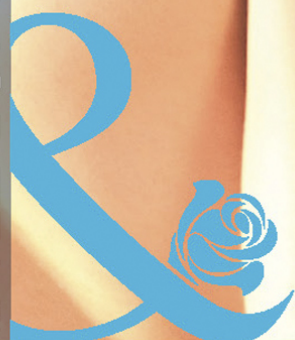




MODERN™



MAYA BLAKE

What the Greek's Money Can't Buy



Maya Blake

What the Greek's Money Can't Buy

«HarperCollins»

Blake M.

What the Greek's Money Can't Buy / M. Blake — «HarperCollins»,

The forbidden tastes all the sweeter... Oil magnate Sakis Pantelides always gets what he wants – after all, he's drop-dead gorgeous, powerful, and wealthy beyond words. But the one thing he can't have is his stunning assistant, Brianna Money Penny – because she's the only woman this cynical Greek can trust. When an international crisis throws them together twenty-four-seven intriguingly buttoned-up Brianna reveals a sensual hunger that rivals his own, and he realises just what he's been denying himself for so long. But when his perfect PA's secret is discovered will he pay the price for taking what he wants? 'Maya Blake writes the sexiest alpha males around!' – Gail, 52, Braintree Discover more at www.millsandboon.co.uk/mayablake

‘You take the shower first,’ Sakis said. The image that slammed into his mind sent a dark tremor through him, but he forced himself to breathe through it.

Brianna straightened and her gaze darted to the bathroom door in the so-called suite. ‘If you’re sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’ Then, unable to stop himself, even while every sense screamed at him to step away, he reached out and rubbed the smudge on her cheek. ‘You have an oil streak right there.’ He rubbed again.

With a sharply drawn breath she moved away, but her eyes stayed on him, and in their depths Sakis saw the clear evidence of lust.

With quick strides she disappeared into the bathroom and slammed the door. Leaving him standing there, staring at the door with an ever-rising pulse-rate that made him certain he risked serious health problems if he didn’t get it under control.

Whatever was happening here, he needed to stop it. *Now*. And he certainly needed *not* to think of Moneypenny behind that door, removing her clothes, stepping beneath the warm water ...

Moving to the drinks cabinet, he poured himself a shot of whisky. As he downed it his gaze strayed to the bathroom door.

Nothing was going to happen ... was it?

THE UNTAMEABLE GREEKS

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Sakis, Arion and Theo Pantelides—three formidable brothers who have risen up from the darkness of their pasts to conquer the world. Powerful, gorgeous and fabulously wealthy, these deliciously arrogant Greeks can have any woman they want—but none will ever tame them.

Until now ...?

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April 2014

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June 2014

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What the Greek’s Money Can’t Buy

Maya Blake



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MAYA BLAKE fell in love with the world of the alpha male and the strong, aspirational heroine when she borrowed her sister’s Mills & Boon® at age thirteen. Shortly thereafter the dream to plot a happy ending for her own characters was born. Writing for Harlequin Mills & Boon is a dream come true. Maya lives in South-East England with her husband and two kids. Reading is an absolute passion, but when she isn’t lost in a book she likes to swim, cycle, travel and Tweet!

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Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[EXTRACT](#)

CHAPTER ONE

‘COME ON, PUT your back into it! Why am I not surprised that you’re slacking as usual while I’m doing all the work?’

Sakis Pantelides reeled the oars through the slightly choppy water, loving the exhilaration and adrenaline that burned in his back and shoulders. ‘Stop complaining, old man. It’s not my fault if you’re feeling your age.’ He smiled when he heard his brother’s hiss of annoyance.

In truth, Ari was only two-and-a-half years older, but Sakis knew it annoyed him when he taunted him with their age difference, so of course he never passed up the chance to niggle where he could.

‘Don’t worry, Theo will be around to bail you out next time we row. That way you won’t have to strain yourself so much,’ Sakis said.

‘Theo would be more concerned about showing off his bulging muscles to the female coxes than he would to serious rowing,’ Ari responded dryly. ‘How he ever managed to stop showing off long enough to win five world championships, I’ll never know.’

Sakis heaved his oars and noted with satisfaction that he hadn’t lost the innate rhythm despite several months away from the favourite sport that had at one time been his sole passion. Thinking about his younger brother, he couldn’t help but smile. ‘Yeah, he always was more into his looks and the ladies than anything else.’

He rowed in perfect sync with his brother, their movements barely rippling through the water as they passed the halfway point of the lake used by the exclusive rowing club a few miles outside of London. Sakis’s smile widened as a sense of peace stole over him.

It’d been a while since he’d come here; since he’d found time to connect with his brothers like this. The punishing schedules it took to manage the three branches of Pantelides Inc meant the brothers hadn’t got together in way too long. That they had even been in the same time zone had been a miracle. Of course, it hadn’t stayed that way for long. Theo had cancelled at the last minute and was right this moment winging his way to Rio on a Pantelides jet to deal with a crisis for the global conglomerate.

Or maybe Theo had cancelled for another reason altogether.

His playboy brother wasn’t above flying thousands of miles for a one-hour dinner date with a beautiful woman. ‘If I find out he blew us off for a piece of skirt, I’ll confiscate his plane for a month.’

Ari snorted. ‘You can try. But I think you’re asking for a swift death if you attempt to come between Theo and a woman. Speaking of women, I see yours has finally managed to surgically remove herself from her laptop...’

He didn't break his rhythm despite the jolt of electricity that zapped through him. His gaze focused past his brother's shoulder to where Ari's attention was fixed.

He nearly missed his next stroke. Only the inbuilt discipline that had seen him win one more championship than his brothers' five apiece stopped him from losing his rhythm.

'Let's get one thing straight—she's not my woman.'

Brianna Money Penny, his executive assistant, stood next to his car. That in itself was a surprise, since she preferred to stay glued to his in-limo computer, one finger firmly on the pulse of his company any time he had to step away.

But what triggered the bolt of astonishment in him more was the not-quite-masked expression on her face. Brianna's countenance since the day she'd become his ultra-efficient assistant eighteen months ago had never once wavered from cool, icy professionalism.

Today she looked...

'Don't tell me she's succumbed to the Sakis Pantelides syndrome?' Ari's dry tone held equal parts amusement and resignation.

Sakis frowned, unease stirring in his belly and mingling with the emotions he refused to acknowledge when it came to his executive assistant. He'd learned the hard way that exposing emotion, especially for the wrong person, could leave scars that never really healed and took monumental effort to keep buried. As for mixing business with pleasure—that had been a near lethal cocktail he'd sampled once. Never again. 'Shut up, Ari.'

'I'm concerned, brother. She's almost ready to jump into the water. Or jump your bones, more like. Please tell me you haven't lost your mind and slept with her?'

Sakis's gaze flitted over to Money Penny, trying to pinpoint what was wrong from across the distance between them. 'I'm not sure what's more disturbing—your unhealthy interest in my sex life or the fact that you can keep rowing straight while practising the Spanish Inquisition,' he murmured absently.

As for getting physical with Money Penny, if his libido chose the most inappropriate times—like now—to remind him he was a red-blooded male, it was a situation he intended to keep ignoring, like he had been the last eighteen months. He'd wasted too much valuable time in this lifetime ridding himself of clinging women.

He strained the oars through the water, suddenly wanting the session to be over. Through the strokes, he kept his gaze fixed on Money Penny, her rigid stance setting off alarm bells inside his head.

'So, there's nothing between you two?' Ari pushed.

Something in his brother's voice made his hackles rise. With one last push, he felt the bottom of the scull hit the slope of the wooden jetty.

'If you're thinking of trying to poach her, Ari, forget it. She's the best executive assistant I've ever had and anyone who threatens that will lose a body part; two body parts for family members.'

'Cool your jets, bro. I wasn't thinking of that sort of poaching. Besides, hearing you gush over her like that tells me you're already far gone.'

