



THE
Surprise

DE ANGELIS BABY

MODERN™



CATHY WILLIAMS

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The Surprise De Angelis Baby

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A surprise holiday souvenir...Billionaire businessman Daniel De Angelis's plan is simple: a few undercover days at sea to reveal the weaknesses of the ship he plans to acquire. Instead he discovers a vulnerability of his own – gorgeous art teacher Delilah Scott!The terms of their liaison are clear: two weeks of complete sensual surrender that will end the moment the cruise ship docks. But stepping back onto dry land brings Delilah down to earth in more ways than one. Now she's facing two very shocking truths: Daniel lied about his identity while tempting her...and now she's pregnant with his baby!

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‘You’re so ... so ...’

‘I know what you’re going to say. You’re going to tell me that I’m *so arrogant* ... I prefer *confident*.’

Delilah laughed, and just like that Daniel kissed her—and this time his kiss wasn’t lingering and explorative. This time it was hungry and demanding. He manoeuvred her so that they had stepped out into the darkness and his mouth never left hers.

She’d been kissed before, but never like this. His hunger matched hers, and she whimpered and coiled her fingers into his hair, pulling him into her and then arching her head back so that he could kiss her neck, the side of her face, the tender spot by her jawline.

She was shocked by the need pouring through her in a tidal wave that eclipsed every preconceived notion she had ever had about the nature of relationships.

When he pulled away, she actually moaned. ‘And you wonder why I’m nervous.’

The Italian Titans

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Theo and Daniel De Angelis have never wanted for anything. These influential Italians command empires and conduct every liaison on *their* terms ... until now.

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Find out what happens next in:

Theo’s Story:

Wearing the De Angelis Ring January 2016

Daniel’s Story:

The Surprise De Angelis Baby February 2016

The Surprise

De Angelis Baby

Cathy Williams



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CATHY WILLIAMS can remember reading Mills & Boon Modern Romance books as a teenager, and now that she is writing them she remains an avid fan. For her, there is nothing like creating romantic stories and engaging plots, and each and every book is a new adventure. Cathy lives in London and her three daughters—Charlotte, Olivia and Emma—have always been, and continue to be, the greatest inspiration in her life.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

COULD THE DAY get any better?

Daniel De Angelis stepped out from the air-conditioned comfort of his black chauffeur-driven Mercedes and removed his dark sunglasses to scan the scenery around him.

Frankly—perfect. Brilliant sunshine glinted on the calm turquoise water of the Aegean Sea. He'd never made it to Santorini before, and he took a few minutes to appreciate the scenic view of the bowl-shaped harbour from where he stood, looking down on it from a distance. He could even make out the vessel he had come to snap up at a bargain price.

It looked as picture-perfect as everything around it, but that, of course, was an illusion. It was semi-bankrupt, on its last legs—a medium-sized cruise ship which he would add to his already vast portfolio of conquests.

He knew down to the last detail how much money it had lost in the past five years, how much it owed the bank, how much its employees were paid, how discounted their fares were now they were desperate to get customers... He practically knew what the owners had for their breakfast and where they did their food shopping.

As with all deals, big or small, it always paid to do his homework. His brother, Theo, might have laughingly referred to this extravagant purchase as nothing more than a toy—something different to occupy him for a few months—but it was going to be a relatively expensive toy, and he intended to use every trick in the book to make sure he got the best possible deal.

Thinking about his brother brought a grin to his face. Who'd have thought it? Who would have thought that Theo De Angelis would one day be singing the praises of the institution of marriage and waxing lyrical about the joys of love? If he hadn't heard it with his own ears when he had spoken to his brother earlier in the week then he wouldn't have believed it.

He looked around him with the shrewd eyes of a man who knew how to make money and wondered what he could do here. Exquisite scenery. Exquisite island, if you could somehow get rid of the hordes of annoying tourists milling around everywhere. Maybe in the future he would think about exploiting this little slice of paradise, but for the moment there was an interesting acquisition at hand, and one which would have the benefit of his very personal input—which was something of a rarity. He was relishing this break from the norm.

Then there was his successful ditching of the last woman he had been dating, who had become a little too clingy for comfort.

And, last but not least on the feel-good spectrum, a sexy little blonde thing would be waiting for him when his time was up on that floating liner so far from paradise...

All in all this was going to be something of a holiday and, bearing in mind the fact that he hadn't had one of those in the longest while, Daniel was in high spirits.

'Sir? Maybe we should head down so that you can board the ship? It's due to leave soon...'

'Shame... I've only been here for a few hours.' Daniel turned to his driver, whom he had brought with him from the other side of the world on an all-expenses-paid, fun in the sun holiday, with only a spot of driving to do here and there. 'I feel Santorini could be just the place for me... Nice exclusive hotel somewhere... Kick back and relax...'

‘I didn’t think you knew how to do that, sir.’

Daniel laughed. Along with his brother and his father, Antonio Delgado was one of only a few people in whom he had absolute trust, and in fairness his driver probably knew more about his private life than both his brother and his father, considering he drove him to his numerous assignations with numerous women and had been doing so for the past decade.

‘You’re right.’ He briskly pulled open the car door and slid inside, appreciating the immediate drop in temperature. ‘Nice thought, though...’

In truth, kicking back by the side of a pool with a margarita in one hand and a book in the other wasn’t his thing.

He kicked back in the gym occasionally, on the slopes occasionally and far more frequently in bed—and his women all ran to type. Small, blonde, sexy and very, very obliging.

Granted, none of them stayed the course for very long, but he saw that as just an occupational hazard for a man whose primary focus—like his brother’s—had always been on work. He thrived on the pressure of a high-octane, fast-paced work-life filled with risk.

He had benefited from the privileges of a wealthy background, but at the age of eighteen, just as he had done with Theo, his father, Stefano De Angelis, had told him that his fortune was his to build or not to build as the case might be. Family money would kick-start his career up to a certain point, but that would be it. He would fly or fall.

And, like Theo, he had flown.

Literally. To the other side of the world, where he had taken the leisure industry by storm, starting small and getting bigger and bigger so that now, at not yet thirty, he owned hotels, casinos and restaurants across Australia and the Far East.

He had acquired so much money that he could spend the remainder of his life taking time out—next to that pool with a book in one hand and a margarita in the other—and still live in the sort of style that most people could only ever dream of. But work was his passion and he liked it that way.

And this particular acquisition was going to be novel and interesting.

‘Don’t forget,’ he reminded Antonio, ‘you’re to drop me off fifteen minutes away from the port.’

‘It’s boiling out there, sir. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather enjoy the air-conditioning in the car for as long as possible?’

‘A little discomfort won’t kill me, Antonio, but I’m deeply touched by your concern.’ He caught his driver’s eye in the rearview mirror and grinned. ‘No, it’s essential that I hit the cruise ship like any other passenger. Arriving in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven Merc isn’t part of the plan.’

The plan was to check out the small cruise liner incognito. The thing hadn’t made a buck in years, and he wanted to see for himself exactly where the myriad problems lay. Mismanagement, he was thinking. Lazy staff, incompetence on every level...

He would spend a few days checking out the situation and making a note of who he would sack and who he would consider taking on as part of his team when the liner was up and running in its new format.

Judging from the list of airy-fairy scheduled activities, he was thinking that the entire lot would be destined for unemployment.

Five days. That was the time scale he had in mind, at the end of which he would stage his takeover. He didn’t anticipate any problems, and he had big plans for the liner. Forget about woolly lectures and cultural visits while on board substandard food was served to passengers who frankly wouldn’t expect much more, considering the pittance they were paying for their trips.

