



THE GREEK'S NINE-MONTH SURPRISE

Jennifer Faye

 *Cherish*™

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The Greek's Nine-Month Surprise

Аннотация

The next Stravos heir... Billionaire hotelier Niko Stravos has turned emotional detachment into an art form. So the last thing he's expecting is an out-of-character night with Sofia Moore—and even less so the shocking consequences: he's going to be a daddy! Niko persuades chambermaid Sofia to join him on a round-the-world business trip, knowing he must deal with the emotional turmoil inside him. As Sofia's warmth, beauty and compassion touch Niko's heart, it's time to confront the past – so he can convince relationship-wary Sofia that he wants a future!

Brides for the Greek Tycoons

Marriages maid in Greece!

Business is Cristo's and Niko's first—and only—love. So when marriage becomes necessary to secure the future of their hotel empire, they vow to approach it like any other deal.

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The Greek's Ready-Made Wife

And discover what shocking surprise Sofia has in store for Niko in their story:

The Greek's Nine-Month Surprise

Available now!

The Greek's Nine-Month Surprise

Jennifer Faye



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Award-winning author **JENNIFER FAYE** pens fun, heart-warming romances. Jennifer has won the RT Reviewers' Choice Best Book Award, is a Top Pick author and has been nominated for numerous awards. Now living her dream, she resides

with her patient husband, one amazing daughter (the other remarkable daughter is off chasing her own dreams) and two spoiled cats. She'd love to hear from you via her website, www.jenniferfaye.com.

For Lois.

To an amazing lady who always makes me smile.

Thanks for your support.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

THE WEDDING BOUQUET tumbled through the air.

The breath caught in Sofia Moore's throat as she watched the flowers sail end over end. They were headed her way. She raised her hands high in the air. With a firm grasp on the bouquet, she smiled triumphantly, thankful her friend had chosen flowers that didn't bother her allergies. Sofia lowered her arms, taking a moment to admire the beautiful white lilies and the delicate blue orchids.

As a round of applause went up, she lifted her head. Her gaze immediately met a set of piercing blue-gray eyes. Only one person had such mesmerizing eyes. Niko Stravos.

Her heart pounded in her chest. He quickly averted his gaze, but the connection had been long enough for her stomach to quiver with excitement. He liked her. Of that she was certain.

In turn, she was drawn to him like a honeybee to a sun-warmed daisy. How could she not be? He was drop-dead gorgeous in the tall, dark and dreamy sort of way. But there was something more—something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

She moved to where he was standing. His stance was a bit stiff, and a frown marred his handsome face. What had caused him to look so uncomfortable? Just moments ago, they'd been enjoying their time together. Their conversation had been light and entertaining. She wasn't ready for it to end.

"Care to dance again?" She hoped to cajole him back into a good mood.

Niko's hesitant gaze zeroed in on the bouquet before returning to her face. "Perhaps we should rest. Aren't you tired?"

"Tired? Not a chance. I love weddings." This was the first time since she'd called off her engagement that she'd truly enjoyed herself. She didn't want this magical evening to end. "Don't you?"

"What?" Lines creased between his dark brows.

"Don't you enjoy weddings?"

His gaze moved to the colorful lilies again. "Not so much. I'm usually too busy at the office to attend them."

"In that case, you should make the most of the occasion. I'm sure Kyra's glad you made an exception today." She noticed how his attention kept straying back to the flowers. She turned and

placed the arrangement on the bridal table. But still the pensive look on his face remained. “I love this song. Let’s go dance.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“But why?”

He glanced around as though trying to avoid her pointed stare. “You should dance with someone else. I...I don’t want to take up your entire evening. I should go.”

“But we were having fun. Don’t say goodbye. Not yet.” She needed this—she needed to feel alive again after beating herself up for letting herself stay in a dead-end relationship for too long. “Please.”

Niko hesitated. Then he held out his arm to her. “Shall we?”

A smile pulled at her lips. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He escorted her onto the crowded dance floor that had been erected on the beach of the Blue Tide Resort beneath a giant tent supported by white columns. Everyone around them was smiling and laughing. The tables were adorned with white linens, floral centerpieces and votive candles. It was so easy to get swept up in the joyful celebration of her best friend’s wedding.

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “You are unlike anyone I’ve ever known. I never know what to expect from you.”

“I like to keep you guessing.” She stepped into his very capable arms.

“You enjoy being different, don’t you?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in her response. None whatsoever. “I tried living up to someone’s expectations. I turned

myself inside out, and it still wasn't enough. In fact, it was an utter disaster. Since then, I've decided to march to my own drum."

"And how's that working for you?"

"Quite well." After all, she was dancing the night away with the most eligible bachelor at this wedding. "Quite well indeed. You should try it."

His eyes widened. "And what makes you think I don't march to my own drum?"

"Just a feeling."

He struck her as the conservative type, from his restrained emotions to his proper hold on her as they danced; not standing too close and his hands always remained in a respectable place. But then there was his longer, wavy dark hair. And the way he stared at her when he didn't think she noticed. Perhaps there was an impulsive side to him just longing to get out. She relished the idea.

Wanting to push him out of his safety zone, she moved closer to him. Her curves brushed up against his muscular chest. Immediately he sucked in a deep breath as his body stiffened.

"Relax," she murmured, feeling exceedingly daring. Perhaps it was the dim lighting. Or maybe it was the sparkling wine. Whatever it was, she decided not to fight it. She was having too much fun. "Don't worry—I won't bite."

A deep, rich chuckle rumbled from his chest. They began to move to the music again. He leaned in close—real close. His breath lightly brushed over her neck, sending goose bumps

down her arms. “Why do I get the feeling you’re trying to take advantage of me?”

She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way he had her pulse racing. “Would that be so bad?”

“I never let anyone have the advantage.”

“Maybe you should—think of all you’re missing out on.” She wasn’t one for flings, but Niko was different. The push and pull of her common sense versus her desires raged war within her. Should she? Or shouldn’t she? In the end, she threw caution to the wind and decided that for Niko, she just might make an exception.

“Sofia? Did you hear me?”

He’d been talking? Between the loud voices and the strums of the eight-piece band, not to mention her own riotous thoughts, she’d missed what he’d said. And that was a shame because she loved his voice that was heavily laden with a Greek accent.

“I’m sorry. I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“Perhaps you’d care to stop by my suite. We could continue our conversation. It’s much quieter there. Unless of course you’d care to dance the night away.”

He was inviting her to his suite? Her immediate response was no. But, then again, after tonight he’d be gone. And tomorrow she’d be like Cinderella, trading in her royal blue chiffon gown and satin heels for a black-and-white maid’s uniform complete with no-nonsense black shoes with rubber soles.

The way Niko implored her with his eyes eroded any

lingering doubts. Tonight would be her fairy tale—something she'd remember for years to come.

“Lead the way.”

CHAPTER ONE

Twelve weeks later...

HE WAS LATE.

He was never late. Nikolas Stravos III expelled a disgruntled sigh as he stood in the shower. There was something about being at the Blue Tide Resort that always seemed to have him acting out of character. His previous stay had included the most fascinating evening with the most incredible woman. He smiled at the memory.

He turned away from the spray of water, letting the soapsuds slide down his body. He leaned forward, pressing his palms against the cold tiles. The jets of water beat against the backs of his shoulders. Hundreds of droplets of water came together and trickled down his spine. He longed for the pulsating rhythm to ease away the ache in his tense muscles.