Sakis's irritation grew, wishing his brother would get off the subject.

'Just because I recognise talent doesn't mean I've lost my mind. Besides, tell me, does your assistant know her Windsor knot from her double-cross knot?'

Ari's brows shot up as he stepped onto the pier and grabbed his oars. 'My assistant is a man. And the fact that you hired yours based on her tie-knotting abilities only confirms you're more screwed than I thought.'

'There's nothing delusional about the fact that she has more brains in her pinkie than the total sum of my previous assistants, and she's a Rottweiler when it comes to managing my business life. That's all I need.'

'Are you sure that's all? Because I detect a distinct...reverence in your tone there.'

Sakis froze, then grimaced when he realised Ari was messing with him. 'Keep it up. I owe you a scar for the one you planted on me with your carelessness.' He touched the arrow-shaped scar just above his right brow, a present from Ari's oar when they had first started rowing together in their teens.

'Someone had to bring you down a notch or three for thinking you were the better-looking brother.' Ari grinned, and Sakis was reminded of the carefree brother Ari had been before tragedy had struck and sunk its merciless claws into him. Then Ari's gaze slid beyond Sakis's shoulder. 'Your Rottweiler's prowling for you. She looks ready to bare her teeth.'

Sakis dropped his oars next to the overturned scull and glanced over, to find Brianna had moved closer. She now stood at the top of the pier, her arms folded and her gaze trained on him.

His alarm intensified. There was a look on her face he'd never seen before. Plus she held a towel in one hand, which suggested she was expecting him not to take his usual shower at the clubhouse.

Sakis frowned. 'Something's up. I need to go.'

'Did she communicate that to you subliminally or are you two so attuned to each other you can tell just by looking at her?' Ari enquired in an amused tone.

'Seriously, Ari, cork it.' His scowl deepened as he noted Brianna's pinched look. Again acting out of the ordinary, she started towards him.

Moneypenny knew never to disturb him during his time with his brothers. She was great like that. She knew her place in his life and had never once overstepped the mark. He started to walk away from the waterfront.

'Hey, don't worry about me. I'll make sure the equipment is returned to the boathouse. And I'll have all those drinks we ordered by myself too,' Ari stated drolly.

Sakis ignored him. When he reached speaking distance, he stopped. 'What's wrong?' he demanded.

For the very first time since she'd turned up for an interview at Pantelides Towers at five o'clock in the morning, Sakis saw her hesitate. The hair on his nape rose to attention. 'Spit it out, Moneypenny.'

The tightening of her mouth was infinitesimal but he spotted it. Another first. He couldn't remember ever witnessing an outward sign of distress. Silently, she held out his towel.

He snatched it from her, more to hurry her response than a need to wipe his sweat-drenched body.

'Mr Pantelides, we have a situation.'

His jaw tightened. 'What situation?'

'One of your tankers, the Pantelides Six, has run aground off Point Noire.'

Ice cascaded down his back despite the midsummer sun blazing down on him. Sakis forced a swallow. 'When did this happen?'

'I got a call via the head office from a crew member five minutes ago.'

She licked her lips and his apprehension grew.

'There's something else?'

'Yes. The captain and two crew members are missing and...'

'And what?'

Her pinched look intensified. 'The tanker hit an outcropping of rocks. Crude oil is spilling into the South Atlantic at an estimated rate of sixty barrels per minute.'

* * *

Brianna would never forget what happened next after her announcement. Outwardly, Sakis Pantelides remained the calm, ruthlessly controlled oil tycoon she'd worked alongside for the past eighteen months. But she would've failed in her task to make herself indispensable to him if she hadn't learned to read between the lines of the enigma that was Sakis Pantelides. The set of his strong

jaw and the way his hands tightened around the snow-white towel told her how badly the news had affected him.

Over his shoulder, Brianna saw Arion Pantelides pause in his task. Her eyes connected with his. Something in her face must have given her away because before she'd taken another breath the oldest Pantelides brother was striding towards them. He was just as imposing as his younger brother, just as formidable. But, where Sakis's gaze was sharp with laser-like focus and almost lethal intelligence, Arion's held a wealth of dark torment and soul-deep weariness.

Brianna's gaze swung back to her boss, and she wasn't even slightly surprised to see the solid mask of power and ruthless efficiency back in place.

'Do we know what caused the accident?' he fired out.

She shook her head. 'The captain isn't responding to his mobile phone. We haven't been able to establish contact with vessel since the initial call. The Congolese coast guard are on their way. I've asked them to contact me as soon as they're on site.' She fell into step beside him as his long strides headed for the car. 'I've got our emergency crew on standby. They're ready to fly out once you give the word.'

Arion Pantelides caught up with them as they neared the limousine.

He put a halting hand on his brother's shoulder. 'Talk to me, Sakis.'

In clipped tones, Sakis filled him in on what had happened. Arion's gaze swung to her. 'Do we have the names of the missing crew members?'

'I've emailed the complete crew manifest to both your phones and Theo's. I've also attached a list of the relevant ministers we need to deal with in the government to ensure we don't ruffle any feathers, and I've scheduled calls with all of them.'

A look flickered in his eyes before his gaze connected with his brother's. When Sakis's brow rose a fraction, Arion gave a small smile.

'Go. I'll deal with as much as I can from here. We'll talk in one hour.' Arion clasped his brother's shoulder in reassurance before he strode off.

Sakis turned to her. 'I'll need to speak to the President.'

Brianna nodded. 'I've got his chief of staff on hold. He'll put you through when you're ready.'

Her gaze dropped to his chest and immediately shifted away. She stepped back to move away from the potent scent of sweat and man that radiated off his deep olive skin. 'You need to change. I'll get you some fresh clothes.'

As she headed towards the boot of the car, she heard the slide of his rowing suit zip. She didn't turn because she'd seen it all before. At least that was what she told herself. She hadn't seen Sakis Pantelides totally naked, of course. But hers was a twenty-four-seven job. And, when you worked as close as she did with a suave, self-assured, powerful tycoon who saw you as nothing but a super-efficient, sexless automaton, you were bound to be exposed to all aspects of his nature. And his various states of undress.

The first time Sakis Pantelides had undressed in front of her, Brianna had taken it in her stride, just as she'd brutally trained herself to take most things in her stride.

To feel, to trust, to give emotion an inch, was to invite disaster.

So she'd learned to harden her heart. It had been that...or sink beneath the weight of crushing despair.

And she refused to sink...

She straightened from the boot with a pristine blue shirt and a charcoal-grey Armani suit in one hand and the perfectly knotted double Oxford tie Sakis favoured in the other. She kept her gaze trained on the sun-dappled lake beyond his shoulder as she handed the items over and went to retrieve his socks and hand-made leather shoes.

She didn't need to see his strong neck and shoulders, honed perfectly from his years of professional, championship-winning rowing, or his deep, ripped chest with silky hairs that arrowed

down to his neat, trim waist and disappeared beneath the band of his boxers. She most certainly didn't need to see the powerful thighs that looked as if they could crush an unwary opponent, or pin a willing female to an unyielding wall...in the right circumstances. And she especially didn't need to see the black cotton boxer briefs that made a poor effort to contain his—

A loud beep signalling an incoming call from the limo's phone startled her into dropping his socks. She hastily picked them up and slid into the car. From the corner of her eye, she saw Sakis step into his trousers. Silently, she held out the remaining items and picked up the phone.

'Pantelides Shipping,' she said into the receiver as she picked up her electronic tablet. She listened calmly to the voice at the other end of the line, tapping away at her keyboard as she added to the ever-growing to-do list.

By the time Sakis slid next to her, and slammed the door, impeccably dressed, she was on her fifth item. She paused long enough to secure her seat belt before resuming her typing.