He intended to turn the liner into one of unparalleled luxury, for a wealthy elite whose every whim would be indulged as they were ferried from golf course to golf course in some of the most desirable locations in the world. He would decide on the destinations once the purchase was signed, sealed and delivered.

As with every other deal he had successfully completed, Daniel had utter confidence that he would succeed with this one and that the ship would prove to be a valuable asset. He had never failed and he had no reason to assume that this would prove the exception.

At the port, with the shiny black Merc behind him and a battered backpack bought especially for the purpose slung over his shoulder, he cast a jaundiced eye over the motley crew heading onto the liner.

Already he could see that the thing was in a deplorable state. How could Gerry Ockley, who had inherited this potential goldmine from his extremely wealthy father, have managed so thoroughly to turn it into something that no self-respecting pirate would have even considered jumping aboard to plunder? How the hell could he ever have imagined that some wacky cultural cruise would actually turn a profit?

True, it had taken over eight years to run it into the ground, but he would have thought that someone—bank manager...good friend...concerned acquaintance...wife—would have pointed him in the right direction at some point.

The liner was equipped to hold two hundred and fifty passengers comfortably, in addition to all the crew needed. Daniel figured that at present it was half full—if that.

He would be joining it halfway through its trip and, ticket at the ready, he joined the chattering groups of people, mostly in their mid-fifties and early sixties, who were gathering in preparation for boarding.

Did he blend in? No. When it came to anyone under the age of thirty-five, as far as he could tell he was in the minority. And at six foot two he was taller than nearly everyone else there.

But he was in no doubt that he would be able to fend off any curious questions, and he was tickled pink that he would be travelling incognito for the next few days. Was that really necessary? Possibly not. He could always have stayed where he was, in his plush offices in Australia, and formulated a hostile takeover. But this, he thought, would afford him the opportunity of removing at least some of the hostility from his takeover.

He would be able to tell Ockley and his wife exactly why he was taking over and exactly why they couldn't refuse him. He would be able to point out all the significant shortcomings of their business and he would be able to do that from the advantageous perspective of someone who had been on board their liner. He was being kind, and in the process would enjoy the experience. The fact that the experience would be reflected in his offer would be a nice bonus.

He could feel inquisitive eyes on him as the crowd of people narrowed into something resembling an orderly queue. With the ease born of habit he ignored them all.

His appearance matched his battered backpack. He was just a broke traveller on a cut-price cultural tour of the Greek islands and possibly Italy. His hair, a few shades lighter than his brother's, was slightly longer than he normally wore it, curling at the nape of his neck, and as he hadn't shaved that morning his face was shadowed with bristle. His eyes, however, the same unusual shade of green as his brother's, were shrewd as they skimmed the crowds. He had tucked his sunglasses into his pocket.

The sun was ferocious. He could feel himself perspiring freely under the faded polo shirt and realised he shouldn't have worn jeans. Fortunately, he had a few pairs of khaki shorts in the backpack, along with an assortment of tee shirts, and those should do the trick in the blistering sun once he was on board the liner.

He switched off the thought, his mind already moving to work, planning how he would coordinate the work to be done on the liner and the time when it would be ready to set sail in its new, improved condition. He would charge outrageous prices for anyone lucky enough to secure a ticket, and he had no doubt that people would be queuing to pay.

Done deal.

He hadn't felt this relaxed in ages.

* * *

Delilah Scott eyed her mobile, which was buzzing furiously at her, and debated whether she should pick it up or not.

Her sister's name was flashing on the screen, demanding urgent attention.

With a little sigh of resignation she answered, and was greeted with a flurry of anxious questions.

'Where on earth have you been? I've been trying to get through to you for the past two days! You know how I worry, Delly! It's mad here, with the shop... I can't believe you've decided, just like that, to extend your holiday! You know I'm depending on you getting back here to help... I can't do it on my own...'

Delilah felt her stomach churn into instant nervous knots.

'I—I know, Sarah,' she stammered, gazing through the tiny porthole of her very small cabin, which was just big enough for a single bed, the very barest of furniture, and an absolutely minuscule en-suite shower room. 'But I thought the added experience would come in handy for when I get back to the Cotswolds... It's not like I'm on holiday...' she tacked on guiltily.

'You are on holiday, Delly!' her sister said accusingly. 'When you said that you'd be doing some teaching for a fortnight, I never expected you to send me an email telling me that you'd decided to extend the fortnight into six weeks! I know you really needed to get away, Delly...what with that business with Michael...but still... It's manic here...'

Delilah felt the worry pouring down the phone line and experienced another wave of guilt.

Back home, Sarah was waiting for her. Building work which was costing an absolute arm and a leg was set to begin in two weeks' time, and she knew that her sister had been waiting for her to get back so that they could weather it together.

But was it too much to take a bit of time off before the dreadful drudgery of normal life returned? She had just completed her art degree, and every single free moment during those three years she had been in that tiny cottage with her sister, worrying about how they were going to survive and counting the takings from the gallery downstairs in the certain knowledge that sooner or later Dave Evans from the bank was going to lose patience and foreclose.

And then there had been Michael...

She hated thinking about him—hated the way just remembering how she had fallen for him, how he had messed her around, made her feel sick and foolish at the same time.

She definitely didn't want to hear Sarah rehashing that horrible catastrophe. Delilah loved her sister, but ever since she could remember Sarah had mothered her, had made decisions for her, had worried on her behalf about anything and everything. The business with Michael had just fed into all that concern. Yes, it was always great to have the comfort of someone's love and empathy when you'd just had your heart broken, but it could also be claustrophobic.

Sarah cared so much...always had...

Their parents, Neptune and Moon, both gloriously irresponsible hippies who had been utterly and completely wrapped up in one another, had had little time to spare for their offspring. Both artists, they had scratched a living selling some of their art, and later on a random assortment of crystals and gems after their mother had become interested in alternative healing.

They had converted their cottage into a little gallery and had just about managed to survive because it was slap-bang in the middle of tourist territory. They had always benefited from that. But when they had died—within months of one another, five years previously—sales of local art had already begun to take a nosedive and things had not improved since.

Sarah, five years older than Delilah, had been doing the best she could, making ends meet by doing the books for various people in the small village where they lived, but it had always been understood that once Delilah had completed her art degree she would return and help out.

As things stood, they had taken out a substantial loan to fund renovations to the gallery, in order to create a new space at the back where Delilah would teach art to anyone local who was interested and, more importantly, other people, keen on learning to draw and paint, who would perhaps attend week-long courses, combining sightseeing in the picturesque Cotswolds with painting indoors and outdoors.

It was all a brilliant if last-ditch idea, and whilst Delilah had been totally in favour of it she had suddenly, when offered the opportunity to extend her stay on board the *Rambling Rose*, been desperate to escape.

A little more time to escape the finality of returning to the Cotswolds and to breathe a little after her break-up from Michael.

Just a little more time to feel normal and relaxed.

‘It’ll be brilliant experience for when I get back,’ she offered weakly. ‘And I’ve transferred most of my earnings to the account. I’ll admit I’m not on a fabulous amount, but I’m making loads of good contacts here. Some of the people are really interested in the courses we’ll be offering...’

‘Really?’

‘Honestly, Sarah. In fact, several have promised that they’ll be emailing you for details about prices and stuff in the next week or so.’

‘Adrian’s just about finished doing the website. That’s more money we’re having to expend...’

