



MODERN



ANNE MCALLISTER

The Antonides Marriage Deal



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Greek magnate Elias Antonides has single-handedly regained his family's fortune. So when his father gambles away a vital share he's furious! Elias now has a new business partner...stunning heiress Tallie Savas. Tallie's eager to prove herself, but she hasn't counted on Elias being so sexy. Elias has underestimated Tallie, and now wonders if he can make their business arrangement personal—as in marriage!

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Содержание

The Antonides Marriage Deal	6
All about the author...	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	21
CHAPTER THREE	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

The Antonides Marriage Deal

Anne McAllister



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All about the author...

Anne McAllister

RITA[®] Award winner ANNE MCALLISTER was born in California. She spent formative summer vacations on the beach near her home, on her grandparents' small ranch in Colorado and visiting relatives in Montana. Studying the cowboys, the surfers and the beach volleyball players, she spent long hours developing her concept of "the perfect hero." (Have you noticed a lack of hard-driving type A businessmen among them? Well, she promises to do one soon, just for a change!)

One thing she did do, early on, was develop a weakness for lean, dark-haired, handsome lone-wolf type of guys. When she finally found one, he was in the university library where she was working. She knew a good man when she saw one. They've now been sharing "happily ever afters" for over thirty years. They have four grown children, and a steadily increasing number of grandchildren. They also have three dogs, who keep her fit by taking her on long walks every day.

Quite a few years ago they moved to the Midwest, but they spend more and more time in Montana. And as Anne says, she lives there in her head most of the time anyway. She wishes a small town like her very own Elmer, Montana, existed. She'd move there in a minute. But she loves visiting big cities as well, and New York has always been her favorite.

Before she started writing romances, Anne taught Spanish, capped deodorant bottles copyedited textbooks, got a master's degree in theology and ghostwrote sermons. Strange and varied, perhaps, but all grist for the writer's mill, she says.

For Aunt Billie
with love forever

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER ONE

“YOUR father is on line six.”

Elias Antonides stared at the row of red lights blinking on his desk phone and thanked God he'd declined the ten-line option he'd been offered when he'd begun renovating and converting the riverside warehouse into the new Brooklyn-based home of Antonides Marine International nine months ago.

“Right,” he said. “Thanks, Rosie. Put him on hold.”

“He says it's important,” his assistant informed him.

“If it's important, he'll wait,” Elias said, reasonably confident that he wouldn't do anything of the sort.

Aeolus Antonides had the staying power of a fruit fly. Named for the god of the wind, according to him, and “the god of hot air,” in Elias's view, Aeolus was as charming and feckless a man as had ever lived. As president of Antonides Marine, he enjoyed three-hour lunches and three olive martinis, playing golf with his cronies and taking them out in his sailboat, but he had no patience for day-to-day routine, for turning red ink into black, for anything that resembled a daily grind. He didn't want to know that they would benefit from some ready cash or that Elias was contemplating the purchase of a small marine outfitter that would expand their holdings. Business bored him. Talking to his son bored him.

And chances were excellent today that, by the time Elias had dealt with the other five blinking lights, his father would have hung up and gone off to play another round of golf or out for a sail from his Hamptons home.

In fact, Elias was counting on it. He loved his father dearly, but he didn't need the old man meddling in business matters. Whatever his father wanted, it would invariably complicate his life.

And he had enough complications already today—though it wasn't much different from any other.

His sister Cristina, on line two, wanted him to help her set up the financing for a bead store.

“A bead store?” Elias thought he'd heard everything. Cristina had variously wanted to raise rabbits, tie-dye T-shirts and go to disk-jockey school. But the beads were new.

“So I can stay in New York,” she explained perfectly reasonably. “Mark's in New York.”

Mark was her latest boyfriend. Elias didn't think he'd be her last. Famous for racing speedboats and chasing women, Mark Batakis was as likely to be here today and gone tomorrow as Cristina's bead-store aspirations.

“No, Cristina,” he said firmly.

“But—”

“No. You come up with a good business plan for something and we'll talk. Until then, no.” And he hung up before she could reply.

His mother, on line three, was arranging a dinner party on the weekend. “Are you bringing a girlfriend?” she asked hopefully. “Or shall I arrange one.”

Elias gritted his teeth. “I don't need you arranging dates for me, Mother,” he said evenly, knowing full well as he did so that his words fell on deaf ears.

Helena Antonides's goal in life was to see him married and providing her with grandchildren. Inasmuch as he'd been married once disastrously and had no intention of ever being married again, Elias could have told her she was doomed to fail. She had other children, let them have the grandchildren she was so desperate for.

Besides, wasn't it enough that he was providing the financial support for the entire Antonides clan to live in the manner to which three generations of them had become accustomed? Apparently not.

“Well—” she sniffed, annoyed at him as usual “—you don’t seem to be doing a very good job yourself.”

“Thank you for sharing your opinion,” Elias said politely.

He never bluntly told his mother that he was not ever getting married again, because she would have argued with him, and as far as Elias was concerned, the matter wasn’t up for debate. He had been divorced for seven years, had purposely made no effort at all to find anyone to replace the duplicitous, avaricious Millicent, and had no intention of doing so.

Surely after seven years his mother should have noticed that.

“Don’t go all stuffy on me, Elias Antonides. I’ve got your best interests at heart. You should be grateful.”

As that didn’t call for an answer, Elias didn’t supply one. “I have to go, Mom, I have work to do.”

“You always have work to do.”

“Someone has to.”

There was a dead silence on the other end of the line. She couldn’t deny it, but she wouldn’t agree, either. At last Helena said firmly, “Just be here Sunday. I’ll provide the girl.” She was the one who hung up on him.

His sister, Martha, on line four, was brimming with ideas for her painting. Martha always had ideas—and rarely had the means to see them through.

“If you want me to do a good job on those murals,” she told him, “I really should go back to Greece.”

“What for?”

“Inspiration,” she said cheerfully.

“A vacation, you mean.” Elias knew his sister. Martha was a good artist. He wouldn’t have asked her to cover the wall of the foyer of his building, not to mention one in his office and the other in his bedroom if she were a hack. But he didn’t feel like subsidizing her summer holidays, either. “Forget it. I’ll send you some photos. You can work from them.”

Martha sighed. “You’re such a killjoy, Elias.”

“Everyone knows that,” he agreed. “Deal with it.”

On line five Martha’s twin, Lukas, didn’t want to deal with it. “What’s wrong with going to New Zealand?” Lukas wanted to know.

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Elias said with more patience than he felt. “But I thought you were going to Greece?”

“I did. I’m in Greece,” Lukas informed him. “But it’s boring here. There’s nothing to do. I met some guys at the taverna last night. They’re heading to New Zealand. I thought I’d go, too. So do you know someone there—in Auckland, say—who might want to hire me for a while?”

“To do what?” It was a fair question. Lukas had graduated from college with a major in ancient languages. None of them was Maori.

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever,” Lukas said vaguely. “Or I could go to Australia. Maybe go walkabout?”

Which seemed to be pretty much what he was already doing, Elias thought, save for the fact that he wasn’t confining his wandering to Australia as their brother Peter had.

“You could come home and go to work for me,” Elias suggested not for the first time.

“No way,” Lukas said not for the first time, either. “I’ll give you a call when I get to Auckland to see if you have any ideas.”

Ted Corbett—on line one—the only legitimate caller as far as Elias was concerned, was fortunately still there.

“So, what do you think? Ready to take us over?” That was why he was still there. Corbett was eager to sell his marine outfitters business and just as eager for Elias to be the one to buy it.

“We’re thinking about it,” Elias said. “No decision yet. Paul has been doing some research, running the numbers.”

His projects manager loved ferreting out all the details that went into these decisions. Elias, who didn’t, left Paul to it. But ultimately Elias was going to have to make the final decision. All the decisions, in the end, were his.

“I want to come out and see the operation in person,” he said.

“Of course,” Corbett agreed. “Whenever you want.” He chattered on about the selling points, and Elias listened.

He deliberately took his time with Corbett, eyeing the red light on line six all the while. It stayed bright red. When he finally finished with Corbett it was still blinking. Probably the old man just walked off and left his phone on. That would be just like him. But Elias punched the button anyway.

