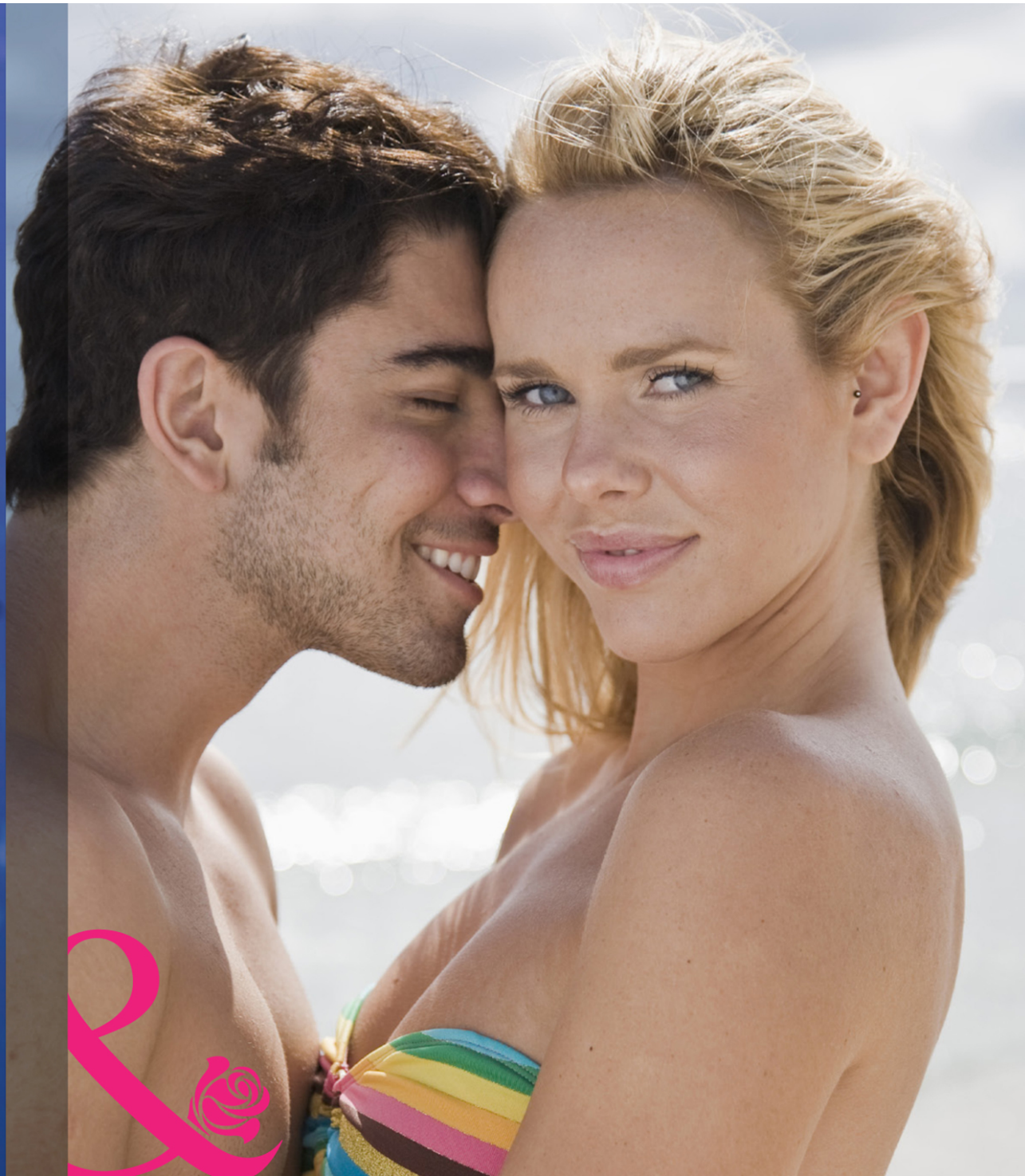




NINA HARRINGTON

My Greek Island Fling

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Nina Harrington

My Greek Island Fling

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Could writing someone else's life story mean re-writing her own? Sipping a cocktail under the warm Greek sun, Lexi Sloane can almost taste success. Ghost-writing a celebrity memoir on a postcard-perfect island will be the career breakthrough she's been working towards for years...but only if she can persuade the infuriatingly guarded Mark Belmont to open up about his famous mother. Mark grew up in the spotlight and learned young to stay cautious and alert to intrusion, so Lexi has her work cut out. Lexi is hiding too – behind the experiences of those she writes about... Could she learn to be the star of her own life? If you like the films *Mamma Mia* or *Love Actually*, you'll love this.

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Praise for Nina Harrington

‘I look forward to reading this author’s next release ...
and her next ... and her next. It truly is a stunning debut,
with characters that will remain in your thoughts
long after you have closed the book.’

—pinkheartsocietyreviews.blogspot.com on

Always the Bridesmaid

‘Rich with emotion,
and pairing two truly special characters,
this beautiful story is simply unforgettable. A keeper.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Hired: Sassy Assistant

‘A well-constructed plot and a scrumptious,
larger-than-life hero combined with generous amounts
of humour and pathos make for an excellent read.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Tipping the Waitress with Diamonds

About the Author

About Nina Harrington

NINA HARRINGTON grew up in rural Northumberland, England, and decided at the age of eleven that she was going to be a librarian—because then she could read *all* of the books in the public library whenever she wanted! Since then she has been a shop assistant, community pharmacist, technical writer, university lecturer, volcano walker and industrial scientist, before taking a career break to realise her dream of being a fiction writer. When she is not creating stories which make her readers smile, her hobbies are cooking, eating, enjoying good wine—and talking, for which she has had specialist training.

Also by Nina Harrington

When Chocolate is Not Enough

The Boy is Back in Town

Her Moment in the Spotlight

The Last Summer of Being Single

Tipping the Waitress with Diamonds

Hired: Sassy Assistant

Always the Bridesmaid

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My Greek Island Fling
Nina Harrington



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PROLOGUE

‘MUM—I’m here,’ Lexi Collazo Sloane whispered as her mother breezed into her room, instantly bringing a splash of purple, bravado and energy to the calm cream and gold colour scheme in the exclusive London hospital.

‘I am *so* sorry I’m late, darling,’ her mother gushed, shaking the rain from her coat and then planting a firm kiss on Lexi’s cheek. ‘But our director suddenly decided to bring the rehearsal of the ballroom scene forward.’ She shook her head and laughed out loud. ‘Pirate swords and silk skirts. If those dresses survive intact it will be a miracle. And don’t talk to me about the shoes and wigs!’

‘You can do it, Mum.’ Lexi chuckled, folding her pyjamas into her overnight bag. ‘You’re the best wardrobe mistress in the theatre business. No worries. The dress rehearsal tomorrow will be a triumph.’

‘Alexis Sloane, you are the most outrageous fibber. But, thanks. Now. Down to more important things.’ She took a breath, then gently put a hand on Lexi’s shoulder and looked into her eyes. ‘How did it go this morning? And don’t spare me. What did the specialist say? Am I going to be a grandmother one of these fine days?’

Lexi sat back down on the bed and her heart wanted to weep. Time to get this over and done with.

‘Well, there’s some good news, and some less-than-good news. Apparently medical science has advanced a little over the past eighteen years, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up.’ She reached out and drew her mother to sit next to her on the bed. ‘There is a small chance that I might be able to have children, but ...’ she caught her breath as her mother gasped ‘... it would be a long, tough process—and there’s no guarantee that the treatment would be a success in the end. According to the specialist, I’d only be setting myself up for disappointment.’