Delilah listened and wondered whether these few weeks on the liner were to be her only window of freedom from worrying. Sarah would not countenance selling the cottage and Delilah, in fairness, would have hated to leave her family home. But staying required so many sacrifices that she felt as though her youth would be eaten up in the process. She was only twenty-one now, but she could see herself saying goodbye to her twenties in the never-ending task of just making ends meet.

She had had a vision of having fun, of feeling young when she had been going out with Michael, but that had been a very narrow window and in the end it had just been an idiotic illusion anyway. When she thought about him now she didn’t think of fun, she just thought of being stupid and naïve.

She knew that she was playing truant by extending her stay here, but the responsibilities waiting for her wouldn’t be going anywhere...and it was nice not being mothered by her sister, not having every move she made frowningly analysed, not having her life prescribed because Sarah knew best...

She hung up, relieved to end the conversation, and decided to spend what remained of the evening in her cabin.

Maybe she would ask a couple of the other teachers on the liner—young girls, like herself—to have something to eat with her in the cabin, maybe play cards and joke about some of the passengers, who mostly reminded her of her parents. Free-spirited ageing hippies, into all sorts of weird and wonderful arty pastimes and hobbies.

Tomorrow, she would be back to teaching, and she had a full schedule ahead of her...

* * *

Daniel stretched. Peered through the porthole to a splendid view of deep blue ocean. The night before he had enjoyed an expected below average meal—though not sitting at the captain’s table. That sort of formality didn’t exist aboard this liner. It seemed to be one big, chattering, happy family of roughly one hundred people, of varying ages, and fifty-odd crew members who all joined in the fun. He had mixed and circulated but he knew that he’d stuck out like a sore thumb.

Now, breakfast...and then he would begin checking out the various classes—all of which seemed destined to make no money. Pottery, poetry writing, art, cookery and a host of others, including some more outlandish ones, like astronomy and palm reading.

Today he ditched the jeans in favour of a pair of low slung khaki shorts, a faded grey polo shirt and deck shoes, which he used on his own sailing boat when he occasionally took to the sea.

He paused, in passing, to glance in the mirror.

He saw what he always saw. A lean, bronzed face, green eyes, thick dark lashes, dirty blond hair streaked from the Australian sun. When he had time for sport he preferred it to be extreme, and his body reflected that. Boxing sessions at the gym, sailing on his own for relaxation, skiing on black runs...

It was after nine, and on the spur of the moment he decided to skip breakfast, pulling a map of the liner from his pocket and, after discarding some of the more outrageous courses, heading for the section of the liner where the slightly less appalling ones were taking place.

He had no idea what to expect. Every single passenger seemed to be an enthusiastic member of some course or other, and as he made his way through the ship, his sharp eyes noting all the signs of dilapidation, he peered into full classes. Some people were on deck, enjoying the sun, but it had to be said that the majority had come for the educational aspect of the cruise.

It took all sorts, he thought as he meandered through the bowels of the liner.

Inside the ship, as outside, it was very hot. The rooms in which the various courses were being taught were all air-conditioned, and for no better reason than because his clothes were beginning to stick to him like glue, he pushed open one of the doors and stepped inside.

* * *

In the midst of explaining the technique for drawing perspective, Delilah looked up and...

Her breath caught in her throat.

Lounging indolently by the door was the most stunningly beautiful man she had ever seen in her life. He definitely hadn't joined the cruise when they had started. He must have embarked in Santorini, a late member of the passenger list.

He was tall. Very tall. And built like an athlete. Even wearing the standard gear of nearly every other passenger on the liner—longish shorts and a tee shirt—it was impossible to miss the honed muscularity of his body.

'May I help you?'

Everyone had turned to stare at the new recruit and she smartly called them back to attention, and to the arrangement of various little ceramic pots they had been in the process of trying to sketch.

Daniel had been expecting many things, but he hadn't been expecting this. The girl looking at him questioningly was tall and reed-slender and her hair was a vibrant shade of copper—a thousand different shades from red through to auburn—and had been tugged back into a loose ponytail which hung over one shoulder.

He sauntered into the room and looked around him at the twenty or so people, all seated in front of canvasses. A long shelf at the back held various artists' materials and on the walls several paintings were hanging—presumably efforts from the members of the class.

'If I'm interrupting I can always return later...'

'Not at all, Mr...?'

'Daniel.' He held out his hand and the girl hurried forward and briefly shook it. 'I joined the cruise yesterday,' he expanded, 'and I haven't had time to sign up to any of the courses...'

'But you're interested in art?' That brief meeting of hands had sent a sharp little frisson skittering through her and it was all she could do to maintain eye contact with him. 'I'm Delilah Scott, and I'm in charge of the art course...'

Up close, he was truly spectacular. With an artist's eye she could appreciate the perfect symmetry of his lean face. The brooding amazing eyes, the straight nose and the wide, sensual mouth. His hair looked sun-washed—not quite blond, but nothing as dull as brown—and there was something about him...something strangely charismatic that rescued him from being just another very good-looking guy.

She would love to paint him. But right now...

'I can explain the course that I run...'

She launched into her little set speech and edged slightly away, because standing too close was making her feel jumpy. She'd had enough of men to last a lifetime, and the last thing she needed was to start feeling jumpy around one now.

'Of course I don't know what standard you're at, but I'm sure you'll be able to fit in whether you're a complete beginner or at a more intermediary level. I can also show you my qualifications... You would have to return later to get the proper lowdown, because as you can see I'm in the middle of taking a class and this one will last until lunchtime... But perhaps you'd like to see some of the work my class have been doing...?'

Not really, Daniel thought, but he tilted his head to one side and nodded with a show of interest.

She was as graceful as a ballerina. He liked women curvy and voluptuous. This girl was anything but. She was willowy, and dressed in just the sort of appalling clothes he disliked on a woman. A loose ankle-length skirt in a confusing number of clashing colours and a floaty top that left way too much to the imagination.

Personally, he had never been a big fan of having to work on his imagination when it came to women. He liked to see what he was getting, and he'd never had any trouble in finding beautiful women keen to oblige. Small, tight clothes showing off curves in all the right places... Girls who were in it for fun, no-strings-attached relationships. True, the occasional woman might get a little too wrapped up in planning for a future that wasn't going to happen, but that was fine. He just ditched her. And not once had he ever felt a qualm of guilt or unease about doing that because he was straight with every single one of them upfront.

He wasn't ready for marriage. He wasn't even in it for anything approaching long term. He didn't want a partner to meet his family and close friends and start getting ideas. He didn't do home-cooked meals or watching telly or anything remotely domesticated.

He thought of Kelly Close and his lips thinned. Oh, no, he didn't do any of that stuff...

As far as Daniel De Angelis was concerned, at this point in his life work was way more important than women, and when and if he decided to tie the knot—which was nowhere in the near future, especially as Theo was now happily planning a big wedding himself, thereby paving the way for Daniel to take his time getting there—he intended to marry someone who didn't just see the benefits of his bank balance.

He'd had his brush with a scheming gold-digger and once was plenty enough. Kelly Close—an angelic vision with the corrupt heart of a born opportunist. He slammed the door on pointless introspection. Enough that she had been a valuable learning curve. Now he had fun. Uncomplicated fun with sexy little things, like the blonde who would be waiting for him when he jumped ship.

Delilah Scott was showing him around the room, encouraging him to look at what the aspiring artists had already accomplished while they had been on the cruise.

'Fascinating,' he murmured. Then he turned to her before she could conclude the tour. 'So—lunch. Where shall we meet and what time?'

'Sorry?' Delilah asked in confusion.