“My, you’re a busy fellow,” Aeolus boomed in his ear.

Elias shut his eyes and mustered his patience. His father must have been doing the crossword to wait so long. “Actually, yes. I’ve been on the phone way too long, and now I’m late for a meeting. What’s up?”

“Me, actually. Came into the city to see a friend. Thought I’d stop by. Got something to discuss with you.”

The last thing Elias needed today was his father making a personal appearance. “I’m coming out on the weekend,” Elias said, hoping to forestall the visit. “We can talk then.”

But Aeolus was otherwise inclined. “This won’t take long. See you in a bit.” And the phone clicked in Elias’s ear.

Damn it! How typical of his father. It didn’t matter how busy you were, if he wanted your attention, Aeolus found a way to get it. Elias banged the phone down and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache gathering force back behind his eyes.

By the time his beaming father breezed straight past Rosie and into Elias’s office an hour later, Elias’s headache was raging full-bore.

“Guess what I did!” Aeolus kicked the door shut and did one of the little soft-shuffle steps that invariably followed his sinking a particularly tricky putt.

“Hit a hole in one?” Elias guessed. He stood up so he could meet his father head-on.

At the golf reference, Aeolus’s smile grew almost wistful. “I wish,” he murmured. He sighed, then brightened. “But, metaphorically speaking, I guess you could say that.”

Metaphorically speaking? Since when did Aeolus Antonides speak in metaphors? Elias raised his eyebrows and waited politely for his father’s news.

Aeolus rubbed his hands together and beamed. “I found us a business partner!”

“What!” Elias stared at his father, appalled. “What the hell do you mean, business partner? We don’t need a business partner!”

“You said we needed ready cash.”

Oh, hell. He had been listening. “I never said anything about a business partner! The business is doing fine!”

“Of course it is,” Aeolus nodded. “Couldn’t get a partner if it weren’t. No rats want to board sinking ships.”

Rats? Elias felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “What rats?”

“Nothing. No rats,” Aeolus said quickly. “Just a figure of speech.”

“Well, forget it.”

“No. You work too hard, Elias. I know I haven’t done my part. It’s just...it’s not in me. I—” Aeolus looked bleak.

“I know that, Dad.” Elias gave his father a sincere, sympathetic smile. “I understand.” Which was the truth. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not a problem.”

Not now at least. Eight years ago it had cost him his marriage.

No, that wasn't fair. His father's lack of business acumen had been only one factor in the breakup with Millicent. It had begun when he'd toyed with quitting business school to start his own boat-building company, to do what his grandfather had done. Millicent had been appalled. She'd been passionate about him finishing school and stepping in at Antonides. But that was when she'd thought it was worth something. When she found out its books were redder than a sunset, she'd been appalled, and livid when Elias had insisted on staying and trying to salvage the firm.

No, his father's business incompetence had only highlighted the problems between himself and Millicent. The truth was that he should have realized what Millicent's priorities were and never married her in the first place. It was a case of extraordinary bad judgement and one Elias was not going to repeat.

"But I do worry," his father went on. "We both do, your mother and I. You work so hard. Too hard."

Elias had never spoken of the reasons for the divorce, but his parents weren't fools. They knew Elias had worked almost 24/7 to salvage the business from the state it had slid to due to his father's not-so-benign neglect. They knew that the financial reality of Antonides Marine did not meet the expectations of their son's social-ladder climbing wife. They knew she had vanished not long after Elias dropped out of business school to work in the family firm. And within weeks of the divorce being final, Millicent had married the heir to a Napa Valley winery.

Of course no one mentioned any of this. For years no one had spoken her name, least of all Elias.

But shortly after Millicent's marriage, the fretting began—and so had the parade of eligible women, as if getting Elias a new wife would make things better, make his father feel less guilty.

As far as Elias was concerned, his father had no need to feel guilty. Aeolus was who he was. Millicent was who she was. And Elias was who he was—a man who didn't want a wife.

Or a business partner.

"No, Dad," he said firmly now.

Aeolus shrugged. "Sorry. Too late. It's done. I sold forty percent of Antonides Marine."

Elias felt as if he'd been punched. "Sold it? You can't do that!"

Aeolus's whole demeanor changed in an instant. He was no longer the amiable, charming father Elias knew and loved. Drawing himself up sharply with almost military rigidity, he looked down his not inconsiderable nose at his furious son.

"Of course I can sell it," Aeolus said stiffly, his tone infused with generations of Greek arrogance that even his customary amiable temperament couldn't erase. "I own it."

"Yes, I know that. But—" But it was true. Aeolus did own Antonides Marine. Or fifty percent of it anyway. Elias owned ten percent. Forty percent was in trust for his four siblings. It was a family company. Always had been. No one whose name was not Antonides had ever owned any of it.

Elias stared at his father, feeling poleaxed. Gutted. Betrayed. He swallowed. "Sold it?" he echoed hollowly. Which meant what? That his work of the past eight years was, like his marriage, gone in the stroke of a pen?

"Not all of it," Aeolus assured him. "Just enough to give you a little capital. You said you needed money. All last Sunday at your mother's dinner party you were on the phone talking to someone about raising capital to buy some outfitter."

"And I was doing it." Elias ground out.

"Well, now I've done it instead." His father rubbed his hands together briskly. "So you don't have to work so hard. You have breathing room."

"Breathing room?" Elias would have laughed if he hadn't already been gasping. His knees felt weak. He wanted to sit down. He wanted to put his head between his knees and take deep desperate breaths. But instead he stood rigid, his fingers balled into fists, and stared at his father in impotent fury, none of which he allowed to show on his face.

“You didn’t need to sell,” he said at last in measured tones that he congratulated himself did not betray the rage he felt. “It would have been all right.”

“Oh, yes? Then why did we move here?” Aeolus wrinkled his nose as he looked around the newly renovated offices in the riverside warehouse Elias had bought and which until today his father had never seen.

“To get back to our roots,” Elias said through his teeth. There was no reason at all to pay midtown Manhattan prices when his business could be better conducted from Brooklyn. “This is where Papu had his first offices.” His grandfather had never wanted to be far from water.

Aeolus didn’t seem convinced. “Well, it’s obvious that things aren’t what they used to be,” he said with a look around. “I wanted to help.”

Help? Dear God! Elias took a wild, shuddering breath, raked a hand through his hair. With help like this he might as well throw in the towel.

Of course, he wouldn’t.

Antonides Marine was his life. Since he’d shelved his dream of building his own boats, since Millicent had walked out, it was the only thing he’d focused on. She would have said, of course, that it was the only thing he’d focused on before she’d left him. But that wasn’t true. And he’d done it in the first place for her, to try to give her the life she’d wanted. How was he to know she’d just been looking for an excuse to walk out?

Now it was all he had. All he lived for. He was determined to restore it to the glory his great-grandfather and his grandfather had achieved. And he was almost there.

But it hadn’t been an easy road so far, and he shouldn’t expect it would start now. Deliberately he straightened his tie and pasted a smile on his face and told himself it would be all right.

This was just one more bump in the road. There had been plenty of bumps—and potholes—and potential disasters in the road since he’d taken over running Antonides Marine.

With luck he could even work out a deal to buy the shares Aeolus had sold away. Yes. That was a good idea. Then there would be no more opportunity for his father to do something foolish behind his back.

Elias flexed his shoulders, worked to ease the tension in them, took another, calmer breath and then turned to his father, prepared to make the best of it.

“Sold it to whom?” he asked politely.

“Socrates Savas.”

“The hell you say!”

So much for calm. So much for polite. So much for making the best of it!

“Socrates Savas is a pirate. A scavenger! He buys up failing companies, guts them, then sells off what’s left for scrap!” Elias was yelling. He knew he was yelling. He couldn’t help it.

“He does have a certain reputation,” Aeolus admitted, the characteristic smile not in evidence now.

“An entirely deserved reputation,” Elias snarled. He stalked around the room. He wanted to punch the walls. Wanted to punch his father. “Damn it to hell! Antonides Marine is not failing!”