A lot had happened since he'd last been to the Blue Tide. He now had a solo voice in the operation and direction of the Stravos Trust, a position he'd been groomed to ascend to since childhood. But no one had warned him the promotion would cost him dearly.

It'd all started here at the resort, at Cristo Kiriakas's wedding to Kyra, Niko's newfound cousin. The memories unfolded in his mind like a promo to a blockbuster movie, hitting all the highlights.

Some of the recollections were amazing, like getting to know Sofia, the maid of honor. And spending a glorious night together, an evening he hadn't been able to banish from his mind. But as good as that brief period had been, what had followed was horrific—losing his grandfather suddenly to a heart attack. The memory still sliced through him. There had been no time for goodbyes—no final words. It was all over before Niko had time to react.

He cursed under his breath as he turned off the water. Life could be so cruel sometimes. If he'd learned one thing, it was that everything could change at the drop of a hat. No notice. No nothing. And then you were all alone in this big, cold world. It was the story of his life.

Niko reached for the towel waiting for him just outside the shower stall. Instead of thinking about his upcoming business meeting with Cristo to finalize the terms of the sale of the Stravos Star Hotels, Niko found his thoughts spiraling back to Sofia. He ran the plush towel over his face. He made a mental note to inquire about her. He hadn't even gotten a chance to learn where she lived. By the time he'd awoken on that not-so-long-ago morning, she was gone. Like a dream, she'd vanished—

Thunk!

The startling noise drew his thoughts up short. What was that? It sure sounded like something had fallen over. But how was that possible? He didn't recall leaving a window open for the breeze to wreak havoc. But he conceded that, in his exhausted state

after working day and night, anything was possible. And he had opened the windows last night when he'd first arrived. Perhaps he'd forgotten to close one of them.

Not bothering to dry himself off, he draped the towel around his waist, anxious to find out what damage had been done. His feet moved soundlessly over the cool ceramic tile floor.

He stepped into the outer room when he heard, "Ghuahh!"

He stopped in his tracks. He scanned the room, at last settling on a most beautiful woman. Her eyes were round with alarm as she straightened, holding a lamp that belonged on the end table. Who was this woman? And what was she doing in his bungalow uninvited?

His gaze moved back to her face. It took a second before he realized he knew her—in fact, he knew her quite well, in a manner of speaking. Sofia. She'd come back. And this time, she wasn't a figment of his dreams. She was standing before him with those tempting lips and all her curvy goodness.

He noticed how her gaze slipped down to his towel before quickly returning to his face. Her cheeks were suffused with color. Really? How could she be so innocent after the night they'd spent together?

Still, at the sight of her embarrassment, he felt as though the towel had shrunk to half its size. He should have excused himself to go throw on some clothes, but his mind wasn't exactly working right. "Sofia? What are you doing here?"

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She turned and

bolted for the door.

“Hey, wait!” He hadn’t meant to scare her off. Perhaps his tone hadn’t exactly been welcoming, but she was in his bungalow without an invitation—oh, who was he kidding? He was frustrated with himself for being so excited to see her.

And he just couldn’t let her get away without finding out why she’d sought him out. He started after her, but when he reached the covered porch of his exclusive bungalow, a breeze rushed past him, reminding him that he was dressed in nothing more than a bath towel.

He stopped and stared at Sofia’s back as she moved away from him as quickly as her legs would carry her. What puzzled him the most was why she kept leaving him without so much as a word.

Usually he had the opposite problem with women. They were too clingy for his comfort. Sofia was different. She intrigued him. He’d have to work harder at making a good impression the next time they met.

He pressed his hand to the wooden rail as he watched her make her way along the path surrounded by lush, colorful vegetation. All too soon, she disappeared from sight. The part that stuck with him was the fact she’d been wearing a maid’s uniform. She works here?

A whistle drew his attention. He turned to find a pretty brunette in a red bikini sunbathing not far from his bungalow. She flashed him a toothy smile and waved, but he didn’t return the gesture, not wanting to encourage her attention.

His phone chimed with a reminder that he had a meeting in fifteen minutes. With a shake of his head, he turned and headed inside the thatched-roof bungalow. Thoughts of Sofia persisted. Had she, too, been unable to forget about their time together? Was that why she'd shown up at his bungalow? But if so, why had she run away? Surely it wasn't his lack of clothing. It had to be more than that. But what?

He inwardly groaned as he removed the first suit he came across in the wardrobe. His knowledge of women wouldn't even fill up a shot glass. And he had no intention of learning more—at least not anytime soon. And when he did decide to settle down, it would be a marriage of convenience.

He'd experienced enough loss in his life. He wasn't about to risk his heart on romance. A strategically planned marriage would be best for all concerned. It's what made the most sense. From what he'd observed, emotions were too fickle. Sometimes he wondered if romantic love truly existed or if people only imagined it. He sighed. Even if it did exist, he was better off without such an entanglement. It just made life more complicated than it needed to be.

If he were smart, he'd forget Sofia. That was the best thing he could do for both of them, because he had nothing to offer her except a moment here or a moment there. Certainly nothing consistent—nothing lasting.

In fact, tomorrow he would be jetting off, far from the Blue Tide Resort. His grandfather had given him one last mission

to complete. And that had to be Niko's focus—not a beautiful woman with eyes full of mystery.

* * *

Her heart pounded.

Sofia pressed a hand to her chest as she eased open the door to the employee area in the lower level of the resort. With it being midmorning, the locker area was deserted. Everyone was busy trying to get their assigned tasks completed while the guests soaked up rays on the beach, golfed or toured the picturesque seaside.

She moved to the far corner of the room, anxious to be alone. Her mind had been racing ever since she ran into Mr. Dreamy, as she'd dubbed him during her best friend's wedding. What was he doing back here? And why hadn't Kyra mentioned his visit?

Sofia leaned against the cool tiled wall. She slid down to the floor and pulled out her phone. She could really use a sounding board. It wasn't until then that she realized her hands were trembling.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting for their reunion, but it certainly wasn't the suspicion in Niko's eyes. And when he spoke, his voice had been laced with agitation.

The backs of her eyes stung, and her stomach churned. This couldn't be happening. She hadn't meant to catch him by surprise. There had been no privacy notice on the door, and she'd knocked several times without getting a response. She hadn't even known that he'd returned to the Blue Tide.

Her fingers moved over the keyboard as she messaged Kyra.
MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): He's here!

Seconds passed and nothing. She willed Kyra to message her back. Of all the times she needed her best friend... Sofia's hand moved protectively over her still-flat midsection.

"It's okay, little one. I'll get this all sorted out. I promise."
Impatiently her fingers moved over the keypad again.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): I need you.

Mop&Glow007 (Kyra): I'm here. Who's here?

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): Niko. What do I do?

Mop&Glow007 (Kyra): Do you want to see him?

Sofia hadn't told Kyra the steamy bits that had transpired between her and Niko. It felt strange to hold back from her best friend, who until this point in her life had known all her secrets and insecurities. But this was different. She'd had a one-night stand with Niko—Kyra's long-lost cousin. That totally changed the rules of the game.

There was something else Sofia hadn't told Kyra—she was pregnant. Sofia had just found out earlier that week. She would tell Kyra everything just as soon as she figured out how best to deal with Niko.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): No. Yes. I don't know.

Mop&Glow007 (Kyra): Do you want me to say something to him for you?