'You said you wanted to give me the lowdown on the course. Over lunch sounds good. When and where? I'm guessing there's only one restaurant on the liner?'

Delilah felt a rush of heat swamp her and sharply brought herself back down to earth. 'Did I say that? I didn't think I had. You're more than welcome to just turn up tomorrow morning for the class, or you could join in right now if you like... There's lots of paper...pencils...'

Those amazing green eyes, the opaque colour of burnished glass, made her want to stare and keep on staring.

'I intend to spend the morning considering my options,' Daniel inserted smoothly. 'Checking out what the other courses are...whether they're more up my street... I'll meet you for lunch at twelve-thirty in the restaurant. You can tell me all about your course and see whether it fits the bill or not...'

Not his type, but eye-catching all the same. Skin as smooth as satin, sherry-coloured eyes, and she was pale gold after time spent in the sun. And her mouth... Its full lips parted now as she looked at him.

‘I don’t think there’s any need for me to explain the course over lunch...’

‘You’re in the service industry... Surely that implies that you have to serve the customer? I’m just after some information...’

‘I know that, but...’

But Michael had left her wary of men like this one. Good-looking men who were a little offbeat, a little off the beaten track...

Eight months ago Michael Connor had sauntered into her life—all long, dark hair and navy blue eyes and a sexy, sexy smile that had blown her away. At twenty-seven, he already had a fledgling career in photography, and he had charmed her with the amazing photos he had taken over the years. He had wine and dined her and talked about taking her to the Amazon, so that she could paint and he could take pictures.

He had swept her away from all her miserable, niggling worries about money and held out a shimmering vision of adventure and excitement. Two free spirits travelling the world. She had fallen in love with him and with those thrilling possibilities. She had dared to think that she had found a soul mate—someone with whom she could spend the rest of her life. They had kissed, but he hadn’t pressed her into bed, and now she wondered how long he would have bided his time until deciding that kissing and cuddling wasn’t what he was in it for.

Not much longer—because he’d already had a girlfriend. Someone in one of those countries he had visited. She’d chanced upon the fact only because she had happened to see a text message flash up on his screen. When she had confronted him, he’d laughed and shrugged. So he wasn’t the settling down type...? He had an open relationship with his girlfriend so what was the big deal...? He had lots of women...he was single, wasn’t he? And he’d hung around with her, hadn’t he? She hadn’t really thought that they were going to get married and have two point two kids and a dog, had she?

She had misread him utterly. She’d been taken in by a charming facade and by her own longing for a little adventure.

She’d been a fool.

Her sister had always sung the praises of stability and a good old-fashioned guy who could provide, whose feet were firmly planted on the ground. She’d seen no virtue in their parents’ chaotic lives, which had left them with debt and financial worries.

She should have paid more attention to those sermons.

‘I won’t occupy a lot of your time,’ Daniel murmured, intrigued by this woman who didn’t jump at the offer of having a meal with him.

Delilah blinked, ready to shake her head in instant refusal.

‘There’s a bar... We can have something light and you can tell me all about your course. You can sell it to me.’ He flung his hands wide in a gesture that was both exotic and self-deprecating at the same time. ‘I’m caught on the horns of a dilemma...’ Again, he found it weirdly invigorating to actually be in the position of trying to persuade a woman to join him for a meal ‘You wouldn’t want to drive a man into the arms of learning palmistry, would you?’

Delilah swallowed down a responding smile. ‘I suppose if you really think it’s that important...’

‘Great. I’ll see you in the bar at twelve-thirty. You can hone your pitch before we meet...’

Delilah watched as he strolled out of the room. She felt as though she had been tossed into a tumble drier with the speed turned to high and she didn’t like it. But she’d agreed to meet him and she would keep their meeting brief and businesslike.

She could barely focus on her class for the next three hours. Her mind was zooming ahead to meeting Daniel in the bar. And sure enough when, at a little after twelve-thirty, she hesitantly walked

into the small saloon bar, which was already filling up with passengers whose courses had likewise ended for the morning, there he was. Seated at a small table, nursing a drink in front of him.

He was eye-catching—and not just because he was noticeably younger than everyone else. He would have been eye-catching in any crowd. She threaded her way through to him, pausing to chat to some of the other passengers.

Daniel watched her with lazy, deceptive indolence. He hadn't boarded this third-rate liner for adventure. He had boarded it for information.

He looked at her narrowly, thoughts idly playing through his head. She seemed to know everyone and she was popular. He could tell from the way the older passengers laughed in her company, totally at ease. He was sure that she would be equally popular amongst the staff.

Who was worth keeping on? Who would get the sack immediately? He wouldn't need any of the teachers on board, but the crew would be familiar with the liner, would probably have proved themselves over a number of years and might be an asset to him. It would certainly save him having to recruit from scratch and then face the prospect of some of them not being up to the task. When it came to pleasing the wealthy there could be no room for error.

Would she be able to help him with the information he needed? Naturally he wouldn't be able to tell her why...

Not for a second did Daniel see this as any form of deception. As far as he was concerned he would merely be making the most of a possible opportunity, no harm done.

He rose as she finally approached him.

'You came,' he said with a slashing smile, indicating the chair next to him. 'I wasn't sure whether you would. You seemed a little reluctant to take me up on my offer.'

'I don't normally fraternise with the passengers,' Delilah said stiffly as she sat down.

'You seemed familiar enough with them just then...'

'Yes, but...'

'What can I get you to drink?'

His eyes roved over her colt-like frame. He watched the way her fingers nervously played with the tip of her ponytail and the way her eyes dipped to avoid his. If he had had the slightest suspicion that she knew who he was he might have wondered whether her shyness was some kind of act to stir his interest—because women, in his company, were usually anything but coy.

'Just some juice, please.' Delilah was flustered by the way he looked at her—as though he could see straight into her head.

Juice in hand, and with a refill of whisky for him, he returned to settle into the chair and looked at her.

'So, you wanted to know about the course...'

Delilah launched into chatter. She found that she was drawn to look at him, even though she didn't want to. It wasn't just that he was a passenger—something about him sent disturbing little chills racing up and down her spine and sent her alarm bells into overdrive.

'I've brought some brochures for you to have a look at...'

She rummaged in her capacious bag and extracted a few photocopied bits of paper, which she self-consciously thrust at him. Several had samples of her work printed inside, and these he inspected, glancing between her face and the paintings she had done at college.

'Impressive,' he mused.

'Have you seen any other courses that interest you? Aside...?' She allowed herself a polite smile. 'Aside from the palmistry?'

'I'm tempted by astronomy... When it comes to stars, I feel I could become something of an expert...' Daniel murmured. His last girlfriend had been an actress. Did that count? 'But, no...' He sat back briskly, angling his chair so that he could stretch his legs to one side. 'I'm only here for a week. Probably just to take in a couple of stops. I think I'll go for yours...'

A week? Delilah felt an inexplicable surge of disappointment, but she pinned a smile on her face and kept it there as she sipped some of the orange juice.

‘Well, I can’t guarantee I can turn you into Picasso at the end of a week... I mean, most of the other passengers are here for the full month, and then we have more joining us when we dock at Naples...’

‘Seems a bit haphazard,’ Daniel said. ‘Put it this way—I managed to get a place at the last minute, and for whatever duration I chose...’

‘It’s...it’s a little more informal than most cruises, I guess,’ Delilah conceded. ‘But that’s because it’s a family-run business. Gerry and Christine like the fact that people can dip in and out...’

‘Gerry and Christine?’

