



# Kidnapped by the Greek Billionaire

*Author: Rachel Lyndhurst*

**Category:** Billionaire Romance

**Description:**

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:11 am*

## Chapter One

“Damn this place!”

Andreas Lazarides stared up through the Bentley’s dark-tinted windows into a dull London sky. His driver was parked illegally, his delegates were late and he was in danger of forgetting how much he stood to gain by courting this parliamentary lobbying group.

He hated it when people were late.

As he sat there, waiting, Andreas realized with disbelief that this was his second no-show in the capital that morning.

He made a grab for his briefcase as a police officer indicated they should move immediately. His chauffeur turned the key in the ignition and waited expectantly.

“Okay, I’ll get out here and call when I need you back.”

Andreas glared as the car’s red taillights disappeared into traffic. His hand tightened into a fist; his cell phone was still on the back seat of the Bentley. He inhaled savagely as he pictured his already tight schedule being squeezed. And none of this was his fault.

“Bloody politicians,” he muttered as he glanced across the river to Big Ben. His annoyance intensified into volcanic exasperation as the first warm, heavy drops of a summer storm began to spatter the shoulders of his Canali suit.

Stalking across the gritty pavement, Andreas Lazarides cursed every atom on earth that had brought him to this particular place and time.

...

The secretary was immaculately dressed and coiffured, and her huge white reception desk was equally intimidating. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Miss Dean, but the senior partner left the building some time ago.”

Kizzy Dean felt her stomach churn with panic. There had to be some mistake. “But I have an appointment, a long-standing one. It’s taken me over two months to get a meeting, in fact, I—”

“You’re late,” the other woman snapped. She returned the passport Kizzy had been instructed to bring along as ID. Her long, red nails reflected the cold neon strip light overhead. “Ten minutes late, to be precise.”

Kizzy felt heat flood her cheeks as their eyes locked in a silent impasse. Clearly, it would be a waste of breath to try to explain that her train journey had taken four hours instead of two due to a bomb scare. Her obsessive forward planning had failed spectacularly and she was, as had been so sharply pointed out, a full ten minutes late.

And she was never, ever late.

Kizzy’s eyes fell helplessly to the secretary’s gilt nameplate on the desk. Nervously, she fingered the envelope in her hand. Things were starting to go terribly wrong. It felt as though she were slipping off the edge of a cliff; she needed to take action to save herself. And fast.

“Listen, Mrs. Hoppenwilde, Isabella, this really isn’t my fault and in the light of this letter it’s imperative that I speak with him immediately.” Kizzy battled inwardly with

her pride; she hated having to beg. But what choice did she have? “Please. Is there anything you can do to help me?”

“I’m afraid not. By my calculations, he’ll be on his first glass of champagne one hundred meters up on the London Eye, and he’s due to leave London immediately after that engagement.” Isabella Hoppenwilde regarded her frostily. Her thin smile verged on the sadistic. “Looks like you’ve had it.”

...

Kizzy fought to steady her breathing and palmed the weave of her skirt, willing it down another discreet inch or two to cover the snag her hosiery had sustained on the London Underground.

She was still struggling with what she had read in the dark oak-paneled offices of Heliades International Inc., the chilling words that had made her chase like a lunatic across London toward the river Thames. The words that meant she had no choice in the drastic step she was about to take, because she had nothing left in the world to lose.

Her frantic bolt to the London Eye—where she now stood, staring up at the wheel—had left her feeling disheveled and clammy, her heavy woolen suit an instrument of torture. The tweedy garment was the only suitable business attire she owned and the last of her funds had been sunk into the new stilettos she was wearing.

And now those new stilettos really hurt.

Kizzy glanced down at her pointy toes and wondered if she dared slip her heels off for a moment, but she forgot her discomfort when she noticed once more the large white envelope protruding from her bag. Its forbidding, formal whiteness made her heart flood with dread.

Tearing her eyes away, she looked determinedly up at the colossal ring of glass and steel that held her future, a future for which she intended to fight tooth and nail.

Oh, how she wished she were somewhere else right now.

“Ow!”

Kizzy tottered backward as a large raindrop landed forcefully just beneath her eye, stinging her skin. As her eye began to water, she scrubbed at it angrily in case it ushered along a flood of real tears.

“Here,” came a deep male voice from beside her. A blue, folded silk handkerchief was thrust into her hand. “Same thing just happened to me.”

“Please don’t worry.” She instinctively went to push away the offering. “It’s very kind, but—”

The breath stalled in her lungs as her eyes focused on the striking physical embodiment of That Voice. His tall body was all angles, a mass of square and triangular planes of masculinity, which shifted powerfully beneath the fabric of what was obviously a very expensive suit.

As she slowly dared to look up farther, his face was close enough for her to take in every detail.

Her knees went as weak as a newborn lamb’s.

A shock of jet-black hair stroked his smooth caramel-lacquer brow above a pair of assertive eyebrows tapering elegantly over dark onyx eyes that shimmered with tiny flecks of gold, pewter and slate. Briefly, trying not to stare like a schoolgirl, Kizzy’s gaze slid to his aristocratic, almost Roman nose and the terse line of his mouth below

it, a mouth that made her tingle with sudden and acute female awareness. Before she could stop herself, her lips parted to exhale a soft, involuntary breath of excitement.

“It’s not contaminated.” He pressed forward the triangle of navy blue silk again and nodded with satisfaction as she took it from him. “You look harassed. Not here for pleasure, then?”

She must look a mess, Kizzy realized with horror, and hurriedly swept the handkerchief across her face. She did her best to ignore the trace of male scent within its fibers, though it was difficult.

“I’m trying to find my boss actually; it’s a matter of urgency.”

“Not an MP, is he?” the businessman drawled sardonically. A look of wry amusement briefly softened the harsh perspective of his face as he looked absently around him.

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“No.” She handed back the crumpled handkerchief. “He’s a complete and utter bastard.”

A dark eyebrow rose. “Is that so?”

“Sorry—I’m not usually so insulting about people, but this man is different.” Kizzy felt annoyance as the stranger shrugged and rocked back on his heels, clearly unconvinced. “If you must know, this man intends to take my job, my home and my entire future from me. And he hasn’t even got the guts to do it to my face.”

The Suit looked over his shoulder and then at his watch. “He must have his reasons.”

“I doubt if Andreas Lazarides gives a damn about anyone or anything.” She glared angrily up at the gigantic tubular wheel spokes splayed across the sky. “But I’m not giving in without a fight.”

Kizzy glanced across at him as the man squinted into the distance. He must be a big shot in the city, she thought. Smart and gorgeous, but undoubtedly a workaholic judging by the way he seemed to be constantly thinking, analyzing, speculating.

His dark eyes unexpectedly found hers again. “Andreas Lazarides. A Greek bastard, then?”

Kizzy nodded and shot him a crooked smile; his accent was quite compelling.