'The only answer I have for you right now is no comment. Sorry, no can do.' Sakis stiffened beside her. 'Absolutely not. No news outlet will be getting exclusives. Pantelides Shipping will issue one press release within the hour. It will be posted on our company's website and affiliated media and social network links with the relevant contact details. If you have any questions after that, contact our press office.'

'Tabloid or mainstream media?' Sakis asked the moment she hung up.

'Fleet Street. They want to verify what they've heard.' The phone rang again. Seeing the number of another tabloid, she ignored it. Sakis had more pressing phone calls to make. She passed him the headset connected to the call she'd put on hold for the last ten minutes.

The tightening of his jaw was almost imperceptible before complete control slid back into place. His fingers brushed hers as he took the device from her. The unnerving voltage that came from touching Sakis made her heartbeat momentarily fluctuate but that was yet another thing she took in her stride.

His deep voice brimmed with authority and bone-deep assuredness. It held the barest hint of his Greek heritage but Brianna knew he spoke his mother tongue with the same stunning fluency and efficiency with which he ran the crude-oil brokerage arm of Pantelides Shipping, his family's multi-billion-dollar conglomerate.

'Mr President, please allow me to express my deepest regret at the situation we find ourselves in. Of course, my company takes full responsibility for this incident and will make every effort to ensure minimal ecological and economic distress. Yes, I have a fifty-man expert salvage and investigation crew on its way. They'll assess what needs to be done... Yes, I agree. I'll be there at the site within the next twelve hours.'

Brianna's fingers flew over her tablet as she absorbed the conversation and planned accordingly. By the time Sakis concluded the call, she had his private jet and necessary flight crew on standby.

They both stopped as the sleek phone rang again.

'Would you like me to get it?' Brianna asked.

Sakis shook his head. 'No. I'm the head of the company. The buck stops with me.' His gaze snagged hers with a compelling look that held hers captive. 'This is going to get worse before it gets better. Are you up to the task, Miss Money Penny?'

Brianna forced herself to breathe, even as the tingle in her shoulder reminded her of the solemn vow she'd taken in a dark, cold room two years ago.

I refuse to sink.

She swallowed and firmed her spine. 'Yes, I'm up to the task, Mr Pantelides.'

Dark-green eyes the colour of fresh moss held hers for a moment longer. Then he gave a curt nod and picked up the phone.

'Pantelides,' he clipped out.

For the rest of the journey to Pantelides Towers, Brianna immersed herself in doing what she did best—anticipating her boss's every need and fulfilling it without so much as a whisper-light ruffle.

It was the only way she knew how to function nowadays.

By the time she handed their emergency suitcases to his helicopter pilot and followed Sakis into the lift that would take them to the helipad at the top of Pantelides Towers, they had a firm idea of what lay ahead of them.

There was nothing they could do to stop the crude oil spilling into the South Atlantic—at least not until the salvage team got there and went into action.

But, glancing at him, Brianna knew it wasn't only the disaster that had put the strain on Sakis's face. It was also being hit with the unexpected.

If there was one thing Sakis hated, it was surprises. It was why he always out-thought his opponents by a dozen moves, so he couldn't be surprised. Having gained a little insight into his past from working with him, Brianna wasn't surprised.

The devastating bombshell Sakis's father had dropped on his family when Sakis had been a teen was still fodder for journalists. Of course, she didn't know the full story, but she knew enough to understand why Sakis would hate having his company thrown into the limelight like this.

His phone rang again.

'Mrs Lowell. No, I'm sorry, there's no news.' His voice held the strength and the solid dependable calm needed to reassure the wife of the missing captain. 'Yes, he's still missing, but please be assured, I'll personally call you as soon as I have any information. You have my word.'

A pulse jumped in his temple as he hung up. 'How long before the search and rescue team are at the site?'

She checked her watch. 'Ninety minutes.'

'Hire another crew. Three teams working in eight-hour shifts are better than two working in twelve-hour shifts. I don't want anything missed because they're exhausted. And they're to work around the clock until the missing crew are found. Make it happen, Moneypenny.'

'Yes, of course.'

The lift doors opened. Brianna nearly stumbled when his hand settled in the small of her back to guide her out.

In all her time working for him, he'd never touched her in any way. Forcing herself not to react, she glanced at him. His face was set, his brows clamped in fierce concentration as he guided her swiftly towards the waiting helicopter. A few feet away, his hand dropped. He waited for the pilot to help her up into her seat before he slid in beside her.

Before the aircraft was airborne, Sakis was on the phone again, this time to Theo. The urgent exchange in Greek went right over Brianna's head but it didn't stop her secret fascination with the mellifluous language or the man who spoke it.

His glance slid to her and she realised she'd been unashamedly staring.

She snapped her attention back to the tablet in her hand and activated it.

There'd been nothing personal in Sakis's touch or his look. Not that she'd expected there to be. In all ways and in all things, Sakis Pantelides was extremely professional.

She expected nothing less from him. And that was just the way she wished it.

Her lesson had been well and truly learned in that department, in the harshest possible way, barring death—not that she hadn't come close once or twice. And all because she'd allowed herself to feel, to dare to connect with another human being after the hell she'd suffered with her mother.

She was in no danger of forgetting; if she did, she had the tattoo on her shoulder to remind her.

* * *

Sakis pressed the 'end' button on yet another phone call and leaned back against the club seat's headrest.

Across from him, the tap-tap of the keyboard filled the silence as his assistant worked away at the ever-growing list of tasks he'd been throwing at her since they'd taken off four hours ago.

Turning his head, he glanced at her. As usual her face was expressionless save the occasional crease at the corner of her eyes as she squinted at the screen. Her brow remained smooth and untroubled as her fingers flew over the keyboard.

Her sleek blonde hair was in the same pristine, precise knot it had been when she'd arrived at work at six o'clock this morning. Without conscious thought, his gaze traced over her, again feeling that immediate zing to his senses.

Her dress suit was impeccable—a black-and-white combination that looked a bit severe but suited her perfectly. In her lobes, pearl earrings gleamed, small and unassuming.

His gaze slid down her neck, past slim shoulders and over the rest of her body, examining her in a way he rarely permitted himself to. The sight of the gentle curve of her breasts, her flat stomach and her long, shapely legs made his hands flex on his armrests as the zing turned stronger.

Money Penny was fit, if a little on the slim side. Despite his slave-driving schedule, not once in the last year and a half had she turned up late for work or called in sick. He knew she stayed in the executive apartment in Pantelides Towers more and more lately rather than return to... He frowned. To wherever it was she called home.

Again he thanked whatever deity had sent her his way.

After his hellish experience with his last executive assistant, Giselle, he'd seriously contemplated commissioning a robot to handle his day-to-day life. When he'd read Brianna's flawless CV, he'd convinced himself she was too good to be true. He'd only reconsidered her after all the other candidates, after purporting to have almost identical supernatural abilities, had turned up at the interviews with not-so-hidden agendas—ones that involved getting into his bed at the earliest opportunity.

Brianna Money Penny's file had listed talents that made him wonder why another competitor hadn't snapped her up. No one that good would've been jobless, even in the current economic climate. He'd asked her as much.

Her reply had been simple: 'You're the best at what you do. I want to work for the best.'

His hackles had risen at that response, but there had been no guile, no coquettish lowering of her lashes or strategic crossing of her legs. If anything, she'd looked defiant.

Thinking back now, he realised that was the first time he'd felt it—that tug on his senses that accompanied the electrifying sensation when he looked into her eyes.

Of course, he dismissed the feeling whenever it arose. Feelings had no place in his life or his business.

What he'd wanted was an efficient assistant who could rise to any challenge he set her. Money Penny had risen to each challenge and continued to surprise him on a regular basis, a rare thing in a man of his position.

His gaze finally reached her feet and, with a sharp dart of astonishment, he noted the tiny tattoo on the inside of her left ankle. The star-shaped design, its circumference no larger than his thumb, was inked in black and blue and stood out against her pale skin.