She braved a half smile and squeezed her mother’s hand. ‘Sorry, Mum. It looks like you might have to wait a lot longer before I can give you those grandchildren after all.’

Her mother exhaled loudly before hugging her. ‘Now, don’t you worry about that for one more minute. We’ve talked about this before. There are lots of children out there looking for a loving home, and Adam is happy to adopt. You *will* have your own family one day—I just know it. Okay?’

‘I know, but you had such high hopes that it would be good news.’

‘As far as I am concerned it *is* good news. In fact, I think we should splash out on a nice restaurant this evening, don’t you? Your dad will insist,’ she added, wagging her eyebrows. ‘It seems the photography business is paying well these days.’

Lexi touched her arm and swallowed down the huge lump of anxiety and apprehension that had made an already miserable day even more stressful. ‘Is he here yet, Mum? I’ve been nodding off all afternoon and now I’m terrified that I might have missed him.’

But her mother looked into her face with a huge grin. ‘Yes,’ she replied, clasping hold of both of Lexi’s hands. ‘Yes, he *is* here. I left your dad back in the car park. And he is so different. He really does want to make up for lost time. Why else would he pay for this lovely private hospital at the first mention that you needed treatment? He knew how scared you must be after the last time. Everything’s going to be just fine. You wait and see.’

Lexi’s heart started to race. ‘What if he doesn’t even recognise me? I mean, I was only ten the last time he saw me. That was eighteen years ago. He might not even know who I am.’

Her mother patted her cheek, shaking her head. ‘Now, don’t be so silly. Of course he’ll recognise you. He must have albums filled with all of the photos I’ve sent him over the years. Besides, you’re so lovely he’ll spot you in an instant.’

She pressed her cheek against Lexi's as she wrapped her in a warm hug. 'Your dad has already told me how very proud he is of everything you've achieved in your life. And you can tell him all about your brilliant writing over dinner tonight.'

Then she patted her hair, snatched up her bag and headed into the bathroom. 'Which means I need to get ready. Back in a moment.'

Lexi smiled and shrugged her shoulders. As if her mother could ever be anything other than gorgeous! She'd always been so irrepressible, no matter what life had thrown at them. And all she'd ever wanted was a large family around her whom she could shower with love.

Lexi wiped away a stray tear from her cheek. It broke her heart that she wouldn't be able to give her mother grandchildren and make her happy. Just broke her heart.

Mark Belmont stabbed at the elevator buttons, willing them to respond, then cursed under his breath and took off towards the stairs.

The logical part of his brain knew that it had only been seconds since he'd thanked his mother's friend for keeping vigil in that terrible hospital room until he arrived. The steady weeping hadn't helped him to keep calm or controlled, but he was on his own now, and it was his turn to make some sense of the last few hours.

The urgent call from the hospital. The terrible flight from Mumbai, which had felt never-ending, then the taxi ride from the airport, which had seemed to hit every red light in London on the way in.

The truth was still hard to take in. His mother, his beautiful, talented and self-confident mother, had taken herself to a London plastic surgeon without telling her family. According to her actress friend she had made some feeble joke about not alerting the media to the fact that Crystal Leighton was having a tummy tuck. And she was right. The press were only too ready to track down any dirty secrets about the famously wholesome English movie star. But to him? That was his mother the tabloids were stalking.

Mark took the stairs two at a time as his sense of failure threatened to overwhelm him.

He couldn't believe it. They'd been together for the whole of the Christmas and New Year holiday and she'd seemed more excited and positive than she'd been in years. Her autobiography was coming together, her charity work was showing results and his clever sister had provided her with a second grandchild.

Why? Why had she done this without telling anyone? Why had she come here alone to have an operation that had gone so horribly wrong? She'd known the risks, and she'd always laughed off any suggestion of plastic surgery in the past. And yet she'd gone ahead and done it anyway.

His steps slowed and he sniffed and took a long breath, steadying himself before going back into that hospital room where his lovely, precious mother was lying comatose, hooked up to monitors which beeped out every second just how much damage the embolism had done.

A stroke. Doing what they could. Specialists called in. Still no clear prognosis.

Mark pulled open the door. At least she'd had the good sense to choose a discreet hospital, well-known for protecting its patients from prying eyes. There would be no paparazzi taking pictures of his bruised and battered mother for the world to ogle at.

No. He would have to endure that image on his own.

Lexi had just turned back to her packing when a young nurse popped her head around the door. 'More visitors, Miss Sloane.' She smiled. 'Your dad and your cousin have just arrived to take you home. They'll be right with you.' And with a quick wave she was gone.

'Thank you,' Lexi replied in the direction of the door, and swallowed down a deep feeling of uncertainty and nervousness. Why did her father want to see her now, after all these long years? She pushed herself off the bed and slowly walked towards the door.

Then Lexi paused and frowned. Her cousin? She didn't have a cousin—as far as she knew. Perhaps that was another one of the surprises her dad had lined up for her? She'd promised her

mother that she would give him a chance today, and that was what she was going to do, no matter how painful it might be.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her back and strolled out into the corridor to greet the father who had abandoned her and her mother just when they'd needed him most. If he expected her to leap into his arms then he was sorely mistaken, but she could be polite and thank him for her mother's sake, at least.

If only her heart would stop thumping so hard that she could hardly think. She'd loved him so much when she was little—her wonderful father had been the centre of her world.

She braced herself and looked around. But all was calm, restful and quiet. Of course it would take a few moments for him to get through the elaborate security checks at the main desk—designed to protect the rich and famous—and then take the elevator to the first floor.

She was just about to turn back when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye through the half-open door of one of the patient's rooms identical to the one she had just left, but tucked away at the end of the long corridor.

And then she saw him.

Unmistakable. Unforgettable. Her father. Mario Collazo. Slim and handsome, greying around the temples, but still gorgeous. He was crouched down just inside the room, under the window, and he had a small but powerful digital camera in his hand.

Something was horribly wrong here. Without thinking, she crept towards the door to get a better look.

In an instant she took in the scene. A woman lay on the hospital bed, her long dark hair spread out against the bleached white sheets which matched the colour of her face. Her eyes were closed and she was connected to tubes and monitors all around the bed.

The horrific truth of what she was looking at struck Lexi hard and left her reeling with shock, so that she had to lean against the wall to stay upright.

The nurses wouldn't have been able to see her father from the main reception area, where a younger man she had never seen before was showing them some paperwork, diverting their attention away from what was happening in this exclusive clinic under their very noses.

When she found the strength to speak her words came out in a horrified shudder. 'Oh, no. No, Dad. Please, no.'

And he heard her. In an instant he whirled around from where he was crouching and glared at her in disbelief. Just for a moment she saw a flash of shock, regret and contrition drift across his face, before his mouth twisted into a silent grin.

And her blood ran cold.

Mario Collazo had made a name for himself as a celebrity photographer. It wasn't hard to work out what he was doing with a camera inside the hospital room of some celebrity that he had stalked here.

If that was true ... If that was true then her dad hadn't come to see *her* at all. He had lied to her warm-hearted mother and tricked his way into the hospital. None of the security officers would have stopped him if he was the relative of a patient.

Ice formed in the pit of her stomach as the hard reality of what she had just seen hit home. Her dad never had any intention of visiting her. The only reason he was here was to invade this poor sick woman's privacy. Lexi had no idea who she was, or why she was in this hospital, but that was irrelevant. She deserved to be left alone, no matter who she was.