His own mouth remained stern. “So what’s your name? Miss...?”

She paused for a moment and tried not to be drawn further into the deep mocha swirl of his eyes. His tone had suddenly become a little harsh and her stomach clenched for a second. She needed to be careful. After all, he was a complete stranger.

He could be anyone.

“Isabella,” she murmured, before she could stop herself.

She held out a hand and suppressed a tremor of awareness as his large, warm hand captured hers and held it for a second longer than was absolutely necessary. The sensation rocketed straight to the middle of her chest and seemed to double her heart rate.

“Isabella Hoppenwilde,” she continued, lying instinctively.

The air hung still for a moment and Kizzy was aware of nothing but the way this city Adonis was staring at her, sucking her into the dangerous depths of his eyes, almost undressing her with his unwavering scrutiny.

Perhaps he was waiting for her to ask his name in return?

It would be the polite thing to do. Not that she was feeling particularly polite today, of all days.

“So how are you planning to find him? There are hundreds of people around.” He released her hand. “Unless, of course, he stands out from the crowd in some way.”

“I’m just going to watch while everyone comes off,” Kizzy said feebly, realizing that she had no idea what her quarry looked like. They had never even spoken on the phone, let alone met.

“Well, let me help you spot him,” he offered, much to her surprise. “What does he look like, this Andreas Lazarides?”

“He’s balding and generally surrounded by security staff,” she heard herself bluff shamelessly, not daring to hesitate in case he guessed she was lying. “And he’ll head straight for one of those ostentatious blacked-out vehicles that will be circling the area, a Mercedes or something. Oh yes, and he always struts about in a very pompous, self-important way—his method of compensating for being so short.”

She smiled with satisfaction at the image she had just created. He sounded quite revolting, her Andreas Lazarides.

“Sounds like he may be doing a couple of circuits of the wheel—especially if it’s a boozy corporate do,” the Suit replied and looked coldly skyward as heavy raindrops began to fall faster and closer together. “In which case, you could be standing out in this for an hour. I’ve got a better idea. My party seems to have let me down, and as you will discover,” he gestured toward the embarkation pier where a guide stood next to a silver-wheeled metal case, “the Eye waits for no one.”

She was hit by a rush of adrenaline as he grabbed her hand and pulled her along behind him. Her high heels clattered on the grooved metal plating underfoot as they shot along a roped-off “fast track” route to the front of the queue, netting curious stares and a number of speculative camera flashes as they went.

“No, I can’t!” Kizzy was quickly trying to work out a dignified exit route, a means of escape from a situation that was beginning to feel increasingly dangerous. “My boss—”

“I intend to help you find him.” He broke off briefly to speak into the waiting guide’s ear. “Join me for thirty minutes on the Eye and we’ll spot him while we’re up there. There can’t be too many stack-heeled bastards with receding hairlines per capsule and

his henchmen are going to make it obvious where he is.”

“Really...I don’t want to put you out.”

Kizzy was frantically trying to decline his invitation without making a fool of herself. She was going to look completely nuts if she confessed she’d never even met her boss in the flesh.

“It’s moving so slowly, I could lose him if he gets off before us, so—”

She rubbed her brow without even realizing she was doing it, inadvertently revealing her unease.

“That won’t happen.” He tugged her sharply toward an empty capsule. “Now jump!”

The guide swiftly loaded the silver-wheeled box into the capsule and all Kizzy could do was watch the door slide closed as if in a horrible dream.

There was an eerie quietness as the rattle of London life was muffled into submission. Then the crowd outside gradually shrank from view as the Eye continued its relentless journey. Her attention was jolted back from the sight of the world disappearing beneath her feet by the sound of a popping champagne cork. It hit the ceiling and then rolled toward the soles of her uncomfortably shod feet.

“Let’s celebrate,” the dark stranger announced smoothly, handing her a champagne flute, “our chance meeting. Like two planets colliding. The chances of it happening? Slim. The results? Earth-shattering.”

Kizzy felt color warm her cheeks and couldn’t be sure if it was panic because she was alone with—practically kidnapped by, in fact—this incredibly sexy man, or shame at allowing her body to respond to his domineering smile in a way that was most

unladylike.

“Thank you,” she murmured. Her fingers curled tightly around the slender champagne flute. “You’re incredibly generous, especially considering I’m a complete stranger.”

“A most beautiful stranger,” he corrected and smiled with obvious satisfaction at the deepening flush of color that accompanied the lowering of her eyelashes. “But, you know, it’s odd. Somehow it feels as if we have known each other for rather longer than five minutes.”

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Kizzy's heart was pounding hard enough to hike up her blood pressure until she felt sick.

She was not enjoying this enforced captivity one bit.

"I should have asked," he continued blandly as he gestured toward the now-elevated view over the city. "Have you ever been up on the Eye before?"

"No, never," she replied and took a nervous sip of her icy champagne. "This view over London is quite spectacular."

"It is," he agreed, and another taut smile briefly dressed his lips. "And we're now too far off the ground for you to evade me."

Kizzy's heart plunged to her feet and her entire body stiffened. She felt her eyes widen with alarm. "Evade you? Look, this capsule is transparent. You'll never get away with—"

He laughed harshly.

"With what? Taking gross advantage of you? Please." The gorgeous stranger snapped his gaze away from her and gestured toward the rapidly shrinking Houses of Parliament. "Look at that view. A hotbed of corruption and deceit these days, I gather."

Kizzy stared at his sharp features and cowered against the curved glass wall until his eyes rounded on her.

“So...Isabella...” His eyes were blacker than anything she had ever seen. “I am very keen to know your secret.”

“M-my secret?”

“Mmm, like how you managed to totally transform yourself in the space of an hour.” He exhaled slowly and the curl of his lips exuded disgust. “Just how did you get all that scarlet nail polish off?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Then you’re not very good at this, are you?” He took a sip of his champagne and swallowed hard. “I assume you are the unbelievably persistent and annoying Kizzy Dean? The pint-pulling, napkin-folding thorn in my side that’s been badgering my offices over the past two months?”

Kizzy’s legs trembled with the appalling realization of what was happening, of how stupid she must look.

It was him!

Lazarides had been handed to her on a plate, she finally had his full attention, but... She almost choked when she began to remember the things she’d said about him down on the ground. Her entire world seemed to be shriveling to nothing beneath his looming shadow.

“There’s no need to be so rude,” she whispered, even as her mind raced around the fact that there was no way out of this awkward situation.

“I don’t think we’ll get on to rude, Kizzy, do you? I don’t recall ever being called a bastard to my face—not even by a woman scorned. And there have been a few.”

Kizzy felt her cheeks blaze with humiliation. “Look, this is horrifically embarrassing—”

“Big of you to admit it.”