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): No!

Mop&Glow007 (Kyra): Are you sure?

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): I'll handle it.

Mop&Glow007 (Kyra): LMK if you change your mind. I'll help.

The offer was generous, so typical of Kyra. Her friend had already pulled strings and gotten Sofia enrolled in an in-house managerial training program. Sofia was immensely grateful for the opportunity, but she was seriously considering returning to the States to earn an accounting degree. She'd always had a knack for numbers.

Though Kyra's offer to help smooth over things with Niko was tempting, Sofia would have to face Niko on her own. She couldn't even imagine how he'd react to her news.

CHAPTER TWO

NIKO YANKED AT his necktie, loosening it. He took the steps leading up to his bungalow two at a time while holding firmly to the notes he'd taken during his meeting with Cristo. He released the top buttons on his dress shirt. Whatever made him think wearing a suit at the Blue Tide was a good idea?

Because it was a habit. He felt in control in a suit and tie. His grandfather had drilled this message into him since he was just a boy. Without his father around to assume his rightful place as the Stravos heir, the role had fallen to Niko. He'd vowed at an early age to be the type of man that would have made his father and grandfather proud. That role included dressing the part.

However, Cristo hadn't felt the need for business attire, even though they were dealing with a very big contract that involved

the sale of Niko's international hotel chain to Cristo. Thankfully the meeting had gone quite well. The changes to the terms of the contract were minor. So why was he so uptight? So out of sorts?

The answer immediately came to him in the vision of Sofia. He strode into the bungalow, where he uncharacteristically tossed his tie over the back of the couch, followed by his suit jacket. Why had she looked at him as if he were the Big Bad Wolf and she were Little Red Riding Hood? Had he really been that gruff?

He gave himself a mental shake as he sat down at the spacious desk and turned on his laptop. He'd be lost without it. Immediately his email software popped up on the screen. Forty-three new emails since that morning. All appeared to be business related. He inwardly groaned. They'd have to wait a little longer.

Niko opened a new email and started typing a note to his legal team. Sofia's panic-stricken face as she'd rushed out the door came to him. He shoved the image to the back of his mind as he transcribed his hasty notes into something more understandable.

When he'd finished proofreading the rather lengthy email, he pressed Send. He soon found three more emails had landed in his inbox. He leaned back in his chair as the memory of Sofia continued to plague him.

What had she wanted? Why had she looked so upset? He couldn't fully focus on his work until he had answers.

Niko strode over to the phone and was quickly connected with the front desk. He couldn't come straight out and request they

send over Sofia. It would raise too many questions. Instead he requested the maid who'd cleaned his room to stop by, as he'd misplaced some papers and needed to know if she'd seen them. He assured the desk clerk that no crime had been committed. He just needed a bit of help.

Not more than five minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Niko opened it to find Sofia holding a stack of plush white towels as though they were a shield. "Hi. Thanks for coming back."

Her gaze didn't quite meet his. "I...I didn't see any papers."

He arched a brow. "And you would know this how? You took off so fast this morning that you didn't have time to look around."

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't know you were in the bungalow."

After being up late into the night working, he'd slept in. He'd forgotten to put out the do-not-disturb placard. That answered some of his questions but not all of them. "I understand about the mix-up this morning, but we still need to talk."

Panic reflected in her brown eyes. "We...we do."

He got the feeling from her awkward stance and the way her gaze didn't quite meet his that whatever she had to say he wasn't going to like it. Not one little bit. It was like he'd walked in on the middle of a play and he had absolutely no idea what was going on.

If he was smart, he'd just make a quick excuse to disentangle himself from Sofia right here and now. But what came out of his mouth was something entirely different. "Come inside."

She hesitated before moving past him, taking great pains to

keep some distance between them. This was not the way he'd expected her to act after their amazing night together. In fact, it was exactly the opposite.

When she stood in the middle of the living room, clenching and unclenching her hands, he said, "You can have a seat."

She perched on the edge of the couch. She laced her fingers together and rested them in her lap. The awkward silence stretched out.

"What did you want to discuss?" Surely it couldn't be as serious as her body language indicated. Perhaps she regretted running out on him the morning after the wedding and she wanted to know if they could start over.

The thought of letting her down weighed on him. He'd really enjoyed getting to know her. She'd been so easy to be around. But as amazing as he found her, he wasn't at a place in his life where he could even think about a serious relationship. Maybe it wasn't right—wasn't fair—but neither would lying to her. In the end, it would hurt her more.

His gaze met hers. There was a vulnerability in her eyes that evoked a protective side of him he hadn't been aware of before that moment. Her eyes grew shiny as though she were about to burst into tears at any moment.

No. Please. Not that.

Niko sat down on an adjacent armchair, uncomfortable with the thought of dealing with an emotional woman. He had absolutely no experience in that area. He wasn't a love-'em-and-

leave-'em kinda guy. But on the rare occasions he spent the evening in a woman's company, whether for a fund-raiser or a business dinner, he made sure she knew up front that there would never be anything serious between them.

Had he told Sofia that? His memory was a bit fuzzy. He remembered when he'd first approached her at the wedding reception. She'd been sitting all alone at the bridal table. He'd been drawn to her, unable to resist talking to her.

Her smile had been the first thing he noticed. It had lit up her whole face, and it was infectious. The evening had been full of dancing and sparkling wine. Then more dancing, more laughing and more wine. He honestly hadn't wanted the night to end.

The woman sitting before him didn't resemble the engaging, bubbly woman at his cousin's wedding—she may look the same, but it was obvious something major had changed. What could it be? Why did she look as though she had the weight of the world on her delicate shoulders?

He drew his thoughts up short. Whatever was bothering her, he wasn't the one to resolve it. As much as he wanted to ride to her rescue, he was only in town for the night. There simply wasn't enough time—or so he tried to tell himself.

* * *

Sofia had no idea why Niko had requested her presence. Obviously, it wasn't to locate any missing papers or to restock his towels. Realizing she was still holding the fresh linens, she placed them on the couch next to her. She knew for a fact he

had more than enough fresh towels because once he'd departed the bungalow that morning, she'd rushed back in. She'd done her fastest, most thorough cleaning job to date. So whatever he wanted had absolutely nothing to do with housekeeping.

And by the serious look on his face, he wasn't anxious to pick up where they'd left off. So where did that leave them? Was he just upset about finding her in his room? Or did he know about her pregnancy? No, impossible. She hadn't told a soul.

The best course of action was to get it all out there in the open, but her mouth refused to cooperate. She could feel Niko's gaze on her, and she averted her eyes to the pattern on the rug. Her stomach quivered.

Why was she letting herself get all twisted up in knots? It wasn't as if she wanted anything from him. Quite the contrary. She planned to take care of the baby on her own.

Niko cleared his throat. "Listen, I know you probably came here expecting us to pick up where we left off—"

"What? No, I didn't." Was that what he was expecting? Another clandestine hookup before he left?

His eyes widened. "You didn't?"

"What do you take me for?" Sofia pressed her lips together, holding back a stinging comment. Just because he was sexy and rich didn't mean she was going to throw herself at him. Was that how little he thought of her?

"I apologize if I jumped to the wrong conclusion." The look in his eyes said he didn't quite believe her. "Then why did you

agree that we needed to talk?”

“I...I...” Her stomach lurched nauseously.