“So I hear. Socrates said it was doing very well indeed. He had to give me a pile for it,” Aeolus reflected with considerable satisfaction. “So much that he complained about it. Said he should have bought it five years ago. Said it was too bad he hadn’t known about it then.”

Which had been the whole point. One look at the Antonides Marine’s books eight years ago, and Elias had known their days as a company were numbered unless he could drag them back into the black.

He’d done it. But it had meant long long hours and cost-cutting and streamlining and reorganization and doing all of it without allowing the company to look as if it were in any trouble at all. He’d spent years trying to stay under Socrates Savas’s radar. For all the good it had done him.

“Good thing for us Socrates didn’t notice it then,” Aeolus reflected, as if it had just occurred to him.

“Good thing,” Elias agreed sarcastically, for once taking no pains to spare his father’s feelings.

Aeolus looked momentarily chagrined, but then brightened again and looked at his son approvingly. “You should be proud. You pulled us out of the abyss, Socrates says. Though I don’t know as I’d have called it an abyss,” he reflected.

“I would’ve,” Elias muttered.

Obviously Savas had had his eye on the business for a while whether Elias had known it or not. Circling like a vulture, no doubt. Not that he’d ever given any indication. But he was a past master at spotting prey, waiting for the right moment, then snapping up a floundering company.

For the past year Elias had dared to breathe easier knowing that Antonides Marine wasn’t floundering anymore. And now his father had sold the blackguard forty percent of it anyway?

Damnation!

So what did Savas intend to do with it? The possibilities sent chills down Elias’s spine. He wouldn’t let himself imagine. And he certainly wouldn’t hang around to watch. Knowing he couldn’t bear it gave him the resolve to say words he never ever thought he’d say.

“Fine,” he said, looking his father in the eye. “He can have it. I quit.”

His father gaped at him, his normally rosy countenance going suddenly, starkly white. “Quit? Quit? But...but, Elias...you can’t quit!”

“Of course I can.” Elias had been blessed with his own share of the Antonides arrogance and hauteur, and if Aeolus could sell the business that his son had rescued from the scrap pile without so much as a nod in his direction, then by God, Elias could certainly quit without looking back!

“But...” Aeolus shook his head helplessly, his hands waving in futility. “You can’t.” His words were almost a whisper, his face still ashen. There was a pleading note in his voice.

Elias frowned. He had expected sturm und drang, not a death mask.

“Why can’t I?” he asked with studied politeness, a hint of a not very pleasant smile on his lips.

“Because—” Aeolus’s hands fluttered “—because it’s...it’s written in the contract that you’ll stay on.”

“You can’t sell me with the company, Dad. That’s slavery. There’re laws against it. So, I guess the contract is null and void?” Elias smiled a real smile now. “All’s well that ends well,” he added, managing—barely—to restrain himself from rubbing his hands together.

But Aeolus didn’t look pleased and his color hadn’t returned. His fingers knotted and twisted. His gaze dropped. He didn’t look at his son. He looked at the floor without a word.

“What is it?” Elias said warily in the silence.

Still nothing. Not for a long, long time. Then, at last, his father lifted his head. “We’ll lose the house.”

Elias scowled. “What do you mean, you’ll lose the house? What house? The house on Long Island?”

His father gave an almost imperceptible negative shake of his head.

No? Not the Long Island house?

Then that meant...

“Our house?”

The family home on Santorini? The one his great-grandfather, also called Elias, had built with his bare hands? The one each succeeding generation of Antonides men and women had added to, so that it was home to not only their bodies but their history, their memories, their accomplishments?

Of course, they’d had the house on Long Island for years. They’d had flats in London, in Sydney and in Hong Kong.

But they only had one home.

But his father couldn't mean that. The house on Santorini had nothing to do with the business! Never had. It belonged to his father now as it had belonged to his father and his father's father before him. For four generations the house had gone from eldest son to eldest son.

It would be Elias's someday. And, though he'd saved the company and all its holdings, none of them mattered to him as much as that single house. It held memories of his childhood, of summer days spent working building boats with his grandfather, of the dreams of youth that were pure and untarnished, though life was anything but. The house on Santorini was their strength, their refuge—the physical heart of the Antonides family.

It was the only thing Elias loved.

His fingers curled into fists. It was the only way he could keep from grabbing his father by the front of his emerald-green polo shirt and shaking him. "What have you done to our house?"

"Nothing," Aeolus said quickly. "Well, nothing if you stay on at Antonides." He shot Elias a quick, hopeful glance that skittered away at once in the face of his son's burning black fury. He wrung his hands. "It was just a small bet. A sailboat race. A bet I made with Socrates. Which boat—his or mine—could sail to Montauk and back faster. I'm a better sailor than Socrates Savas!"

Which Elias had no doubt was true. "So what happened?"

"The bet was about the boats," his father said heavily.

"I know. You raced the boats. So?"

Aeolus shot him an exasperated look. "I'm a better sailor than Socrates Savas. I don't hold a candle to his son Theo!"

Elias whistled. "Theo Savas is Socrates's son?"

Even Elias had heard of Theo Savas. Anyone who knew anything about sailing knew Theo Savas. He had sailed for Greece in the Olympics. He had crewed in several America's Cup races. He had done windsurfing and solo sailing voyages that caught the hearts and minds of armchair adventurers everywhere. He was also lean, muscular and handsome, a playboy without equal and, naturally—according to Elias's sisters—the ideal of Greek manhood.

No matter that he had been raised in Queens.

"Theo won," Aeolus said, filling his cheeks with air, then exhaling sharply and shaking his head. "And he gets clear title to the house—unless you agree to stay on as managing director of Antonides Marine for two years."

"Two years!"

"It's not much!" Aeolus protested. "Hardly a life sentence."

It might as well be. Elias couldn't believe it. His father was asking him to simply sit here and watch as Socrates Savas gutted the company he had worked so hard to save!

"What the hell did I ever do to him?" Elias demanded.

"Do to him? Why, nothing at all. What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind." There was no reason to take it personally. Socrates Savas did this sort of thing all the time. Still Elias ground his teeth. He felt the pulse pound in his temple and deliberately unclenched his jaw and took a deep, calculated breath.

Two years. It was a price he could pay. He'd paid far bigger ones. And this wasn't just about his life, it was the life of his whole family.

He'd done everything else. How could he not do this?

"All right," he said at last. "I'll stay."

His father beamed, breathed again, pounded him on the back. "I knew you would!"

"But I'm not answering to Socrates Savas. He's not running things!"

"Of course not!" His father said, relieved beyond belief. "His daughter is!"

The new president of Antonides Marine International hadn't slept a wink all night.

Tallie had lain awake, grinning ear to ear, her mind whirling with glorious possibilities and the satisfaction of knowing that her father was finally acknowledging she was good at what she did.

She knew it wasn't easy for him. Socrates Savas was as traditional as a stubborn, opinionated Greek father could be—even though he was two generations removed from the old country.

In her father's mind, his four sons were the ones who were supposed to follow his footsteps into the family business. His only daughter, Thalia, ought to stay at home, mend clothes and cook meals and eventually marry a nice, hardworking Greek man and have lots of lovely little dark-haired, dark-eyed Greek grandchildren for Socrates to dandle on his knee.

It wasn't going to happen.

Oh, she would have married. If Lieutenant Brian O'Malley's plane had not crashed seven years ago, she certainly would have married him. Life would have been a lot different.

But since Brian's death she'd never met anyone who'd even tempted her. And not for her father's lack of trying. Sometimes she thought he'd introduced her to every eligible Greek on the East Coast.

"Go pester the boys," she told him. "Go find them wives."

But Socrates just muttered and grumbled about his four sons. They were even more of a mystery to him than Tallie was. If she desperately wanted to follow him into business, Theo, George, Demetrios and Yiannis, had absolutely no interest in their father's footsteps—or his business—at all.

Theo, the eldest, was a world-class open-ocean sailor. Tie him to an office or even stick him in a city and he would die. Socrates wasn't sympathetic. He considered that his oldest son just "mucked about in boats."

George was a brilliant physicist. He was unraveling the universe, one strand at a time. Socrates couldn't believe people actually had theories about strings.