Although he was staring straight at it, the mark was so out of sync with the rest of her non-nonsense persona, he wondered if he was hallucinating.

No, it was definitely a tattoo, right there, etched into her flawless skin.

Intrigued, he returned his gaze to the busy fingers tapping away. As if sensing his scrutiny, her fingers slowed and her head started to lift and turn towards him.

Sakis glanced down at his watch. 'We'll be landing in three hours. Let's take a break now and regroup in half an hour.'

Despite the loud whirr of her laptop shutting down, he noticed her attention didn't stray far from the device. Her attention never wavered from her work—a fact that should've pleased him.

'I've ordered lunch to be served in five minutes. I can hold it off for a few more minutes if you would like to look over the bios of the people we need to speak to when we land?' Her gaze met his, her blue eyes cool and unwavering.

His gaze dropped again to her ankle. As he watched, she slowly re-crossed her legs, obscuring the tattoo from his gaze.

'Mr Pantelides?' came the cool query.

Sakis inhaled slowly, willed his wavering control to slide back into place. By the time his gaze reconnected with hers, his interest in her tattoo had receded to the back of his mind.

Receded, but not been obliterated.

'Have lunch served in ten. I'll go take a quick shower.' He rose and headed for the larger of the two bedrooms at the rear of his plane.

At the door, he glanced back over his shoulder. Brianna Moneypenny was reaching for the attendant intercom with one hand while reopening her laptop with the other.

Super-efficient and ultra-professional. His executive assistant was everything she'd said on the tin, just like he'd explained to Ari.

But it suddenly occurred to Sakis that, in the eighteen months she'd worked for him, he'd never bothered looking inside the tin.

CHAPTER TWO

'I NEED TO get to the site asap once we land,' Sakis said in between bites of his chef-made gourmet beef burger.

Brianna curbed her pang of envy as she forked her plain, low-fat, crouton-free salad niçoise into her mouth and shook her head. 'The environment minister wants a meeting first. I tried to postpone it but he was insistent. I think he wants a photo op, this being an election year and all. I told him it'd have to be a brief meeting.'

His jaw tightened on his bite, his eyes narrowing with displeasure. Brianna didn't have to wonder why.

Sakis Pantelides detested any form of media attention with an almost unholy hatred, courtesy of the public devastation and humiliation Alexandrou Pantelides had visited on his family two decades ago. The Pantelides' downfall had been played out in full media glare.

'I have a helicopter on standby to take you straight to the site when you're done.'

'Make sure his people know my definition of brief. Do we know what the media presence is at the site?' he asked after swallowing another mouthful.

Her gaze darted to his. Green eyes watched her like a hawk. 'All the major global networks are present. We also have a couple of EPA ships in the area monitoring things.'

He gave a grim nod. 'There's not much we can do about the Environmental Protection Agency's presence, but make sure security know that they can't be allowed to interfere in the salvage and clean-up process. Rescuing the wildlife and keeping pollution to a minimum is another top priority.'

'I know. And...I had an idea.' Her plan was risky, in that it could attract more media attention than Sakis would agree to, but if she managed to pull it off it would reap enormous benefits and buy back some goodwill for Pantelides Shipping. It would also cement her invaluable status in Sakis's eyes and she could finally be rid of the sinking, rock-hard feeling in her stomach when she woke in a cold sweat many nights.

Some might find it shallow but Brianna placed job security above everything else. After everything she'd been through as a child—naively trusting that the only parent she had would put her well-being ahead of the clamour of the next drug fix—keeping her job and her small Docklands apartment meant everything to her. The terror of not knowing where her next meal would come from or when her temporary home would be taken from her still haunted her. And after her foolish decision to risk giving her trust, and the steep price she'd paid for it, she'd vowed never to be that helpless again.

'Moneypenny, I'm listening,' Sakis said briskly, and she realised he was waiting for her to speak.

Gathering her fracturing thoughts, she took a deep breath.

'I was thinking we can use the media and social network sites to our advantage. A few environmental blogs have started up, and they're comparing what's happening with the other oil conglomerate incident a few years ago. We need to nip that in the bud before it gets out of hand.'

Sakis frowned. 'It isn't even remotely the same thing. For one thing, this is a surface spill, not a deep sea pipeline breach.'

'But...'

His expression turned icy. 'I'd also like to keep the media out of this as much as possible. Things tend to get twisted around when the media becomes involved.'

'I believe this is the ideal time to bring them round to our side. I know a few journalists who are above-board. Perhaps, if we can work exclusively with them, we can get a great result. We've admitted the error is ours, so there's nothing to cover up. But not everyone has time to fact-check and the public making assumptions could be detrimental to us. We need to keep the line of communication wide open so people know everything that's going on at every stage.'

'What do you propose?' Sakis pushed his plate away.

She followed suit and fired up her laptop. Keying in the address, she called up the page she'd been working on. 'I've started a blog with a corresponding social networking accounts.' She turned the screen towards him and held her breath.

He glanced down at it. "'Save Point Noire'"?

She nodded.

'What is the point of that, exactly?'

'It's an invitation for anyone who wants to volunteer—either physically at the site or online with expertise.'

Sakis started to shake his head and her heart took a dive. 'Pantelides Shipping is responsible for this. We'll clean up our own mess.'

'Yes, but shutting ourselves off can also cause us a huge negative backlash. Look—' she indicated the numbers on the screen '—we're trending worldwide. People want to get involved.'

'Won't they see it as soliciting free help?'

'Not if we give them something in return.'

His gaze scoured her face, intense and focused, and Brianna felt a tiny burst of heat in her belly. Feverishly, she pushed it away.

'And what would that something be?' he asked.

Nerves suddenly attacked her stomach. 'I haven't thought that far ahead. But I'm sure I can come up with something before the day's out.'

He kept staring at her for so long, her insides churned harder. Reaching for his glass, he took a long sip of water, his gaze still locked on her.

'Just when I think you're out of tricks, you surprise me all over again, Miss Money Penny.' The slow, almost lazy murmur didn't throw her. What threw her was the keen speculation in his eyes.

Brianna held his gaze even though she yearned to look away. Speculation led to curiosity. Curiosity was something she didn't want to attract from her boss, or anyone for that matter. Her past needed to stay firmly, irretrievably buried.

'I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr Pantelides.'

He glanced down at the laptop. 'Your plan is ingenious but, while I commend you for its inception, I'm also aware that keeping track of all the information flowing in will be a monumental task. How do you propose to do that?'

'If you give me the go-ahead, I can brief a small team back at the head office to take over. Any relevant information or genuine volunteer will be put through to me and I can take it from there.'

The decisive shake of his head made her want to clench her fist in disappointment. 'I need you with me once we get on site. I can't have you running off to check your emails every few minutes.'

'I can ask for three-hourly email updates.' When his gaze remained sceptical, she rushed on. 'You said so yourself—it's a great idea. At least let me have a go at trying to execute it. We need the flow of information now more than ever and getting the public on our side can't hurt. What do we have to lose?'

After a minute, he nodded. 'Four-hourly updates. But we make cleaning up the spill our top priority.'

'Of course.' She reached for the laptop but he leaned forward, took it from her and set it down beside his plate.

'Leave that for now. You haven't finished your meal.'

Surprised, she glanced down at her half-finished plate. 'Um...I sort of had.'

He pushed her plate towards her. 'You'll need your strength for what's ahead. Eat.'

Her gaze slid to his own unfinished meal as she picked up her fork. 'What about you?'

'My stamina is much more robust than yours—no offence.'

'None taken at all.' Her voice emerged a little stiffer than she intended.

Sakis quirked one eyebrow. 'Your response is at variance with your tone, Miss Money Penny. I'm sure some die-hard feminist would accuse me of being sexist, but you really need it more than I do. You barely eat enough as it is.'

She gripped her fork harder. 'I wasn't aware my diet was under scrutiny.'