She jumped to her feet, not about to get sick in front of him. It was time to make a hasty exit. She would admit to her pregnancy later, when she wasn't so nervous. She rushed to the door. She could hear Niko curse under his breath as he hurried after her.

“Sofia, wait!”

She stopped at the edge of the porch. She inhaled a couple of deep breaths. Her stomach settled a bit. Her hands gripped the wood and squeezed tight, willing herself to remain calm enough to utter words.

“I need to tell you something.” So far so good. Now if only she could get the rest out. “It's about the night of the wedding.”

“It's okay.” He stopped just behind her. His voice was much softer than it had been just moments before. “I understand. I haven't been able to forget that night, either.”

“You haven't?” She turned, finding him much closer than she'd expected. That was not what she was expecting him to say.

His voice lowered and vibrated with emotion. “No, I haven't. It was special.” He stared deep into her eyes. “You are special. But after you disappeared without a word, I thought you regretted it.”

Her heart leaped into her throat. Was this really happening? Was it possible she'd totally misjudged him? “You really mean it? About the special part?”

His head dipped, and his lips claimed hers. There was no room for doubt in his kiss. This was how she remembered things from

that one magical night. Maybe it'd been the sparkling wine or the romantic ballads, but Niko had swept her off her feet...just like now.

His lips moved over hers, brushing aside the rush of turbulent emotions and replacing them with pure, undiluted passion. She suddenly remembered how on that not-so-long-ago night she'd momentarily disengaged from her common sense and followed her heart. Their time together wasn't supposed to be anything serious, but sometimes actions have consequences. And in her—well, their—case, it was a life-altering consequence.

But as his hands moved over her back, her stiff muscles eased. Her body leaned into his. Her hands wrapped around the back of his neck as her fingertips played with the longer strands of his dark hair. She could easily get used to this—quite easy indeed.

Thunk!

Sofia jumped back as though the bungalow had been struck by lightning. She glanced around. Her gaze came to rest on a volleyball. A couple of teenage girls came rushing up to the bungalow and apologized. Niko smiled, flashing his white teeth, and assured them it wasn't a problem. Just as if nothing had happened.

Sofia tried to wrap her mind around how things had gotten so far off course. Her hand moved to her lips, her fingers gently swiping over her now-sensitive lips. Though her heart fluttered at the memory of their kiss, she knew she had to show more self-restraint. Giving in to her desires had succeeded only in

complicating matters even more.

Her attention moved to the steps. She wanted to flee—wanted to avoid the inevitable questions—

“Don’t even think about escaping. I’m dressed this time. I’ll follow you.”

CHAPTER THREE

“THAT KISS...IT CAN’T happen again.” Sofia met his confused gaze.

Best to get this over with.

The sooner, the better.

Her palms moistened, and her mouth grew dry. She had no idea how much longer she could stand to be so close to him and yet so far away. Because she knew her secret would drive a permanent wedge between them. Nothing would ever be the same.

His expression hardened. “Then what exactly did you want to talk about?”

The time had come. Her stomach took another nervous lurch. And the words that she’d rehearsed over and over again utterly fled her mind.

“Sofia?”

It wasn’t as if she’d gotten into this position by herself. And though it was the truth, it didn’t settle her nerves. Why did this have to be so hard? Because he’d blame her. His eyes would grow dark and cold, shutting her out.

Niko made a point of glancing at his Rolex watch. “I don’t

have much time. Maybe we should talk later—”

“No!” When he frowned, she realized her response had been a bit too exuberant.

He arched a dark brow. “It’s that important?”

She nodded, not trusting her mouth.

“Then come back inside.”

She did as he asked. It was just two words—I’m pregnant. Why did she have to make such a production of this?

Just say the words and leave. Easy. Peasy. Not!

He moved to the minibar. “Can I get you something to drink? A mimosa?”

She shook her head. She couldn’t drink in her condition. Instead of taking advantage of the opening, she said, “I can’t. I’m still working. Some water would be nice.”

In no time at all, he was handing her a glass of ice water. “Now, what did you need to talk about?”

She sipped at the water, needing it to wet her dry mouth. Once she set it aside, she clenched her hands and faced him. “I’m pregnant.”

For a moment, nothing moved. It was as if time were suspended. As the seconds ticked by, the color leached from Niko’s face.

At last he spoke in a strangled voice. “It...it’s mine?”

“Of course it’s yours. You surely don’t think I have sex with every man I meet.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “How should I know?”

She glared at him. "That doesn't say much for you."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm not thinking clearly." He started to pace back and forth. "I just never thought." He stopped and stared at her as though expecting an answer. "But how could this happen?"

She frowned at him. Was their night so forgettable? Her face warmed at the memory. Did she really have to recount the evening in detail for him?

He shook his head. "Never mind. It was a stupid question. I...I'm just shocked. We took precaution."

"And it failed somewhere along the way. But analyzing the how of it isn't going to change the fact. What is done is done."

His face grew even paler. "Things did get pretty out of hand that night."

That was the understatement of the century. She'd never thought she'd ever have a one-night stand in her life, but that was before she met Niko. He was a mixture of hotness, sweetness and power wrapped up in a really cute package.

Funnily enough, telling him the news of the baby had a calming effect on her. She had not been expecting that. Perhaps it was because she was no longer harboring a huge, life-changing secret. With the truth out in the open, they could make whatever decisions were necessary.

"You're sure about this?" He gazed at her with one last bit of hope glimmering in his eyes.

She nodded. "I went to the doctor this week. He confirmed

what I suspected.”

Niko’s shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

She felt bad for him. He obviously wasn’t looking to start a family anytime soon, and she had blindsided him with this news. She hadn’t known any other way to tell him. She knew it wouldn’t be unreasonable to expect him to step up and take responsibility. But that wasn’t why she’d told him. As the father he had a right to know.

“Listen, I know this isn’t what you want.”

His head snapped around to face her. His dark brows rose high as his gaze searched hers. “And it’s what you want?”

She wasn’t about to get into what she did and didn’t want. Ideally she wanted to be in love with the father of her baby, and even though they’d shared an incredibly intense attraction, she refused to let herself believe in love at first sight. Whatever she’d felt for Niko at the wedding had been an intense attraction. Nothing more.

She stared deep into his eyes and swallowed hard. “I’m keeping the baby if that’s what you mean.”

His expression didn’t give away his thoughts. “I’ll need some time to digest this.”

“That’s fair.” There was one more thing she hadn’t told him. “How much time are we talking?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know. Why?”

“I’m leaving in two weeks.”

“Leaving?”

She nodded. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone, as I haven't turned in my notice yet."

"Leaving and going where?"

"Home. Back to New York. I want my baby—"

"Our baby."

She sighed. "Our baby to grow up around family."

His mouth opened, but before he could utter a word, her phone chimed. It was the ringtone she'd assigned to her boss. Although this was a bad time for a phone call, she couldn't ignore it, either.

Her gaze met Niko's. "It's my supervisor."

Niko's lips pressed together as he waved at her to go ahead and answer it. Was it her imagination or was he relieved by the distraction? There was no time for her to contemplate it as the phone chimed again.

She pressed the button, knowing her absence had been noticed and she didn't have a good excuse. Or at least not one that she was willing to share.

She moved to the porch for some privacy. "Hello."

* * *

This can't be happening.

Alone now, Niko paced back and forth. Sofia had appeared more than relieved to be summoned back to work. He glanced down at the scrap of paper where she'd jotted down her phone number and told him to call her when he was ready to talk.

