perhaps his sister was equally as charming. Perhaps that’s how she’d stolen Alex away.

“And yet, when you wake up and see the morning papers, you will no doubt wish yourself far from Santina.”

A current of dread slid through her, icy fingers scraping her soul. The papers. They would be filled with news of Alex and Allegra tomorrow—and she would be mentioned side by side with them. The poor jilted bride. The faithful girl who'd been stood up by a prince. Sad little heiress, no longer a queen-in-waiting.

Anna's throat constricted. She absolutely did not want to be here tomorrow. And he was giving her a way out, though she would have to endure his company. But which was worse? The media frenzy, or Leo Jackson?

If she took him to Amanti, they wouldn't escape the attention entirely, but at least they would be out of Alex and Allegra's proximity. Perhaps the press might not think her so sad and distraught if she were seen going about her duties.

"I've just remembered," she said, proud that she managed to sound so cold and detached. Professional. "My appointment isn't for tomorrow after all. I keep getting my days mixed up. It's for the next day."

"Is that so?" Leo said, his gaze slipping over her once more. There was heat and promise in that voice, and a hint of possession, as well. It infuriated her—and intrigued her.

"If you wish to tour Amanti," she said crisply, already partially regretting the impulse that had her choosing him over tomorrow's papers, "we can leave around nine in the morning."

"Nine?" he mocked. "I doubt I'll have slept off tonight's debaucheries by then."

Anna felt her ears going hot. She refused to picture *any* debauchery. “Nine o’clock, Mr. Jackson. Or not at all.”

“You drive a hard bargain, darling,” he drawled, as if he weren’t in the least bit dangerous to her sense of well-being. “But we’ll do it your way.”

Before she knew what he was about, he caught her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. Her skin tingled as his warm breath washed over her, his beautiful lips skimming so lightly over her flesh. She couldn’t suppress the small shudder that racked her body or the ache of sensation that made her crave more of his touch.

Leo Jackson looked up, his gaze sharp. Too sharp. As if he’d seen through to the core of her and knew what she’d been thinking. That devilish grin was back as his coffee-colored eyes glittered with heat. “Tomorrow, darling,” he said. “I look forward to it.”

Anna pulled her hand away, tried very hard to ignore the pulsing throb in her belly, between her legs. “I’m not your darling, Mr. Jackson.”

He winked. “Not yet. But let’s see what tomorrow brings, shall we?”

After a restless night, Anna rose early the next morning, and then showered and dressed with care. She was the tourist ambassador to Amanti, not a woman going on a date, so she chose a fashionable skirt and blazer. She paired the gray suit with a red silk camisole—her one nod to color—her pearls, and gray

suede pumps. She wrapped her long dark hair in a neat knot and secured it with pins. Then she slipped on mascara and lip gloss before walking over to the cheval glass and studying her reflection from head to toe.

She looked professional, competent. Precisely the way she wanted to appear. She absolutely did not care whether Leo Jackson found her attractive or not.

Liar.

Anna frowned at herself. She wasn't unattractive; she was professional. And she intended to stay that way. If she could control nothing else about these chaotic past few weeks, she could at least control her image. And this was the image she wanted to project. Serenity in the face of turmoil. Grace under fire. A calm port in the storm.

Anna patted her hair one last time before she whirled away from the mirror, found her handbag and cell phone, checked her calendar to make sure she'd taken care of everything and left her room at precisely twenty to nine. Her room was two floors up from Leo Jackson's room, but first she took an elevator down to the dining room and grabbed a quick cup of coffee and a whole-grain muffin before going back up to Leo's floor. At three minutes to nine, she knocked on his door.

Nothing happened. Anna frowned as she listened for movement behind the door. She checked her watch, studied the sweep of the second hand across the mother-of-pearl face. At nine o'clock precisely, she knocked again. "Mr. Jackson?" she

said, pressing her face close to the door in order not to wake any of the other late-sleeping guests in nearby rooms. “Are you in there?”

Two minutes later, when she’d knocked yet again—louder this time, because she was getting very annoyed—the door jerked open.

Anna’s stomach flipped at the sight of Leo Jackson in all his bad-boy glory. Heavens above, why did this man have to be so compelling? She should feel nothing for him but contempt. Not only had his family wrecked her perfect life, but he was also not the sort of man a proper lady should ever get involved with.

Yet heat bloomed in her cheeks as she thought of his comment last night about debauchery. Because that’s precisely what he looked like—as if he’d spent the night in some lucky woman’s bed, debauching her thoroughly.

Before she could control herself, Anna thought that *she* wanted to be debauched. Thoroughly. Repeatedly.

If she could have slapped her palms to her cheeks in horror, she would have done so. She most definitely did *not* want to be debauched—and certainly not by this rogue.

“Hello, darling,” Leo said casually, his sensual lips twisting in that arrogant grin that had featured so prominently in her thoughts last night while she’d tossed and turned in her bed. And yet, in the moment before he’d spoken, she’d sensed something behind that playboy demeanor, something tightly leashed in and controlled.

A sleek, dangerous beast on a tether.

“Mr. Jackson,” she replied coolly, hoping he couldn’t see the thrum of her pulse in her throat. “We had an appointment at nine, I believe.”

He ran a hand through his dark hair. His eyes gleamed with interest as his gaze slipped over her. He had a day’s growth of beard on his face—and she’d never seen anything sexier in her life.

Neither, it seemed, had some other woman. Or, heaven forbid, *women*. Yes, she definitely could see Leo Jackson taking more than one woman home with him at a time.

Oh, dear... The images in her head were definitely not safe for public consumption.

But he stood in the door, looking so dissolute and sexy in his tuxedo from last night she couldn’t form a coherent thought as she studied him. The beast was concealed once more, so that she found herself wondering if she’d imagined it. But she had not, she was certain. He was smooth and magnificent—and not quite what he seemed to be at first glance.

His jacket hung open and his shirt was unbuttoned. The tie and studs were gone, probably tucked into a pocket. A bright smudge of pink was smeared across the pristine white of his collar. Lipstick, she realized with a jolt. And not the color Graziana Ricci had been wearing.