Lexi felt bitter tears burning in the corners of her eyes. She had to get away. Escape. Collect her mother and get out of this place as fast as her legs could take her.

But in an instant that option was wiped away.

She had waited too long.

Because striding towards her was a tall, dark-haired man in a superbly tailored dark grey business suit. Not a doctor. This man was power and authority all wrapped up inside the handsome package of a broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man of about thirty. His head was low, his steps powerful and strident to match the dark, twisted brow. And he was heading straight for the room where her father was hiding.

He didn't even notice she was there, and she could only watch in horror as he flung open the door to the woman's room.

Then everything seemed to happen at once.

'What the hell are you doing in here?' he demanded, his voice furious with disbelief as he stormed into the room, pushed aside the visitor's chair and grabbed her father by the shoulder of his jacket.

Her breath froze inside her lungs, and Lexi pressed her back farther against the wall.

'Who are you, and what do you want?' His voice was shrill and full of menace, but loud enough to alert the receptionist at the desk to look up and lift the telephone. 'And how did you get a camera in here? I'll take that, you parasite.'

The camera came flying out of the door and crashed against the wall next to Lexi with such force that it smashed the lens. To Lexi's horror she saw the young man at reception reach into his pocket and pull out a digital camera and start to take photographs of what was happening inside the room from the safety of the corridor. Suddenly the stillness of the hushed hospital was filled with shouting, yelling, crashing furniture and medical equipment, flower vases smashing to the floor, nurses running and other patients coming out of their rooms to see what the noise was all about.

Shock and fear overwhelmed her. Her legs simply refused to move.

She was frozen. Immobile. Because, as if it was a horrible train wreck, she simply could not take her eyes away from that hospital room.

The door had swung half closed, but she could see her father struggling with the man in the suit. They were fighting, pushing and shoving each other against the glass window of the room. And her heart broke for the poor woman who was lying so still on the bed, oblivious to the fight that had erupted around her.

The door swung open and her father staggered backwards into the corridor, his left arm raised to protect himself. Lexi covered her mouth with both hands as the handsome stranger stretched back his right arm and punched her father in the face, knocking him sprawling onto the floor just in front of her feet.

The stranger lunged again, pulling her father off the ground by his jacket and starting to shake him so vigorously that Lexi felt sick. She screamed out loud. 'Stop it—please! That's my dad!'

Her father was hurled back to the ground with a thud. She dropped to the floor on her knees and put her hand on her father's heaving chest as he pushed himself up on one elbow and rubbed his jaw. Only then did she look up into the face of the attacker. And what she saw there made Lexi recoil in horror and shock.

The handsome face was twisted into a mask of rage and anger so distorted that it was barely recognisable.

'Your *dad*? So that's how it is. He used his own daughter as an accomplice. Nice.'

He stepped back, shaking his head and trying to straighten his jacket as security guards swarmed around him and nurses ran into the patient's room.

'Congratulations,' he added, 'you got what you came for.'

The penetrating gaze emanating from eyes of the darkest blue like a stormy sea bored deep into her own, as though they were trying to penetrate her skull. 'I hope you're satisfied,' he added, twisting his lips into a snarl of disgust and contempt before looking away, as if he couldn't bear the sight of her and her father for a second longer.

'I didn't know!' she called. 'I didn't know anything about this. Please believe me.'

He almost turned, but instead shrugged his shoulders and returned to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him and leaving her kneeling on the cold hospital floor, nauseous with shock, fear and wretched humiliation.

CHAPTER ONE

Five Months Later

GOATS!

Lexi Sloane pushed her designer sandal hard onto the brake pedal as a pair of long-eared brown and white nanny goats tottered out in front of the car as she drove around a bend, and bleated at her in disgust.

‘Hey, give me a chance, girls. I’m new around here,’ Lexi sang out into the silent countryside, snorting inelegantly as the goats totally ignored her and sauntered off into the long grass under the olive trees on the other side of the road.

‘Which girls? Lexi? I thought you were working.’ Her mother laughed into her earpiece in such a clear voice that it was hard to imagine that she was calling from the basement of an historic London theatre hundreds of miles away. ‘Don’t tell me. You’ve changed your mind and taken off with your pals on holiday to Spain after all.’

‘Oh, please—don’t remind me! Nope. The agency made me an offer I couldn’t refuse and I am definitely on Paxos,’ Lexi replied into the headset, stretching her head forward like a turtle to scan the sunlit road for more stray wildlife. ‘You know how it goes. I am the official go-to girl when it comes to ghostwriting biographies. And it’s always at the last minute. I will say one thing—’ she grinned ‘—I stepped off the hydrofoil from Corfu an hour ago and those goats are the first local inhabitants I’ve met since I left the main road. Oh—and did I mention it is *seriously* hot?’

‘A Greek Island in June ... I am *so* jealous.’ Her mother sighed. ‘It’s such a pity you have to work, but we’ll make up for it when you get back. That reminds me. I was talking to a charming young actor just this morning who would love to meet you, and I sort of invited him to my engagement party. I’m sure you’d like him.’

‘Oh, no. Mum, I adore you, and I know you mean well, but no more actors. Not after the disaster with Adam. In fact, please don’t set me up with any more boyfriends at all. I’ll be fine,’ Lexi insisted, trying desperately to keep the anxiety out of her voice and change the subject. ‘You have far more important things to sort out without worrying about finding me a boyfriend. Have you found a venue for this famous party yet? I’m expecting something remarkable.’

‘Oh, don’t talk to me about that. Patrick seems to acquire more relatives by the day. I thought that four daughters and three grandchildren were more than enough, but he wants the whole tribe there. He’s so terribly old-fashioned about these things. Do you know, he won’t even sleep with me until his grandmother’s ring is on my finger?’

‘Mum!’

‘I know, but what’s a girl to do? He’s gorgeous, and I’m crazy about him. Anyhow, must go—I’m being dragged out to look at gothic chapels. Don’t worry—I’ll tell you all about it when you get back.’

‘Gothic? You wouldn’t dare. Anyway, I look terrible in black,’ Lexi replied, peering through the windscreen and slowing the car at the entrance to the first driveway she’d seen so far. ‘Ah—wait. I think I’ve just arrived at my client’s house. Finally! Wish me luck?’

‘I will if you need it, but you don’t. Now, call me the minute you get back to London. I want to know everything about this mystery client you’re working with. And I mean *everything*. Don’t worry about me. You just try and enjoy yourself. *Ciao*, gorgeous.’

And with that her mother hung up, leaving Lexi alone on the silent country lane.

She glanced up at the letters carved into a stone nameplate, then double-checked the address she’d noted down over the phone while waiting for her luggage to come off the carousel at Corfu airport, some five hours earlier.

Yup. This was it. Villa Ares. Wasn’t Ares the Greek god of war? Curious name for a house, but she was here and in one piece—which was quite a miracle.

Checking quickly for more goats or other animal residents, Lexi shifted the hire car into gear and drove slowly up a rough gravel driveway which curved around a long, white two-storey house before coming to a shuddering halt.

She lifted off her telephone headset and sat still for a few minutes to take in the stunning villa. She inhaled a long breath of hot, dry air through the open window, fragrant with the scent of orange blossom from the trees at the end of the drive. The only sound was birdsong from the olive groves and the gentle ripple of water from the swimming pool.

No sign of life. And certainly no sign of the mystery celebrity who was supposed to have sent a minion to meet her at the hydrofoil terminal.