Talk? He couldn't think straight much less string together a bunch of coherent sentences. Not so long ago, he'd had his life

planned out. But in a matter of weeks, twelve to be exact, it'd all gone off course.

First, his grandfather unexpectedly passed away and now he was about to become a father. A father. The words sounded so off to him. He wasn't ready to be a father. What did he even know about being a parent? Nothing. Zip. Zilch. And nada.

And to think that not so long ago this news would have been the answer to so many of his problems with his grandfather. The thought of not being able to share this news with him sent a fresh wave of sorrow washing over Niko. His hands balled up at his sides as he struggled to control his rising emotions.

His cell phone rang, but he ignored it—something he rarely did. He wasn't in any frame of mind to talk business. He wasn't sure how it felt to be in shock, but he'd hazard a guess it was what he was experiencing now.

The truth was he wasn't ready to be a family man.

He had too much to do...like restructuring the numerous divisions to eliminate overlap of personnel and continuing to overhaul his outdated company with new human resources policies. Even though he'd faced employee pushback in the face of change, he refused to let that stop him. He wasn't the boss in order to win friends. He'd been groomed to lead the company into the future. To do that, change must be a part of his plan.

But how was he supposed to fit a baby into that plan?

He accepted that someday he'd need an heir or two to hand down the family business. That was in his plan—his long-range

plan. But a family didn't fit in his agenda now.

Still, there was a baby on the way. That couldn't be changed. Nor could he turn his back on his own flesh and blood. For the first time in his life, he didn't know which way to turn. The stakes were just too high.

His grandfather's solution would have been to have a wedding—quick and simple. He imagined how his grandfather would pat him on the back, pleased that he was carrying on the Stravos line. But would his parents have been just as pleased? Or would they have been disappointed in him? The thought weighed heavily on him. He missed them, especially at a time like this.

So what options did that leave him? To marry Sofia? But was it the right decision? Could Sofia be his convenient bride? Would she accept an unconventional marriage?

He recalled her contagious laughter at the wedding—the way she'd turned his head. She'd been like a breath of fresh air, and he'd been unable to get enough of her.

Could they ever get back to that happy place? He'd like to think once the shock wore away that they could smile and laugh again—together. So maybe the idea of marriage had come much sooner than he expected. He and Sofia had hit it off. He may not want a romantic entanglement, but he would like them to be on friendly terms when they wed. And the fact they were compatible in bed was a definite bonus.

Would Sofia jump at the offer? Or would she rebuff his proposal? The one thing he'd learned about Sofia was that she

could be unpredictable, which made her quite intriguing. But it also left him uncertain when it came to his proposition of a marriage in name only.

Certain that he was on to something, he called Cristo. Luckily, his friend had just wrapped up a meeting. He was available to have coffee and a chat. Though Cristo asked him repeatedly if there was a problem, Niko was reluctant to get into it over the phone. This delicate conversation needed to be handled in person. And even then Niko was hesitant to share the full details—only what was necessary to bring his quickly evolving plan to fruition.

CHAPTER FOUR

THIS PLAN JUST had to work.

Niko stepped inside Cristo's luxury suite. Not so long ago they'd met here to discuss business, but this time his agenda was a bit more personal. Over the months, he and Cristo had become not only family, but also close friends. It was interesting to both of them how much they had in common—powerful families with unrealistic expectations.

Niko joined Cristo on his private balcony overlooking the beach littered with sunbathers soaking up the sunshine while others enjoyed the warm water of the resort's private cove. They all looked so relaxed and happy. Right now, Niko couldn't remember what it was like to be either of those two things.

His gut knotted up. If he made the wrong decision, he knew it would impact not only his life but Sofia's and their unborn

baby's. The decision to make Sofia his bride didn't have to be made overnight. If he cut his trip short, Sofia would still be at the Blue Tide when he returned.

Cristo cleared his throat. "Sorry about the delay. Some staffing issues were just brought to my attention."

"You really take a hands-on approach with this place, don't you?"

Cristo poured them each a cup of coffee. "Yes. This resort is special to me. It was my idea. I've seen it through the planning, building and opening. And now that Kyra and I married here, it's our home."

"Even more so than New York?"

"My home is wherever my wife is, and right now, she's enjoying her time here." Cristo sipped his coffee. "So tell me what's on your mind."

Niko wasn't sure how much of what he was thinking he should vocalize. "I wanted to ask you about Sofia."

A knowing smile came across Cristo's face. "I saw the way you two hit it off at the wedding. Kyra wanted to do some matchmaking, but I told her not to get involved. It's better when things work out on their own. So you and Sofia, are you getting serious?"

Now how exactly did he answer that? The pregnancy was serious. The rest of it had yet to be determined. "We might be."

"And that's why you're here? You want to know if there's any reason you shouldn't get involved?"

Niko inclined his head. "Something like that."

Cristo took another sip of his coffee. "I don't know if I'm the person you should consult."

"Why's that?"

"Because I know nothing about romance and relationships."

"But how can that be? You're happily married."

"And that's due to my amazing wife. She's the one who believed in us and helped me to get past some rough spots. If it wasn't for her, I'd still be miserable and alone."

That last comment really caught Niko's attention. "You were miserable when you were single?"

Cristo shrugged his shoulders. "I just didn't want to admit it to myself. I thought I knew what would make me happy. And I was completely wrong. Lucky for me, Kyra opened my eyes. Your cousin is very smart, but if you tell her I said any of this, I'll totally deny it."

A smile pulled at Niko's lips. "Don't worry. I don't think I have to tell my cousin a thing. Anyone can see the happiness radiating from you two."

"It's easy when you have the right person in your life. Do you think Sofia is the right person for you?"

The smile slipped from Niko's face. "I think so."

"Why do you look so worried?"

"I'm not sure Sofia feels the same way."

"Ah, I understand. Women are tough to read."

Niko cleared his throat. "Speaking of Sofia, have you known

her long?”

“Depends on how you look at it. I’ve known her as long as I’ve known Kyra. And that was long enough for me to realize I wasn’t going to let Kyra get away. From what I’ve witnessed, Sofia is loyal and trustworthy.”

“Thanks for the insight.”

“But if you’re curious about Sofia, why aren’t you talking to her?”

Cristo was right. He just wanted to make sure there wasn’t something he was missing about Sofia before he enacted his plan. “It’s just that... Oh, never mind. I need to focus on my trip so we can finalize our deal. I’ll worry about this stuff later.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Not long.” While away, he intended to give his idea of marriage to Sofia some serious thought. “A few weeks.”

“That fast?”

“You sound surprised.” To him, being away from the Stravos Trust during this pivotal transition seemed like an eternity.

“I don’t know. I just thought you might want to take some downtime after everything that has happened.”

He was referring to the death of Niko’s grandfather. “I did take a little time off, but I found the work helps. It’s therapeutic for me.”

Cristo nodded in understanding. “Maybe the trip will be good for you, too.”

“Honestly, I’m not thrilled about this trip. It couldn’t have

come at a worse time.”

“Then why not delay it?”

“Trust me—the thought has crossed my mind more than once. But the sale of the hotel chain can’t be delayed. I have plans for the money, and I’m sure you’re anxious to get on with the merger of the two hotel chains.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

“And what about Sofia? You don’t want to miss this opportunity. You might never get it back.”