She was positive, looking at him, that he’d not spent the night in his own bed. In fact, she was pretty sure he hadn’t slept at all.

She tried not to think of what he'd been doing instead—or whom he'd been doing it with.

While she had lain awake thinking about this man, he'd forgotten all about her. Clearly, as his lack of readiness and his delay in answering the door indicated. She only hoped her cheeks weren't scarlet. What if he had a woman in there right now?

"I—I can come back later," she blurted. "If you're, um, busy."

"Not at all," he said smoothly, wrapping a hand around her elbow and pulling her into the room. She caught her heel and stumbled to a halt in the small foyer of his suite, her hands automatically bracing against his chest as she nearly lost her balance.

"Sorry about that, darling," he said, his arms enveloping her. His broad hands were on her back, her waist, searing into her like a flaming-hot brand. Her heart skittered. She had an impression of a sleeping lion rearing its head and sniffing the air for prey.

"I don't think you're sorry at all," she bit out, and then stifled a gasp when she realized what she'd said. No matter how she felt about Leo Jackson, it wasn't permissible to be rude. She'd spent a lifetime learning the art of diplomacy, a skill she would have needed as Queen of Santina one day. And she'd just failed miserably, hadn't she?

No wonder Alex had left her. Except, how was Allegra Jackson any better suited to be a queen, considering how scandalously her family had behaved last night?

If appearances were any indication, *this* particular Jackson had

behaved very badly indeed.

Leo laughed, the fingers of one hand caressing the furrow of her spine through her clothing. Oh, if he kept doing that... Heat and light flared inside her, slid through her limbs until she wanted to mold herself to him like a second skin. His body was hard against hers, hot. It disconcerted her, and thrilled her. How could she react to this man so soon after Alex had turned her world upside down?

“Since you’ve landed in my arms, perhaps I’m not sorry,” he said.

No man had ever held her so close. Not even Alex. She’d learned to dance with men, to conduct herself with poise and grace, and she’d been in a man’s embrace before. But not this kind of embrace. This hot, needy, sensual embrace that was, on the surface, not improper at all.

Except for how it made her feel. Oh, yes, she felt quite improper when Leo Jackson had his arms around her. As if she wanted to feel skin against skin, mouth against mouth. As if she wanted to burn up in his arms and see what it felt like.

Ridiculous, since she didn’t even know him. The stress of the past few weeks had obviously affected her brain.

Anna disentangled herself from his embrace and took a step back. She tugged on the bottom of her jacket to straighten it. Then she patted her hair, happy that no stray wisps had escaped the confinement of her knot.

Leo shook his head as he studied her with an expression of

bemusement on his face. “Afraid of what you might feel if you let yourself go, darling?”

Fire burst through her, making twin spots rise in her cheeks. “Stop calling me *darling*,” she said firmly. “And stop trying to seduce me, Mr. Jackson. It won’t work.”

She wouldn’t *let* it work.

The gleam in his eyes was predatory. Feral. Exciting.

Dangerous.

“Really? Not feeling the least bit angry about your fiancé and my sister? Not aching to put it all behind you with a few pleasurable hours?”

Anna lifted her chin. He’d seen right through her, hadn’t he? “Actually, that sounds quite lovely. But first I’ll need to find someone to spend those hours with.”

“I’m wounded,” he said lightly, though something in his expression made her take a step back.

“I doubt that,” she replied crisply. “You’ll have moved on to the next woman on your list without a moment’s regret, I’m certain. We are all interchangeable to you.”

Was that irritation flaring in his dark eyes? Anger?

Or pain? It shocked her enough that she couldn’t decide. But then it was gone so quickly she began to wonder if she’d imagined it. Did she want him to have a conscience so it would make this strange attraction to him more bearable?

Probably.

Still, her outburst went against everything she’d ever been

taught. She was out of her depth lately, stressed and furious and hurt. She had to govern herself better. “Forget I said that. It was rude.”

“And you can’t stand being rude, can you, Anna?” His voice caressed her name exactly as she’d imagined it last night, while lying awake in her bed.

“It’s not the way I was raised,” she said primly. Then she glanced at her watch, because the air felt suddenly thick and hot and she didn’t know what else to do. “We’re running late, Mr. Jackson. Our boat is at the dock. We were supposed to leave five minutes ago.”

“Heaven forbid we are late. But you can cancel the boat. The tour will go much faster if we take my plane.”

Anna blinked. “Plane? Amanti is only twenty-five miles away by sea. The boat will have us there in under an hour, and then we can hire a car to take us around the island.”

His expression was patient but firm. “I need to see the coast. We’ll fly around the island first, and then land and have a tour, yes?”

Anna reached for her pearls, comforting herself with the solid feel of them between her fingers. He was overriding all her plans. It was too much like what had happened to her life lately, and it made her nervous. Uncertain. Damn, how she hated that feeling.

“But I’ve already arranged things,” she said firmly, attempting to regain control of the situation. “There is no need for you to put yourself out, Mr. Jackson.”

He reached for her again, put his hands on either side of her shoulders and bent until his gorgeous eyes were on a level with hers. Her heart flipped. “Arrangements can be changed, Anna. And you really need to call me Leo.”

She darted her tongue over her lower lip. “I’d prefer to keep this professional, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind,” he said, his eyes darkening.

Anna tried not to let the warm, spicy scent of him wrap around her senses. But he was too close, and he smelled so good, and her stomach was knotting with tension at his proximity. He confused her. She ached in ways she never had before, and she wanted things she’d once looked upon with quiet acceptance. She’d expected to be intimate with Alex, of course. She hadn’t expected to find out she wanted that intimacy with a kind of earthy sensuality that was completely foreign to her nature.

But not with Alex.

With this man. With Leo.

“Keep looking at me that way, and we won’t go anywhere,” he murmured, his voice a lovely growl in his throat. She imagined him growling against her skin, his body twining intimately with hers, and swallowed hard.

It was shocking to be thinking these thoughts. And so very, *very* titillating.