Demetrios was a well-known television actor with an action-adventure series of his own. His face—and a whole lot of his bare, sculpted torso—had recently been on a billboard in Times Square. Socrates had averted his eyes and muttered, "What next?"

But he wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told him.

Yiannis, the youngest of Tallie's four older brothers, who was as city-born and -bred as the rest of them, had, five years ago, finished a master's degree in forestry and was living and working at the top of a Montana mountain!

It was Tallie who had always been determined to follow in her father's footsteps. She was the one with the head for business. She was the one who had worked in stockrooms and storerooms, in warehouses and shipping offices, doing everything she could to learn how things worked from the ground up.

And she was the one her father had fired more than once when he'd found her working in one of his companies.

"No daughter of mine is going to work here," he'd blustered and fumed.

So she'd gone to work for someone else.

He hadn't liked that any better. But Tallie was as stubborn as her old man. She'd gone to university and done a degree in accounting. She'd taken a job in California, crunching numbers for a mom-and-pop tortilla factory. And while she was there, she'd learned everything from how to make tortillas to a thousand ways to cook with them to the cleverest way to market them. Then she'd gone back and got her MBA, working on the side for a Viennese baker who taught her everything he knew. If she were ever going into business for herself, Tallie decided, it would be in baking. She loved making cakes and tortes and pastries. But she preferred that as her relaxation.

Eighteen months ago, MBA in hand, she'd applied for another job with one of her father's companies—and had been turned down.

So she'd gone to work for Easley Manufacturing, one of his biggest competitors. She'd been doing well there and had recently been promoted. She was on the fast track, the boss had told her. She'd hoped word would get back to Socrates.

Obviously it had.

Two weeks ago he'd rung and invited her to dinner after she got off work.

“Dinner?” she’d echoed. “With whom?”

Had he dredged up another eligible Greek, in other words?

“Just me,” Socrates said, offended. “I’m in the city. Your mother is in Rome with her art group. I’m lonely. I thought I’d call my daughter and invite her to a meal.”

It sounded perfectly innocent, but Tallie had known her father for twenty-nine years. She knew suppressed excitement when she heard it in his voice. She accepted, but not without reservations.

And when she’d met him at Lazlo’s, a Hungarian restaurant on the Upper East Side he’d suggested, she had looked around warily for stray males before she went to sit at the table with him.

But Socrates hadn’t come bearing Greeks for a change. Instead he’d offered her a job.

“A job?” Tallie had done her best to hide her incredulity while she found herself glancing outside to see if the late-May sun was still shining. The words hell froze over were flitting around in her brain. “What sort of job?”

Her father waited until the server had brought their dinners. Then he said in his characteristic blunt fashion. “I’ve just acquired forty percent of Antonides Marine International. They build boats. As major stockholder, I get to name the president.” He paused, smiling. “You.”

“Me?” Tallie’s voice squeaked. She blinked rapidly. Now she was sure that hell had frozen over. Or that she’d lost her mind.

But Socrates picked up his knife and fork and cut into his chicken paprika and said with a shrug, “You’ve always said you wanted to come into the business.”

“Yes, but—”

“So now you’re in.”

Tallie shook her head, mind still whirling. “I meant...I didn’t mean I expected you to buy me a company, Dad!”

“I didn’t buy you a company,” he said, enunciating every word. “I acquired part of a company. And so, I have a say in how it’s run. I want you to run it.”

Tallie wet her lips. Her brain spun with possibilities, with potential—with panic. She tried to get a toehold on her thoughts. “I don’t— It’s so...sudden.”

“The best opportunities often are.”

“I know.” But still...she needed to think. To consider. To—

“So, what do you say?”

“I—” Her tongue seemed welded to the roof of her mouth.

Socrates smiled gently and regarded her over a forkful of chicken. “Or maybe you were just talking. Maybe you don’t think you can do it.”

By God, yes, she could do it!

And she’d said so.

Socrates had beamed, the way a shark must beam when an unsuspecting little fish swims straight into his mouth. Tallie knew it. She could almost hear his jaws snap shut. But she didn’t care.

Whatever agenda her father had in offering her this job, she had her own agenda—to do the best damned job she could do and prove to him that she was worthy of his trust.

The two weeks she had to spend working out her notice at Easley’s had given her time to break in a replacement and do a crash course of reading everything she could get her hands on about Antonides Marine International.

What she’d learned about its history had made her even more eager to get to work. It was an old and respected boat-building company that had fallen on hard times and over the past eight years had been in the process of righting itself and moving ahead. While there was no change in leadership—Aeolus Antonides was still president (until today!)—his son had been running things. And apparently the son had done rather well. He’d economized and streamlined things, getting back to basics, redefining and refocusing the company’s mission. Recently she’d read that AMI appeared

poised to branch out, to test the waters in areas other than strictly marine construction. It was on the brink of expansion.

Tallie could hardly wait to be part of the process.

And now, she thought as she stood on the pavement and stared up at the old Brooklyn warehouse that was the home of the offices of Antonides Marine International, she was.

Amazingly the address was only nine blocks from her flat. She had expected some mid-Manhattan office building. Six months ago, she knew, she would have been right. But then AMI had moved across the East River to Brooklyn.

Tallie understood it was a cost-cutting move. But there was a certain rightness to it being here in DUMBO, the neighborhood acronym for its location “down under the Manhattan Bridge.”

DUMBO was a vital, happening place—lots of urban renewal going on, considerable gentrification of the old brownstones and even older warehouses that sat on or near the edge of the East River. It was that energy, as well as the more reasonable rents, that had drawn her to DUMBO. She imagined it had drawn the management of AMI as well.

But looking around in the crisp early morning light, Tallie could see that it belonged here anyway, in the old five-story brick warehouse in the process of being restored. Within sight of the old Navy Shipyards, it was where a shipbuilding company—even the corporate offices thereof—ought to be.

Feng shui, her friend Katy who knew these things, would have said. Or maybe that was just inside buildings and where you put your bed. But it felt right. And that made Tallie smile and feel even better.

She was early—way early—but she couldn’t wait any longer. She pushed open the door and went in.

It was like stepping across the ocean. Expecting the traditional neutral business environment, she was startled to find herself in a foyer painted blue—and not the soft pale blue one usually found on walls—but the deep vibrant blue of the Mediterranean. From floor to ceiling there was blue sea and blue sky—and dotted here and there were brown islands out of which seemed to grow impossibly white buildings and blue-domed churches. All very simple and spare, and almost breathtaking in its unexpectedness. And in its appropriateness.

Tallie had never been to the Greek homeland of her forebears. She’d never had time. But she knew it at once and found it drawing her in. Instinctively she reached out a finger and traced the line of rooftops, then a bare hillside, then one lone white building at the far end of one island. As if it were a sentry. A lookout.

She’d never particularly wanted to go to Greece. It had seemed the source of all the tradition she’d spent her life battling. But now she could see there was more to it than that. And suddenly the notion tempted her.

But not as much as punching the elevator button and hitting 3.

The elevator was apparently part of the refurbishment, all polished wood and carpet that still smelled new. When the door slid open three floors later she saw that the renovation was still a work in progress. The floor was bare, unfinished wood. The walls were plastered but unpainted. She could hear hammering coming from behind a closed door down the hall.

She thought briefly that whoever was doing it, she’d have to get his name and pass it on to her landlord. Arnie was trying to get some renovations done on one of the apartments and couldn’t find a workman who would show up before noon.

She passed several offices—an accountant, a magazine publisher, a dentist—before she found the new heavy glass door of Antonides Marine International. The door was locked. At six-forty in the morning she could hardly expect otherwise.

No matter. She had a key. A key to her company. Well, a key to the company she was president of.

Now all she had to do was prove herself worthy of it.

Taking a deep breath and feeling the rightness of the moment, Tallie set her briefcase down and shifted the bag in her arm to get out the key. Then she turned it in the lock, pushed open the door and went in.

She was late.

First day on the job and the new hotshot president of Antonides Marine couldn't even be bothered to show up!

Elias prowled his office, coffee mug in hand, grinding the teeth with which he'd intended to take a bite out of her. So much for the "eager beaver" his father had assured him Socrates insisted she was.