Ockley. He knew their names, knew how far into debt they were. Little wonder people could dip in and out of the cruise at whim. Any business was good business when it came to making ends meet.

‘They run the cruise ship. Actually, it’s theirs, and they’re great.’

She felt herself relax, because he was so clearly interested in what she was saying. He was just another keen passenger, and if his looks made her a bit jittery then that was her problem and, after the debacle with Michael, it was one she could easily deal with.

‘Are they? In what way?’

‘Just very interested in all the passengers—and the crew have been with them for ages.’

‘Is that a fact...? And I guess you know all the crew...?’

‘They’re wonderful. Devoted to their jobs. They all love the fact that they’re pretty much allowed free rein with what they do... Of course they all follow the rules, but for instance the chef is allowed to do as he likes and so is the head of entertainment. I’ve been very lucky to get this job...’ She guiltily thought of her sister, but she would be back home soon and all would be fine.

Daniel saw the shadow cross her face and for a few seconds was intrigued enough to want to find out more about the woman sitting in front of him. But there was no time in his busy, compacted schedule for curiosity about a random stranger, however strangely attractive he might find her. He had to cut to the chase.

‘So...’ He carried the conversation along briskly. ‘Tomorrow...what time do we start...?’

CHAPTER TWO

‘NOW HAVE A look at the jug. George...see how it forms the centre of the arrangement? With the other two pieces in the background? So that the whole forms a geometric shape...? If you could just make the jug a teeny bit smaller, then I think we’re getting there!’

For the umpteenth time Delilah’s eyes skittered towards the door, waiting for it to be pushed open by Daniel.

Her calm, peaceful enjoyment of her brief window of freedom appeared to have disappeared the moment she had met the man. She had been knocked sideways by his looks, but more than that he had a certain watchfulness about him that she found weirdly compelling...

She was seeing him through the eyes of an artist, she had told herself, over and over again. The arrangement of his features, the peculiar aura of authority and power he emanated was quite unlike anything she had ever seen before in anyone.

She had laughingly told herself that she was reading far too much into someone who was probably a drifter, working his way through the continent. Someone who had managed to accumulate sufficient money to buy himself a few days on the liner so that he could pursue a hobby. Most of the passengers were in their fifties or sixties, on the cruise for the whole time, but there were a number who, like him, were on the cruise for a limited period of time, taking advantage of one or other of the many courses offered while enjoying the ports before disembarking so that they could continue travelling.

He was a traveller.

But she still found herself searching out the door every two minutes, and when—an hour after the class had begun—he pushed it open and strolled into the room she drew her breath in sharply.

‘Class!’ Everyone instantly stopped what they were doing and looked at Daniel. ‘I’d like to introduce a new recruit! His name is Daniel and he’s an aspiring artist, so I hope you’ll welcome him in and show him the ropes if I happen to be busy with someone. Daniel... I’ve set aside a seat for you, with an easel. You never mentioned what level you feel you might be at...?’

Daniel didn’t think that there was any level that might apply to him. ‘Basic.’ He smiled, encompassing every single person in the room, and was met with smiles in return, before their attention reverted to their masterpieces in the making.

‘In that case, why don’t you start with pencil? You can choose whichever softness you feel comfortable with and perhaps try your hand at reproducing the arrangement on the table in front of the class...’

She was extremely encouraging. She had kind things to say about even the most glaringly amateurish efforts. She took time to help and answered all the questions thrown at her patiently. When he told her, as he stared at the empty paper pinned to his easel, that he was waiting for inspiration to come and that you couldn’t rush that sort of thing, she didn’t roar with laughter but merely suggested that a single stroke of the pencil might be all the inspiration he needed.

He thought that he might have been a little more interested in art at school if he’d had her as his teacher instead of the battleaxe who had told him that the world of art would be better off without his input. Not that she hadn’t had a point...

He’d managed something roughly the shape of one of the objects on the table by the time the class drew to an end, but instead of heading out with everyone else he remained exactly where he was, watching as she tidied everything away.

Delilah could feel his eyes on her as she busied herself returning pencils and foam pads and palette knives to the various boxes on the shelf. She’d been so conscious of him sitting there at the back of the class, sprawled out with his body at an angle and doing absolutely nothing, from what she could see. She’d barely been able to focus.

Now she turned to him and smiled politely. ‘Won’t you be joining the other passengers for some lunch?’ she asked as she began the process of dismounting the easels and stacking them away neatly against the wall, where straps had been rigged to secure them in place.

Daniel linked his fingers behind his head and relaxed back into the chair. ‘I thought you could give me some pointers on my efforts today...’ He swivelled the easel so that it was facing her and Delilah walked slowly towards it.

‘I’m sorry you haven’t managed to accomplish a bit more,’ she said tactfully. ‘I was aiming for more of a realistic reproduction of the jugs...it’s important to really try and replicate what you see at this stage of your art career...’

‘I don’t think I’ll be having a career in art,’ Daniel pointed out.

‘So this is just a hobby for you...? Well, that’s good, as well. Hobbies can be very relaxing, and once you become a bit more familiar with the pencil—once your confidence starts growing—you’ll find it the most relaxing thing in the world...’

‘Is that what you do to relax?’ he asked, making no move to shift.

‘I really must get on and tidy away this stuff...’

‘No afternoon classes?’

‘The afternoons, generally speaking, are downtime for everyone. The passengers like to go out onto the deck, or else sit in the shade and catch up with their reading or whatever homework’s been set...’

‘And what do you do?’

‘I... I do a little painting...sometimes I sit by the pool on the top deck and read...’

Daniel enjoyed the way she blushed. It was a rare occurrence. The women he dated had left their blushing days far behind.

‘I thought we might have lunch again today,’ he suggested, waiting to see what form her refusal would take. ‘As you can see...’ he waved in the vague direction of his easel ‘...my efforts at art are crap.’

‘No one’s efforts at art are anything but good. You forget that beauty is in the eye of the beholder...’

‘How long are you going to be on the liner for?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Are you here for...?’ He whipped out the crumpled cruise brochure from his shorts pocket, twisted it in various directions before finding the bit he wanted. ‘For the full duration of a month?’

‘I can’t see what this has to do with the course, Mr...er... Daniel...’

‘If you’re going to be on the course for the full duration I might be incentivised to stay a bit longer than a week.’

Complete lie—but something about her appealed to him. Yet again she was in an outfit more suitable for one of the middle-aged free spirits on the cruise ship. Another flowing skirt in random colours, and another kind of loose, baggy top that worked hard at concealing her figure—which, he saw as he surreptitiously cast his eye over it, was as slender and as graceful as a gazelle’s.

The libido he had planned on resting while he was on the ship stirred into enthusiastic life as he wondered what the body under the unappealing clothes might be like.

He went for big breasts. She was flat-chested—that much he could see. He went for women who were small and curvy—she was long and willowy. He liked them blonde and blue-eyed. She was copper-haired and brown-eyed.

Maybe it was the novelty... But whatever it was he was happy to go with the flow—not forgetting that she could also be a useful conduit to the information he wanted.

‘Don’t you have the rest of your travel plans already sorted out?’ Delilah was irritated to find herself lingering on the possibility that this man she had spent about fifteen seconds with might stay on for longer than he had originally suggested.

‘I try not to live my life according to too many prearranged plans,’ Daniel murmured, appreciating the delicate bloom of pink in her cheeks. ‘I guess we probably have that in common...’