She might be a virgin, but she wasn’t stupid. She was modern enough to have read a few books on sex. She’d even managed to watch a video, the memory of which had her heart hurtling

forward. The way the man had put his head between the woman's legs and—

“Anna,” Leo groaned. “Stop.”

Anna shook herself. What was wrong with her? Baiting a lion in his den? Was she insane?

“Really, I have no idea what you're talking about Mr.—Leo. You have a very dirty mind.”

His sharp bark of laughter was not quite what she expected. He let her go abruptly, and her skin tingled through her clothes where he'd so recently touched her. “I think if this tour stands a chance of getting off the ground, I'd better change.”

“That would be wise,” she said primly.

She stood in the foyer, uncertain whether to follow or stay where she was. In the end, she decided to stay. She could hear him moving around, hear a soft curse as a door opened and shut again. She looked at her reflection in the mirror, blushed anew at her heightened color. Leo Jackson brought out the worst in her.

She was just beginning to worry about how long she'd been standing there when he reappeared. A jolt of surprise went through her at the sight of him. She didn't know what she'd expected, but his casual attire had not quite been it.

He wore a long-sleeved navy shirt, unbuttoned midchest, with a white T-shirt beneath. Half the shirt was tucked into faded, ripped jeans. The other half hung free in a kind of casual slouch that proclaimed this man didn't care about rules.

But the truth was that he looked utterly gorgeous. The height

of Bohemian fashion, while she stood there in her prim suit and felt frumpy. Stuffy. Oh, the suit was expensive, but it was staid. Safe and boring. A generation too old for her, perhaps. The stylist had tried to get her to go with a shorter hem, a nipped-in waist, but she'd refused.

She was regretting it at the moment.

“Ready, my love?” he asked, and her heart skipped a beat.

“Only if you stop calling me names,” she said, her jaw aching with the effort it took to be polite as she forced the words out.

He grinned, and her heart melted. Damn it. Damn *him*.

“I can try, sweet Anna.”

Somehow, that was even worse.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS a glorious morning in Santina. The sun was shining brightly in the sky and the turquoise water of the Mediterranean sparkled like diamonds beneath it. Anna buckled her seat belt and tried to calm the racing of her heart as their plane began to taxi toward the runway.

Leo was flying. She hadn't quite expected that. When he'd said they would take his plane, she'd assumed he had a flight crew. Which he did, but he'd given them the day off to see the sights.

"Don't you need help?" she'd asked.

"It's a small plane," he'd replied. "Certified for one pilot. I left the 737 at home this time."

"It seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a short trip."

He smiled at her, and her heart turned over. "Relax, Anna. They wouldn't let me take off if I wasn't licensed."

She had to admit that he'd done a thorough check of the plane before they'd gone anywhere. He'd spent time looking at the instruments, walking around the craft, going over a checklist. Finally, when he'd deemed everything to be okay, he'd communicated with the tower.

And now they were turning onto the runway, the plane braking only momentarily while Leo said something else to the tower. Someone gave him the go-ahead, and then the plane was shooting down the runway. Anna bit her lip to stifle the laughter that

wanted to break free at that very moment.

She loved everything about taking off. The charge down the runway, the plane lifting into the air, the ground falling away and her stomach going with it. She loved the way they soared into the sky with the landscape below getting smaller and smaller. She could see the rocky outcrop on which the palace was built, the faded terra-cotta roofs of the city, the glint of sunlight on glass and metal.

She slumped into her seat, a strange sense of relief pouring over her. She was leaving it all behind. She was free, at least for the next few hours, and her heart felt suddenly light.

She turned to look out Leo's side and caught him glancing at her. Her stomach flipped.

"Happy?" he asked, and she wondered how he knew. She hadn't given it away. She hadn't laughed, or smiled, or reacted at all. She knew because she'd practiced it for so many years. It was essential, as a queen, to be tranquil. To hide your feelings behind a mask of cool efficiency. She was good at it.

Usually.

"I don't, um, feel happy or sad," she said, stumbling in the middle and hoping he hadn't noticed.

"Liar," he shot at her. But he grinned when he said it, and a current of warmth washed over her. "I've an idea, sweet Anna."

She pointedly ignored his use of her name and the epithet he'd attached to it. "What is this idea?"

The hot, intense look he gave her had the power to melt her

insides. He looked at her like he owned her, and it made little sparks fly around inside her like a racquetball bouncing off the walls of the court.

“Let’s fly to Sicily. We can spend the day there, eating pasta, viewing the volcano—” one eyebrow arched, his voice dropping an octave before he said the next two words “—making love. We’ll return to Amanti tonight and tour tomorrow.”

Anna felt her face go red even as her heart rate notched up. “Impossible,” she said.

“And why is that? Because you don’t like me? You don’t need to like me, Anna, for what I have in mind.”

She needed a fan turned on her body full blast. “I have no feelings about you at all, Mr. Jackson.”

“Really? I find that difficult to believe.”

“I don’t see why you should.”

“Because I am a Jackson, perhaps?”

She crossed her arms and gazed out the window. Below, the ocean rolled in all directions. “I could hardly hold you responsible for what your sister has done.”

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Whatever she has done,” he said softly, “she has not done it alone.”

Anna’s heart burned. “No, you are quite correct. It takes two, as the saying goes.”

“Indeed. Just imagine what the two of us could do together in Sicily.” His voice was seductive, full of promise.

“We’re going to Amanti. Now,” she said firmly.

“Are you sure? I’m quite worth the side trip, I assure you.”

“Good heavens, you are vain,” she said, her heart racing at the thought of doing something so insane, so out of the ordinary. “No. No, no, *no*.”

But a part of her wanted to say yes. She wanted to be the woman she’d never been allowed to be. She wanted to break free of her suits and her pearls and spend one glorious, hot, naked day with a man. She wanted to know what it felt like to let a man like Leo have his wicked way with her.

No, she told herself quite firmly, *she did not*.