'It's hard to miss that you watch what you eat with almost military precision. If it wasn't absurd, I'd think you were rationing yourself.' His eyes were narrowed in that unnervingly probing way.

Her pulse skittered in alarm at the observation. 'Maybe I am.'

His lips tightened. 'Well, going without food for the sake of vanity is dangerous. You're risking your health, and thereby your ability to function properly. It's your duty to ensure you're in the right shape so you can fulfil your duties.'

The vehemence in his tone made her alarm escalate. 'Why do I get the feeling we're talking about more than my abandoned salad?'

He didn't answer immediately. His lowered lids and closed expression told her the memory wasn't a pleasant one.

He settled back in his seat, outwardly calm. But Brianna saw the hand still wrapped around his water glass wasn't quite so steady. 'Watching someone wilfully waste away despite being surrounded by abundance isn't exactly a forgettable experience.'

Her grip went slack. 'I'm sorry...I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories for you. Who do you...?'

He shook his head once and indicated her plate. 'It doesn't matter. Don't let your food go to waste, Money Penny.'

Brianna glanced down at the remnants of her meal, trying to reconcile the outwardly confident man sitting across from her with the man whose hands trembled at a deeply disturbing memory. Not that she'd even been foolish enough to think Sakis Pantelides was one-faceted.

She recalled that one moment during her interview when he'd looked up from her file, his green eyes granite-hard and merciless.

'If you are to survive this job, I'd strongly urge you to take one piece of advice, Miss Money Penny. Don't fall in love with me.'

Her response had been quick, painful memory making her tongue acid-sharp. 'With respect, Mr Pantelides, I'm here for the salary. The benefits package isn't too bad either, but most of all I'm here for the top-notch experience. To my knowledge, love never has and never will pay the bills.'

What she'd wanted to add then was that she'd been there, done her time and had the tattoo to prove it.

What she wanted tell him now was that she'd endured far, far worse than a hungry stomach. That she'd known the complete desolation of coming a poor second to her mother's love for drugs.

She'd slept rougher than any child deserved to and had fought every day to survive in a concrete jungle, surrounded by the drug-addled bullies with vicious fists.

She held her tongue because to speak would be to reveal far more than she could ever afford to reveal.

Curiosity gnawed at her but she refused to probe further. Probing would invite reciprocity. Her past was under lock and key, tucked behind a titanium vault and sealed in concrete. And that was exactly where she intended to keep it.

In silence, she finished her meal and looked up with relief as the attendant arrived to clear away their plates.

When the phone rang, she pounced on it, grabbing the familiarity that came with work in an effort to banish the brief moments of unguarded intimacy.

'The captain of the coast guard is on the line for you.'

Sakis's gaze swept over her face, a speculative gleam in his eyes that slowly disappeared as he took the phone.

With an inward sigh of relief, Brianna reached for her laptop and fired it up.

* * *

Sakis's first glimpse of the troubled tanker made his gut clench hard. He tapped the helicopter pilot on the shoulder.

'Circle the vessel, would you? I want to assess the damage from the air before we land.'

The pilot obliged. Sakis's jaw tightened as he grasped the full impact of the damage of the tanker bearing the black and gold Pantelides colours.

He signalled for the pilot to land and alighted the moment the chopper touched down. A group of scandal-hungry journalists stood behind the cordoned-off area. From painful experience, Moneypenny's suggestion to bring them on-side rankled, but Sakis didn't dismiss the fact that in this instance she was right.

Ignoring them for now, he strode to where the crew waited, dressed in yellow, high-visibility jumpsuits.

'What's the situation?' he asked.

The head of the salvage crew—a thickset, middle-aged man with greying hair—stepped forward. 'We've managed to get inside the tanker and assessed the damage with the investigation team—we have three breached compartments. The other compartments haven't been affected but, the longer the vessel stays askew, the more likely we are to have another breach. We're working as fast as we can to set up the pumps to drain the compartment and the spillage.'

'How long will it take?'

'Thirty-six to forty-eight hours. Once the last of the crew get here, we'll work around the clock.'

Sakis nodded and turned to see Brianna emerge from the hastily set-up tents on the far side of the beach. For a moment he couldn't reconcile the woman heading towards him with his usual impeccably dressed assistant. Not that she had a hair out of place, of course. But she'd changed into cargo pants and a white T-shirt which was neatly tucked in and belted tight, emphasising her trim waist. Her shining hair made even more vivid by the fierce African sun was still caught in an immaculate knot, but on her feet she wore weathered combat boots.

For the second time today, Sakis felt the attraction he'd ruthlessly batted down strain at the leash.

Ignoring it, he turned his attention to the man next to him. 'It'll be nightfall in three hours. How many boats do you have conducting the search?'

'We have four boats, including the two you provided. Your helicopter is also assisting with the search.' The captain wiped a trickle of sweat off his face. 'But what worries me is the possibility of pirates.'

His gut clenched. 'You think they've been kidnapped?'

The captain nodded. 'We can't rule it out.'

Brianna's eyes widened, then she extracted her mini-tablet from her thigh pocket, her fingers flying over the keypad.

One corner of her lower lip was caught between her teeth as she pressed buttons. A small spike of heat broke through the tight anxiety in his gut. Without giving it the tiniest room, Sakis smashed down on it. Hard.

'What is it, Moneypenny?' he asked briskly after he'd dismissed the captain.

Her brow creased but she didn't look up. 'I'm sorry, I should've anticipated the pirates angle...'

He caught her chin with his forefinger and gently forced her head up. When her gaze connected with his, he saw the trace of distress in her eyes.

'That's what the investigators are here for. Besides, you've had a lot to deal with in the last several hours. What I need is the list of journalists you promised. Can you handle that?'

Her nod made her skin slide against his finger. Soft. Silky. Smooth.

Stási!

He stepped back abruptly and pushed the aberration from his mind.

Turning, he moved towards the shoreline, conscious that she'd fallen into step beside him. From the air, he'd guesstimated that the oil had spread about half a mile along the shore. As he surveyed the frantic activity up and down the once pristine shoreline, regret bit deep.

Whatever had triggered this accident, the blame for the now-blackened, polluted water lay with him, just as he was responsible for the missing crew members. Whatever it took, he would make this right.

The captain of the salvage crew brought the small boat near and Sakis went towards it. When Brianna moved towards him, he shook his head.

'No, stay here. This could be dangerous.'

She frowned. 'If you're going aboard the tanker, you'll need someone to jot down the details and take pictures of the damage.'

'I merely want to see the damage from the inside myself. I'm leaving everything else in the hands of the investigators. And, if I need to, I'm sure I can handle taking a few pictures. What I'm not sure of is the situation inside the vessel and I won't risk you getting injured under any circumstances.' He held out his hand for the camera slung around her neck.

She looked ready to argue with him. Beneath her T-shirt, her chest rose and fell as she exhaled and Sakis forced himself not to glance down as another spike of erotic heat lanced his groin.

Theos...

The unsettling feeling made him snap his fingers, an irritatingly frantic need to step away from her charging into him.

'If you're sure,' she started.

'I'm sure.'

By the time she freed herself from the camera strap and handed it over, her face had settled once more into its customary serene professionalism.

Her fingers brushed his as he took the camera and Sakis registered a single instance of softness before the contact was disconnected.

Taking a deep breath, he started to walk away.

'Wait!'

He turned back. 'What is it, Moneypenny?' His tone was harsh but couldn't stop the disturbing edginess creeping over him.

She held out a large yellow jumpsuit. 'You can't get on the boat without wearing this. The health and safety guidelines require it.'

Despite the grim situation, Sakis wanted to laugh at her implacable expression as she held him to account.

‘Then by all means...if the guidelines require it.’

He took the plastic garment, shook it out and stepped into it under her watchful eye. He glanced at her as he zipped the jumpsuit and once again saw her lower lip caught between her teeth.

With more force than was necessary, he shoved the small digital camera into the waterproof pocket and trudged through the oil-slicked water.