Delilah grimaced. ‘I wish that was like me,’ she said without thinking. ‘But unfortunately you couldn’t be further from the truth.’ She reddened and spun round, away from those piercing unusual eyes. ‘Of course,’ she said, ‘it would be lovely if you stayed on a bit longer. I’m sure you could become an able artist if you put all your efforts into it.’

She knew that the cruise ship was running at a loss. All the crew knew that. Gerry and Christine had not kept it a secret from them at all. In fact on day one they had called a meeting and apologised straight away for the fact that they couldn’t be paid more. None of the teachers on board had protested. They were there because they loved what they did, and the fact that there was sun and sea in the mix was enough for all of them.

But the Ockleys had suggested that if they could try and persuade some of the passengers to prolong their stay, or even tempt interested holidaymakers into hopping on board for a couple of days to try their hand at one of the many courses... Well, every little would help.

‘Persuade me over lunch,’ Daniel suggested. It felt like a challenge to get her to comply—and since when had he ever backed down in the face of a challenge? ‘Unless, of course, you find my company objectionable...?’

Realistically, he didn’t even countenance that.

‘I had lunch with you yesterday because you wanted to find out about the course.’

Delilah did her best to dredge up the memory of her disaster of a relationship with Michael and to listen to the warning voice in her head reminding her that she was still recovering from a

broken heart—which, by definition, meant retreating from men, taking time out, paying attention to the value of common sense.

‘So? What does that have to do with anything? We’ve talked about the course and now I’d like to find out whether you think I’m a suitable candidate to be on it. I wouldn’t want to be accused of wasting your time...so why the hesitation?’

‘Perhaps a quick lunch,’ she agreed—for Gerry and Christine’s sake.

Daniel smiled slowly. ‘Shame the choice of food is so limited,’ he said, rising to his feet and giving his effort at drawing the jug a cursory glance.

If he had really been interested in learning how to draw then she would have had to commit to an indefinite period of time explaining to him how he might set about improving his skills, because he clearly had none. Fortunately he had no intention of spending too long on that particular subject.

‘And it’s below average...’

‘Sorry?’ Delilah, in the act of washing her hands, turned round and frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘From what I’ve sampled, the food onboard doesn’t exactly set the culinary world alight, does it?’

He moved to stand by the door and watched as she gathered her bag—some sort of tapestry affair that could have held the kitchen table and sink. Again, her hair was pulled back, with strands escaping round her face, and she absently shoved the stray strands behind her ear.

‘It’s okay...’ she said cautiously.

‘You don’t want to rat on your fellow crew members,’ Daniel murmured, with a hint of amusement in his voice. ‘I understand that. But just between the two of us, I’ve been disappointed with what I’ve been served so far...’

‘I don’t think the passengers come for the food...’

‘It’s all part and parcel of the package,’ Daniel said expansively. ‘You said that the chef is allowed free rein...?’

‘But he has to stick to a budget,’ Delilah qualified uncomfortably. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t really matter, does it? I mean, if you’re really unhappy, then perhaps you should mention something to Christine...’

‘Who is the head chef?’

‘Stan...and he works really hard to do the best he can with the money he’s allotted...’ She tripped along behind him, riveted by the long, lean lines of his muscular body.

‘Don’t worry,’ Daniel said in a placating voice.

They had reached the bar and, as usual, people were tucking in to the offerings in a desultory fashion. Salads...baguettes with a variety of fillings...jacket potatoes...

It beggared belief that the owners of the liner had got their mismanagement down to such a fine art. Had they no concept of the importance of good food onboard a cruise liner, where the passengers did not have the option of scouting around for alternative restaurants?

‘I’m not going to accost your pal in front of the chip-fryer...’

‘Can I tell you something?’ She reached into her bag for her wallet and insisted that she paid for his drink, as he had paid for hers the day before. This wasn’t a date.

Daniel was chuffed. He couldn’t remember the last time any woman had offered to pay for anything for him—not that he would have allowed it. But, no...the offer had never been made anyway. And yet this girl, who clearly bought her clothes from charity shops, was offering to buy him a drink. He was oddly touched by that. If only she knew!

His inherent cynicism quickly rose to the surface. If only she knew how much he was worth, then there was no chance in hell that she would be dipping into her wallet to buy him anything.

Once upon a time, in the tragic wake of his mother’s death, he had foolishly allowed his emotions their freedom. He had fallen for Kelly Close’s sympathetic ear. He had harboured no suspicions about the sweet-natured primary school teacher who had been into doing good and giving

back to the community. He'd enjoyed lavishing gifts on her, enjoyed basking in her shyly endearing acceptance of whatever he bought for her.

Until he'd glimpsed the band of pure steel underneath the shyness when she had ditched her job and suggested that they make their arrangement permanent. It had occurred to him then, belatedly, that when you got past all the coy dipping of the eyes and trembling, grateful smiles, she had managed to acquire quite a substantial nest egg of priceless jewellery—not to mention the studio apartment he had bought her because the lease on her own flat had supposedly expired, and the countless weekends away.

At that point he had tried to pull back and bring some common sense to bear on the proceedings. He had discovered then that gold-diggers came in all different shapes and sizes and, his guard temporarily down, had realised that Kelly Close had found her way through the cracks in his armour and staged a clever assault, with her eventual aim being a wedding ring on her finger and a claim to his vast inheritance should they ever divorce. Which, he had seen very quickly, would have happened sooner rather than later.

A clean severing of the ways, however, had turned into a cat fight. Threats of a kiss-and-tell exposé to the tabloids had resulted in money changing hands—a vast sum of money, which had hit him at the worst possible time. In return he had managed to secure a contract with a privacy clause, prohibiting her from ever mentioning his name in public, but the emotional cost to him had also been steep.

With his brother and his father in another country, he had at least been spared the horror of either of them knowing about the unholy mess and the financial cost to him because he had taken his eye off the ball. But he had learnt a valuable lesson, and now, whilst it cost him nothing to be generous with his money, he made damn sure not to be generous with his emotions. Those he kept firmly under wraps. Considering his women exited their relationships with him better off by furs and diamonds and cars, he didn't think it was an unfair trade-off.

'What?' he asked.

Their eyes tangled and he didn't look away. But she was desperate to. He could see it in those sherry-coloured eyes and in her sudden flush. She wanted to look away but she was drawn to look at him.

What would she be like under those clothes? What noises did she make when she made love? What would it feel like to touch her between her legs...to hold her small breasts in his big hands...to lick her nipples...?

He cleared his throat, got a grip. He liked the fact that he never lost control when he was with a woman. Never. He had no idea why he kept veering off in that direction now. Was it the salty tang of the sea air? He was here on a fact-finding mission and yet he felt as though he was playing truant from real life. Was that it?

'I've known lots of art students...' She tiptoed around her words, not wanting them to sound offensive. Artists could sometimes be very sensitive souls. 'And you're nothing like any of them...'

'I'm very glad to hear it,' Daniel drawled. He immediately sideswiped a sudden twinge of guilt at his masquerade. 'I pride myself on being one of a kind.'

'That's what I mean,' Delilah blurted out. 'You'd never hear an artist come out with something as arrogant as that.' She pressed the palms of her hands against her cheeks, mortified. 'I'm so—so sorry...' she stammered.

When Gerry and Catherine had made noises about the crew trying to persuade their guests into prolonging their stay, she didn't think that one of the methods they would have advised using would have been insults. Delilah was horrified at what she had said. She was not the sort who ever did anything but encourage.