‘Welcome to Paxos,’ she whispered with a chuckle, and stepped out of the car into the heat and the crunch of rough stone beneath her feet.

The words had no sooner slipped from Lexi’s lips than the slim stiletto heel of her favourite Italian sandal scraped down a large smooth cobblestone, her ankle twisted over, and she stumbled against the hot metal of her tiny hire car.

Which left a neat trail of several weeks’ worth of grime and bright green tree pollen all down the side of the Italian silk and linen jacket.

Oh, no! Grinding her teeth, she inspected the damage to her clothing and the scrape down her shoe and swore to herself with all of the fluency and extensive vocabulary of a girl raised in show business. The dark red leather had been completely scraped into a tight, crumpled ball down the heel of her shoe.

This project had better be a real emergency!

Even if it was so *totally* intriguing.

In the five years that she’d worked as a contract ghost writer this was the first time that she had been sent out on a top-secret assignment on her own—so secret that the publisher who’d signed the contract had insisted that all details about the identity of the mystery author must remain under wraps until the ghost writer arrived at the celebrity’s private home. The talent agency was well-known for being extremely discreet, but this was taking it to the next level.

She didn’t even know the name of her client! Or anything about the book she would be working on.

A tingle of excitement and anticipation whispered across Lexi’s shoulders as she peered up at the imposing stone villa. She loved a mystery almost as much as she loved meeting new people and travelling to new places around the world.

And her mind had been racing ever since she’d taken the call in Hong Kong.

Who *was* this mysterious celebrity, and why the great secrecy?

Several pop stars just out of rehab came to mind, and there was always the movie star who had just set up his own charity organisation to fight child trafficking—any publisher would be keen to have that story.

Only one thing was certain: this was going to be someone special.

Lexi brushed most of the pollen from the rough silk-tweed fabric of her jacket, then straightened her back and walked as tall as she could across the loose stone drive, the excitement of walking into the unknown making her buzz with anticipation.

A warm breeze caressed her neck and she dipped her sunglasses lower onto her nose, wagging her shoulders in delight.

This had to be the second-best job in the world. She was actually getting paid to meet interesting people in lovely parts of the world and learn about their lives. And the best thing of all? Not one of those celebrities knew that she used every second of the time she spent travelling and waiting around in cold studios to work on the stories she *really* wanted to write.

Her children’s books.

A few more paying jobs like this one and she would finally be able to take some time out and write properly. Just the thought of that gave her the shivers. To make that dream happen she was prepared to put up with anyone.

Magic.

Swinging her red-leather tote—which had been colour-matched to her now-ruined sandals—she shrugged, lifted her chin and strode out lopsided and wincing as the sharp stones of the drive pressed into the thin soles of her shoes.

Hey-ho. They were only sandals. She had seen too much of the flip side of life to let a little thing like a damaged sandal annoy her. Meeting a client when she didn't even know their name was a drop in the ocean compared to the train wreck of her personal history.

It was time to find out whose life she was going to share for the next week, and why they wanted to keep their project such a secret. She could hardly wait.

Mark Belmont rolled over onto his back on the padded sun lounger and blinked several times, before yawning widely and stretching his arms high above his head. He hadn't intended to fall asleep, but the hot, sunny weather, combined with the latest bout of insomnia, had taken its toll.

He swung his legs over the lounger, sat upright, and ground the palms of his hands into his eyes for a few seconds to try and relieve the nagging headache—without success. The bright sunlight and the calm, beautiful garden seemed to be laughing at the turmoil roiling inside his head.

Coming to Paxos had seemed like a good idea. In the past the family villa had always been a serene, welcoming refuge for the family, away from the prying eyes of the media; a place where he could relax and be himself. But even this tranquil location didn't hold enough magic to conjure up the amount of calm he needed to see his work through.

After four days of working through his mother's biography his emotions were a riot of awe at her beauty and talent combined with sadness and regret for all the opportunities he had missed when she was alive. All the things he could have said or done which might have made a difference to how she'd felt and the decision she'd made. Perhaps even convinced her not to have surgery at all.

But it was a futile quest. Way too late and way too little.

Worse, he had always relished the solitude of the villa, but now it seemed to echo with the ghosts of happier days and he felt so very alone. Isolated. His sister Cassie had been right.

Five months wasn't long enough to put aside his grief. Nowhere near.

He sniffed, and was about to stand when a thin black cat appeared at his side and meowed loudly for lunch as she rubbed herself along the lounger.

'Okay, Emmy. Sorry I'm late.'

He shuffled across the patio towards the stone barbecue in his bare feet, watching out for sharp pebbles. Reaching into a tall metal bin, he pulled out a box of cat biscuits and quickly loaded up a plastic plate, narrowly avoiding the claws and teeth of the feral cat as it attacked the food. Within seconds her two white kittens appeared and cautiously approached the plate, their pink ears and tongue a total contrast to their mum. Dad Oscar must be out in the olive groves.

'It's okay, guys. It's all yours.' Mark chuckled as he filled the water bowl from the tap and set it down. *'Bon appétit.'*

He ran his hands through his hair and sighed out loud as he strolled back towards the villa. This was *not* getting the work done.

He had stolen ten days away from Belmont Investments to try and make some sense of the suitcase full of manuscript pages, press clippings, personal notes, appointment diaries and letters he had scooped up from his late mother's desk. So far he had failed miserably.

It certainly hadn't been *his* idea to finish his mother's biography. Far from it. He knew it would only bring more publicity knocking on his door. But his father was adamant. He was prepared to do press interviews and make his life public property if it helped put the ghosts to rest and celebrate her life in the way he wanted.

But of course that had been before the relapse.

And since when could Mark refuse his father anything? He'd put his own dreams and personal aspirations to one side for the family before, and would willingly do it again in a heartbeat.

But where to start? How to write the biography of the woman known worldwide as Crystal Leighton, beautiful international movie star, but known to him as the mother who'd taken him shopping for shoes and turned up at every school sports day?

The woman who had been willing to give up her movie career rather than allow her family to be subjected to the constant and repeated invasion of privacy that came with being a celebrity?

Mark paused under the shade of the awning outside the dining-room window and looked out over the gardens and swimming pool as a light breeze brought some relief from the unrelenting late-June heat.

He needed to find some new way of working through the mass of information that any celebrity, wife and mother accumulated in a lifetime and make some sense of it all.

And one thing was clear. He had to do it fast.

The publisher had wanted the manuscript on his desk in time for a major celebration of Crystal Leighton at a London film festival scheduled for the week before Easter. The deadline had been pushed back to April, and now he would be lucky to have anything before the end of August.

And every time the date slipped another unofficial biography appeared. Packed with the usual lies, speculation and innuendo about her private life and, of course, the horrific way it had been brought to an early end.

He had to do something—anything—to protect the reputation of his mother. He'd failed to protect her privacy when it mattered most, and he refused to fail her again. If anyone was going to create a biography it would be someone who cared about keeping her reputation and memory alive and revered.

No going back. No compromises. He would keep his promise and he was happy to do it—for her and for his family. And just maybe there was a slim chance that he would come to terms with his own crushing guilt at how much he had failed her. Maybe.

Mark turned back towards the house and frowned as he saw movement on the other side of the French doors separating the house from the patio.

Strange. His housekeeper was away and he wasn't expecting visitors. *Any* visitors. He had made sure of that. His office had strict instructions not to reveal the location of the villa or give out his private contact details to anyone.