An hour later, the words of his lead investigator made his heart sink.

‘I retired from piloting tankers like these ten years ago, and even then the navigation systems were state-of-the-art. Your vessel has the best one I’ve ever seen. There’s no way this was systems failure. Too many fail-safes in place for the vessel to veer this far off course.’

Sakis gave a grim nod and pulled his phone from his pocket. ‘Moneypenny, get me the head of security. I want to know everything about Morgan Lowell... Yes, the captain of my tanker. And prepare a press release. Unfortunately, the investigators are almost certain this was pilot error.’

* * *

Brianna perused the electronic page for typos. Once she was satisfied, she approached where Sakis stood with the environment minister. His yellow jumpsuit was unzipped to the waist, displaying the dark-green T-shirt that moulded his lean, sleekly muscular torso. She’d never thought she’d find the sight of a man slipping on a hideous yellow jumpsuit so...hot and unsettling.

He turned, and she held her breath as his gaze swept over her. The crackle of electricity she’d felt earlier when their fingers had touched returned.

Abruptly she pushed it away. They were caught in a severely fraught set of circumstances. What she was experiencing was just residual adrenaline that came with these unfortunate events.

‘Is it ready?’ he asked.

She nodded and passed the press release over, along with the list of names he’d requested. He skimmed the words then passed the tablet back to her. Brianna knew he’d memorised every single word.

‘I’ll go and prep the media.’

She headed for the group of journalists poised behind the white cordon. As she walked, she practised the breathing exercises she’d mastered long before she’d come to work for Sakis Pantelides.

By the time she reached the group, she’d calmed her roiling emotions.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is how it’s going to work. Mr Pantelides will give his statement. Then he’ll invite questions—one from each of you.’ She held out a hand at the immediate protests. ‘I’m sure you’ll understand that it’ll take hours for every question you’ve jotted down to be answered and frankly we don’t have time for that. Right now the priority is the salvage operation. So, one question each.’ Control settled over her as her steely gaze held the group’s and received their cooperation.

Yes, that was more like it. Not for her the searing, jittery feelings of the last few hours, ever since she’d looked up on the plane and caught Sakis’s gaze on her ankle tattoo; since he’d touched her on the beach, told her not to worry that she’d missed the pirates angle. Those few minutes had been intensely...rattling.

The momentary heat she’d seen in his eyes had thrown her off-balance. At the start of her employment she’d taken pains to hide the tattoo but, after realising Sakis took no notice of what she wore or anything about her, she’d relaxed. The sensation of his eyes on her tattoo had smashed a fist through her tight control.

It had taken hours to restore it but, now she had, she was determined not to lose it again.

There was too much at stake.

Feeling utterly composed, she glanced over to where Sakis waited at the assembled podium. At his nod, she signalled security to let the media through.

She stood next to the podium and tried not to let his deep voice affect her as he started speaking. His authority and confidence as he outlined the plans for the salvage mission and the search for the

missing crew belied the tension in his body. From her position, she could see the rigid outline of his washboard stomach and the braced tension in his legs. Even though his hands remained loose at his sides, his shoulders barely moved as he spoke.

A camera flashed nearby and she saw his tiniest flinch.

‘What’s going to happen to the remaining oil on board?’ a reporter asked.

His gaze swung to where the minister stood. ‘For their very generous assistance, we’re donating the contents on board the distressed vessel to the coast guard and army. The minister has kindly offered to co-ordinate the distribution.’

‘So you’re just going to give away oil worth millions of dollars, out of the goodness of your heart? Are you trying to bribe your way out of your company’s responsibilities, Mr Pantelides?’

Brianna’s breath stalled but Sakis barely blinked at the caustic remark from a particularly vile tabloid reporter. That he didn’t visibly react was a testament to his unshakeable control.

‘On the contrary, as I said at the start, my company assumes one hundred per cent liability for this incident and are working with the government in making reparations. No price is too high to pay for ensuring that the clean-up process is speedy and causes minimum damage to the sea life. This means the remaining crude oil has to be removed as quickly as possible and the vessel secured and towed away. Rather than transfer it to another Pantelides tanker, a process that’ll take time, I’ve decided to donate it to the government. I’m sure you’ll agree it makes perfect sense.’ His tone remained even but the tic in his jaw belied his simmering anger. ‘Next question.’

‘Can you confirm what caused the accident? According to your sources, this is one of your newest tankers, equipped with state-of-the-art navigation systems, so what went wrong?’

‘That is a question for our investigators to answer once they’d finished their work.’

‘What does your gut feeling say?’

‘I choose to rely on hard facts when stakes are this high, not gut feelings,’ Sakis responded, his tone clipped.

‘You haven’t made a secret of your dislike for the media. Are you going to use that to try and stop the media from reporting on this accident, Mr Pantelides?’

‘You wouldn’t be here if I felt that way. In fact—’ he stopped and flicked a glance at Brianna before facing the crowd, but not before she caught a glimpse of the banked unease in his eyes ‘—I’ve hand-picked five journalists who will be given exclusive access to the salvage process.’

He read out the names. While the chosen few preened, the rest of the media erupted with shouted questions.

One in particular filtered through. ‘If your father were alive and in your place, how would he react to this incident? Would he try and buy his way out of it, like he did with everything else?’

The distressed sound slipped from Brianna’s throat before she could stop it. Silence fell over the gathered group as the words froze in the air. Beneath the podium, out of sight of the media’s glare, Sakis’s hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

The urge to protect him surged out of nowhere and swept over her in an overwhelming wave. Her heart lurched, bringing with it a light-headedness that made her sway where she stood. Sakis’s quick sideways glance told her he’d noticed.

Facing the media, he inhaled slowly. ‘You have to go to the afterlife to ask my father that question. I do not speak for the dead.’

He stepped from the podium and stood directly in front of her. The breadth of his broad shoulders blocked out the sun.

‘What’s wrong?’ he demanded in a fierce whisper.

‘N...nothing. Everything is fine.... Going according to plan.’ She fought to maintain her steady breathing even as she flailed inside. Needing desperately to claw back her control, she searched blindly for the solid reassurance of her mini-tablet.

Sakis plucked it out of her hands, his piercing gaze unwavering as it remained trained on her. 'According to plan would be these damned vultures finding another carcass to pick on and leaving us to get on with the work that needs to be done.' From his tone, there was no sign that the last question had had a lasting effect on him, but this close she saw his pinched lips and the ruthlessly suppressed pain in his eyes. Another wave of protectiveness rushed over her.

Purpose. That was what she needed. Purpose and focus.

Swallowing hard, she held out her hand for her tablet. 'I'll take care of it. You've chosen the journalists you want to cover the salvage operation. There's no need for the rest to hang around.'

He didn't relinquish it. 'Are you sure you're all right? You look pale. I hope you're not succumbing to the heat. Have you had anything to eat since we got here?'

'I'm fine, Mr Pantelides.' He kept staring at her, dark brows clamped in a frown. 'I assure you, there's nothing wrong.' She deliberately made her voice crisp. 'The sooner I get rid of the media, the sooner we can get on with things.'

He finally let her take the tablet from him. Hardly daring to breathe, Brianna stepped back and away from the imposing man in front of her.

No. No. No...

The negative sound reverberated through her skull as she walked away. There was no way she was developing feelings for her boss.

Even if Sakis didn't fire her the moment she betrayed even the slightest non-professional emotion, she had no intention of letting herself down like that ever again.

The tattoo on her ankle throbbed.

The larger one on her shoulder burned with the fierce reminder.

She'd spent two years in jail for her serious error in judgement after funnelling her need to be loved towards the wrong guy.

Making the same mistake again was not an option.

CHAPTER THREE

SAKIS WATCHED BRIANNA walk away; her back was held so rigid her upper half barely moved. His frown deepened. Something was wrong. Granted, this was the first crisis they'd been thrown into together, but her conduct up till now had been beyond exemplary.