But why not? Everything she’d prepared for, everything she’d thought her life was going to be, had disappeared in the blink of an eye. She was a virgin who’d never even kissed a man because she’d been saving herself for Alex Santana. Alex, who’d never kissed her properly. He’d brushed his lips across her cheek, once over her mouth, but the contact had been so light and perfunctory that she had no idea what it truly felt like to kiss a man.

And Leo wanted to take her to Sicily and make love to her. She shivered with excitement. It was preposterous, and she wasn’t going to say yes, but the idea was rather thrilling in an illicit way that had her sex tightening in response.

A static voice came over the headset then, and she jumped in surprise at the sudden sound slicing across her thoughts. She couldn’t hear what the voice said, but Leo replied. And then he was pulling on the controls and they were climbing higher and faster.

“What?” she said, her heart thudding for a different reason now. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “Some unexpected turbulence. We’re climbing to avoid it.”

“Why did you ask me to go to Sicily? You’ve filed a flight plan. You can’t just change it.”

Leo flashed her another of those smiles that did things to her insides. “We aren’t a commercial aircraft, darling. I can change it if I wish. Haven’t you heard I’m eccentric that way?”

“I’ve heard nothing at all about you,” she said with a sniff. It was only partially true. Last night, when she’d gotten back to her room, she’d done an internet search on Leo Jackson.

“Excellent. So you won’t have made up your mind about me yet.”

“Oh, I’m sure I have.”

“Have you now? And what have you decided?”

Anna studied his profile. Leo Jackson was handsome and wealthy, and reputed to be intense in both his business dealings and personal relationships. He was also a serial womanizer who’d spent the past several years living in the United States, dating Hollywood starlets and supermodels and, on one memorable occasion, a gorgeous actress who was at least twenty years his senior. Of all the women he’d been linked with, that was the only one that had ever seemed to be somewhat serious.

There was no indication about what had ended the relationship, but it was definitely over. The actress had recently

married someone else and adopted a baby with him.

“I think you can’t be trusted,” she said softly.

“Ah. What a shame.”

“But you don’t deny it.”

He shook his head. “That depends on how you define *trust*. Will I seduce you in spite of your denials that you’re attracted to me? Possibly. Will I lie to you and leave you heartbroken? Never. Because I will tell you up front that it’s not wise to have expectations beyond the physical. We can have a good time, but we aren’t getting married.”

Anna crossed her legs. Had she really thought going to Sicily with him might be thrilling? “Why would you assume that a woman might have expectations about you? Are you truly that fabulous that no one can resist you? Honestly, I’ve never met anyone so arrogant as you. Not everyone thinks you’re irresistible, you know.”

“But you do.”

Surely her face was bright red. From anger, not embarrassment, she told herself. “I do not. I don’t even like you.”

He laughed as if she’d admitted something she shouldn’t have. “And here I thought you didn’t have any feelings at all about me.”

“I’m rapidly changing my mind.”

The look he gave her jolted her to her core. Dark, sensual, breathtakingly intense. “We could have fun in Sicily, Anna. Hot, decadent, pleasurable fun.”

Her heart was thrumming. “Please stop saying *we*. *We* aren’t

doing anything together, Mr. Jackson.”

He laughed again. “Back to that? Have you ever considered, sweet Anna, that perhaps it’s time you let your hair down a bit? Time to let go of that buttoned-up perfection you try so hard to project and have some fun?”

Anna clenched her hands into fists in her lap. He didn’t know her, didn’t know what he was saying. He was simply guessing, because that’s what men like him did. They got beneath your skin and made you desire them, made you think they understood you when in fact they only understood how to lower your defenses. It was a parlor trick, the kind of thing bogus fortune tellers did every day at the carnival.

She might not be experienced, but she wasn’t stupid.

“You’re grabbing at straws,” she said calmly. “I am well aware I’m not perfect. And I like the way I’m dressed.”

“It’s not a bad way to dress if you’re chairing a board meeting,” he said. “But it’s not your true style.”

“I don’t think you have the first clue about my style.”

“I’m not sure you do, either,” he said. “But we could start with naked and go from there.”

Heat flared in her core, impossible heat. Her limbs were jelly whenever he mentioned the word *naked*. She was in danger of turning into a slack-jawed nitwit if he kept it up. “Do you ever quit?”

“I do,” he said. “But I don’t think we’ve reached that point yet.”

Anna groaned. It was uncharacteristic of her, but she couldn’t

help it. “Why are you torturing me? Why can’t we just fly to Amanti, view the coast and go back to Santina?”

Leo looked at her, his expression suddenly very serious. “Do you really want to go back to Santina? Is that where you want to be today?”

She turned to look out the window. The sea spread in all directions, as far as the eye could see. It was hard to believe they could be in the Mediterranean and it could still feel so remote. As if they were the only two people in the world. There were no boats out here, no other planes, nothing but the blue sky, the bright sun and dazzling water.

She was alone with him, and while he frustrated her, he also made her feel things she’d not felt before: attractive, alive, interesting. She wasn’t quite ready to give that up yet.

“No,” she said softly. And then she turned to face him, her jaw hardening. “No, I don’t want to go back.”

Leo wasn’t sure why, but he wanted her. She was quite possibly the most uptight woman he’d ever met, but for some reason that intrigued him. Like now, when she sat there beside him and tried to look stony. He wasn’t sure she realized it, but stony didn’t really work when you had wide jade-green eyes that showed every ounce of hurt you were feeling, whether you wanted them to or not.

And Anna was hurting. He’d seen her across the room last night, looking so isolated and alone, and he’d wanted to know who she was. Graziana Ricci had laughed dismissively. “Oh,

that's Anna Constantinides. The jilted bride.”

The jilted bride. He'd watched her closely then, wondering what she must be feeling as she listened to the toasts to Prince Alessandro and Allegra. She'd looked so cool, so bored, so perfect and untouchable dressed all in icy white—but then her fingers had strayed to the pearl necklace she wore, and he'd noticed they were trembling. When she'd turned toward him, the light from the chandeliers caught her just right and he'd realized she was on the verge of tears.

Shimmering tears she never once let fall.