Mark blinked several times and found his glasses on the side table.

A woman he had never seen before was strolling around inside his living room, picking things up and putting them down again as if she owned the place.

His things! Things he had not intended anyone else to see. Documents that were personal and very private.

He inhaled slowly and forced himself to stay calm. Anger and resentment boiled up from deep inside his body. He had to fight the urge to rush inside and throw this woman out onto the lane, sending her back whence she came.

The last thing he wanted was yet another journalist or so-called filmmaker looking for some dirt amongst his parents' personal letters.

This was the very reason he'd come to Paxos in the first place. To escape constant pressure from the world of journalists and the media. And now it seemed that the world had decided to invade his privacy. Without even having the decency to ring the doorbell and ask to be admitted.

This was unacceptable.

Mark rolled back his shoulders, his head thumping, his hands clenched and his attention totally focused on the back of the head of this woman who thought she had the right to inspect the contents of his living room.

The patio door was half-open, and Mark padded across the stone patio in his bare feet quietly, so that she wouldn't hear him against the jazz piano music tinkling out from his favourite CD which he had left playing on Repeat.

He unfurled one fist so that his hand rested lightly on the doorframe. But as he moved the glass backwards his body froze, his hand flat against the doorjamb.

There was something vaguely familiar about this chestnut-haired woman who was so oblivious to his presence, her head tilted slightly to one side as she browsed the family collection of popular novels and business books that had accumulated here over the years.

She reminded him of someone he had met before, but her name and the circumstances of that meeting drew an annoying blank. Perhaps it was due to the very odd combination of clothing she was wearing. Nobody on this island deliberately chose to wear floral grey and pink patterned leggings beneath a fuchsia dress and an expensive jacket. And she had to be wearing four or five long, trailing scarves in contrasting patterns and colours, which in this heat was not only madness but clearly designed to impress rather than be functional.

She must have been quite entertaining for the other passengers on the ferry or the hydrofoil to the island from Corfu that morning.

One thing was certain.

This girl was not a tourist. She was a city girl, wearing city clothes. And that meant she was here for one reason—and that reason was him. Probably some journalist who had asked him for an interview at some function or other and was under pressure from her editor to deliver. She might have come a long way to track him down, but that was her problem. Whoever she was, it was time to find out what she wanted and send her back to the city.

Then she picked up a silver-framed photograph, and his blood ran cold.

It was the only precious picture he had from the last Christmas they had celebrated together as a family. His mother's happy face smiled out from the photograph, complete with the snowman earrings and reindeer headset she was wearing in honour of Cassie's little boy. A snapshot of life at Belmont Manor as it used to be and never could be again.

And now it was in the hands of a stranger.

Max gave a short, low cough, both hands on his hips.

'Looking for anything in particular?' he asked.

The girl swung round, a look of absolute horror on her face. As she did so the photograph she was holding dropped from her fingers, and she only just caught it in time as it slid down the sofa towards the hard tiled floor.

As she looked at him through her oversized dark sunglasses, catching her breath unsteadily, a fluttering fragment of memory flashed through his mind and then wafted out again before he could grasp hold of it. Which annoyed him even more.

'I don't know who you are, or what you're doing here, but I'll give you one chance to explain before asking you to leave the same way you came in. Am I making myself clear?'

CHAPTER TWO

LEXI thought her heart was going to explode.

It couldn't be. It just could *not* be him.

Exhaustion. That was the only explanation. Three weeks on the road, following a film director through a series of red-carpet events across Asia, had finally taken their toll.

She simply had to be hallucinating. But as he looked at her through narrowed eyes behind rimless designer spectacles Lexi's stomach began to turn over and over as the true horror of the situation hit home.

She was standing in front of Mark Belmont—son of Baron Charles Belmont and his stunningly beautiful wife, the late movie actress Crystal Leighton.

The same Mark Belmont who had punched her father in that hospital on the day his mother had died. And accused *her* of being his accomplice in the process. Completely unfairly.

When she was a little girl she'd had a recurring nightmare about being a pilgrim sent to fight the lions in some gladiatorial arena in Rome.

This was worse.

Her legs were shaking like jelly, and if her hand held on to her bag any tighter the strap would snap.

'What—what are you doing here?' she asked, begging and pleading with him in her mind to tell her that he was a temporary guest of the celebrity she had been paid to work with and that he would soon be leaving. Very soon. Because the other alternative was too horrible to imagine.

She'd thought that she had escaped her shameful connection to this man and his family.

Fate apparently had other ideas.

Fate in the form of Mark Belmont, who was looking at her with such disdain and contempt that she had to fight back the temptation to defend herself.

With a single shake of the head, he dismissed her question.

'I have every right to be here. Unlike yourself. So let's start again and I'll ask you the same question. Who are you and what are you doing in my house?'

His house? A deep well of understanding hit her hard and the bottom dropped out of Lexi's stomach.

If this was his house—was it possible that Mark Belmont was her celebrity?

It would make sense. Crystal Leighton's name had never left the gossip columns since her tragic death, and Lexi had heard a rumour that the Belmont family were writing a biography that would be front-page news. But surely that was *Baron* Belmont, not his business-guru son?

Lexi sighed out loud. She was jumping to conclusions—her imagination was running ahead of itself. This was a big house, with room for plenty of guests. It could easily be one of his colleagues or aristocratic friends who needed her help.

And then the impact of what he was asking got through to her muddled brain.

Mark had not recognised her. He had no clue that she was the girl he had met in the hospital corridor only a few months earlier.

They had only met for a few fleeting moments, and she had certainly changed since then. They both had. And her sunglasses were a genius idea.

She inhaled a couple of breaths, but the air was too warm and thick to clear her head very much. It was as though his tall, powerful body had absorbed all the oxygen from the room.

A flicker of annoyance flashed across his full, sensuous mouth before he said, 'I don't take kindly to uninvited guests, so I suggest you answer my question before I ask you to leave.'

Uninvited guests? Oh, God, the situation was worse than she'd realised. He didn't seem to be expecting a visitor—any visitor. He had no idea that his publisher had sent a ghost writer out to the island! No wonder he thought that she was some pathetic burglar or a photojournalist.

Okay, so he had treated her unfairly in the worst of circumstances, but she was here to do a job. She glanced down, desperate to escape his laser-beam focus, and her eyes found the image of a happy family smiling back at her from behind the glass in the picture she had almost dropped.

It could have been a movie set, with a perfect cast of actors brought in for the day. Gorgeous film-star mother, handsome and tall aristocratic father, and two pretty children—with the cutest toddler on the planet waving at the camera. All grouped in front of a tall Christmas tree decorated in red and gold and a real fire burning bright in a huge marble fireplace.

What did Mark Belmont know about broken families and wrecked dreams?

Guilt about the pain her father had caused the Belmont family pinched her skin hard enough to make her flinch. But she ignored it. What her father had done had never been her fault, and she wasn't going to allow the past to ruin her work. She needed this job, and she'd be a fool to let her father snatch away the chance to make her dream come true.

Lexi opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it again, and then pinched her thumb and forefinger tightly against the bridge of her nose.

'Oh, no.' She shook her head slowly from side to side, eyes closed. 'The agency would *not* do this to me.'

'The agency?' Mark asked, his head tilted slightly to one side. 'Have you got the right villa? Island? Country?'

She chuckled, and when she spoke her voice was calmer, steadier.

'Let me guess. Something tells me that you may not have spoken, emailed or in some other way communicated with your publisher in the past forty-eight hours. Am I right?'