Having grown up with her wildly unorthodox background, she knew only too well the frailty of human beings—the way they could be lovable and exasperating at the same time. She had seen

the way her sister had made allowances for their mum and dad, and she, too, had fallen into line, doing the same. She also knew how hurtful unintentionally blunt statements could be. Her mum had once told Sarah, without meaning to offend at all, that too much maths was turning her into a very boring person. Delilah didn't think that her sister had ever forgotten that stray remark, which had been accompanied by a merry laugh and a fond ruffling of her hair.

She impulsively rested her hand on his and Daniel looked at her earnestly.

'I think I'll survive,' he said, making no move to remove his hand.

She had beautiful fingers. Long and slim and soft—the fingers of an artist or a musician. He was tempted to ask if she played any instruments...

'In fact, you aren't the first person to have told me that I can sometimes be a little arrogant,' he confessed, with such a rueful, charming, self-deprecating smile that Delilah could feel all her bones begin to melt.

Which made her yank her hand away at the speed of light. Her heart was beating so fast that she would have bet that if everyone in the bar fell silent they would all hear it.

'But I prefer to think of it as being self-confident...' he expanded softly. 'Now, if you insist on buying a drink for me, then I will graciously accept—but on one condition...'

'What's that?' She barely recognised her voice, which sounded high-pitched, girlish and breathless. She cleared her throat. She was a teacher, being paid to do a job. He was her pupil. She was also sworn off men.

Her ego had been battered and bruised by her experience with Michael. She wondered whether, instead of toughening her up the way it should have, it had somehow made her more vulnerable to someone like this guy, with his smooth charm and his insanely sexy good looks... Or was he the equivalent of a strong dose of pick-me-up tonic? Was that light, musing, flirtatious banter just a soothing balm, restoring her fragile self-confidence, making her feel good about herself?

And if it was then why should she be nervous around him? It wasn't as though she was going to actually let him get under her skin, was she? He was nothing more than a passing stranger whose innate charm made her feel better about herself.

She relaxed when she looked at it in that light. It made sense.

'I buy you dinner.'

'What for?'

'Why not?' Daniel frowned.

'You've already bought me lunch. Twice. So that we could talk about the course I offer and your contribution.' She was doggedly determined not to let a couple of non-dates and a dinner invitation—extended because he was obviously a very sociable animal, probably accustomed to an abundance of female company—go to her head. 'I don't see the point of dinner. What do you want to talk about now?'

'Good God...what sort of an answer is that?'

Delilah thought it was a very good answer to give a guy who was probably bored by the lack of female eye candy on the ship. A bit of mild flirting might do her the power of good, but it was important for him to realise that she wasn't easy. She was probably over-thinking the whole thing, because she knew that she was no supermodel—and he was good-looking enough to have supermodels banging on his door even if he wasn't made of money. But still...

'How old are you?' Daniel asked, while she was still in the middle of getting her thoughts together.

'Twenty-one, but...'

'We're not at school, Delilah... Do you mind if I call you by your first name? We're two adults on a cruise ship. I think it's fair to say that accepting a dinner invitation from me doesn't actually require hours of mental debate and indecision. It's a simple yes or no scenario...'

‘Of course, but...’ But why did it feel so dangerous? Like he said, they were both adults—and why not?

‘Besides...’ He leaned forward, drawing her into an intimate circle where only the two of them existed. ‘I was given a little money before I...er...embarked on this adventure, and I promised myself that I would spend it buying dinner for a beautiful woman...’

Delilah felt a thrill of forbidden pleasure race through her at his blatant flattery. He was so utterly serious that she could feel herself going hot and cold. Gripped with sudden panic and confusion, she tried to remember if she had ever felt like this when she had been with Michael—or had that been more of a slow-burning attraction? The meeting of two minds, connected, she had thought at the time, at the same level? Of course he had been a very attractive man, too, but certainly not in this full-on, sledgehammer-to-the-ribs kind of way.

Two different situations, she told herself, frowning. This was pure lust—her body reminding her that whilst her emotions had been knocked for six, she could still respond to other men. Reminding her that she would recover from the blow she had taken and that being physically attracted to another man was the first step. This was a healthy and positive reaction to someone with drop-dead good looks.

‘Surely you wouldn’t insult me by throwing my invitation back in my face? And I thought we could make it something a bit more special than the buffet in the restaurant...’

Daniel hadn’t actually tried the buffet, but judging from what he had sampled of the other meals, he didn’t think it would be too hard to top it.

‘What would that be?’ Delilah asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

‘I’d like to see you with your hair loose,’ he heard himself say—which surprised him as much as it surprised her.

Delilah’s hand flew to her hair and her eyes widened. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Tonight. Have dinner with me. Dress up...wear your hair loose... I have money to blow and I’ve never been one to hang on to money if I can spend it. I’m going to ask your head chef to prepare a meal especially for us, and I intend to pay him way over the odds for it. Of course I’ll make sure I clear it with the captain and his...er...wife first...’

He had no doubt at all that they would accept his offer with alacrity, and it would afford him the opportunity to see exactly what standard the head chef was capable of cooking to. As with all the other members of the crew, he would be more than happy to keep the chef in gainful employment if he was up to scratch. He might be on the verge of staging a hostile takeover, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be fair in certain areas.

To his complete mystification she continued to look dubious, even though he could sense that she wanted to take him up on his offer. Even though he could sense that there was a part of her that was drawn to him...

‘I’d bet that Stan...that is his name, isn’t it?...would love nothing more than to practise the skills he’s learnt without having to consider a budget...’

‘Isn’t it a bit extravagant to blow a lot of money on a meal when you’ve still got travelling to do...? I mean, I’m assuming this is just a single leg of your journey...’

‘I’m very touched by your concern,’ Daniel said gently, ‘but I’m more than capable of looking after my finances... So what time will you be ready to join me? It’s going to be a stunning night. The water is as calm as a sheet of glass. I think I’ll get a table laid out for us in a secluded corner of the deck outside... Dining under the stars has always been something of a dream for me, and when else would I be likely to get the chance?’

Delilah wondered how much money he had to spend. She couldn’t fight the fact that it was incredibly flattering, and a bit of flattery was just so seductive to her at this point in time. What was the harm in responding to it? As long as she remained in control everything would be fine—and she knew that she was more than capable of remaining in control. She might not be very experienced, but she was experienced enough to know that she would never risk making an idiot of herself again.

‘Just dinner,’ she said quickly.

‘As opposed to dinner and...what?’

Unaccustomed to this sort of sexual banter, Delilah flushed and cleared her throat. ‘I don’t feel comfortable accepting an invitation from you when I know that it’s going to cost the earth,’ she offered lamely, only just rescuing herself from launching into a ridiculous speech about sex not being on the agenda because she wasn’t looking for any kind of relationship and she wasn’t the sort of girl who went in for meaningless flings.

‘Hardly the earth,’ Daniel pointed out drily. ‘I’ll pay the going rate for a good meal in Sydney. Or London. Or New York. Plus a little extra for the setting, of course...’

He named a figure that made her eyes water.

She had no idea what it felt like to spend that much money on a single meal in one reckless go. Her parents had seldom eaten out. In fact her mother had been a terrible cook and Sarah had usually done the cooking duties in the house. Delilah could remember meals, but they had all been basic, with food bought on a budget, because her parents had never had more than a couple of dimes to rub together. And then later, at art college, she had scraped by and so had everyone else she had known.

Even when she had been going out with Michael they had gone out on the cheap.

This seemed so generous...so impulsive...so tempting... Would it be so very wrong to accept? Would a couple of hours of being made to feel better about herself really hurt?