He supposed he ought to be pleased. If she wasn't there, she couldn't screw things up. He'd spent the past two weeks trying to make sure she had as little opportunity to interfere as possible.

Once it had been clear that there was no way out of the mess his father had created, Elias had done his best to limit the damage. That meant defining the limits of the problem and making sure it didn't get bigger. So he'd readied the big office overlooking the river—the one he'd hoped to move into someday but which was too far from the hub of the office to be practical now. That was for when things were running themselves.

Or for when he was running them and needed to stick a figurehead president as far from the action as possible, he thought grimly. With her conveniently out of the way, he could get on with running the company. Which he ought to be doing right now, damn it! But he wanted her settled and disposed of first.

He had expected she'd at least be there by nine, but it was already half past. He'd been at his desk since eight, ready to deal with the interloper. Rosie, his assistant, had been there when he came in and had coffee brewing—obviously trying to impress the new "boss."

She told him to make his own damn coffee on a daily basis. She'd even put a plate of fancy cookies by the coffeemaker.

Elias had considered giving her grief over them, but they were damn good. Some buttery chocolate kind with a hint of cinnamon, and some with almonds, and the traditional American favorite, peanut butter criss-cross.

His stomach growled now just thinking about them, and he went out to snatch another one only to find everyone else already there.

His normally spit-and-polished researcher, Paul Johanssen, was talking with his mouth full. Lucy, who oversaw the contracts and accounting, was deciding to go on her diet tomorrow. Dyson, who did blueprints and development for AMI projects, had crumbs in his mustache, and even the temp steno girls, Trina and Cara and the very-pregnant-and-about-to-deliver-any-moment Giulia were sneaking into reception to steal a cookie or two.

Elias thought it was no wonder Rosie had always refused to even make coffee in the office. If they'd known the extent of her talents, they wouldn't have let her do anything else.

Well, Ms Thalia Savas was sure to be impressed—provided she managed to show up before the coffee and cookies were gone.

But he was done waiting. It was time she realized this wasn't business school. Real work got done in the real world.

"We'll go into the boardroom," he said to Paul and Dyson. They jumped guiltily at the sound of his voice, and Paul surreptitiously wiped his mouth.

Elias grinned, taking a bit of perverse satisfaction in the tardy Ms Savas missing out on the cookies made especially for her. Not to mention that Rosie had gone to all that trouble only to have her efforts gobbled up by the rest of the staff.

"Very impressive," he said as he passed her on his way to the boardroom. "I can see why you don't do it all the time."

Rosie looked up. "I didn't do it at all."

Elias gave her a sceptical look, but she stared him down so sternly that he turned to Paul. “Don’t tell me you baked them?”

Paul laughed. “I can’t boil water.”

“Don’t look at me,” Dyson backed away, shaking his dreadlocks and grinning.

“Maybe the new girl made them,” Trina suggested as she headed back to her office with her arms full of files.

“What new girl?” Elias knew they were going to send one to fill Giulia’s spot, but he didn’t know she’d arrived.

“I guess that would be me.” A cheerful, unfamiliar voice from the hallway made them all turn around. She was not the usual temp agency girl. She was older for one thing. Late twenties probably. She didn’t resemble a stick insect, either. She was slender but definitely curvy. She also wasn’t wearing a nose ring or sporting a hank of blue hair. Her hair, in fact, though pulled back and tied down and even anchored, had a will of its own. And even the army of barrettes she’d enlisted to tame it wasn’t up to the job. Her hair was thick and wild and decidedly sexy.

She looked as if she’d just got out of bed.

Elias found himself imagining what she would be like in bed. The thought brought him up short. He was as appreciative of a beautiful woman as the next man, but he didn’t usually fantasize about taking them to bed within moments of meeting them.

Then Ms Temp smiled brightly at him, at the same time giving her head a little shake so that her hair actually danced. And the urge to pull out those pins and tangle his fingers in that glorious hair hit him harder.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. He knew better than to mix business and pleasure.

“You made the cookies?” he demanded.

She nodded, still smiling. “Did you like them?”

“They’re good,” he acknowledged gruffly. But he didn’t want her getting the idea she could use them as a ticket to something more. “But they aren’t necessary. You only have to do your job.”

“My job?” She looked blank.

So she had a temp brain apparently. “Filing,” he said patiently. “Typing. Doing what you’re told.”

“I don’t type. I hate to file. And I rarely do what I’m told,” she said cheerfully.

Elias frowned. “Then what the hell are you doing here?”

She stuck out her hand to shake his. “I’m Tallie Savas. The new president. It’s nice to meet you.”

CHAPTER TWO

DAMN Socrates, anyway.

One look at Elias Antonides and Tallie knew she'd been had. So much for her father finally taking her seriously.

Now she knew what he was really up to. The presidency of Antonides Marine was nothing more than a means to throw her into the path of a Greek god in khakis and a blue oxford cloth shirt.

Elias Antonides was definitely that—an astonishingly handsome Greek god with thick, wavy, tousled black hair, a wide mobile mouth, strong cheekbones and an aquiline nose that was no less attractive for having been rearranged at some earlier date. Its slight crook only made him look tough and capable—like the sort of god who could quell sea monsters on the one hand while sacking Troy on the other.

And naturally he wasn't wearing a wedding ring, which just confirmed her suspicions. Well, she certainly couldn't say her father didn't have high aspirations.

But he must have lost his mind to imagine that a hunk like Elias Antonides would be interested in her!

In the looks department, Tallie knew she was decidedly average. Passable, but certainly not head-turning. Some men liked her hair, but they rarely liked the high-energy, high-powered brain beneath it. More men liked her father's money, but they seldom wanted to put up with a woman who had a mind of her own.

Only Brian had loved her for herself. And until she found another man who did, she wasn't interested.

When the right man came along, he wouldn't be intimidated by her brain or attracted only by her hair or her father's millions. He would love her.

He certainly wouldn't be looking at her, appalled, as Elias Antonides was, like she was something nasty he'd found on the bottom of his shoe. At least she didn't have to worry that Elias was in on her father's little game.

But if he found her presence so distasteful, why hadn't he just told her father—and his—no? As managing director—not to mention the man who had pulled Antonides Marine back from the edge of the financial abyss over the past eight years—surely he had some say in the matter.

Maybe he was just always surly.

Well, Tallie wasn't surly, and she was determined to make the best of this as a business opportunity, regardless of what her father's hidden agenda was.

So she grabbed Elias's hand and shook it firmly. "You must be Elias. I'm glad to meet you at last. And I'm glad you liked the cookies. I thought I should begin as I mean to go on."

"Making cookies?" He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind, then scowled, his brow furrowing, which would have made the average man look baffled and confused. It made Elias Antonides look brooding and dangerous and entirely too tempting. Silently Tallie cursed her father.

"Yes," she said firmly. "I've always found that people like them—and so they enjoy coming to work."

Elias's brows lifted, and he looked down his patrician nose at her. "Enjoyment is highly overrated, Ms Savas," he said haughtily.

Tallie let out a sigh of relief. Oh, good, if he was going to be all stiff and pompous, he would be much easier to resist.

"Oh, I don't agree at all," she said frankly. "I think it's enormously important. If employee morale is low," she informed him, "the business suffers."

His teeth came together with a snap. "Morale at Antonides Marine is not low."

"Of course it isn't," Tallie agreed. "And I want to keep it that way."

“Cookies do not make morale.”

“Well, they don’t hurt,” she said. “And they certainly improve the quality of life, don’t you think?” She glanced around at the group who had been scarfing down her best offering and was gratified to see several heads nod vigorously.

A glare from Elias brought them to an abrupt halt. “Don’t you have work to do?” he asked them. The heads bobbed again, and the group started to scatter.

“Before you go, though,” Tallie said. “I’d like to meet you.”

Elias didn’t look pleased, but he stuffed his hands in his pockets and stood silently while she introduced herself to each one, shook hands and tried to commit all their names to memory.

Paul was blond and bespectacled and crew-cut and personified efficiency. “I hope you’ll be very happy here,” he told her politely.