Kizzy’s voice shook. “I’ve dealt with this very badly and I can’t apologize enough for my remarks earlier, but I was—am—convinced that Timi’s Taverna can still work. I’ve brought my business plan—”

“Forget it, the restaurant is finished.” He frowned at the way her violet blue eyes seemed to exude innocence and he disliked the strange feeling it caused inside him. He deliberately sharpened his tone, suddenly aware that the lush shape and color of her mouth had been distracting him. “It’s no reflection on your abilities or efforts since the Antonides family left you as manager, but the whole mess is now beyond making economic sense.”

“But—”

“As stated in my letter, you will receive three months’ salary in lieu of notice and must vacate the flat above the restaurant within the month. It’s a reasonable settlement in my opinion, going over and above what is strictly required legally, so I’d take the offer and run if I were you.” He paused and his eyes narrowed to charcoal slits as his voice dropped to a menacing whisper. “I could be much more of a bastard if I wanted to be, believe me.”

Kizzy’s hand trembled as she produced a folder that held hours of work and represented many nights of lost sleep. “So you’re not even going to look at this then?” She couldn’t just give up.

“There’s no point. The numbers speak for themselves. The business is a dead duck.”

“But I can turn it round. Just give me a chance.”

He shrugged. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Kizzy replied bitterly. “I don’t believe you.”

For one inexplicable moment, Andreas was tempted to inform her that as executor of his mother’s will he was merely carrying out her wishes. But he restrained himself. Whatever he had to do in England was none of her business and he was not in the habit of explaining himself to anyone.

He took a step nearer and lowered his face to within an inch of hers.

“Okay then, let’s make this simple. I won’t!” He frowned harder, rattled for some reason by the altercation. “Besides, there are other factors, things about which you know nothing. I admire your spirit, but Timi’s has to go.”

“But I came all this way, even prepared a presentation for you—”

“I’m sorry you’ve had a wasted journey.” Andreas Lazarides waved his hand dismissively. “But it was you who insisted on coming here with all your big ideas after hounding the office for weeks until I gave in. And that was just to stop Isabella moaning about your twice-daily calls. To be frank, you’ve made a bloody nuisance of yourself. This unpleasantness could have been settled much more conveniently by e-mail.”

Anger simmered in Kizzy’s belly. Such persistence hadn’t come easily to her, but she had been so sure that her new boss would have a speck of fair play about him and that he would at least listen. She had been terribly wrong about the Greek business tycoon.

“Instinct tells me that you would have found me much easier to ignore by e-mail, Mr. Lazarides. I wouldn’t put it past you to have dumped me straight into the spam folder, unread.”

“There is every possibility of that, yes. And then I imagine I would have pressed ‘delete.’ It would have been an enormous relief.”

Kizzy felt the metaphorical slap in the face, and then the random kicks for good measure. She felt herself tremble. In spite of everything she had done at the restaurant following its sale to Heliades International Inc., her future now looked utterly bleak.

Any excitement or optimism she had felt that morning had evaporated.

“What a mess.” She tipped her head skyward to contain the humiliated tear she felt growing in the corner of her eye. “I was so certain about all this. I went over it so many times in my head, on paper and spreadsheets.”

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“It is most unfortunate,” he muttered.

Kizzy lowered her gaze, summoning hidden reserves to challenge the black ice that crackled mercilessly in his eyes. “Listen, I’d never have sunk what was left of my savings into the taverna if Mr. Antonides hadn’t promised me it was going to be a long-term thing, that you supported appointing a manager to run the place when he retired. There was no indication that I was going to have the rug pulled right out from under my feet.”

“You’ve spent your own money on the venture? That was a pretty stupid thing to do. Managers take a salary; they don’t go ‘investing’ all over the place.” Andreas shook his head at her in disbelief. “Your file says you’re a graduate, a woman with a brain. What on earth made you act so dumb?”

He’d read her file?

She felt the tenacious tear drip onto the floor, and loathed her lack of control. But there seemed to be little point in keeping up appearances now.

“Timi’s is all I have left; it’s my home and only source of income. Or it was.” The silence was as heavy as the sky was becoming dark. “I can’t believe this is what the Antonideses intended. They’re friends. And they’re going to be so upset when I tell them what’s happened.”

Andreas reached her in three long strides and gripped her by the upper arm. “You will tell them nothing! Nothing at all, do you hear?” His grip only loosened as he registered the shock on her face. “They must never hear of this. Never.”

Kizzy's brain was now a confused tangle. The Antonideses had been like family to her since her mother died, and she was still in regular contact with them. In fact, Mrs. Antonides had e-mailed a few pictures of their new villa that morning, so it would be impossible not to tell them without being dishonest.

The first acrid threads of anger and indignation began to rise to her defense; roughly, she wrenched her arm free.

"And why the hell shouldn't I tell them? To protect your reputation or something?" Kizzy let out a bitter laugh. "You want me to lie for you, is that it? I don't think so."

"You have no idea what damage you could cause with that mouth of yours. The Antonideses are good people who have worked hard, asked for little and given back a hundred-fold all they received. But they are not good businesspeople. Incredibly proud, but hopeless with money." He began to pace the floor, and heads turned in the adjacent capsule as he spoke tersely, gesturing. "How do you think they'll feel if you tell them their lives' work was just a mountain of debt? That it was all for nothing? And then you intend heaping guilt on them for leaving poor little you in the gutter!"

"No! I'd never—"

"Your indiscretion will ruin their happy retirement and condemn them to spend the rest of their lives in shame and regret. Believe me, Miss Dean, I know how these people are. Prouder and more honorable than you could ever imagine. Besides that, no one owes you a living either; times are hard for everyone right now." He raked a hand through his black hair. "And please. You're a pretty little graduate, you can get a reasonable job if you apply yourself, so spare me the crocodile tears."

Kizzy snapped her jaw shut, crushing her teeth together so hard it hurt. She'd stupidly let him see her cry and he'd pounced on that moment of incredible vulnerability.

No one owes you a living.

As if she didn't know that already. The man was a beast.

"Of course I would do anything to avoid hurting Theo and Ana. They don't deserve that."

He fixed her with a stare as hard and cold as stone. "So how much do you want?"

Kizzy swallowed back more bitter, acid tears. "What?"

"You heard me," he replied, dark lashes narrowing his eyes until it looked as if he was sneering at her. "How much do I have to pay you to say that you have decided to resign your position, and then to sign a legal document promising you won't do anything to cause mental or emotional harm to the Antonides family?"

Kizzy's mouth gaped with disbelief that this dreadful man could think so badly of her. "I told you I would never hurt them deliberately!"

Andreas pretended to choke on a hollow laugh. "And why on earth should I believe that?"

"Because I said so?" Kizzy folded her arms tightly across her chest to stop her hands from shaking.