Right up until she'd reacted strongly to the journalist's question. A question he himself had not anticipated. He should've known that somehow his father would be dredged up like this. Should've known that, even from beyond the grave, the parent who'd held his family in such low, deplorable regard would not remain buried. He stomped on the pain riding just beneath his chest, the way he always did when he thought of his father. He refused to let the past haunt him. It no longer had any power over him.

After what his father had done to his family, to his mother especially, he deserved to be forgotten totally and utterly.

Unfortunately, at times like these, when the media thought they could get a whiff of scandal, they pounced. And this time, there was no escaping their rabid focus...

The deafening sound of the industrial-size vacuum starting up drew his attention from Brianna, reminding him that he had more important things to deal with than his hitherto unruffled personal assistant's off behaviour, and the unwanted memories of a ghost.

He zipped his jumpsuit back up and strode over to the black, slick shoreline. Half a mile away, giant oil-absorbing booms floated around the perimeter of the contaminated water to catch the spreading spill. Closer to shore, right in the middle of where the oil poured out, ecologically safe chemicals pumped from huge sprays to dissolve as much of the slick as possible.

It's not enough. It would never be enough because this shouldn't have happened in the first place.

His phone rang and he recognised Theo's number on his screen.

'What's happening, brother? Talk to me,' Theo said.

Sakis summarised the situation as quickly as he could, leaving out nothing, even though he was very aware that the mention of kidnap would raise painful, unwanted memories for Theo.

‘Anything I can do from here?’ his brother asked. The only hint of his disturbance at being reminded of his own kidnap when he was eighteen was the slight ring of steel in his voice when he asked the question. ‘I can put you in touch with the right people if you want. I made it my business to find out who the right contacts are in a situation like this.’ His analytical brain wouldn’t have made him cope with his ordeal otherwise.

That was Theo through and through. He went after a problem until he had every imaginable scenario broken down, then he went after the solution with single-minded determination—which was why he fulfilled his role as trouble-shooter for Pantelides Inc so perfectly.

‘We’ve got it in hand. But perhaps you could cause an outrageous scandal where you are, distract these damned paparazzi from messing with my salvage operation.’

‘Hmm, I suppose I could skydive naked from the top of Cristo Redentor,’ Theo offered.

For the first time in what felt like days, Sakis’s lips cracked in a smile. ‘You love Rio too much to get yourself barred from the city for ever for blasphemy.’ His gaze flicked to where Brianna stood alone, having dispersed the last of the journalists. She was back on her tablet, her fingers busy on the glass keyboard.

Satisfaction oozed through him. Whatever had fractured his PA’s normal efficiency, she had it back again.

‘Everything’s in hand,’ he repeated, probably more to reassure himself that he had his emotions under control.

‘Great to hear. Keep me in the loop, ne?’

Sakis signed off and jumped into the nearest boat carrying a crew of six and the vacuum, and signalled to the pilot to head out.

For the next three hours, while sunlight prevailed, he worked with the crew to pump as much sludge of out the water as possible. From another boat nearby, the journalists to whom he’d granted access filmed the process. Some even asked intelligent questions that didn’t make his teeth grind.

Floodlights arrived, mounted on tripods on more boats, and he carried on working.

It was nearing midnight when, alerted to the arrival of the refresh crew, he straightened from where he’d been managing the pump. And froze.

‘What the hell?’

The salvage-crew captain glanced up sharply. ‘Excuse me, sir?’

But Sakis’s gaze was on the boat about twenty yards to his left, where Brianna held the nozzle of a chemical spray aimed at the slick, a distressed look on her face as she swung her arm back and forth over the water.

The first of the changeover crew was approaching on a motor-powered dinghy. Sakis hopped into the small vessel and directed it to where Brianna worked.

Seeing him approach on a direct course, she changed the angle of her nozzle to avoid spraying him, her face hurriedly set in its usual calm expression. It was almost as if the bleakness he’d glimpsed moments ago had been a mirage.

‘Mr Pantelides, did you need something?’

For some reason, the sound of his father’s name on her lips aggravated him. For several hours he’d managed not to think about his father. He wanted to keep it that way. ‘Put that hose down and get in.’

She turned the spray off, eyes widening. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Get in here. Now.’

‘I...I don’t understand,’ she said. Her voice had lost a little of the sharpness and she looked genuinely puzzled as she stared down at him.

He saw the long streak of oil across her cheek. Her once white T-shirt had now turned grimy and slick and her khaki cargo pants had suffered the same fate.

But not a single hair was out of place.

The dichotomy of dirt, flawless efficiency and the bleakness he'd glimpsed a moment ago intrigued him beyond definition. The intrigue escalated his irritation. 'It's almost midnight. You should've left here hours ago.' He manoeuvred the dinghy until it bumped the boat, directly below where she stood on the starboard side.

From that angle, he couldn't miss the landscape of her upper body—more specifically, the perfect shape of her breasts or the sleek line of her jaw and neck as she glanced down at him.

'Oh. Well...I'm here to work, Mr Pantelides. Why should I have left?'

'Because you're not part of the salvage team, and even they work in six-hour shifts. Besides this —' he waved at the nozzle in her hand '—is not part of your job description.'

'I'm aware of what my job description is. But, if we're being pedantic, you're not part of the crew either. And yet here you are.'

Sakis felt a shake of surprise. In all her time with him, she'd never raised her voice or shown signs of feminine ire. But in the last few minutes, he'd seen intense emotion ream over her face and through her voice. Right now, Sakis had the distinct feeling she was extremely displeased with his directive. A small spurt of masochistic pleasure fizzed through him at the thought that he'd unruffled the unflappable Miss Money Penny.

'I'm the boss. I have the luxury of doing whatever the hell I want,' he said softly, his gaze raking her face, secretly eager for further animated reaction.

What he got was unexpected. Her shoulders slumped and she shrugged. 'Of course. But, just in case you're worried about the corporate risks, I signed a waiver before coming aboard. So you'll suffer no liability if anything happens to me.'

Irritation returned, bit deeper. 'I don't give a damn about personal liability or corporate risks. What I do give a damn about is your ability to function properly tomorrow if you don't get enough sleep. You've been up for over eighteen hours. So, unless you have super powers I'm not aware of, put that hose down and get down here.' He held out a hand, unwilling to examine this almost clawing need to take care of her.

She didn't put the hose down. Instead she handed it over to a salvage crew member. Finally, she faced Sakis.

'Fine. You win.' Again he saw the tiniest mutinous set to her lips and wondered why that little action pleased him so much.

He was tired; he must be hallucinating. He certainly wasn't thinking straight if the thought of getting under his executive assistant's skin held so much of his interest.

She swung long, slim legs over the side of the boat and dropped into the dinghy. The movement made the vessel sway. She swayed with it, and threw out a hand to steady herself as Sakis turned.

Her torso bumped his arm and her hand landed on his shoulder as she tried to find her feet. His arm snagged her waist, encountered firm, warm muscle beneath his fingers.

Heat punched through his chest and arrowed straight for his groin.

'Stasi!'

'I...I'm sorry,' she stammered, pulling away with a skittishness very unlike her.

'No harm done,' he murmured. But Sakis wasn't so hot on that reassurance. Harm was being done to his insides. Heat continued to ravage him, firing sensations he sure as hell didn't want fired up. And especially not with his PA.

A quick glance showed she'd retreated to the farthest part of the small dinghy with her arms crossed primly around her middle and her face averted from his. He tried not to let his gaze drop to her plump breasts...but, Theos, it was hard not to notice their tempting fullness.

With a muttered curse, his hand tightened on the rudder of the dinghy and steered it towards shore.

This time she didn't refuse his offer of help when they stepped into the shallow water. After making sure the vessel was secure, he followed her onto the floodlit beach.

When he neared, he caught another glimpse of distress on her face.