She'd been a beautiful ice queen in the center of that gathering, the most regal and elegant of them all—and he'd wanted to see if he could melt the ice surrounding her heart. Leo lived for challenges, and Anna Constantinides was a challenge. It wasn't simply that he wanted to seduce her. He wanted to make her laugh, wanted to see her eyes light up with pleasure.

Anyone who'd seen the newspapers, who'd read those ugly headlines and even uglier stories, would know she was suffering. It made him think of another time, another woman, who had also been deeply hurt by what the papers had said about her. His mother had kept the articles from when her affair with Bobby had been splashed through the papers. He'd found them in her personal documents when he was eighteen. She'd been dead for eight years by then.

Until that moment, he'd thought the most devastating thing she'd had in her possession had been the positive paternity test

naming Bobby Jackson as his father—a fact Bobby had denied until the test was brought out in court after Leo’s mother’s death—but the articles had given Leo a whole new level of understanding about what had happened between his parents.

Though Bobby had raised him from the age of ten onward, their relationship could never be termed ordinary. Bobby didn’t seem to know how to be a father, either to Leo or his siblings. He tried, but he was more of a dotty uncle than anything.

After Leo found the articles and confronted his father, their relationship had soured. Soon after that, he’d gone to the States to forge his way in business. He’d wanted to prove he didn’t need Bobby, or the Jackson name, to succeed. He’d built the Leonidas Group from the ground up, and he’d made more money than Bobby had ever earned, even at the height of his football career.

Since Leo had returned to London recently, he’d been trying damn hard to forge a new relationship with his father. Though it wasn’t perfect, they were finally learning to let go of the past and be friends.

Just then, Anna glanced down at her slim gold watch and turned sharply toward him as she realized how long they’d been flying. “Are we lost? Because we should have been there by now.”

Leo flexed his fingers on the controls. “We aren’t lost, darling. I thought it might be nice to fly for a little while.”

He found flying soothing, especially when he wanted to think. But Anna was used to structure. Her mouth opened. Closed.

Opened again. “But why?” she blurted. “There is much to see on Amanti!”

He glanced over at her. Such an uptight woman. He found himself wanting to unpin her hair and see how long it might be. And he definitely wanted to get her out of that bland suit. Grey. Why was the woman wearing grey? The red of her shirt was the only spot of color in her drab outfit. Didn't she know she should be dressed all in red? In vibrant, sassy colors that made the green of her eyes stand out even more than they already did?

She was utterly beautiful, and trying so hard to hide that beauty. He found himself wanting to know why.

“And do you really want to be on Amanti today?” he asked coolly.

Her eyes were wide, her expression haunted. He didn't have to explain what he meant. The newspapers and tabloids couldn't seem to leave the story of Prince Alessandro's surprise engagement alone, especially since he'd picked Allegra Jackson—of those *scandalous* Jacksons—as his bride.

Anna couldn't help but be dragged into the publicity. She was the antithesis of his family, and probably far more suited to being a royal bride by virtue of her lack of scandalous relations.

Which also meant she was the perfect sacrificial lamb for the roasting fires of the papers that dogged the Santinas' every move.

The press loved every minute of her humiliation. Each story that featured Alessandro and Allegra's forbidden love also featured Anna. She endured it with quiet dignity, but Leo

wondered how close she was getting to breaking. She was only human after all. It couldn't be easy to see her former fiancé with Allegra.

"I can't hide forever," she said, drawing herself up regally, shuttering her hurt behind her lowered lashes. "The press will have their fun until they tire of the story. If I run away or hide from the world, it will be a thousand times worse."

Her fingers strayed to her neck, caught at her pearls. "No, I have to endure it until it goes away."

Leo swore. He wanted to protect her, and he wanted to shake her at the same time. "It's acceptable to be angry, Anna. And it's acceptable to want to escape."

"I never said I wasn't angry," she snapped before closing her eyes again and saying something in what he assumed was her native Greek. When she trained those green eyes on him again, they were as placid as a secluded lake. She was good. Very good. But he could see the fire she couldn't quite hide in the depths of that gaze. And it pulled at him more than it ought.

"These things pass," she said. "And now we must go to Amanti and begin our tour. The last thing I need is for the press to think I'm off being promiscuous with you."

"Perhaps you need a little promiscuity in your life," he replied, very aware he was being self-serving as he said it. "A little fun that's about you, not about others or what they expect from you."

"You're only saying this because it would suit *your* purposes if I agreed with you. Stop trying to seduce me, Mr. Jackson. It

won't work.”

It was close to the mark, and inexplicably it made him angry. Except that he wasn't quite sure if it was her or himself he was angry with. He definitely wanted her. She intrigued him. She didn't seem to care who he was or what he offered her—and that made him think of something else, something he'd not let himself consider before. “Were you in love with him?”

Anna spluttered. He loved ruffling her cool, though he hoped the answer was no. For some reason, he needed it to be no.

“That's none of your business! We hardly know each other, Mr. Jackson,” she said, her entire body stiff with outrage. Her long fingers gripped the arm of the seat. Her nails were manicured and neat, and there was a pale line on her left ring finger where her engagement ring had once sat. He imagined those elegant fingers playing his body like a fine instrument, and nearly groaned.

Since when was he interested in prim little schoolteachers anyway? Not that Anna was a schoolteacher—she was far too well bred and rich to have an actual job—but she reminded him of one. The kind of teacher who wore buttoned-up suits to work and lacy knickers beneath. Whether she realized it or not, the woman seethed with pent-up sexuality.

Whoever got her to let her hair down and give in to her sensual nature would be one lucky man. He pictured Anna in a bed, her naked body lying against red sheets, those full kissable lips open and eager as he lowered himself onto her and captured her mouth

with his own.

Suddenly, flying was getting damned uncomfortable. Leo forced himself to think of something unsexy—like Graziana Ricci’s collagen-plumped lips smeared in cherry-red lipstick—and hoped his body would take the hint.

“How can we possibly get to know each other,” he said, “if you keep retreating behind that starched formality every time I ask you a question?”