"What? You? The woman who introduced herself to me as my very own secretary of five years? Who lied with the very first breaths of London air we shared? I can't take that risk." Andreas turned abruptly away and, raising both palms above his head, leaned against the cool glass of the capsule window. "I might be a bastard, but I'm not an idiot. Name your price."

“I don’t want your money.”

“No?” He laughed unpleasantly and pushed himself away from the window. “I find that almost impossible to believe, since you lost everything you possessed in the world only a few seconds ago. So, tell me, what do you want?”

“I want back what’s been taken from me. My job, my home, and my plans for the future. I don’t want your handouts, or anyone else’s for that matter. All I want is the chance to prove myself and to earn my way out of—to earn a reasonable living. Enough to be independent.”

“Interesting.”

Kizzy was beginning to feel more annoyed than upset now that all seemed to be lost and her best efforts had come to nothing. “Well, I’m so glad you think so,” she replied.

At least she’d stopped crying now, Andreas thought disparagingly. “So,” he began. “Would you consider yourself to be a risk-taker?”

Kizzy regarded him suspiciously. “I’m not sure.”

He waited for a moment to see if she would elaborate. “Or do you perhaps see yourself spending the next forty or so years in a dusty office ticking boxes for a living?”

Kizzy’s thoughts strayed to her late mother as she posed in a very old photograph, young, beautiful, and deliciously wild with large golden hoops in her ears. She yearned to be cast to the four winds by circumstance. She would relish the freedom and exhilaration but there were the debts to consider, a bitter legacy she had to bear. She couldn’t just run away from that.

“Absolutely not,” she told him.

“How brave are you feeling at the moment?” Andreas asked, his expression deadly.

Kizzy was perplexed at the tone of his question; something had changed behind those demanding black eyes of his. “I think this is the bravest I’ve ever had to be in my life.”

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He gestured to the London skyline. “Brave enough to leave this place straight away? To leave London with me?”

Kizzy stared at him blankly, unable to work out what was going on inside their huge, floating bubble of glass. “Leave? Now?”

“In the next thirty minutes.”

“And go where exactly?”

“Somewhere I can keep a close eye on you until I sort out some legal guarantees between us. I agree to provide you with work and accommodation in return for your cooperation with regard to the Antonides family. The ‘future’ part is up to you, but you’ll have the tools to make it happen. I want you to come to Greece with me. The island of Rhodes, to be precise.”

“But I’ve nothing with me, no spare clothes.”

“Don’t worry.” A slow smile formed as his dark eyes trailed her body from head to toe. “You won’t be needing many clothes.”

### Chapter Two

Kizzy blinked away the fierce sunshine of Rhodes and, in spite of her previous protestations, flipped down the designer sunglasses that Andreas had insisted on buying her...along with a wardrobe’s worth of the finest silk and linen daywear money could buy.

“So, still want your woolen suit back? And those stockings?” Andreas flicked Kizzy a condescending smile, then urged her to speed up as he marched her through one of the ancient stone gates in the city ramparts toward the harbor.

“That wouldn’t be very sensible under the circumstances. They did have a run in them,” Kizzy replied breathlessly. His strides were a good deal longer than hers.

She tossed her head belligerently, glad of the sunglasses in case her eyes gave away just how intimidated and awestruck she was feeling.

It had cut her to the core having to accept an entirely new and outrageously expensive set of clothes. But Andreas had insisted. He’d said it was a non-negotiable part of the deal.

She had, however, managed to salvage a shred of pride by refusing to try on anything that could not be justified as necessary for everyday practical purposes, leaving her with a few casual pieces and a couple of smarter combinations that would do for business, whatever that would amount to. And just two pairs of shoes. Flat ones.

“I didn’t ask for all this stuff,” she pointed out. “If you’d given me time to go home and pack, I could have saved you a fortune.”

“And let you loose on my hard-earned business interests dressed like some backwater funeral director? That suit was...” He cocked his head to one side and surveyed her slowly from head to toe. “Let’s just say you’re better off being guided on such matters.”

Kizzy stopped dead in her tracks. Her cheeks sizzled with indignation. This man was so insulting. “I’ve never had money to burn, as it happens,” she replied, with undisguised contempt.

“Well I do, and most women would lap it up. So what’s your problem?”

“Problem?” Kizzy let out a hollow laugh. “You’ve turned my whole world on its head, flown me thousands of miles, insulted my dress sense, and my integrity, and I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing apart from keeping my mouth shut of course.” She frowned. “I’m curious, Mr. Lazarides. Just what sort of job am I here to do?”

Andreas tightened his lips thoughtfully and took a moment to savor the amethyst fire that was dancing in her eyes. Kizzy Dean was clearly not going to be the fawning, simpering variety of female he was accustomed to, employee or otherwise. Her manner was irritating, in that it was beginning to take up more of his valuable time than he’d like, but there was something else happening. A dart of amusement hit him. This was like being attacked by an angry dormouse—painless enough, but impossible to ignore.

“I’ve not decided yet. I intend to assess your skills over the next few days, to see what can be done with you.” He allowed his eyes to drop to her new silk camisole as it fluttered against her breasts in the breeze, deliberately provoking more annoyance by studying her at length. “But we won’t go rushing you into haute couture or customer relations.”

“You promised me a job,” Kizzy pointed out, only belatedly realizing that he had her at a complete disadvantage. She didn’t speak a word of Greek, had no money and nowhere to go.

She then remembered with horror that he hadn’t returned her passport at the airport, so she had no form of identification either. She felt the blood drain from her face as her hand strayed to a nonexistent inside pocket. He’d taken her cell phone to call his driver in London—he still had that too. There was nothing to stop him from just dumping her in the middle of the ocean and leaving her to drown. No one was going

to raise the alarm in England now, were they?

“And a job you shall have, plus accommodation. But if you can’t behave yourself and are determined to be difficult, the chances are you will get a mediocre, undemanding job.” Lazarides was clearly enjoying her discomfort. His chin lifted, baiting her. “If you are a good girl, however...”

Kizzy’s dry mouth opened to deliver a blistering response, but before she could reply her attention was drawn down to the left hand side of her body. The hem of her expensive new cream jacket appeared to be trapped. The fabric was suddenly dragging at her body, tugging her insistently backward and down to...a child. Large avocado stone eyes stared up, from a sallow, dirty face that had cheekbones just a little too prominent for a boy of what Kizzy estimated to be nine or ten years old. The boy’s face broke into a nervous smile as he began to pump away at a battered accordion.

“Parakalo?” he ventured, holding out a dirty, trembling hand.

“What’s he saying?” Kizzy asked as she instinctively went to brush the matted hair out of his eyes.

“What do you think he’s saying? He’s begging for money.” Andreas thrust out his own hand to block her palm from making contact with the little boy. “And begging is frowned upon—especially here, where he’s likely to offend and annoy most of the super-yacht owners he encounters. He’s also infested with lice.”