Dyson was black with flying dreadlocks and a gold hoop earring. “You’re good for my morale,” he told her with a grin, and snagged another cookie.

Rosie was short and curvy with flame-coloured hair. It was her job, she said, to keep everyone in line. “Even him.” She jerked her head at Elias. “I never make coffee,” she told Tallie. “Or cookies.” Then she confided that she might—if she could have these recipes.

“Sure, no problem,” Tallie said.

Lucy wore her silver hair in a bun and had a charm bracelet with a charm for every grandchild. Trina had long black hair with one blue streak, while Cara’s was short and spiky and decidedly pink. Giulia looked as if she were going to deliver triplets any minute.

“Boy or girl?” Tallie asked her.

“Boy,” Giulia said. “And soon, I hope,” she added wearily. “I want to see my feet.”

Tallie laughed. “My friend Katy said the same thing.”

They were a nice group, she decided after she’d chatted with them all. Friendly, welcoming. Everyone said they were happy to have her. Well, everyone except Elias Antonides.

He never said a word.

Finally, when the group began to head back to their various jobs, she looked at him. He was studying her as if she were a bomb he had to defuse.

“Perhaps we should talk?” she suggested. “Get acquainted?”

“Perhaps we should,” he said, his voice flat. He raked a hand through his hair, then sighed and called after Paul and Dyson, “Just keep going on the Corbett project. We’ll meet later.”

“If you need to meet with them, don’t let me interrupt,” Tallie said.

“I won’t.”

No, not really very welcoming at all.

But Tallie persisted, determined to get a spark of interest out of him. “I apologize for not letting you know I was already here,” she said. “I came in about seven. I could hardly wait,” she confided. “I was always getting to school on the first day hours early, too. Do you do that?”

“No.”

Right. Okay, let’s take a different tack.

“I found my office. Thank you for the name plaque, by the way. I don’t think I’ve ever had a plaque before. And thank you for all the fiscal reports. I got them from my father, so I’d already read them and I have a few questions. For example, have you considered that Corbett’s, while a viable possible acquisition, might not be the best one to start with? I thought—”

“Look, Ms Savas,” he said abruptly, “this isn’t going to work.”

“What isn’t going to work?”

“This! This question-and-answer business! You baking cookies, for God’s sake, then coming in with questions concerning things you know nothing about! I don’t have time for it. I have a business to run.”

“A business I am president of,” she reminded him archly.

“On account of a bet.”

Tallie stopped dead. “Bet? What bet?”

Hard dark eyes met hers accusingly. “You don’t know?”

But before she could do more than begin to shake her head, his jaw tightened and he sighed. “No, probably you don’t.” He opened his mouth, then shut it again. “Not here,” he muttered, glancing around the open break room. “Come on.”

And he grabbed her arm, steered her out the door and down the hallway, past the chattering temps and his flame-haired, goggle-eyed secretary and straight into his office. He shut the door with a definite click.

Elias Antonides’s office was far smaller than the one he’d given her. It didn’t even have a window. It had a desk overflowing with papers and files, two filing cabinets, a blueprint cabinet, three bookcases and one glorious wall painted by the same artist who had done the murals in the entry downstairs.

“Wow,” Tallie said involuntarily.

Elias looked startled. “Wow?”

She nodded at the mural. “It’s unexpected. Breathtaking. You don’t need a window.”

“No.” He stared at the mural a long moment, his jaw tight. Then abruptly he turned his gaze back to her and gestured toward a chair. “Sit down.”

It was more a command than an invitation. But it didn’t seem worth fighting about, so Tallie sat, then waited for him to do likewise. But he didn’t. He cracked his knuckles and paced behind his desk. A muscle worked in his jaw. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, paced some more and finally came to a stop directly behind the desk where at last he turned to face her. But he still didn’t speak.

“The bet?” Tallie prompted, not sure she wanted to know this, but reasonably certain it would shed light on why Elias was so upset.

“My father fancies himself a racing sailor,” he said at last. “And after he sold forty percent of Antonides Marine without telling anyone of his intentions—”

Uh-oh.

“—he hadn’t screwed things up badly enough yet. So he and your father made a little bet.” Elias cracked his knuckles again. She got the feeling he wished he was cracking his father’s head.

“What sort of bet?” Tallie asked warily. Dear God, her father hadn’t bet her hand in marriage, had he? He hadn’t done anything quite that outrageous yet in his attempt to marry her off, but she wouldn’t put it past him.

“The winner got the other’s island house and the presidency of Antonides Marine.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” Tallie protested. “What on earth would my father want with another house?” He had five now—if you counted what the family called “the hermitage” on a little island off the coast of Maine.

“I have no idea,” Elias said grimly. “I don’t think the houses had anything to do with it...even though,” he added bitterly, “in our case it was our family’s home for generations.”

“So why did they do it? Because of the presidency?”

Elias shrugged. “Not my father.”

But hers would have cared a great deal, she thought. She didn’t say so, however. “Then why would your father bet?”

“Because he thought he’d win!” Elias’s dark eyes flashed in anger. He shoved his hands through his hair. “He likes a good challenge. Especially when he’s got what he considers a sure thing. He didn’t count on your brother, the Olympic sailor,” Elias added heavily. He flung himself down in his chair and glared at her as if it were her fault.

Tallie knew whose fault it was. “Oh, dear. Daddy got Theo to race.”

It wasn't a question. Of course he had got Theo to race—because just like Aeolus Antonides, Socrates Savas always played to win. And in this case, Aeolus had something that Socrates wanted far more than any house—the presidency for his daughter—and the consequent proximity to Aeolus's Greek godson.

At least he hadn't offered her hand in marriage.

But what he had done was almost worse.

"Then we'll just call it off," Tallie said firmly. As much as she wanted the chance to prove herself, she was damned if she wanted the opportunity this way. "I'll quit and you can have your house back."

Elias looked surprised at her suggestion. Then he surprised her by shaking his head. "Won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because it's your father's. He won it, fair and square." Elias's mouth twisted as he said that. "Or as fair as Socrates Savas is likely to be."

"My father doesn't cheat!" Tallie defended her father fiercely on that count. He manipulated with the best of them. He played all the angles, pushed the edges of the envelope. But he didn't cheat.

Elias shrugged. "Whatever. He's got the house. And he's going to keep the house."

"I'll tell him not to. If I can't hand it back to you, I'll quit. I won't take the job."

"You have to take the job."

"Why?"

"Because that's the deal. That's the only way he'll deed it back."

Deals? Bets? She wanted to strangle her father.

"Tell me," she said grimly.

"He told my father he'd deed it back in two years..." Elias stopped and shook his head.

"If...?" Tallie prompted. She knew there was an if. There was always an if.

Elias ground his teeth. "If I stay on as managing director of Antonides," Elias said at last. "And you stay on as president."

"For two years?"

Obviously her father didn't have much confidence in her if he figured she would need two years to get Elias to the altar, Tallie thought wryly. Or maybe he thought it would take him two years to convince her that it was a good idea.

It wasn't a good idea. And she had no intention of doing any such thing!

"That's absurd," she said at last. "We don't have to play their games."

"The house—"

"It can't be that great a house!" she objected.

"There are a thousand others like it," he agreed readily.

"Well then—"

Elias steepled his hands. "My father was born there. His father was born there. His grandfather was born there. The only reason I wasn't born there was because my folks came to New York the year before I was born. But generations of Antonides have lived and loved and died in that house. We go back all the time. I built boats with my grandfather there when I was a boy." There was no tonelessness in his voice now. All the emotion he had so carefully reined in earlier was ragged in his voice now. "My parents were married there, for God's sake! It's our history, our heart."

"Then your father had no business betting it." Tallie was almost as mad at his father as he was.

"Of course he didn't! And your father had no business taking advantage of a man who shouldn't be let out alone."

They glared at each other.

It was true, Tallie reflected, what Elias just said. Her father had always had an eye for the main chance. His own dirt-poor immigrant parents had taught him that. If the Antonides family had an

ancestral home to lose, it was more than Socrates's family had ever had. Tallie had been brought up on stories of how hard they'd worked for little pay. So when opportunities came along, you took them, Socrates said. And luck—well, that you made yourself.