“We don’t need to know each other. I’m taking you to Amanti so you can decide whether or not you want to build a hotel there. Beyond that, I’m sure we’ll never see each other again. Now, if you will please take us *to* Amanti, we can get on with the tour.”

Leo shot her a glance. She was prickly as hell and completely fascinating. “You don’t like it when your plans get changed, do you? You’re very much a list girl.”

Her head whipped around. “A list girl? What, pray tell, is that?”

“You make lists. You like a long list of things to do and then you check them off one by one. There’s no room for spontaneity on your lists.” He made a checkmark in the air. “Woke up early, check. Ate breakfast, check.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being organized, Mr. Jackson,” she said. He could hear the starch in her voice, the outrage she tried to keep hidden. She was trying to keep him at a distance, and he wouldn’t allow it.

“If you call me Mr. Jackson one more time,” he growled, “I’ll

keep flying until we reach Sicily.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Her arms folded over her prim grey suit, her chin thrusting forward in challenge. Clearly, Anna Constantinides didn’t know him very well. No matter how successful he’d become, he’d never shaken that raw, edgy side of his personality that liked to push barriers to their limit. No doubt it came from trying to fit into the Jackson household when he’d been young and motherless and uncertain of his place in their lives. He’d pushed and rebelled, certain his father would throw him out, but Bobby had never wavered in his acceptance once he’d stepped up and admitted paternity.

“I would, in fact,” Leo replied. “I’ve got nothing to lose.”

Her jaw clenched tight and he felt suddenly wrong for phrasing it that way. She had everything to lose, or so she thought. A trip to Sicily with him would be devastating in Anna’s world. Because she was already the focus of attention and she couldn’t fathom drawing yet more. Never mind that if she were only to behave as if she didn’t care, the media would soon leave her alone. He knew from experience that they liked nothing better than a victim—and Anna was a perfect victim right now.

“I don’t want to go to Sicily, Leo. I want to go to Amanti.”

“Tell the truth, Anna. You don’t want to do that, either. But you’ve committed to it and so you want to get there without giving the media anything else to speculate about.”

She made a frustrated noise. “Yes. This is precisely the truth.

If I could run to Sicily or Egypt or Timbuktu and not have to endure another moment of this shame, I would do it. But I can't run, Leo. I have to carry on as always and wait for the scandal to pass."

It was perhaps the most honest thing she'd said yet. But he wanted more. "Tell me this, then. If you could have an affair, no consequences, no one the wiser, would you do so?"

She didn't say anything for the longest time. "I... I..."

But whatever she was about to say was lost as a light on the instrument panel flashed on. A tight knot formed in Leo's stomach as he turned his focus to the plane. He'd checked everything before they'd left Santa Maria, and everything had been fine. He wouldn't have taken off otherwise.

But something had changed in the half hour since.

CHAPTER THREE

THE plane shuddered and Anna's heart leaped. Whatever she'd been about to say was forgotten as she took in Leo's sudden concentration. "What's happening?"

He didn't look at her. "We're losing fuel pressure," he said as he did something with the switches. The plane shuddered again, and the engine made a high-pitched whining noise that sent her heart into her throat.

"What does that mean?" Because she needed to know, precisely, what he was saying to her. It didn't sound good, and she didn't like the sensation of being out of control. Whatever happened, she was in a plane with Leo, high above the Mediterranean, and there was nothing she could do to fix the problem.

But that didn't mean she intended to sit quietly and hope for the best.

"It means there's a problem in the fuel line. We need to land before we run out of gas."

"Land? Where?" She scanned the horizon, saw nothing but water for kilometers. Her stomach churned. "Leo, there's nothing out here."

He checked the GPS, his long fingers flexing against the controls. "We're too far from Amanti," he finally said, concentrating on the screen. "But there's another island a few

miles distant.”

Another island? She didn't know what it could be, but she began to pray fervently that they would make it there. The plane bucked again, the engine sputtering before smoothing out once more. Anna gripped her seat, her fingers pressing into the leather so hard that they ached.

“Are we going to die?”

“No.” His answer was swift, sure, and she took comfort in it. But doubts began to creep in. What if he was wrong? What if he was only trying to keep her calm? She couldn't abide that. She had to know.

“Tell me the truth, Leo,” she finally said, unable to stand it a moment longer. “Please.”

Leo's dark eyes glinted with determination as he looked over at her. How could her heart flip at the look on his face when this was serious? How could heat blossom between her thighs at a moment like this?

Because she had regrets, that's why. Because she'd saved herself for years for a husband who had cast her aside before they'd ever even wed. Now that she might die, she fervently wished she'd experienced passion, even if it had just been for one night.

Leo stared at her so intently that she could almost forget where they were, what was happening. For a moment, she could almost wish they'd had that day in Sicily.

“If we can find this island, we'll be fine,” Leo said shortly.

She wanted to believe him, but she couldn't simply accept it without question. "But what if there's nowhere to land?"

"There's definitely somewhere to land," he said. "Look around you."

There was nothing but blue as far as the eye could see. She gasped as she finally took his meaning. "The sea?"

"Yes. Now put on your life jacket, and grab that orange backpack from where it's stowed behind my seat."

"But, Leo," she said, panic rising inside her as she thought of them marooned at sea. Assuming they survived the impact. *Oh, God.*

"Anna, trust me," he said firmly. "Get the pack. Get your life jacket."

"What about you?"

"Grab mine, too. I can't put it on yet, but I will."

Anna unbuckled her seat belt and found the life jackets. She clipped hers on with shaky fingers, and then grabbed the heavy orange pack he'd told her to get and brought everything back to her seat. Leo was saying something into the headset, but he didn't appear to be getting an answer.

"No," he said when she started to sit down again. "Sit in one of the seats behind me. It'll be safer on impact."

Anna hesitated only a moment before sinking into the seat beside him and buckling her seat belt. "I want to be here with you," she said. "I insist on it."

She didn't expect him to laugh, but he did. A short, sharp bark

of laughter that stole into her soul and made her feel good, if only for a moment. “Dragon lady,” he said, and her heart skipped again. At a time like this, how did he make her feel as if she were formidable? As if she mattered? How did he cut through the pain and anger and make her feel important again?