Kizzy felt an icy wave course through her body in spite of the searing heat. It was only a matter of hours ago that she had been a disheveled, pitiful mess at the mercy of this coldhearted Greek. Her heart went out to the waif.

“But look at the state of him. Couldn’t we give him something?”

“Absolutely not.”

Andreas eased himself between Kizzy and the puny wretch, and bent to issue a few harsh phrases in Greek. The child’s eyes opened wide to show their blemished whites and he quickly snatched up an old ice cream tub containing a few coins from the dusty promenade. Kizzy stared open-mouthed as the boy ran away as fast as he could in dirty, worn, adult-sized trainers that swamped his tiny feet. They flapped noisily around his ankles and Kizzy felt her insides twist with sickening fury.

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She turned on Andreas so abruptly that a thick skein of chestnut hair escaped the cheap clip that still secured her chignon. She brushed it angrily away. "Some food wouldn't have hurt the boy, would it?"

"You have no understanding of the way things are here." Andreas gestured dismissively with a sweep of his arm and, turning his back on her, strode toward the harbor's edge. Briskly, he began to descend the steps that led down to the water before asserting himself further. "I do. So accept my judgment on this matter."

"Do as I'm told, in other words?"

Kizzy swallowed angry tears as she stared furiously down into that impassive expression. His indifferent shrug chilled her to the bone. His eyes were harsh as volcanic rock.

Andreas indicated that she should step aboard the speedboat that was waiting for them. His lips thinned to an angry slash as he noted her continuing mutiny. "We have a schedule," he pointed out, and stepped on board, roughly offering her a hand as the vessel bobbed about in the creamy swell.

"I wish I could afford to walk away from all this," Kizzy hissed, standing motionless on the stone steps. She continued to stare into the abyss of his exacting gaze. "Away from you."

"Well, I do believe you can't."

He pulled her firmly downward by the wrist, ensuring that she fell into the unyielding

cradle of his chest and upper arms.

“And I would appreciate it if you could start behaving in a respectable manner in public,” Andreas Lazarides whispered harshly against her ear. “I wouldn’t want your insubordination to rub off on the rest of my staff.”

“Oh for—”

Kizzy stifled a novel urge to swear at him, and hauled herself free. She reminded herself that a huge loan repayment was due in under a week’s time and she still had no means of meeting it.

“I hope you don’t think I’m impressed by this dingy!”

Andreas flicked her a bleak look from beneath his dark brows. “I’m not in the habit of trying to impress dishonest barmaids. Especially unemployed ones.”

Vitriol coursed through her veins in reaction to this barbed remark. She couldn’t stop herself from blurting out the most insulting thing she could manage at short notice. “So you’ve got a boat as well as your own private plane.” She sniffed ostentatiously. “It’s not the biggest in the harbor though, is it? I would have expected it to match the size of your ego...and heartlessness.”

Andreas sighed. “You flew here in a jet actually, and this, I grant you, is little better than a dingy. But it is manned.”

“Oh, of course it is,” she replied tartly. “Heaven forbid you’d have to get your own impeccable hands dirty.”

Kizzy watched as the Greek businessman raised both those hands to his head and ruffled them exasperatedly through his hair. “And I’d like to know exactly where

we're going, if that's not too much to ask."

Unexpectedly, and to her intense annoyance, Andreas Lazarides began to laugh. Only briefly, but it was still a laugh.

"Come on, Kizzy," he said, with the secret joke still working its magic on his lips. "Stop messing around and sit down. Make yourself comfortable. We have a significant voyage ahead of us to Lindos."

His smile faded to an impatient frown when she still refused to budge.

"Look, I've told you where we're going. Now sit down, will you?"

Kizzy slumped indecorously onto one of the plush seats of the outboard and snapped her head away from his direct line of vision.

She didn't want to look at the despicable man, let alone register the sizzle of awareness as she watched the smooth, sexy curve of his desirable mouth.

The boat drew out slowly and surged forward in the direction of the open sea. Ahead, two enormous bronze deer glinted on massive columns either side of the harbor. Kizzy gripped her seat tightly. Fully aware of the choppy water that awaited them farther out, she just prayed that the small boat was up to fending off the blue ferocity of the Aegean.

"You okay?" Andreas shouted over the roar of the engine and the relentless pounding of water against the vessel's bow.

As if he cared, Kizzy thought, and grimaced in response. She took a deep breath. Her stomach lurched uncomfortably a couple of times as the launch rode the swell of a passing container ship. She closed her eyes against the brilliant mirage of white, blue

and green: a confection of water, bleach-white hulls, and sky that had scored an image on the back of her eyes. She felt her body rise and fall with the engine thrusts, shuddering with the impact of persistent waves.

She was just beginning to wonder how much longer she could maintain her composure when, as suddenly as their journey had begun, the muffled unseen world around her began to change.

Kizzy felt the wind begin to slacken its assault on her hair; the vibration of pulsing cylinders began to slow. They were stopping for some reason before they had reached the open sea.

They were going to sink!

Her eyes flashed open in alarm and were confronted by a gilded nameplate fixed to the hull of a tall white vessel before them. The name was written in Greek, and although she had no understanding of the words, Kizzy knew instantly what it meant—she had just made a complete idiot of herself. Again.

“I do hope you find my everyday Rhodian yacht, Elektron, more to your tastes than a humble dingy, Miss Dean,” Andreas announced, his smile wry.

Kizzy chose to ignore both his remark and the amusement that danced in his dark eyes. As she rose unsteadily from her seat, the young man who had been controlling the outboard stood up quickly to steady her. The young man smiled warmly, murmuring a few honeyed-sounding words into her ear as he squeezed her upper arm.

“Thank you,” Kizzy said.

His hand fell away to deal with the array of ropes and securing mechanisms that were suddenly emerging.

She glanced briefly at Andreas, who was scowling at her again. “I didn’t understand a single word of what he said, I’m afraid.”

Andreas’s tone was savage. “He said, ‘Take it easy, beautiful, and I’ll see you some time soon.’”

Her cheeks suddenly flushed and she looked away.

Taking Kizzy by the elbow, Andreas guided her briskly out of the speedboat and onto a low, wide platform below a curved flight of white steps. “I will make sure that he is disciplined for his impertinence,” he muttered. “But I rather think you brought that lax behavior upon yourself.”

Was there no end to this man’s condescension?

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“I beg your pardon?”

Andreas sighed and gave her a light push between the shoulder blades to encourage her on deck.

“Stephanos obviously assumed from your negative behavior that you weren’t a personal guest of mine. He would never have dared to proposition you otherwise. He must have deduced, quite rightly, that you were a new member of the Lazarides team. Only one with an attitude. And that you were available.”

Kizzy furiously bit back her indignation as she began to climb the steps.