Tallie didn't doubt for a minute that her father thought taking advantage of Aeolus Antonides was a prime bit of luck.

"So what do you propose we do?" she asked politely, since she had no doubt he'd tell her anyway.

"I don't propose we do anything," Elias said sharply. "I've been doing just fine for the past eight years on my own. I've pulled Antonides Marine out of the red, I've made it profitable, and I'll continue to do so. And since you have to be here, Ms President, you can sit in your office or you can bake cookies—or file your fingernails."

"I'm not going to be filing my fingernails!"

"Whatever. Just stay out of my way."

She gaped at him. "I'm the president!"

"You're an interloper," Elias said flatly. "Why'd your old man stick you in here anyway?"

Tallie coloured, certain she knew the real reason. But it wasn't the one she gave him. "Because I can do the job!"

That was the truth, just not all of it.

Elias snorted. "You don't know a damned thing about the marine business."

"I'm learning. I read every report my father sent. I researched AMI in journals and business weeklies. I spent the morning reading the financial statements you put in my office. And I told you I have some concerns—"

"Which are not necessary."

"On the contrary, they are. If Antonides Marine is going to move out of strictly boat building, I think we should be considering a variety of options—"

"Which I have done."

"—and we need to examine the whole marketing strategy—"

"Which I have done."

"—before we make a decision."

"And I will make a decision."

Once more they glared at each other.

"Look," Tallie said finally, mustering every bit of patience she could manage. "We both agree that I can't leave—for our own reasons," she added quickly, before he could speak. "So I'm staying. And since I am, I'm getting involved. I'm president of Antonides Marine, whether you like it or not. And I won't be shunted aside. I won't let you do it."

Elias's jaw worked. He glowered at her. Tallie glowered right back. And they might have gone right on glowering if the phone hadn't rung.

Elias snatched it up. "What?" he barked.

Whatever the answer was, it didn't please him. He listened, drummed his fingers on the desktop, then ground his teeth. "Yeah, okay. Put her through." He punched the hold button and looked at Tallie. "It's my sister. I have to talk to her."

From the look on his face, Tallie didn't think she'd want to be Elias Antonides's sister right now. Or any other time for that matter.

"Fine," she said. "Go right ahead."

She needed time to come to terms with the things she'd learned this morning, anyway. It was far worse than she'd thought—the bet, the house, the deal, the arrogant unsuspecting Greek god her father had his eye on as a prospective son-in-law, not to mention said Greek god's "file your fingernails" attitude about what her role should be at Antonides Marine. Oh, yes, she had her work cut out for her.

She stood up. "I'll be in my office if you need me."

"Yeah, that'll happen," Elias muttered.

She shot him a hard look, but he was already back on the telephone with his sister.

“No,” Elias said.

It was what he always said to Cristina. It wasn't the bead shop this time. As he'd suspected, that had been a momentary whim. But this conversation wasn't going any better. Whenever he talked to his sister Cristina, they ended up at loggerheads. Usually it happened sooner. Like within a minute.

This time it had taken ten, but mostly because he was distracted, his mind still playing over the frustrating encounter with Ms President while Cristina rabbited on about how she'd been out sailing off Montauk last week, and wasn't it beautiful at Montauk this time of year, and on and on.

Waiting for her to get to the point, Elias had tried to think how he could have handled the irritatingly sanguine Ms Savas differently. Surely there had to be some way to convince her to leave well enough alone and not meddle in Antonides Marine affairs. But he couldn't think of one.

She'd flat-out said, “I don't follow directions well,” and then she'd pretty much proved it. Annoying woman!

“It was a beaut,” Cristina enthused. “You'd love it. You should come with us next time.”

Elias dragged his brain back from Tallie Savas long enough to say, “No time.”

“Oh, for heaven's sake, Elias. Get a life.”

“I have a life,” Elias said stiffly, even though he was sure Cristina wouldn't consider working seventy hours a week on Antonides Marine and another thirty or forty renovating the building much of a life at all.

“Sure you do.” Cristina sniffed. “Come on, Elias. Mark would love to take you.”

So she was still with Mark? After what—two months now? Elias supposed it was some sort of record.

“You could bring Gretl,” she suggested enthusiastically. “We saw her this weekend, Mark and I. I don't know why you dumped her.”

And he wasn't going to tell her, either.

When he'd met Gretl Gustavsson at a South Street Seaport bar one night, she'd just broken up with her boyfriend and had no interest in getting serious again anytime soon. As Elias had no interest in getting serious at all, they'd enjoyed each other's company.

Their relationship, which Elias didn't even want to describe with that word, had gone on for the past two years—until Gretl started acting as if there was more to it than there was.

“I've wasted two years on you, Elias,” she'd told him a couple of months ago.

Elias hadn't considered them a waste, but if that was the way she wanted to look at it, so be it. He'd said goodbye, and that was that. He hadn't seen her since.

“She's so sweet. She asked about you.” Cristina waited hopefully and got no response. She sighed. “Well, if you don't want Gretl, fine. We'll find you someone else.”

“No, you won't,” Elias said sharply. “I don't need you setting me up with a woman. Besides, I'm busy. I've got work up to my eyebrows. And it just got harder. In case you haven't heard, we have a new president of Antonides Marine.”

“Daddy told me. And it's a woman!” Amazement didn't even begin to cover Cristina's feelings about that. She giggled. “Do you think he's setting you up?”

“No, I damned well don't!” Though the thought had certainly occurred to him. Still, his father was rarely that subtle. Aeolus took a more shove-the-woman-in-his-face approach.

And the truth was, Tallie Savas would never be his father's choice in a woman.

Aeolus loved his wife, but he had never stopped ogling tall, big-busted Nordic beauties. He'd thought Gretl was stunning, which she had been. But Elias had never fantasized going to bed with her. Because he'd gone to bed with her, he told himself. There had never been any speculation. Never any mystery with Gretl.

Whereas with Tallie Savas and her miles of wild curly hair—

“Maybe I'll come and check her out. What's she like?” Cristina said eagerly.

“Nothing special.” Elias made sure his tone was dampening. Then he cleared his throat. “She’s an MBA. A CEO. All business.”

“Battle-ax, hmm?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh.” Cristina’s disappointment was obvious. “I wonder what Daddy was thinking then.”

“I doubt he was thinking.”

Cristina laughed. “He’s not that bad, Elias. He likes Mark.”

“Which proves my case.”

“It does not,” Cristina said, but she didn’t sound as defensive as she usually did about her boyfriends. “You don’t know him. He knows a lot about boats. If the lady prez is a hard worker, you’ll have some time off now. You can come out with Mark and me.”

“No.” Which brought them back to where they’d started. Elias pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, Cristina, I’ve got work to do—”

“You won’t even meet him,” she accused.

“I’ve met him,” Elias said wearily. “I went to Yale with him.”

“So I heard. He said he’s changed since Yale.”

Elias hoped so. At Yale Mark had been a drunken reveler who’d only got in because his father knew someone who knew someone. What was it with Greek fathers?

“If you want me to meet him again, bring him out to the folks’ on Sunday.” He’d managed to avoid his mother’s last Sunday dinner by pleading a work overload. He wasn’t going to get out of this one and he knew it.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Cristina mumbled.

“I thought you said the old man liked him.”

“Yes, but only because he can beat Mark at golf.”

Elias laughed. “Well, there you go. Something to build on. You’ll work it out, Crissie. I have to go. I’ll see you Sunday.”

“I’ll bring Mark if you bring Ms President.”

“Goodbye, Crissie.” Elias hung up before his sister got any more bright ideas.

He had other far more important things to deal with—like convincing Thalia Savas, aka Ms President, that despite what she thought, it was a better idea to spend the next two years filing her fingernails than trying to meddle in the business of Antonides Marine.

If she thought she’d done her homework, Elias thought, rubbing his hands together in anticipation, she had another think coming.

He’d show her homework. And he knew exactly where to start.

“For me?” Tallie looked up and smiled brightly when Elias appeared in her office late that afternoon with a three-foot-high-stack of reports and folders.