“There it is,” Leo said, and she squinted into the distance, searching the horizon. A small gray bump rose up from the sea, growing bigger the closer they got. There were many small islands out here, some of which were inhabited and some not. Any hope she’d had this might be one of the inhabited ones faded quickly when she saw the size of the island.

It was long, narrow and rocky, with a green area at one end and a white sandy beach on one side.

“There’s nowhere to land,” she said.

“I’m taking us down,” he replied. “It might be rough.”

That was the only warning he gave her as he pointed the nose down and began his descent. Anna’s stomach twisted as the plane dropped in the sky. Sweat broke out on her forehead, between her breasts. Her heart went into free fall as the sea grew bigger and bigger with every passing minute.

The engine sputtered and whined, and Leo’s hands were white on the controls. But the plane continued to descend in a controlled manner. Anna grasped her pearls in her fingers, twisted hard and then chided herself for doing so. This was no time to break them. They’d been her grandmother’s, the only link she had left to the woman she’d most admired. She would not

destroy them.

“Leo,” she said helplessly as they sank lower in the sky. She reached for him, put her hand on his shoulder, squeezed. She hoped she was imparting strength, courage, but she had the feeling he didn’t need any of those things. No, it was she who needed them and Leo who provided them to her.

She could do nothing but sit there and watch powerlessly as the island got bigger. But the sea was bigger still, so big and azure that it filled her vision from all sides. She focused on the island. There were a few trees, she noted, a wooded copse that might provide shelter—and might have fresh water if the rain had a place to collect. Assuming it rained.

If only they survived the plunge into the sea. *First things first, Anna.* She was so used to planning that she couldn’t help herself, when in fact there was nothing to plan if they didn’t make it out alive.

“Brace for landing,” Leo said as he took the plane dangerously close to the island. Anna closed her eyes at the last minute and gripped her seat for dear life. So many feelings went through her at once that she couldn’t process them all. Fear, regret, anger, sadness, love, passion...

Anna’s head snapped back as the plane shuddered into the water with a bone-jarring splash. It glided along the surface before coming to an abrupt stop that would have jerked her forward in the seat if not for the belt holding her tightly in place. There was a surreal moment of complete silence as the craft

pitched and rolled with the waves. Anna's stomach lodged in her throat. How would they ever escape with the motion throwing them around so much? Once the seat belt was off, two steps forward would turn into four steps back.

"There's not much time," Leo said as he unbuckled his seat belt and flung his door open.

"Your jacket," she said, thrusting it toward him with a shaking hand as she unlocked her seat belt with the other. He took it and threw it out the door, then grabbed her and hauled her toward him. She barely had time to register all the sensations that rocked her as she was pressed against his hard body before she dropped into the sea.

The water was shocking, not because it was too cold, but because it was wet when she'd been so dry. The life preserver kept her from going under, but water still splashed over her head, soaking her. Anna spluttered and began to tread water as Leo landed beside her, the orange pack slung over one shoulder.

"Your life jacket," she said. It was floating just out of reach and she made a grab for it.

"I don't need it." His hair was slicked back from his head, his expression grim and determined.

"Leo," she began.

"I'm fine, Anna. Can you swim to the island?"

She turned and looked at the shore only a few meters distant. "Of course," she said crisply, her heart beating like crazy in her chest as she began to process what had happened. They'd

crashed. In the Mediterranean. She couldn't quite wrap her mind around it, and yet the plane bobbed in the water nearby. The scent of salt mingling with jet fuel invaded her senses.

"We need to go now," he said. "Before we get soaked in fuel."

Leo began to stroke toward the island. She followed, easily crossing the distance before stumbling to her knees onto the shore beside him. Her hair was still in its rigid knot, but a few wisps had fallen free and snaked around her neck like tentacles. Her makeup was probably streaked and—

Oh, she'd forgotten her purse! She turned and started wading back into the water when strong arms caught her from behind.

"Where are you going?"

"My purse," she said. "My phone, my identification—"

"It's too late," he growled in her ear.

"But it's not." She pointed. The plane was still on top of the water, though the nose had begun to sink. It wouldn't take her a trifle to get out there and back again.

"It's too dangerous, Anna. Even if the plane wasn't sinking, the remaining fuel is leaching from it. Besides, was there anything irreplaceable in your purse?"

She wanted to tell him yes, of course there was. Instead, Anna slumped in his grip. "No, nothing irreplaceable." Just her lip gloss, her hand sanitizer, her headache tablets and her phone with its calendar of all her events.

Events that were sadly lacking lately. Invitations had dried up since Alex had jilted her.

She stifled a hysterical laugh. They'd crashed in the Mediterranean and she was concerned about her calendar? She needed to be thinking about survival, not social engagements.

Leo held her hard against him. She slowly became aware of his heat, of the solidity of his body where it pressed into hers. They were both soaking wet, dripping onto the sand, and she wondered for a moment why the water didn't sizzle and steam.

Anna put her hand on his where it gripped her beneath the life vest. She wanted to smooth her fingers along his skin, wanted to feel the shape of his hand, the ridges of his knuckles, but instead she loosened his grip and stepped away from him. When she turned, he was looking at her with a kind of laser intensity that made her gut clench in reaction.

Liquid heat flooded her body, her bones. Shakily, she undid the clasp on the vest and shrugged it off. She needed something to do, something that didn't involve looking at Leo.

His shirt was plastered to his chest, delineating every ridge and curve of smooth muscle. She hadn't been able to tell from the tuxedo last night, but Leo was in spectacular shape. His father had once been a famous footballer, she recalled, and Leo looked as if he'd spent quite a bit of time on the field himself. He had the leanly muscled form of an athlete.

"We need to find shelter," he said, and a hard knot formed right below her breastbone. They were stranded, alone, with nothing and no one to help them get home again.

"You were able to tell someone what happened, right?" she

said. “They’ll be looking for us soon.”