'What's wrong? Why were you on the salvage boat? And, before you trot out "nothing", I'd advise you not to insult my intelligence.'

He saw her hesitate, then shove her hands into her pockets. This time, he couldn't stop himself from staring at her chest. Thankfully, she didn't notice because her gaze wasn't on him.

'I was talking to the some of the locals earlier. This cove was a special place for them, a sanctuary. I...I felt bad about what's happened.'

Guilt lanced through him. But, more than that, the rare glimpse into Brianna Moneypenny's human side intrigued him more than ever. 'I'll make sure it's returned to them as pristine as it once was.'

Her gaze flew up and connected with his, surprise and pleasure reflected in her eyes. 'That's good. It's not nice when your sanctuary is ripped away from you.' The pain accompanying those words made him frown. Before he could probe deeper, she stepped back. 'Anyway, I assured them you would make it right.'

'Thank you.'

She started to walk towards the fleet of four-wheelers a short distance away. Their driver stood next to the first one.

'I reserved a suite for you at the Noire. Your case was taken there a few hours ago and your laptop and phones are in the jeep. I'll see you in the morning, Mr Pantelides,' she tagged on.

Sakis froze. 'You'll see me in the morning? Aren't you coming with me?'

'No,' she said.

'Why not?'

'Because I'm not staying at the hotel.'

'Where exactly are you staying?'

She indicated the double row of yellow tents set up further up on the beach, away from the bustle of the clean-up work.

'I've secured a tent and put my stuff in there.'

'What's wrong with staying at the same hotel I'm staying in?'

'Nothing, except they didn't have any more rooms. The suite I reserved for you was the last one. The other hotels are too far away to make the commute efficient.'

Sakis shook his head. 'You've been on your feet all day with barely a break— Don't argue with me, Moneypenny,' He raised a hand when she started to speak. 'You're not sleeping in a flimsy tent on the beach with machines blasting away all around you. Go and get your things.'

'I assure you, it's more than adequate.'

'No. You say I have a suite?'

'Yes.'

'Then there is no reason why we can't share it.'

'I would rather not, Mr Pantelides.'

The outright refusal shocked and annoyed him in equal measures. Also another first from Brianna Moneypenny was the fact that she wasn't quite meeting his gaze. 'Why would you rather not?'

She hesitated.

'Look at me, Moneypenny,' he commanded.

Blue eyes... No, they weren't quite blue. They were a shade of aquamarine, wide, lushly lashed and beautiful...and they met his in frank challenge. 'Your room is a single suite with one double bed. It's not suitable for two, um, professionals, and I'd rather not have to share my personal space.'

Sakis thought of the countless women who would jump at the chance to share 'personal space' with him.

He thought of all the women who would kill to share a double bed with him.

Then he thought of why he was here, in this place: with his oil contaminating a once incredibly beautiful beach; his crew missing; and the tabloid press just waiting for him to slip up, to show them that the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree.

The sick feeling that he'd forced down but never quite suppressed enough threatened to rise again. It was the same mingled despair and anger he'd felt when Theo had been taken. The same sense of helplessness when he'd been unable to do anything to stop his mother fading away before his eyes, her pain raw and wrenching after what his father and the media had done to her.

'I don't give a damn about your personal space. What I do give a damn about is your ability to fire on all cylinders. We discussed this—you being up to standing by me in this situation we find ourselves in. You assured me you were up to the task. And yet, for the last ten minutes, you've shown a certain...mutiny that makes me wonder whether you're equipped to handle what's coming.'

Her outrage made her breathing erratic. 'I don't think that's a fair observation, sir. I've done everything you've asked of me, and I'm more than capable of handling whatever comes. Just because I disagree with you on one small issue doesn't make me mutinous. I'm thinking about you.'

'Then prove it. Stop arguing with me and get in the jeep.'

She opened her mouth; closed it again. When she looked at him, her eyes held a hint of fire he'd seen more than once today. The fire he'd tried—and failed—to bank fired up deep in his groin.

'I'll go and get my things,' she said.

'No need.' He exchanged glances with the driver and the young man headed towards the row of tents. Sakis leaned against the jeep's hood. 'You can fill me in on the results of your social media campaign while we wait.'

He saw how eagerly she snatched at her tablet and suppressed another bout of irritation. Whatever was causing this abnormal behaviour, he needed to nip it in the bud pretty darned quick. The crisis on his hands needed all his attention.

'I've found six individuals who I think will be useful to us. One's a professor of marine biology based in Guinea Bissau. Another, a husband and wife team who are experts in wildlife rescue. They specialise in disaster rescue such as this. The other three have no specialities but they have a huge social media following and are known for volunteering on humanitarian missions. I'm having all six vetted by our security team. If they pass the security test, I'll arrange for them to be flown over tomorrow.'

'I'm still not convinced bringing even more focus on this crisis is the best way to go, Moneypenny.' His insides tightened as he thought of his mother. 'Sometimes you don't see the harm until it's too late.' He thought of her devastation and misery, the incessant sobbing, and finally the substitution of food with alcohol when it'd hit home that the husband she'd thought was a god amongst men, the man she'd thought was true to her and only her, had had a string of affairs with mistresses around the globe, some of whom had dated back to before he'd put his wedding ring on her finger.

The year he'd turned fifteen had been the bleakest year of his life. It was the year he'd had every child's basest fear confirmed—that his father did not love him, did not love anyone or anything but himself. It was also the start of Sakis's hatred of the media, who'd not only exposed his worst fears but trumpeted it to the world.

Ari had withstood the invasion of their lives with his usual unflappable demeanour, although Sakis had a feeling his brother had been just as devastated, if not more so, than he had been. Theo, thirteen at that time, with fresh teenage hormones battering him, had gone off the rails. To this day, their mother had never found out how many times Theo had run away from home because Ari, seventeen going on seventy, had found him every single time and brought him back.

In all that chaos, Sakis had watched his mother deteriorate before his eyes, culminating in her seeking a solution so horrific, he still shuddered at the memory.

He pushed the events of decades past out of his mind and focused on the woman in front of him, who watched him with barely veiled curiosity.

Silently, he held her gaze until hers fell away. That he immediately wished it back made him suppress a frustrated growl.

‘The journalists we hand-picked know this could be the opportunity of a lifetime for them as long as they play ball. I’ll make sure they portray an open and honest account of what we’re doing to remedy the situation, while infusing the appropriate rhetoric to protect the company’s reputation.’

A smile tugged at his mouth. ‘You should’ve been a diplomat, Moneypenny.’

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug that drew his attention to where it had no business being, specifically the pulse beating beneath her flawless skin.

‘We all have something we desire more than anything. Wasting the opportunity when it presents itself is plain foolishness.’

The temptation to look inside the tin was too much to pass up. ‘And what is it you want?’

Her startled gaze flew to his. ‘Excuse me?’

‘What do you want more than anything?’

She shook her head and looked away, a hint of desperation in the movement. He saw her relieved expression as his driver approached, her small carry-all in his hand.

Striding forward, she took the case from the surprised driver and stowed it in the boot. Then she opened the back door and got in.

Sakis took his time to walk to the other door. He ignored her nervous glance and waited until they were both buckled in and the jeep was moving along the dusty road running alongside the beach. The moment she relaxed, he pounced. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘I’m waiting for an answer.’

‘About what I want?’ she asked.

Her stall tactics didn’t go unnoticed. ‘Yes,’ he pressed.

‘I...want the chance to prove that I can do a good job and be recognised for it.’

He exhaled impatiently. ‘You already do an exemplary job, and you’re highly paid and highly valued for it.’

He battled the disappointment rising inside. He’d wanted personal. From the assistant he’d warned against getting personal. So what? Finding out a little bit about what went on behind that professional façade didn’t mean either of them risked losing their highly functional relationship. Besides, Moneypenny knew of his liaisons; she arranged the lunches, dinners and the odd, discreet parting gift.

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