For the first time since she had arrived a concerned look flashed across his tanned and handsome face, but was instantly replaced by a confident glare.

'What do you mean? My publisher?'

Lexi dived into her huge bag, pulled out a flat black tablet computer, and swiped across the screen with her forefinger—being careful not to damage her new fingernails, which still carried the silver and purple glitter that had been the hit of the last show party in Hong Kong.

'Brightmore Press. Sound familiar?'

'Maybe,' he drawled. 'And why should that matter to me?'

Lexi's poor overworked brain spun at top speed.

He was alone in the villa. This was the correct address. And Mark *was* familiar with Brightmore Press. Lexi put those three factoids together and came up with the inevitable conclusion.

Mark Belmont was the mystery celebrity she had been assigned to work with.

And the bubble of excitement and enthusiastic energy that had been steadily inflating on the long journey from Hong Kong popped like an overstretched balloon.

Of all the rotten luck.

She needed the job so badly. Running a home in central London wasn't cheap, and this bonus would have made a big difference to how quickly she could start the renovations. All her plans for the future relied on having her own home office where she could write her children's books full-time. Walking away from this job would set her back months.

She stared at him wide-eyed for a few seconds, before sighing out loud.

'Oh, dear. I hate it when this happens. But it does explain why you didn't meet me at the harbour.'

Mark shifted his legs shoulder-width apart and crossed his arms. 'Meet you? No, I don't think so. Now, let me make myself quite clear. You have two minutes to explain before I escort you from my private home. And please don't think I won't. I've spent more time than I care to think about giving

press conferences. My office has a catalogue of past interviews and press statements, covering every possible topic of conversation. I suggest that you try there—because I have absolutely no intention of giving you an interview, especially when you seem intent on damaging my property. Am I getting through to you?”

‘Your property? Oh, I’m so sorry,’ she murmured, scrabbling to pick up the picture and brushing off any dust from the silver frame. ‘I did knock, but there was no answer, and the door was open. This is a lovely family photo and I couldn’t resist peeking at it, so ...’ She gave a quick shrug of the shoulders and lifted her chin slightly. ‘You should be more careful about security.’

‘Really?’ He nodded, his voice calculating and cool enough to add a chill to the air. ‘Thank you so much for the advice, but you aren’t in the city any more. We don’t lock our doors around here. Of course if I’d *known* I was to have visitors I might have taken additional precautions. Which brings us to my earlier question. Who are you, and why are you here? I’m sure the two charming police officers who take care of this island would be delighted to meet you in a more formal setting. And, as you have probably realised, Gaios is only about three miles from here. And they are the proud owners of both a police car and a motorcycle. So I would suggest that you come up with a very convincing excuse very quickly.’

Police? Was he serious?

She looked warily into those startling blue eyes. Oh, yes, he was serious.

Her chest lifted a good few inches and she stared straight at him in alarm. Then she sucked in a breath and her words came tumbling out faster than she would have thought possible.

‘Okay. Here goes. Sorry, but your peeps have *not* been keeping you up to date on a few rather crucial matters. Your Mr Brightmore called my talent agency, who called me with instructions to get myself to Paxos because one of their clients has a book to finish and they—’ she gestured towards his chest with her flat hand ‘—are apparently a month past the final deadline for the book, and the publishers are becoming a little desperate. They need this manuscript by the end of August.’

She exhaled dramatically, her shoulders slumped, and she slid the tablet back into her bag with a dramatic flourish before looking up at him, eyebrows high, with a broad grin.

‘Right. Now that’s out of the way I suppose I should introduce myself. Alexis Sloane. Otherwise known as Lexi. Ghost writer *extraordinaire*. And I’m here to meet a client who needs help with a book. I take it that would be you?’

‘Well, of *course* I didn’t tell you what the publisher had organised, darling brother, because I knew exactly what your reaction would be.’

Mark Belmont sat down hard on the end of the sun lounger, then immediately stood up again and started pacing up and down the patio, the sun-warmed stone hot under his bare feet. The temperature was a perfect match for his mood: incendiary. His emotions boiled in a turmoil of resistance, resolution and defiance touched with fury. Cassandra Belmont had a lot to answer for.

‘Cassie,’ he hissed, ‘I could strangle you. Seriously. How could you do this to me? You *know* that this biography is too personal, too close to home, to ask anyone to help. Why do you think I’ve come all the way to Paxos to work on the book on my own? The last thing I need is some random stranger asking questions and digging into places I don’t know I want to go myself. Communication is a wonderful thing, you know. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?’

‘Relax.’

His sister’s voice echoed down the phone, and he imagined her curled up on the sofa in Belmont Manor while her two small sons played havoc around her.

‘Lucas Brightmore recommended the most discreet agency in London. Their staff sign cast-iron confidentiality agreements and would never divulge anything you tell them. I think it could work.’

‘Cassie, you are a menace. I don’t care how discreet this ... *secretary* is. If I wanted a personal assistant I would have brought one. I have excellent staff working for me. Remember? And I would never, *ever* invite them here to the villa. I need privacy and space to get the work done. You know

me.’ His voice slowed and dropped lower in pitch. ‘I have to get my head into the detail on my own before I can go public with anything. And I need peace and quiet to do that.’

‘You’re right. But this is not a business project you are evaluating. This is our mother’s life story. It has to do her justice, and you’re the only person in the family with the faintest bit of creativity. I know I couldn’t do it in a million years. I don’t have nearly enough patience. Especially when it comes to the difficult bits.’

Cassie took a breath and her voice softened.

‘Look, Mark, this is hard for all of us. And it’s incredibly brave of you to take over the project. But that makes it even more important to get the job done as quickly as you can. Then we can all get on with our lives and Dad will be happy.’

‘Happy?’ Mark repeated with a dismissive cough. ‘You mean like he’s happy about my plans to renovate those derelict cottages on the estate into holiday lets? Or the restructuring plans for the business that he’s been blocking since Christmas?’

‘Probably not,’ Cassie answered. ‘But you know as well as I do that it isn’t about you or me. It has a lot more to do with the fact that he’s ill for the first time in his life and he’s just lost his wife in a surgical procedure she never even told him about. He doesn’t know how to deal with that any more than the rest of us.’

Mark ran his tongue over his parched lips. ‘How is he today?’

The delay before Cassie answered said more than the sadness inherent in her reply. ‘About the same. This round of chemotherapy has really knocked him back.’ Then her steely determination kicked back in, tinged with concern. ‘You don’t need to put yourself through this. Hand back the advance from the publisher and let some journo write Mum’s biography. Come home and run your business and get on with your life. The past can take care of itself.’

‘Some journo? No, Cassie. The press destroyed Mum’s last chance of dignity, and I don’t even want to *think* about what they’d do with a true-life *exposé* based on lies, innuendo and stupid gossip.’ He shook his head and felt a shiver run down his spine despite the heat. ‘We know that her friends have already been approached by two writers for hire looking for dirt. Can you see the headlines? Read All About It: The True Sordid Past of the Real Crystal Leighton Belmont.’ He swallowed hard on a dry throat. ‘It would kill him. And I *refuse* to let her down like that again.’

‘Then finish the book our mother started. But do it fast. The agency said they were sending their best ghost writer, so be nice. I’m your sister, and I love you, but sometimes you can be a little intense. Oh. Have to go. Your nephews are awake and need feeding. Again. Take care.’

‘You, too,’ Mark replied, but she had already put the phone down.