His expression remained flat. “We were out of radio range. I activated the emergency beacon on the plane. They’ll know approximately where we went down, but it may take some time since they won’t be looking for us yet.”

She turned back toward the plane. “If I had my mobile phone...”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “There are no cell towers out here. You’d need a satellite phone to make a call.”

“So we’re stuck.”

“For the time being,” he replied, hefting the orange pack onto his shoulder again.

“How long will we be here, Leo?”

He shrugged. “I really don’t know. Which is why we need to find shelter.”

“What about food? Water? How will we survive if we don’t have water?”

He gave her a long look. “We have enough water for a couple of days, if we ration it. Everything’s in this pack.”

Anna blinked. “You have water?”

“It’s an emergency survival kit, darling. There’s a bit of everything. Dried food, matches, fuel, blankets—enough to survive a few days in the wild.”

He turned and started walking toward the other end of the island where she’d seen the copse of trees. Anna scrambled after him. Her feet were bare since she’d lost her shoes in the sea. She

felt a momentary pang for the beautiful suede pumps that were no doubt at the bottom of the Med by now, but it was truly the least of her worries.

Part of the going was rocky, but Anna climbed after Leo and never said a word when the rocks sliced into her feet. She fell behind, but she did not call out. Why should she? He couldn't disappear. The island was small and she knew where they were headed. But Leo glanced over his shoulder at one point, stopping when she wasn't right behind him.

He frowned as she approached, his gaze on her feet. "You've lost your shoes."

"They wouldn't have been much use anyway," she said. "They were five-inch platforms."

Her one concession to impracticality.

He closed the distance between them, and then hooked an arm behind her knees and lifted her into his arms before she realized his plan.

"Leo, put me down!"

His face was close to hers. Too close. Oh, heavens. She wanted to tilt her head back, wanted to nuzzle her face into the crook of his neck and breathe in his scent. And then she wanted to lick him.

Heat flashed through her. The hot Mediterranean sun beat down on them from above, but it wasn't the sun that made her skin prickle or her core melt.

"Once we're over the rocks," he said. "I don't want you cutting

your feet.”

“Too late,” she replied.

His coffee-colored eyes were so beautiful as he stared down at her. There was heat in them, and something darker and more intense. Something so elemental it frightened her. “You should have told me sooner.”

“You have the pack,” she said, dropping her gaze. Her heart hammered in her breast. Why did he affect her so much? He was completely, utterly wrong for her. He was the kind of man she should definitely avoid, and yet he thrilled her in ways she’d never expected.

He’s thrilling because he’s dangerous, a voice whispered. *Bad boys are always thrilling.*

“You barely weigh more than the pack does,” he said. “If it gets too much for me, I’ll put one of you down. Honest.”

He winked on that last, and began striding toward the trees again. Anna clung to him, ashamed, miserable, grateful and oddly excited. She had to wrap her arms around his neck, had to press her face in close to his. His fingers splayed over her rib cage, dangerously close to her breast, and she held her breath for a long moment.

Would he touch her there? Did she want him to? What would she say if he did?

But they reached a sandy area and he set her down again. She tried not to be disappointed as he strode away. The sand felt good on her feet, warm on top and cool if she dug her toes down. She

scrambled after Leo, catching him right as he reached the trees.

It was cooler here, and the ground was flat and somewhat sandy. Leo kept walking until he found a spot he liked, and then he set the pack down and opened it. Anna watched in amazement as he pulled out a variety of items—heavy-duty plastic sheeting with grommets, a knife and rope—before he stood and began to peel the wet shirt from his body.

If she'd thought the navy shirt molded his chest, she'd had no idea what molding meant until he stood there in a wet T-shirt and jeans. But then he yanked the T-shirt off and his chest was bare and tanned. Her gaze dropped, halted in surprise. He had a dragon tattoo low on his abdomen—

Anna gulped. And turned away. Automatically she reached for her pearls, relieved they were still there as her fingers toyed with them.

“Do I make you nervous?” Leo asked from behind her. She could hear the laughter in his voice. Deliberately she turned, dropping her hand away from her neck. *Calm, cool.*

“Of course not,” she said.

He winked. “Good. Because I’m afraid the jeans are next, darling. Can’t abide wet clothing.”

Anna held her breath as his long fingers flicked open the button of his jeans. She couldn’t have looked away if her life depended on it. Tanned fingers slipped between the waistband and his skin, and then he was pushing the jeans down. Her heart kicked up as his hip bones appeared, and then the elastic waist

of his underwear. Armani, she thought crazily. It said so on the band.

But she forgot all about it as the jeans slid down his long, strong legs, revealing tanned skin and acres of muscle. Anna couldn't breathe. Her lungs simply wouldn't fill. Had she ever seen a man as beautiful, as strong and lean and muscled, as this one?

Could this day be any more surreal? Just a few minutes ago, they'd been fully clothed strangers. And now they were marooned together and Leo was stripping out of his clothing.

"Keep staring, darling, and the show is bound to get more interesting," Leo said, his voice a growling purr that slid over her nerve endings and made her shudder.

"I've seen naked men before," she said with a sniff. "You can't shock me."

It was only a small lie: the naked man she'd seen had been on a video, not standing before her looking so vibrant and sexy that she physically hurt from looking at him. Leo wasn't wearing any less than a man might wear while swimming, and yet her insides were twisting and squeezing in a way they never had at the sight of a random man in a Speedo at the pool.

"Is that so?" he asked.

"Definitely." But her limbs felt weak.

Leo shook his head, laughing softly. "Come along then, Anna. Get out of your wet things and help me set up this shelter."

Astonishment riveted her to the spot. He wanted her to remove

her clothes? She'd not thought of it before, but now it seemed as if her soaked suit clung to her uncomfortably. Her skin felt cool and clammy under the fabric, though Leo's had looked hot and silky when he'd removed his clothing.

Leo strode over to her and began to gently push her jacket from her shoulders. "Come on, Anna, it's all right. You've had a shock. Let's get you out of these wet things. I'll put everything in the sun and it'll be dry again in no time. You can armor yourself behind your buttoned-up clothing quite soon, I promise."

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