Cristo’s warning made Niko hesitate. Had he somehow found out about Sofia’s plans to return to New York? She’d said she hadn’t turned her resignation in yet, but after their discussion perhaps she’d changed her mind. “Is there a particular reason you say that?”

Cristo rubbed his clean-shaven jaw. “I really shouldn’t say anything—”

“This is important. If it’s about Sofia, I really need to know.”

Cristo’s brows rose. “Fine. The phone call I was on when you arrived was from my manager. Sofia has tendered her resignation at the Blue Tide Resort. She’s transferring back to the New York hotel.”

“How soon?”

“Immediately.”

“Immediately?” This was news.

“I haven’t spoken to her myself, but from what I can gather,

she's planning to hop on the next plane to New York. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Let's just say I might have some idea about what's going on." When Cristo sent him an I knew it look, Niko continued, "The thing is I, um, need her help. Would it be possible to give her some time off?"

"What sort of time are we talking? A day? Or two?"

"At least a few weeks."

Cristo's eyes widened. "I see. Well, I think we could make that work. But is Sofia willing to go along with whatever you have in mind?"

"I don't know, but I'm about to find out."

"Are you sure—"

"I am." Niko jumped to his feet. "Thanks. I have to go."

He didn't have a specific plan in mind to delay her departure, but he'd think of something. He didn't have a choice. He couldn't let Sofia disappear before they settled things. He was good at coming up with spontaneous plans. He had to come up with something good, something irresistible.

* * *

With a sigh, Sofia settled on the couch in her efficiency apartment. It had been a long, stressful day, and all she wanted now was to stay put, eat some leftover pizza and watch a romantic comedy. It might cheer her up. Then again, an adventure movie might be better.

Her meeting with Niko hadn't gone terribly wrong, but it

hadn't been good, either. Was it so far-fetched that she'd secretly envisioned his happy acceptance of the news? Instead, Niko looked as though he'd been diagnosed with a month to live.

Sofia glanced down at the uneaten slice of pepperoni pizza in her hand. Her stomach lurched. She slipped the food back on the plate. Maybe she'd finish it later—much later. After her stomach stopped feeling as if it was on the high seas. She hadn't experienced morning sickness until this week. Perhaps it was her nerves. Whatever it was, she wanted it to go away.

When her phone chimed, she welcomed the distraction. She snatched it from the coffee table, expecting to find a text from Kyra. Sofia had messaged her best friend earlier, telling her they needed to talk ASAP.

She'd been best friends with Kyra since junior high. Sofia thought they complemented each other well. She liked to take risks while Kyra liked to toe the line. Between the two of them, they'd kept out of trouble—or at least were never caught, as Kyra had reminded her over the years. But still, having a baby with a man that Kyra was just getting to know as family might put a strain on their friendship. Sofia hoped she was worried for nothing, but she'd learned the hard way that things don't always work out the way you imagine.

When she glanced at her phone, she saw the message wasn't from Kyra, after all. It was Niko. Her heart pounded, and her palms grew clammy. She immediately clicked on the text, anxious to find out what he wanted.

NikoStravosIII: Can we meet?

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): When?

NikoStravosIII: Now.

She glanced down at her gray sweat shorts and faded pink T-shirt. She definitely wasn't in any condition to run out the door and meet up with a billionaire. She wondered if he ever had a hair out of place or dressed in anything but designer clothes. She highly doubted it.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): Now isn't a good time.

NikoStravosIII: It has to be tonight.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): I don't know.

NikoStravosIII: We must talk before you leave tomorrow.

He knew? At least it saved her from having to tell him. And as much as she hated to admit it, he was right. They had to finish their discussion, and perhaps it'd be easier in person. But he wouldn't change her mind—she was going home. She'd just heard about an opening at the hotel in New York, and she'd jumped on it. It would make it possible for her to make a future for her and the baby near her family.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): Can you give me a little time?

NikoStravosIII: Hurry.

MaidintheShade347 (Sofia): I will.

Sofia leaped up from the couch. After tossing her leftover pizza back in the fridge, she hurried to her small bedroom. A glance in the mirror told her that she would benefit from jumping in the shower and starting all over again, but she knew Niko

wouldn't have the patience to wait that long. So she'd have to do her best to quickly paste herself back together.

At last she settled for a short summer dress that had a sleeveless denim blouse that tied at the waist and a white flowered skirt. It looked good on her without letting on that she'd tried too hard. After all, this wasn't a date or anything.

She texted Niko when she was ready. He wanted to meet on the beach. It was evening now, and the resort's guests would be having dinner. For the most part, they'd have the beach to themselves.

She rushed out the door, all the while wondering what he'd decided. As she rode down the elevator by herself, she pressed a protective hand to her abdomen and whispered, "Don't worry, little one. Everything will be all right." If only she could convince herself of that. "Your daddy will see that I'm doing what's best for all concerned."

Sofia made her way from the small employee complex on the outskirts of the resort to the hotel. It wasn't until then that she realized Niko hadn't been explicit in his instructions. The beach was huge. But she didn't have to wonder for long as he waved to her.

She joined him on the overlook that gave a stunning view of the private cove. The setting sun splashed streaks of pink and purple over the darkening water. But it wasn't the horizon that made the breath catch in Sofia's throat.

Her gaze settled on Niko. His wavy hair was finger-combed

back off his face. Talk about hitting the jackpot in the gene department. If their baby took after him, it'd be adorable.

Niko was wearing dark slacks and a blue dress shirt. Didn't the man ever go casual? She was starting to wonder if his wardrobe contained anything but designer suits. Although tonight he'd dispensed with his jacket and tie. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, and the top buttons were undone, giving a hint of the few dark curls on his chest. Her fingers longed to reach out to him as she had on that unforgettable night.

Her gaze rose, meeting his. A frown pulled at his lips as he glanced down at himself. "Is there something wrong with my clothes?"

Realizing that she'd been caught staring, she shook her head. "Um...no."

"Are you sure? Did I spill something on myself?"

She shook her head again. "I was just wondering if you ever wear anything but suits."

"Really? That's what you were thinking?" When she nodded, he added, "And what's wrong with a suit?"

She waved her hand around at the beach. "You do realize this is a resort. People come here to relax and unwind. You look like you're ready to close a billion-dollar deal."

"Ah, but in my case I came to the Blue Tide Resort to do exactly that." He smiled, sending her stomach dipping. "Well, not the billion-dollar part, but it's a substantial deal. Therefore, my attire is quite appropriate."

“Are you always so uptight? Do you ever kick back? Relax?”

“Of course.”

She didn't believe him. “I think you focus on business 24/7.”

“Did you ever consider I might find it relaxing?”

“And the suits?”

“To quote my grandfather, a man must dress properly to do business. But if you hadn't noticed, I did dispense with my jacket and tie.”

She shook her head in disbelief. Inside, her stomach shivered with nervous tension. Critiquing his attire wasn't why he'd invited her here, but she welcomed the diversion. “How about some jean shorts and a T-shirt? Or in your case, perhaps dress shorts and a polo shirt?”

He glanced away. “I'm more comfortable like this.”

“Do you even own any casual clothes?”

“Of course.” He responded much too quickly, making her wonder whether he really did own anything she would classify as casual. “But I just returned from a meeting.”

Was it really his clothes that bothered her? Or was it the thought that if she dressed him down, then his attitude might not be so serious? She wasn't quite sure. “Did you pack any of these casual clothes?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“Good. I'll wait here while you go change.”

“Change? Why would I do that?”