He exhaled slowly and willed his heart rate to slow.

He had never been able to stay angry with Cassie. His sister had been the one constant in his father’s life ever since their mother had died. She had her own husband, a toddler and a new baby to take care of, but she adored the manor house where they had grown up and was happy to make a home there. Her husband was a doctor at the local hospital whom Cassie had met when she’d taken their father for a check-up. Mark knew that he could totally rely on her to take care of their father for a few weeks while he took time out of the office.

She had even taken over the role of peacemaker on the rare occasion when he went back to Belmont Manor.

But she shouldn’t have talked to the publisher without telling him about it.

Suddenly the decision to come to Paxos to finish the biography seemed ridiculous. He’d thought that being on his own would help, but instead he’d become more agitated and irritable by the day. He needed to do things. Make things happen. Take responsibility just like he’d always done. It infuriated him that he’d found it impossible to focus on the task he had set himself for more than a few minutes without having to get up and pace around, desperate for an opportunity to procrastinate.

Cassie was right. This biography was too close. Too personal.

His mother had always been a hopeless housekeeper, and organisation had never been one of her strong points. She'd liked the creative world, and enjoyed making sense of the jumble of random photographs, letters, newspaper clippings and memorabilia.

And he was just the same. An artist in many ways. His natural inclination was to push through the boundaries of possibility to see what lay beyond and shake things up. Little wonder that he was increasingly at loggerheads with his father's almost obsessive need to keep things in order. Compliant. Unchanging. Private and quiet.

Or at least that had been the case until six months ago.

But now?

Now his father was on his second round of chemotherapy, his beloved mother had effectively died on a plastic surgeon's operating table, and his on-off girlfriend had finally given up on him and met someone she actually seemed to love and who loved her in return.

Mark felt as though the foundations on which he had based his entire life had been ripped out from under him.

His fingers wrapped tightly around the back of the chair until the knuckles turned white with the pressure.

No. He could handle this trauma. Just as he had abandoned his own life so that he could take his brother's place in the family.

There was no point in getting angry about the past.

He had given his word. And he would see it happen on his own, with the privacy and the space to work things through. The last thing he needed right now was a stranger entering his private space, and the sooner he persuaded her that the publisher was wrong and she could head off back to the city the better.

Think. He needed to think.

To stop herself shaking Lexi gripped her shoulder bag with one hand and pressed the other against the back of the leather sofa. She couldn't risk ruining her carefully contrived show of being completely unfazed as she looked at Mark Belmont, pacing up and down the patio next to the swimming pool, her cell phone pressed to his ear.

Only this was not the business-guru version of The Honourable Mark Belmont that usually graced the covers of international business magazines around the world. Oh, no. She could have dealt with that stiff, formally dressed office clone quite easily. *This* version was an entirely different sort of man: much more of a challenge for any woman.

The business suit was gone. Mark was wearing a pair of loose white linen trousers and a short-sleeved pale blue striped polo shirt that perfectly matched the colour of his eyes. His toned muscular arms and bare feet were tanned as dark as the scowl he had greeted her with, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a bronzed, muscular chest.

His dark brown hair might have been expertly cut into tight curls, but he hadn't shaved, and his square jaw was covered in a light stubble much more holiday laid-back than designer businessman. But, Lord, it suited him perfectly.

She knew several fashion stylists who would have swooned just at the sight of him.

This was a completely different type of beast from the man who'd defended his mother so valiantly in the hospital. This was Mark Belmont in his natural setting. His territory. His home.

Oh, my.

She could lie and pretend that her burning red neck was simply due to the heat of a Greek island in late June and the fact that she was overdressed, but she knew better.

Her curse had struck yet again.

She was always like this around Adonis-handsome men. They were like gorgeous baubles on display in a shop window. She could ogle them all day but never dared to touch. Because they were

always so far out of reach that she knew she would never be able to afford one. And even if she could afford one it would never match the disorganised chaos of her life.

This particular bauble had dark eyebrows which were heavy and full of concern. He looked tense. Annoyed and anxious.

It had seemed only right to ring the publisher for him. Just to clarify things.

Only judging by the expression on his face the news that her assignment was not a practical joke after all had not gone down well.

Normally her clients were delighted that a fairy godmother had dropped into their world to help them out of a tricky situation.

Apparently Mark Belmont was not seeing his situation in quite the same way.

She had to persuade him to allow her to stay and help him with ... with *what*? She still had no idea what type of book Mark Belmont was writing. Business management? A family history? Or ... she swallowed ... the obvious. A memoir of his mother.

Lexi looked up as Mark turned towards her from the door, lowering the phone, and searched his face for something—anything—that would help her make the decision.

And she found it. In his eyes of frosty blue.

The same eyes that had looked at her with such pain mixed with contempt on that terrible day in the hospital. When his heart had been breaking.

Decision made. If he could survive writing about his late mother then she would do her best to make the book the best it could be. Even without his help.

She could make this work. It would take a lot of effort, and she would have to be as stubborn as a stubborn thing in Stubbornland, but she could do it. She had stood her ground before, and she'd do it again.

Mark stood still for a moment, eyes closed, tapping the cell phone against the side of his head.

'If you're quite finished with my phone, Mr Belmont?' A sweet, charming voice echoed out from behind his back. 'It tends not to function very well after being used as a percussion instrument.'

Mark opened his eyes and stared at the offending cell phone as though he had never seen it before. He'd never used a purple phone in his life and he was extremely tempted to throw the offending article into the pool and leave it there. *With its owner. The hack writer.*

Fortunately for the phone, good manners kicked in and, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, he turned and extended his arm towards Lexi.

To her credit, she was not wearing a self-satisfied smirk but the same look of professional non-confrontational indifference he was used to seeing from city suits around the boardroom table where some of his riskier ideas were discussed.

Except for him this was not a job. It was very personal. And even the idea of sharing his deepest concerns and emotions about his parents made him bristle with resentment and refusal to comply.

He hadn't built a venture-capital company from the ruins of his father's business without taking risks, but they had been calculated risks, based on information he had personally checked and worked on until he'd known that the family's money would not be wasted on the investment.

This girl—this woman—in this ridiculous outfit had arrived at his home without his approval.

His sister might have confidence in the talent agency, but he knew nothing about the plan, and if there was one thing guaranteed to annoy him it was things being planned behind the scenes without his knowledge.

Cassie was perfectly aware of that fact, but she'd done it anyway. Her intentions might be excellent, but the reality was a little difficult to stomach.

A light tapping broke Mark out of his reverie, and he flashed a glance at the girl just in time to see her keying furiously into the cell phone, her sparkly purple-painted fingernails flashing in the sunlight. Although how she could see through those huge sunglasses was a mystery to him.

In the living room she had been more stunned than stunning, but in the bright white light reflected back from the patio her skin appeared pale and almost translucent, as though she hadn't seen sunlight for quite some time. The contrast between her English-rose complexion and the startlingly bright scarves wrapped around her neck was so great that it distracted him for a moment from the fact that she was talking.

'I'll be with you in a moment, Mr Belmont,' she said away from the phone. 'I'm just trying to find out the location of the nearest hotel on the island. Unless, of course, you can recommend one to me?'

She looked up and gave him a half smile—a pink-cheeked, polite kind of smile that still managed to brighten her whole face, drawing his full attention.

'I apologise for not booking accommodation before I arrived, but this assignment was rather last-minute. I'll need to stay somewhere close by, so I don't waste too much time travelling back and forth. Don't worry,' she added, 'I'll be out of your hair within the hour.'