“Well, aren’t I?” she whispered, for fear of being heard by Stephanos, who was now unloading boxes and shouting instructions to a crew decked out in crisp white shirts. “Or is there going to be a special Grecian clause built into my contract of employment that insists I’m a modern-day vestal virgin?”

Andreas paused momentarily on the steps.

“It’s not something I had considered,” he replied, and his eyes wandered lazily up to the curved peach of her behind. “But I could certainly have it drafted in, if you think it necessary. Although there would have to be certain medical niceties you would need to attend to on the issue of...your innocence, let us say.”

“That’s not something I would particularly welcome.”

She reached the top of the steps and walked shakily across the pale wooden deck,

praying that the deep blush she now felt crawling up her throat would be gone before she had to face him again.

Why on earth had she been stupid enough to allude to her notable lack of experience with men?

“Besides,” she blurted out, a little too loudly for her own comfort, “such a contract would probably be illegal.”

Kizzy stared defiantly out to sea as she took off her jacket, her chin lifting with a burst of imaginary confidence.

“You may be correct.” Placing himself just millimeters away from her tense body, Andreas leaned against the glass and steel balcony of the deck with his back to the ocean. Sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, he tipped his head back to survey her. “But this conversation has gone to prove something quite important.”

“It has?”

Kizzy’s response was as brittle as a shard of ice, catching in her throat as her nerves throbbed. She felt the intimidating, pulsing warmth of his large frame, and her lungs shamelessly clawed in his scent—the leather and limes of an expensive cologne mingled with his own unique, masculine essence.

“It has highlighted the fact that I know too little about you, Kizzy. This is a situation that cannot be allowed to continue,” he murmured.

The rational side of Kizzy’s brain could barely comprehend what was happening as he leaned toward her. She had been inadvertently drawn to the captivating sight of his mouth as he had been speaking, and had wondered, just for a microsecond, what his lips would feel like on hers. Soft and tender? Or hard and plundering?

Well, now she knew. Every nerve ending thrilled beneath his mouth over hers, the velvet pressure of him becoming more intense as every second passed. Kizzy felt herself give in to the powerful circle of his arms, unable to resist the dance of his tongue with hers. Sensations she had never known, never even dreamed of, seared through her as she leaned into the heat of his torso. She became aware that her fingertips were skimming the edge of his leather belt, when suddenly she was being thrust away into a much colder place.

The distance between them was no more than a few inches, but it felt like miles as Kizzy's eyes flickered open with bewilderment. She focused on the dark storm of Andreas's features as he wrenched at the knot of his tie.

"Stephanos!" Andreas acknowledged the man's sudden presence behind them with an irritated wave of the hand. "It's been some weeks since we spoke, my friend. How are Loretta and the twins?"

"They are well, Kyrios," Stephanos replied, his eyes flicking between Kizzy and Andreas with awkward curiosity. "My sister thanks you for the package you sent. It was unexpected."

"I am pleased she has recovered, Stephanos." Andreas turned abruptly toward the front of the yacht. "Please inform Captain Yiannis that I will be up shortly to speak with him."

Kizzy watched Stephanos scuttle away. "I think he was embarrassed," she said, remaining silent about her own newly emerging confusion.

"That was the idea," Andreas replied sharply. "It saves me the unpleasantness of disciplining him. He won't approach you again."

"So you knew he was there?"

His expressionless eyes flickered disparagingly over her for an excruciating moment, and then he ripped his tie completely off.

“Of course. Why else would I have kissed you?”

### Chapter Three

Andreas leaned wordlessly against the handrail, ignoring Kizzy’s awkward silence as he stared out across azure waves glinting with flashes of evening sunshine. His last remark had been cruel and dishonest, he admitted that much. But it had served a greater purpose in helping him see what made Kizzy Dean tick.

As his head began to clear from the drugging effect of their kiss, he noted with interest that Kizzy had seemed more embarrassed at being caught in a compromising situation than Stephanos had been in stumbling across them in the first place. Acutely so, in fact. Yet, at the same time, she had been so responsive to his kiss he would have sworn she was far more experienced than she appeared.

Was she a deeply practiced and artful man-eater perhaps? A gold digger with more brains than were good for her?

She certainly had the confused virgin act well rehearsed, he thought drily. But with all those qualifications behind her, why didn’t she have a proper graduate job with decent prospects? Living in a shabby room over a record-breaking loser of a restaurant certainly seemed beneath her capabilities—on paper anyway.

Nothing about Kizzy Dean seemed to add up; he couldn’t work her out at all, which was unusual. And infuriating.

But then she wouldn’t add up if she was an accomplished liar, would she? And there was no doubt that Kizzy was a liar; he’d had firsthand proof of that at the London

Eye, hadn't he?

Andreas suddenly realized that he had reached a point where he was compelled to find out more about this enticing creature or go mad with curiosity. It would be a professional quest, he reasoned with himself, and had absolutely nothing to do with the way the taste of her still danced upon his lips—his heart was beating much faster than normal.

Years of being a top lawyer had taught him how to read a person within minutes. If he couldn't figure out the true motivation and character of this woman, then no one could. Yet one thing was for sure—Kizzy Dean was an enigma.

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“You will soon learn, Kizzy,” he announced calmly, “that when it comes to your own staff, eyes in the back of your head are simply not enough. It is necessary to observe, smell, touch, taste, and above all feel what is happening around you, to sense where everyone is or should be at any given point in time.”

His eyes slipped involuntarily to her red lips and then snapped back to her eyes almost as quickly. He was in total control of the situation.

“Stephanos knows what is expected of him at any moment of his working day. Today’s trip down to Lindos is no exception. He always comes to take a refreshment order ten minutes into the voyage.” Andreas felt a twinge of self-reproach as he noted the injured expression on Kizzy’s face. He smothered his reaction by focusing on his lecture. “You also need to be aware that disappointment in the past has taught me to trust only a handful of individuals in my employ, and they’re all men. It’s quite a rare thing to find a woman telling you the truth when you’re an unmarried billionaire in a world of material greed and insatiable want. I’m not sure it’s ever happened.”

“And you kiss all your staff?” Kizzy inquired.

She was suddenly as sharp as needles, he observed with surprise, and rose to the verbal challenge as any good lawyer would.

“Only the female ones,” he replied with the lazy, intoxicating smile he saved for especially delicate negotiations. “And then only very selectively. Until now only platonically. What have you done to me, Miss Dean?” he demanded. “I appear to have been abandoning my principles all over the place since we met.”

“You have?” Kizzy replied. “Can’t say I’ve noticed—apart from a few moments ago.”

She fiddled needlessly with the embroidered trim of her top.

Andreas feigned amusement and then got her attention with a viselike stare. “It was the ‘no mixing business with pleasure’ one.”

“So that’s one of your very fine principles.” She bristled, feeling more out of her depth with every syllable uttered. “What about the rest?”

His smile faded.