“So we can go for a walk on the beach.”

His hesitant gaze moved to the deserted beach and then back at her. "Wouldn't you be more comfortable talking here? We could order dinner and eat on the terrace."

He wanted to talk and eat? Her stomach lurched. There was no way. Walking and talking was much more appealing. "I'm not hungry." She didn't even want to smell food at this point. "I'd really like to walk."

He looked at her closely. "Are you feeling all right?"

She nodded.

"You're sure? You look a little pale."

She frowned. "Well, thank you. That's always what a woman wants to hear."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just meant... Oh, never mind. Wait here. I'll be right back."

She nodded, but still he hesitated. "I'll wait. I promise."

His eyes said that he didn't trust her. At all. "Good. We have important issues to discuss."

She couldn't tell by the tone of his voice if she was going to like what he had to say or not. At this point, she wasn't even sure what she wanted him to say. The push and pull of her conflicting emotions made her temples start to throb.

It will all work out. It will all work out.

She turned back to the view of the cove. All the while, she kept repeating those five words like some sort of mantra. It helped calm her nerves. Or so she wanted to believe.

She took in the colorful sky and the gentle lapping of the

water. This was the kind of setting for a romantic movie where the hero and heroine walk off into the sunset. She inwardly groaned. That would never be her and Niko.

About to admit her mistake, she spun around to tell Niko that she'd changed her mind, but he was already gone. Whatever she did this evening, she had to keep her wits about her. Nothing good would come of repeating that toe-curling kiss. Nothing at all.

Still, her mind dwelled on that moment at his bungalow when he'd held her in his arms. Her heart picked up its pace. She'd never been kissed with such passion. No one had ever made her feel as if she was the only woman in the world for him—

No! No! No! she scolded herself. It didn't help when she recalled how delicious it was having his lips pressed to hers. She had to resist the temptation. She had to.

Somehow...

CHAPTER FIVE

SINCE WHEN DID he take orders?

He was the boss. He handed out the orders.

Niko glanced at Sofia. What was it about her that had him continually making exceptions to the rules?

The shorts and polo shirt he now wore were the only casual clothes he'd brought with him. To be honest, he wasn't quite sure what had possessed him to toss them into his suitcase. It must have been the fact that he liked to be prepared for any occasion. Although there was nothing in his suitcase to prepare him for a

discussion about his baby—his baby—the words echoed in his mind.

“Niko?” Sofia’s voice drew him from his thoughts.

Had she been speaking? He hadn’t heard a word she’d said. That wasn’t like him. He was good at multitasking, especially at business meetings. He could respond to emails on his phone while listening to a presentation and never lose a beat. But when he was around Sofia, he had problems staying on task.

“What did you say?”

“I asked if your business meeting went well.”

He nodded. “It would have gone better if I’d been able to close the deal then and there.”

“Why couldn’t you?”

He didn’t want to get into any of that now. They had other things to discuss. “That’s not important.” He stopped walking and turned to her. “We need to talk about your situation.”

“You mean my pregnancy.”

“Yes. That.” She said it so easily, as if she’d already come to terms with it all. Was it possible she was happy about it? Could that be? “What are you planning to do? Because if you need—”

“I don’t need anything. I already told you—I’m keeping it.”

He frowned. “I don’t know what you thought I was about to say. And I don’t want to know. However, if you had let me finish, I was going to ask if I could help with your medical expenses.”

He wanted only the best for her and their baby. Her vehement devotion to keeping their baby struck him. How had she become

so attached and protective in such a short amount of time? It must be different for mothers, because he was still struggling to wrap his mind around the whole baby issue. A baby. His baby. It still didn't feel real.

Curious about her acceptance of the situation, he asked, "How long have you known that you are pregnant?"

"I told you—I found out this week." She turned and started walking again, farther from the resort.

That's right. He vaguely remembered her mentioning it earlier that day, but he'd been too shocked for it to stick. "If it's all new to you, how can you be so certain you want this baby? It's going to change your entire world. Nothing will be the same."

"The timing might not be the best, but I always hoped that someday I'd be a mother." Her hand moved to her abdomen. Then, as though she realized what she was doing, she lowered her hand to her side. "But I understand that just because I feel this way doesn't mean you feel the same way. And...and I'm okay with that. We can say our goodbyes and—"

"Hold on. I didn't say anything about saying goodbye." She was the mother of his baby—the Stravos heir. Like it or not, their lives were intricately entwined.

She turned to him, her eyes flashing with surprise. "So this means that you, um...want to be involved with the baby?"

That's what surprised her? "It is my baby—"

"Our baby."

He was going to have to work on that. He wasn't used to

sharing anything with anyone. As an only child, he hadn't had the luxury of a sibling. As an adult, he'd never ventured into a committed relationship. So sharing was a new concept to him, but he would excel at it just like he did with everything he tackled in the boardroom. And by the stubborn look on Sofia's face, he didn't have any choice in the matter.

"How can you be so sure that being a mother at this stage in your life is the right thing to do?"

She glanced at him. "You really want to know?"

There was so much about her he wanted to know, but this was a good starting point. "Is it wrong for me to be curious?"

"No. But I'll warn you, it isn't what you're thinking. I don't want the baby because of who its father is. I want this baby for itself."

The conviction in her voice had him wanting to believe her. But could he trust her? "You still didn't answer the question."

She sighed. "It all started when I met who I thought was the most wonderful guy. He was cute and charming. In fact, he ticked all of the boxes in what I thought I wanted in a man. He was a hard worker with a bright future in his uncle's construction firm."

"I take it he wasn't all you thought he'd be?"

She shook her head. "At the time, I worked as a housekeeper at the Glamour Hotel in New York. A lot of times our schedules didn't line up, so we'd go long stretches without seeing each other. As time went on, he seemed to work longer and longer hours."

Niko could relate with her ex. It was easy to get caught up in one's work. He did it all the time. But something told him there was more to Sofia's story than she'd revealed so far.

"My family immediately loved Bobby. My mother was anxious to plan a wedding, and at the time I thought it was what I wanted, as well."

"Families sometimes have the best of intentions, but they aren't always right."

"Are you referring to your grandfather?"

Niko nodded. "He sounds a lot like your mother, except for the part about planning a wedding. That would have never happened."

"Because he believed it's women's work?"

"No. Because it would have taken time away from his work."

"Anyway, when Bobby was home, he was too tired to spend quality time with me. My mother, with her eye on the wedding ring, assured me all was fine. Couples got busy, and we just had to work extra hard to find time to spend together. So I gave up my apartment and moved in with him."

Not that Niko wasn't interested in her background, but he suddenly felt as though this conversation was going much deeper than he'd ever anticipated. The more she opened up to him, the closer they became and the harder it would be for him to keep his distance. "But what does any of this have to do with you wanting a baby at this stage?"

She frowned at him. "I'm getting to it if you'll just give me

a minute.”

“Sorry.” He wasn’t. He didn’t want to get caught up in her sticky details. He didn’t want to empathize with her. He didn’t want any entanglements, but he supposed with a baby on the way they would be forever entangled.

“I was certain moving in together would fix things. And it did. At first. Then things fell back into a busy routine. He started working all hours of the day and night, including weekends. It was ridiculous.”

“Well, business isn’t always conducted between nine and five, you know.”

She stopped and planted her hands on her hips. “Who’s telling this story?”