'A hotel? That is quite out of the question,' he answered.

'Oh?' She raised her eyebrows and her fingers stilled. 'And why is that?'

Mark pushed his hands into his pockets to keep them from fastening around that pretty pale neck and squeezing hard.

'Well, for one thing there is indeed a small hotel in Gaios. But it is currently closed for over-running refurbishments. And secondly ...' He paused before saying the words. 'Paxos is a very small island. People talk and ask questions. I hardly think it would be appropriate for you to stay in rented accommodation while you're working on a confidential project for the Belmont family. And I'm afraid that you certainly don't *look* like a package holiday tourist.'

To her credit, she didn't look down at her outfit to check if something was amiss. 'I don't? Excellent. Because I have no intention of looking like a tourist. I want to look like me. As for confidentiality ...? I can assure you that I'm totally discreet. Anything you tell me will be in strict confidence. I've worked on many confidential projects, and none of my previous clients ever had any problems with my work. Now, is there anything else you'd like to know before I head to town?'

He lifted his chin and dropped his shoulders back, chest out, legs braced, creating the sort of profile his media consultants had recommended would be perfect to grace the covers of business magazines. Judging by the slight widening of her eyes, it was equally effective on the patio.

'Only this. You seem to be under the illusion that I've agreed to this arrangement. That is not the case. Any contract you might have is between my publisher and your agency. I certainly haven't signed anything. And I have a big problem with being railroaded. Which is exactly how I'm feeling right now. I dislike surprises, Miss Sloane.'

She lifted her chin, and instantly the firmness of the jawline on her heart-shaped face screamed out to him that this was a girl who rarely took no for an answer.

'It's unfortunate that you weren't expecting me,' she replied with a tight smile, 'but I can assure you that I have no plans to return home before this assignment is completed.'

She reached into the tiny pocket of her jacket, pulled out a small business card and presented it to him. 'I've just survived two long international flights, one hour on the hydrofoil from Corfu, and twenty minutes negotiating car hire with the charming Greek gentleman at the port to get here. I don't intend to leave until my boss instructs me to. So. May I suggest a compromise trial period? Let's say twenty-four hours? And if you don't find my services valuable, then I promise to jump into my hire car and get out of your life. One day. That's all I'm asking.'

'One day?' Mark echoed through gritted teeth.

'Absolutely.'

A smile warmed her lips, and for the first time since they'd met it was a real smile. The kind of smile that made the Cupid's-bow curve of her full lips crinkle girlishly at the edges and the pink in her cheeks flush with enjoyment. She was enjoying this. And she was clearly determined to make him do all the work.

‘Very well. Twenty-four hours it is. In which case there is only one possible option,’ he continued. ‘You will be staying here at the villa with me until I decide whether I need your help or not, Miss Sloane.’

CHAPTER THREE

‘YOU want me to stay here at the villa?’ Lexi looked around the patio, then back towards the house. ‘You did say you lived here alone, Mr Belmont? Is that correct? I’ll take your silence as a yes. In that case, aren’t you worried about what your wife or girlfriend will think about the arrangement? A single man living here alone suddenly has a young lady houseguest? There are bound to be questions.’ Lexi glanced at him. ‘Perhaps you have nieces?’

‘I’m afraid not. Two nephews. Both under five. Go by the names of Charles and Freddie.’

‘Shame.’ She nodded and screwed up her face. ‘How about cousins? Old schoolfriends? Casual acquaintances that just happen to pass by?’

‘No subterfuge will be necessary, Miss Sloane. You can call yourself a business colleague or personal assistant for as long as you stay here. Take your pick.’

‘Business colleague it is. Personal assistant smacks too much of a girl who organises your dry-cleaning, runs your office and buys presents for your lucky lady-friends—of which I’m sure there are many.’

Lexi leaned forward slightly towards Mark.

‘I don’t actually perform those particular duties, by the way. In case you’re wondering. Ghostwriting. That’s it. Okay? Splendid. Now, seeing as I’ll be staying here, would you mind helping me with my suitcases? I do have quite a few.’

‘What do you mean a few?’

Mark strolled over to the edge of the patio and stared at the tiny hire car. Lexi tottered past him and descended the two low steps that curved down to the driveway.

‘You men have it easy.’ She laughed, opening up the boot and heaving the two massive matching cases out onto the pebble driveway. ‘A couple of suits and that’s it. But I’ve just spent three weeks on the road with different events every evening.’

A cabin bag and a leather Gladstone bag followed.

‘Clients expect a girl to wear different outfits for each film launch to keep the photographers happy,’ she added, walking around to the passenger door and flinging it open. The top garment bag had slipped a little down the back of the driver’s seat, so she tugged it free and folded it over one arm before grabbing hold of her travel bag with one hand and slinging the shoulder strap of her overnight case across the front of her jacket.

Lexi pushed the car door closed with one foot and looked around for Mark. He was standing open-mouthed, still watching her from the terrace as though he could hardly believe what he was looking at.

Lexi rolled her eyes, took a firmer hold of her bag and tottered across the pebbles of the car park onto the patio steps. ‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, ‘I’ve left the heavy bags down by the car. Any time today will be good.’

‘No problem,’ Mark murmured under his breath. ‘The porter will be right with you.’

He reached for his shoes, which he had stashed under the lounge. Unfortunately, as he bent over, Lexi tottered past his very fine rear end in her high-heeled sandals, and as he stood up his elbow jogged the overnight bag she was carrying.

At exactly the same moment the slippery silk fabric of her garment bag slipped down her arm. She snatched at it with the hand holding the travel bag, twisting her body round to stop it from falling to the ground.

And she took one step backwards.

The stiletto heel of her right sandal hit the smooth marble edge of the swimming pool, her right leg shot forward, she completely lost her balance and instinctively flung both arms out to compensate.

For one millisecond she was airborne. Arms twirling around in wide circles, both legs in the air, luggage thrown out to each side and the thin silk fabric of her overdress inflated up to her waist as a parachute.

She squeezed her eyes tight shut and prepared herself for a dunking in the swimming pool. But instead her feet lifted even higher off the ground as a long, strong arm grabbed her around the waist and another arm swept under her legs, taking her weight effortlessly.

Lexi flashed open her eyes, gave a high squeak of terror, and flung both her arms around Mark's neck by sheer instinct, pressing herself tight onto his shirt. Unfortunately she forgot that she was still clutching her travel bag for dear life, and succeeded in hitting Mark on the back of the head with it.

To his credit, he gave only a low, deep sigh instead of yelling like a schoolboy.

She opened her mouth to apologise, then closed it again. Her lungs seemed to have forgotten how to work and her breathing had become a series of short panting noises—which would have been perfect for a spaniel but which, from her lips, managed to sound both pathetic and wheezy at the same time.

She had *never* been picked up before.

And the last time she'd been this close to a handsome man had been on Valentine's night, when her ex-boyfriend had confessed he'd been sleeping with a girl she'd thought was her friend. So it would be fair to say that it hadn't ended well.

This, on the other hand, was turning out to be a much more positive experience.

Below his loose blue shirt Mark was muscular, warm and solid against her body, and in the position he was holding her their faces were only inches apart. His eyes locked onto hers, and suddenly it made perfect sense just to lie there in his arms while he took her weight.

Up close, she could see that his eyes were not a perfectly clear blue, as his mother's had been, but were flecked with slivers of darker blue and grey, so that under the shade of the terrace they looked like a cloudy summer sky.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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