“I won’t bore you with those,” he replied, flashing her a look that said “don’t push your luck,” and levered himself away from the balcony. “And now I must speak with the captain. Before I leave, would you like some refreshments? You ate precious little on our flight.”

“I wasn’t hungry,” she said quickly. “And I’m still not.”

“Very well.” Andreas shrugged. “The food at your hotel is excellent. You can eat on the terrace or in your suite. It has a private balcony.”

“Suite?”

“Is that a problem?” Andreas drawled, and glanced at his watch.

“It’s extravagant and not something I can afford, thank you. Perhaps some simple village room or a modest bed and breakfast could be arranged?”

“Kizzy,” he said, with undisguised exasperation, “there is only one, yes, one hotel in

Lindos village. It's the best, the most exquisite. I had to call in quite a few favors to get rooms there."

"How much is it a night?"

He looked at her. "That's not important."

"It is to me."

"About five hundred euros."

Her mouth fell open with horror. "What?"

"There's nothing else, it's high season, and I need you to be in the village, not stuck miles out of town with all the package vacationers. I can afford it, you know."

"I'd rather sleep on the beach."

"Of course you would." He looked ostentatiously at his watch again. He'd noticed that it seemed to irritate her.

"Yes, I would."

"Not with a body like that, Miss Dean," he said laughing briefly, and made sure she saw him appraising her figure. "I'd never see you again!"

She was scowling. "I'll take my chances."

"Not as my employee." He reached out and took her chin firmly between his fingers, forcing her to look him in the eye. "We have a deal, remember?"

“Nothing’s been signed,” she said reminding him sharply, taking a step backward as though to evade his touch.

“So what are you going to do?” His hand fell away from her face, and he thrust it roughly into his trouser pocket. “Jump ship and swim back to a cardboard box in Portsmouth? Sell your body to buy food?”

“Are you suggesting that I couldn’t?”

“You could, of course,” he mused, “but judging by your behavior so far you’d price your services far too low.”

He leaned back lazily and crossed his arms across his chest, allowing himself the hint of a smirk at her floundering argument.

“You’re disgusting,” Kizzy muttered.

“Disgusting...and a bastard?” Andreas mockingly flicked the tips of his fingers across the dark shadow emerging on his square chin. “Unfortunately, your behavior tells me I don’t repulse you quite as much as you suggest. You positively melted into that kiss.”

“You took me by surprise. I hadn’t expected—“

“You don’t fool me for a moment, Kizzy. All this frost and propriety is just a front. I felt what was happening when you were in my arms just now. It was unbelievable, you can’t deny it.”

“I have no intention of discussing this further, Mr. Lazarides. You’re my boss and there are certain standards that need to be maintained. So I’m quite prepared to consider that our—that it—never happened.”

“And I’m quite prepared to be discreet.” He stepped closer and made as if to stroke her cheek. “Your job is quite safe, I guarantee it, whatever may happen between us.”

“Nothing will happen between us,” Kizzy replied, twisting her face away to avoid his touch. “Nothing but business, let me assure you of that.”

He might be as sexy as hell and as rich as Croesus, but she’d seen his dark side in Rhodes and there was no doubt in her mind that he was cold enough to use a woman for sex and then discard her. She would never risk becoming a man’s sexual plaything; having witnessed her own mother’s degradation and misery would make sure of that.

“We’ll see,” he said, and his hand fell to his side. “I have a determined nature.”

“You also have a very high opinion of yourself.”

He laughed bitterly. “But I’ve earned the right, you see? There are not too many self-made billionaires in the world. Certainly not those who collected donkey droppings and worked for a pittance in a supermarket before school just to survive.” He shot her a cold, twisted smile. “My father didn’t believe in breakfast. Or education. I’d have been better nurtured by a feral cat, frankly.”

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Andreas's brain froze for a second as his ears registered the words that had poured from his mouth. Why had he said that? Now she looked horrified and embarrassed. For some reason he had let his guard slip. He never discussed his family history or alluded to his personal life.

"Don't look so shocked," he said. "My parents were quite well off as it happens."

He omitted to mention that his mother's inherited wealth had not extended to the emotional indulgence he had craved as a small boy. His only friend and ally had been his dependent little sister, Callista, and his father had possessed a very warped work ethic for someone who lived so happily off his wife's fortune.

"Even if most of it went to imported alcohol and cigars."

He hesitated for a moment, years of practicing courtroom mind games enabling him to mask his distaste with an impassive face.

Kizzy watched with astonishment as Andreas turned on his heel and walked briskly away. Her eyes skimmed the broadness of his shoulders as he cast aside the tie he had been crushing in his fist. His jacket followed—a slick of blue hurled dismissively onto the cream seats of a luxurious bank of sofas, its red silk lining slithering down like a stain on the immaculate leather.

For a moment Kizzy almost felt sorry for the man she had kissed and pity for the boy Andreas had once been, a small, skinny boy with dark hair and deep, sad eyes. But her empathy quickly faded when she recalled the beggar boy in Rhodes.

If Andreas was so obviously bitter about his own childhood, how could he have chased that poor child away? Was it shame? Revulsion? Or maybe just cold, greed and a desire to establish himself on the social ladder?

And what the hell had she been thinking?

Kizzy tried to analyze why she had allowed herself to crumble so effortlessly into his calculated embrace.

The answer seemed simple enough. Though the man didn't need to try too hard with his money and looks, Andreas Lazarides was still a master of seduction, and he'd used that skill on her to devastating effect.

He must think her the easiest pushover he'd ever encountered.

She could only hope she was still in the running for a job after this shameful episode—a job that didn't involve her seeing too much of Andreas Lazarides on a day-to-day basis.

If it wasn't all so hideous, she might be tempted to laugh at her ridiculous naïveté when it came to men. She'd slipped into Andreas's arms without a speck of resistance, and he'd thrust her away once he'd proved his point. And his point was? That she was easy—far too easy to keep a man used to sophisticated women content for more than five minutes. She'd not even managed to keep his interest for one!

At least her mother had more of an excuse for being downtrodden and needy—she'd suffered her noxious marriage to at least achieve something. It had nothing to do with desire and attraction. It was for the security of bricks and mortar, a meal on the table, a place in a decent school. Her mother had sacrificed everything beautiful in her life to ensure what she assumed would be the best upbringing she could achieve for her illegitimate daughter: an address, an education, and a position in society, however

lowly.

“Kizzy Dean, you really should be ashamed of yourself,” she whispered into the breeze, and then looked quickly around to make sure no one had heard.

...

“That was a lot quicker than I expected,” Kizzy informed the first officer who had been giving her a brief tour of the vast, luxurious yacht. “So we’re almost there?”

He nodded nervously and seemed keen to be elsewhere.