Had she really just admonished him? He wasn’t used to this. At the office, people cowered in his presence. Not that he’d done anything to warrant such a reaction. He supposed it was the legacy his grandfather had left him. That man had been a force to be reckoned with. His grandfather had made grown men quake in their boots with just a look.

“I was just trying to explain.” When Sofia sent him an Are you done yet? look, he added, “Okay. Continue.”

“Bobby promised it would get better. He said we’d have the rest of our lives together. He just needed some time to work on his career while I cooked, cleaned and did his laundry. He was too busy for those things.” She sighed. “This went on for a while, and then I got pregnant. Bobby was excited. We got engaged. He

started spending more time at home, and he expected me to be there. He wanted me to quit my job because he thought my place was in the home.” Frown lines marred her pretty face. “I refused to quit. I liked getting out of the apartment every day and having my own financial independence.”

None of this surprised Niko. Since the first time he met Sofia, she had struck him as fiercely independent. Obviously this story didn’t have a happy ending. His gut told him not to push her, that she’d say it when she was ready.

They continued walking. The sea washed up on the shore, ever closer to their feet. The curiosity to know the rest of Sofia’s story grew with each roll of the tide.

“And then I lost the baby.” A poignant note of pain threaded through her voice. “Bobby didn’t say he blamed me, but it was there in his eyes every time he looked at me.”

“Don’t.” Niko stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. “I don’t know anything about pregnancy, but I do know that sometimes in life things happen that are way beyond our control. I’m sure you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Her gaze met his. “You barely even know me—”

“I know enough.”

“And what is it that you think you know about me?”

“That you’re an honest person with a good heart who would do anything to protect your child.”

Sofia sniffled and blinked repeatedly. “You see a lot.”

“Only the truth.”

No wonder she was eager to turn her life upside down. He believed she would love their child the way children were supposed to be loved. He was so thankful for that part.

“And your boyfriend, what happened to him? Did he leave you because you wouldn’t cave in to his demands?”

“No. But that would have been so much easier.”

“Easier than what?”

She shook her head. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have rattled on so much.”

Just when she was getting to the interesting part, she decided to clam up. Frustration churned in his gut. He wasn’t sure if he was more upset with her for stringing him along with her story only to leave him wondering how the jerk had broken her heart, or if he was upset with himself for letting his guard down and caring about her. Maybe it was a bit of both.

“I take that to mean you’ve sworn off men.”

“Yes. And now that I’m pregnant, I don’t have time to date. I’ve got other priorities.”

Well, that would make what he had in mind even harder. But he was never one to back down from a challenge. Although the stakes had never been this high.

“Shouldn’t you take it easy? You know, after what happened before?” She didn’t have to work. He had the resources to keep her comfortable and well cared for throughout her pregnancy.

“I’m fine.” She smiled. “I had all of the appropriate tests done, and the doctor doesn’t see any reason for the past to repeat itself.”

Only then realizing he'd been holding his breath in anticipation of her response, he exhaled. They turned around and started back toward the resort.

Knowing for a fact that she'd oppose any talk of marriage at this point, he was more certain than ever that his plan would work...if only he could convince Sofia to go along with it.

"I have a proposition for you." He didn't know how else to phrase it.

"What sort of proposition?"

"I'd like to hire your services."

She stopped walking and sent him a puzzled stare. "You want to hire me? For what?"

"I'd like you to do some cleaning. I can make it worth your time."

Confusion reflected in her eyes. "Here at the Blue Tide? But I already cleaned your bungalow."

"Let me explain. Tomorrow I leave on a round-the-world trip. The Stravos family over the years has accumulated numerous private residences at a number of the Stravos Star Hotels. It's my job to see they are emptied and cleaned for the new owner."

"I'd like to help you, but I have plans to return to New York."

"I'll take you there at the conclusion of the trip."

She shook her head. "I don't have time for an extended trip. I have to find a home for myself and the baby."

"It'll only be for a few weeks, and I can help you find a place to live." With me on my private island in Greece, but he decided

to keep that part to himself for now.

“I didn’t tell you about the baby so you’d come riding to my rescue. I don’t need a knight in shining armor.”

“So what are your plans when you return to New York?”

“I’m planning to go back to school.”

“School? Really?” By the deepening frown on her face, he’d utterly failed to keep the surprise from his voice.

“It just so happens that I always did well in school.”

“So why didn’t you get your secondary education?”

She shrugged. “I met my ex just before I graduated high school. And I let myself get distracted, thinking I was in love and trying to make him happy. I always planned to go back someday.”

“And this is someday?”

“Yes. I have a knack with numbers, and I intend to get my accounting degree.”

“And something tells me you’ll do exactly that.”

Her admission made him all the more intent on helping her. He couldn’t imagine being a single parent would be easy for anyone, especially when the pregnancy was a surprise. And then to go back to school on top of it all.

Luckily he was fast and could think on his feet. He was, after all, a Stravos—his family hadn’t amassed a fortune over the years without being quick thinkers and following their guts. He could remedy this by meeting both of their needs.

He turned to her. “Come with me on this trip, and I’ll pay the tuition to the school of your choice.”

CHAPTER SIX

FOUR YEARS' WORTH of tuition earned in just a few weeks?

Was he for real?

Sofia studied Niko's face, finding a very serious expression there. "Why are you working so hard to get me to agree to this trip?"

"Why not? It's a win-win for both of us. I get help making the suites presentable, and you get money to follow your dreams."

She had to admit that it was tempting—very tempting. But her grandmother had taught her to be suspicious of offers that were too good to be true.

Sofia recalled his earlier admission about not being able to forget their night together. Was he interested in picking up where they'd left off at the wedding? That wasn't going to happen. She wasn't interested in a relationship. She'd been there and done that. Her heart still held the scars. And now with a baby coming, there was no way she was going to risk her heart. Not for Niko. Not for anyone.

"Why me? You can afford to hire anyone."

"Ah...but see, I don't want to spend the next couple of weeks globe-trotting with just anyone. My jet is big but not that big. You and I hit it off. You're entertaining. I like talking to you. And we already know we get along well—"

"That was one night—a night with wine flowing freely. You can't base any decisions on that evening."

“But you do have to admit it was unforgettable.”

She glanced away, not about to let him read the truth in her eyes. That night had been amazing—he’d been amazing. But like with all dreams, eventually you woke up and reality settled in. “If I agree, and I’m not saying that I have, but if I did, it’d be purely business.”

He inwardly sighed. He’d never had this hard of a time convincing a woman to travel with him. Not about to let her slip through his fingers, he said, “Yes, it’ll be business only, if that’s what you want.”

“It is.” And then her eyes twinkled as though a thought had just dawned on her. “And I’d have one other stipulation.”

He knew he wasn’t going to like this. “And that would be?”

“Your wardrobe.”

“What about it?”

“It’s not the most practical attire for cleaning out suites. I’m assuming you’ll be helping to box up mementos and such.” He nodded and she continued, “Then you’ll want some more casual clothes. After all, who would do manual labor in a designer suit? Each one probably cost more than a month’s rent.”

She had a point, and by the frown forming on his face, he couldn’t argue. She wondered if he’d ever cleaned and packed up an apartment in his life. His background was so different than hers.

“What are you thinking?”

She shook her head, not about to upset her potential employer.

“It’s nothing.”

“You know you didn’t have a problem opening up to me the night of the reception.”

“That night was different.”

“It’ll be a very long trip if we must censor everything we say to each other.”

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