“For you,” Elias agreed cheerfully, thumping them on her desk. “Since you want to be involved in the decisions, you’ll want to get up to speed.

“Of course I will,” she agreed promptly. “Thank you very much.”

He gave her a hard-eyed gaze, but she smiled in the face of it and finally he just shrugged. “My pleasure.” He turned toward the door, then paused and glanced back. “I’ll have more for you tomorrow.”

Tallie’s determined smile didn’t waver. “I can hardly wait.”

In fact, she was having a very good time. After he’d finished his phone call with his sister, he’d gone into the boardroom to meet with Paul and Dyson. He hadn’t invited her, but she had gone in anyway. He’d looked startled when she’d opened the door and very much like he’d like to throw her out. But finally he’d shrugged and said, “Pull up a chair.”

Tallie had pulled up a chair and taken out a notepad and pen. She'd listened intently, making notes but not saying a word, though from the way Elias angled a glance at her periodically, she knew he was expecting her to stick her oar in.

She never did.

The first order of business she'd learned from her father was to look and listen before saying anything at all. It had stood her in good stead before. She intended to do the same thing here.

Listening today was quite enough. She was impressed with how thorough Elias was and how he was able to take the information Paul provided and examine it from different angles. He had, as he'd told her, done a thorough job of considering many of the ramifications of the purchase of Corbett's.

She still wasn't convinced that it was a good move. It seemed a little too far afield, but she would listen and consider and do more work on her own, and then she'd comment.

In the meantime, she'd read the stack of material he left her.

She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd given her three feet of invoices and grocery lists to read. But she wouldn't know unless she skimmed every single piece. So she spent the rest of the afternoon in her office doing just that.

Some of the reports seemed little more than she'd expected. But some were significant. They outlined in far greater detail than the material her father had given her what the financial status of Antonides Marine had been when Elias had come in eight years ago—and what it was now.

She got a far clearer understanding of just how dire the straits had been when Elias had taken over, and an even greater appreciation for how astute his business handling was. He'd seen what needed to be done, and he'd done it—even when it had meant cutting out some very appealing but not terribly lucrative lines.

The venture into luxury yacht construction that his father had spent vast amounts on was obviously one of Aeolus's pet projects. It had drained the company's assets, though, and had brought in very little.

When Elias took over, it had been the first thing to go.

There was nothing in the papers he gave her that spelled out in words his father's opposition. But in the "who was in favor of what" pieces, it was clear that Elias's decision had met with considerable parental opposition.

She wondered if she dared point it out to him as something the two of them had in common. Somehow she doubted it. But the more she read, the less she blamed him for his attitude. And when at last she leaned back in her chair and contemplated the skyline of Manhattan against the setting sun, she had to admit that if she were Elias Antonides, she'd resent an interloper coming in, too.

At eight o'clock when she gathered up the stack of papers she intended to take home for further study. It was a foot and a half high, but every bit could be all important. When she finally opened her mouth, she wanted to have her facts straight. Giving the stack a little pat, she went in search of a box to put it in.

The office was deserted. Rosie had left ages ago, but not without poking her head in to remind Tallie to bring the recipes tomorrow.

She'd promised them to Paul, too, who thought his fiancée would like them, and to Dyson who'd said he didn't have a fiancée, but who needed one? If you wanted cookies badly enough—and they were good enough—you just baked them yourself.

"I'm liberated," he'd told Tallie.

She smiled now at the memory, glad she'd brought them, determined to bring others tomorrow. They were good for morale. And they were an excellent way to connect with the staff, even if some people, she thought as she opened the supply closet, looked down their once-broken noses at them.

"Ah, excellent," she muttered, discovering a box behind the paper supplies. She fished it out, then stood up and turned, slamming into a hard male chest.

“Can I help you find something?” Elias’s tone was polite, his meaning was anything but. Loosely translated, Tallie knew, he wanted to know what the hell she was doing.

She smiled brightly at him. “You’re still here, too? I was just getting a box to take some work home.” She tried to step around him.

He blocked her way. “What work?”

“Some of that reading material you provided. Excuse me.” Her tone was polite, too, but when he didn’t move, she sidestepped him and—accidentally, of course—knocked the box into his solar plexus. “Oh! Sorry.”

Not exactly the truth, but if he was going to stand in her way... She heard him mutter under his breath as she hurried back down the hall with the box in her arms.

Footsteps came after her. “You don’t need to take things home.” He stopped in the door of her office, scowling as she piled the papers into the box.

“Well, I don’t plan to stay here all night.”

“You’re taking way too much trouble.”

“It’s not trouble. It’s my job.”

His jaw bunched, and she knew he was itching to say, “No, it’s mine.”

But he didn’t say anything, just exhaled sharply and rocked back on his heels before muttering something under his breath, then turning and stalking off down the hall.

“Welcome to your first wonderful day at Antonides Marine,” Tallie murmured to herself as she watched him stalk away.

No question about it—Tallie Savas was going to be a pain.

Who the hell needed a president who baked cookies? Who came to meetings and sat there, scribbling furiously on a notepad and never said a word? Who buried herself in her office with the piles and piles of reports he’d given her and actually read them? And took them home with her?

Elias stood glaring after her from his office as she tottered toward the door, the box full of files balanced on top of her briefcase, and three empty cookie tins teetering precariously on top of that.

A gentleman would help her with it.

Elias didn’t feel much like a gentleman. He would have liked to have seen her collapse in a heap.

But the way his life was going at the moment, his father would probably want to pay all her medical bills with money Elias hadn’t made yet!

Grimly he strode after her. “Allow me,” he said with frigid politeness and opened the door for her.

“Thanks.” She gave him a sweet smile that was completely at odds with her stubborn refusal to go home and let him get on with the job. “Have a good evening.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said drily.

She turned her head to grin at him. The top cookie tin teetered, and she nearly dropped them all, rescuing it.

Against his better judgment, Elias said grudgingly, “Do you want some help?”

Tallie shook her head—and the cookie tins and the briefcase and the box. “No, thanks.” And she wobbled off down the hall.

Oddly annoyed at having his offer refused, Elias shut the door behind her. But he didn’t move away. He continued to watch her through the glass. If she dropped the damn things, she’d have to let him help her.

But at that moment one of the doors down the hall opened and a man came out. Elias recognized Martin de Boer instantly from his tweedy elbow-patched jacket and his floppy earnest-and-intense-journalist-too-busy-to-get-a-haircut hair.

Martin wrote for the snooty monthly opinion mag, *Issues and Answers*, that rented a group of offices down the hall. When Elias had leased to them, he’d figured they’d be congenial tenants, and

the people who worked on the physical magazine were. He even played recreational league basketball with the layout director.

But the journalists who wrote for Issues and Answers were a different story. They thought everyone else had issues but only they had answers. And from the few conversations Elias had had with him, Martin de Boer had more answers than most. As far as Elias could see, de Boer was a pompous, arrogant know-it-all who stuck his oar in where it wasn't needed.

And his opinion didn't improve as he watched Martin smile and speak to Tallie, obviously offering to help carry her box. In this case he got a brilliant smile in return and a reply that permitted him to whisk the box out of her arms gallantly and cradle it in his own.

Hell! Elias glared. She'd practically kicked his shins when he'd offered! He was half tempted to stalk down the hall and jerk the damn box out of de Boer's skinny arms.

Good thing his cell phone rang.

Bad thing to hear his father's voice, jovial and upbeat, booming down the line. "Well how'd it go today with our new president?"

Elias, watching Tallie disappear into the elevator with Martin the Bore, bit out two words: "Don't ask."

CHAPTER THREE

THE PHONE began ringing right after she came in the door.

“Just wanted to see how things went,” Socrates said. Her father’s tone was deliberately casual and offhand but at the same time simply simmering with curiosity.

Tallie, who was feeding a very hungry and indignant cat who thought he should have eaten two hours before, scooped some fishy-smelling glop onto a plate and set it on the floor. Harvey fell on it ravenously. She straightened and took a deep breath. “Just fine.”

She would have left it at that, but she knew from experience that that wasn’t the way to handle Socrates. Less was never more with her father. And letting him ask questions was worse than telling him more than enough to lead him astray.

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