‘I would offer to pay half, but there’s no way I could afford it,’ she said—and if that was the end of that, then so be it, she thought. Though her mind was already leaping ahead to the seductive prospect of being made to feel desirable and attractive by a man like him. ‘I mean, I earn... Well, not much, in actual fact...because...’

‘Because they’re not making much money on this liner...?’

‘Times are tough,’ she said vaguely. ‘The economy isn’t booming and cruises aren’t the sort of things that people race to throw money at...’

Too true, Daniel thought wryly. Especially ill-conceived cruises with sub-standard food that only seemed to attract ageing hippies with limited disposable incomes...

He was mentally making a note of everything she said and everything he saw, because when it came to putting in an offer there was no way he would allow the Ockley couple to try and pull a fast one by pretending their cruises were anything but loss-making ventures.

‘Besides...’ Delilah thought of the money she was currently sending to her sister, trying to pull her weight in paying off the interest on the loan they had secured from the bank for their building work.

Daniel tilted his head to one side and looked at her narrowly. ‘Besides what...?’

‘Nothing. Okay. Well, why not? Dinner might be nice... And maybe,’ she tacked on dutifully, ‘I could persuade you to extend your stay on the ship...?’

‘Maybe,’ Daniel said, non-committal.

He thought that that kind of conversation would hit a roadblock in under thirty seconds. No, this evening would be about finding out about the cruise and her fellow crew members.

And finding out about her. She’d been on the verge of saying something about where her limited income went and he had to admit that he was curious. Unlike the women he had dated in the past, she was reluctant to try and engage his attention by bombarding him with every single detail about herself. That in itself fired up his curiosity.

‘And you can tell me about your travels,’ she said wistfully. ‘Where you’re planning on heading to next...’

‘That’s easy. London.’

‘Really?’

‘I have some...some business to attend to over there...’

‘What do you do?’ Delilah asked with interest. ‘I mean, what’s your profession?’

‘I work in the leisure industry.’

Which was absolutely true. Although in fairness she probably wouldn’t get close to suspecting the role he actually played. Not so much working in the industry as running and dominating it...

‘That probably explains how you managed to get the time off to do a little drifting,’ she said with a smile. ‘I guess if you worked in an office your manager mightn’t be too thrilled if you told him that you wanted time off to explore the artist in you...’

Daniel laughed. He was rarely bothered by a guilty conscience, but he couldn’t help feeling another twinge of guilt at his deliberate manipulation of the truth.

‘I don’t have a manager,’ he murmured. ‘Funny, but I’ve always found it galling to obey someone else’s orders.’

Delilah laughed, her eyes tangling with his. He was so sexy. He had that indefinable sexiness that came with not caring what other people thought about you. He didn’t give a damn if she or anyone else thought that some of the things he said were arrogant. She got the feeling that he wouldn’t care what anyone thought about him.

Her heart picked up speed. The way he was looking at her, his eyes narrowed and brooding, sent little thrills of pleasure racing up and down her spine.

Why shouldn’t she allow herself to feel like a woman again? Surely if she didn’t then Michael would end up having the last word?

Yes, Sarah had told her that she had to learn from her experience and make sensible choices when it came to men, and Delilah knew that her sister was right. But the sensible choice held as much attraction as a bout of flu, and wicked rebellion flared inside her.

She licked her lips in a gesture that Daniel thought was unconsciously erotic.

‘No one likes taking orders from other people,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I guess we’d all like to be able to do our own thing, but unfortunately that’s not how life is.’

Daniel looked around him before settling his gaze back on her flushed face. ‘This strikes me as a pretty loose situation for you,’ he pointed out. ‘Didn’t you tell me that you’re all allowed to do your own thing on the liner, without constraints?’

‘Yes, but I’m only here for a few weeks,’ she reminded him.

‘And then what? Going to hitch a ride on another cruise ship?’

‘If only...’

Daniel leaned forward, intrigued. ‘So tell me...?’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

From a young age she had learnt that there were just too many kids who were happy to snigger behind her back. She and Sarah had been the sisters with the weird parents. They’d learned that the less they’d said about their home life, the better, so they had kept themselves to themselves. The habit was so deeply engrained that even now, as a young adult, Delilah automatically shied away from confiding.

So what was it about this guy that made her want to open up?

And why did the thought of acting against her better judgement in accepting his invitation feel so appealing?

‘I should be heading back to my cabin...’ She barely recognised her voice and took a few steadying breaths. ‘I... I’m going to do some preparation for my class tomorrow and...and...grab a bit of this beautiful weather... We should be at another port the day after tomorrow... It will be nice to just sit and soak up the sun with my book... You know... It’s all go, go, go when we dock...and my students expect me to have clever things to say about all the places of culture that we visit...so...’

Daniel smiled slowly. ‘So...’ He sat back and thought that he needed to use the afternoon productively himself. Various deals going on required his attention. Time, as they said, was money. ‘Seven sharp,’ he murmured. ‘Out on the deck. Far from the crowds...’

‘You haven’t got permission yet...’ Delilah pointed out.

‘Oh, I’ll get permission,’ he drawled.

‘Because everyone listens and obeys when you talk?’

She’d said that jokingly, but there had been a thread of seriousness behind the jest and she wasn’t all that surprised when he looked at her, eyebrows raised.

‘Without exception...’ he replied, deadly serious.

CHAPTER THREE

DELILAH HADN’T CATERED for dining under a starry sky with an Adonis. When she thought of guys at all now she vaguely assumed that the one meant for her would be a little dull, a little staid and a lot reliable. She’d had her brush with adventure and had pronounced herself jaded with love, only interested in a guy who would never use her, let her down or make inflated pie-in-the-sky promises he had no intention of keeping because he had girlfriends in every other port.

She hadn’t been looking for racing pulses and sweaty excitement, and she couldn’t quite believe that racing pulses and sweaty excitement had found her.

Consequently she possessed nothing in her wardrobe that was remotely suitable for dining with a man like Daniel. He hadn’t talked about his love life, but she imagined him with lots and lots of beautiful women—the female equivalent of him. Head-turning model-types who wouldn’t wear long skirts and baggy tops.

Somehow, despite his artistic inclinations, she couldn’t picture him actually going out with an artist. At least, none of the artists she knew.

In the end at precisely six-thirty, after a quick shower in her cramped en-suite bathroom, she extracted the dressiest of her outfits from the single unit wardrobe.

Another long skirt, but black, and a fitted tee shirt with sleeves to the elbows—also black.

At five foot ten, she owned no high shoes at all, so she slipped on a pair of ballet pumps, giving a welcome rest to her flip-flops.

She left her hair loose.

Even in the brief length of time it had been exposed to the blistering sun it had lightened in colour. She was accustomed to tying it back. It was just more practical. Now, staring at her reflection in the mirror, she realised that the long, unruly hair she had always wished she could tame didn’t look half bad.

Heart beating madly, she made her way to the outer deck to find him—she had had no idea where exactly he might be.

The sky was velvety black and pricked with tiny glittering stars. As he had said the ocean, dark and fathomless, was as still as a sheet of glass. The air was balmy, salty, indescribably fresh.

The sound of the passengers inside was barely discernible out here. There were a few couples strolling around, but most had confined themselves to the upper deck, which was more brightly lit and allowed easier access to the entertainment taking place inside.

Tonight, someone was doing a cabaret, and Delilah guiltily thought that it was a true indication of the finances of the liner that the person singing was really not terribly good—but then, as with Stan, Alfie, who was in charge of entertainment, was working on a tight budget.

* * *

Having managed to secure a charming and very secluded spot on the liner, Daniel was waiting for Delilah to track him down.

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