Kizzy thought he was almost as on edge as she was, but that was hardly surprising. Andreas could be an utter beast. Or maybe word had already spread around the ship about her—that she was trouble. However, no amount of unpleasantness from Andreas or stinging embarrassment over their earlier entanglement could detract from the beautiful sight unfolding before her eyes.

The yacht whispered effortlessly into a horseshoe bay of clear, sapphire water gradually deepening to a purple glaze with the fading light. An ancient, burnt ocher fortification dominated the apricot-pink skyline like a brooding volcano, floodlights at its base illuminating the surrounding scrub in such a way that it seemed to be crackling with fire. Clinging to the dry, rocky slopes, a jumbled myriad of white sugar-cube-like buildings took on muted tones of platinum and blue, reflecting the wash of the Aegean and exuding a welcoming coolness as they glowed and twinkled.

Kizzy felt pleasure flood her body. The whitewashed village seemed to have been cast upon the harsh slopes and allowed to tumble to the water’s edge like celestial dice.

A ripple of excitement made her heart beat a little faster, the sparkling, bejeweled

vista reminding her of what it was like to be a small child. It looked like fairyland—a picture-perfect, Christmas fairyland!

She closed her eyes for a moment to savor the whisper of waves breaking on the beach but opened them quickly when her ears registered the distant bleat of a goat. Kizzy spotted its proud, male horns and lithe body, an inky silhouette fixed between the gray tangle of rocks and astonishing orange-purple skyline.

“Beautiful.”

Kizzy’s body jerked with surprise at the sound of Andreas’s voice, behind her. His deep tones reverberated through her body, and he was so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her neck.

“Yes,” she replied tensely, trying to quell the breathlessness that his sudden proximity was causing. “It’s the most incredible sight I’ve ever seen.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he murmured softly as his hands slipped around her waist. “Utterly beguiling.”

## Chapter Four

“This is where the billionaire lifestyle stops for a while,” Andreas announced as they walked along a wooden jetty in the dusk.

Kizzy looked back at the yacht dominating the bay with its luxurious white and gold sparkle. She could hardly believe she had been on board only a few minutes earlier, feeling the hum of the engines beneath her feet and the thunder of her heart as Andreas had touched her again.

The curve of her waist, where his hands had held her, still bore the memory of his

touch. Her skin burned with pleasure at how wonderful it had felt to be so physically close to him. To be held by anyone was an unusual experience for her—but by Andreas Lazarides?

It was a sensation she had better not get used to, she told herself firmly.

He was Greek, for goodness' sake! Warm European cultures touched each other frequently; even men openly kissed one another in greeting. She was being ridiculous, allowing herself to imagine that Andreas could have any interest in her as a woman.

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He'd only kissed her to make it clear who was boss around the place. And she knew her place all right.

Kizzy was perfectly accustomed to being at the bottom of any pecking order—her stepfather had made sure of that over the years, even to the extent of making sure she and her mother were made legally destitute upon his death. She couldn't care less for herself; she'd have rather slept in a gutter than spend one more night under that roof. But her mother had suffered so much in her travesty of a marriage—she didn't deserve to die in poverty, the final insult.

...

She was thinking again, Andreas observed.

Silently, he watched every twitch of her face, each tiny mannerism, waiting for the first clue that would expose her as a ruthless fortune-seeker.

She was probably wondering how to claw her way back to his yacht after heroically refusing the five-star accommodations on offer. But it would take more than that act of piety to convince him she was a humble, low-maintenance woman. She had refused to accept new clothes from him at first, but it hadn't been long before she had given in.

"From here we take the Lindos taxi or continue on foot," he announced gruffly at the end of the pontoon.

"Taxi?" Kizzy shielded her eyes against the harbor lights and squinted past the

bustling taverna they were approaching. “I can’t see a road.”

“Correct,” he replied. “No road required.”

He smiled into the darkness as he led her around a corner to a cave set in the cliff behind the beach. It was dark and full of curious, wide-eyed donkeys.

“This is one of Lindos’ taxi ranks,” he announced. “Hairy and noisy, but totally at your service.”

Kizzy looked at the animals’ faces, noting the way their owner was clanking grumpily about with an armful of buckets.

She reached out to the nearest donkey and scratched its rough forehead. The beast closed its eyes in appreciation.

“They look tired,” she murmured, and turned on her heel. “Let’s walk.”

The donkey owner barked out a few grouchy sentences, then roughly threw a cracked leather bridle past Andreas into a crate.

Andreas frowned with interest as Kizzy made for the path outside. “Are you absolutely sure about that?”

Since when had a woman walked any farther than the jetty without complaining before now? He had been expecting an undignified wail about ruining her Louboutins.

Then he smiled. He’d almost missed the trick—she was wearing sensible pumps on the end of those shapely legs.

A happy coincidence? Or natural pragmatism?

Oh no, he didn't think so. She was just very, very good at this game.

And those practical little slips of footwear? They'd cost three hundred euros and were embellished with mother of pearl. She was going to have to do better than that if she wanted to hide her true colors.

"That would be convenient," Andreas replied, suddenly spotting an easy opportunity to further test Kizzy's mettle. "Stavros has just informed me in no uncertain terms that the donkeys are finished for the night. And he doesn't give a damn how many euros I've got."

"Good for him," she countered, and shot him a defiant smile before striking out up an extremely steep and rough path into the gloom.

...

"Are we going around in circles?" Kizzy muttered half an hour later, and pressed a shaking hand against her breastbone to steady her breathing.

The narrow paths and alleyways of Lindos village were bustling with life but she could no longer appreciate their fusion of color, noise and fragrance. She was far too hot and exhausted to care.

They had climbed achingly steep, narrow routes, worn smooth over the centuries, and she had stumbled a few times in her attempts to keep up with Andreas's long strides. Naturally she had refused his offers of a steadying hand—she wasn't going to give him the opportunity to consider her a weakling.

Ancient shop fronts, archways, and crumbled architecture formed an impenetrable

canopy that gave only brief glimpses of the night sky and held in the warmth of the day like a thick blanket above their heads.

Kizzy realized she was becoming disoriented. The stars that were beginning to dance in front of her eyes were clearly a warning.

“Is it much farther?” she managed.

Andreas turned to look down at her, expecting to see a frowning, pouty little madam stamping her foot in annoyance. He had been set to continue his deliberately protracted and circuitous tour of the village in a cynical attempt to break her spirit, maybe even get her to explode into the spoiled diva she inevitably must be.

But looking at her now, she’d clearly had enough.

Staring down into the deep lilac of her eyes, Andreas saw that she was too weak even to prevent him from brushing away the damp lash of hair plastered to her forehead.

He felt a lurch of shame at the pit of his stomach.

He was starting to feel hot and bothered himself, and he’d been brought up with this heat whereas she—well, she was clearly struggling, and the last thing he wanted was for her to faint on him.

She was still in control of herself, he noted, not verging on hysteria as many women would have been. She was strong, both physically and mentally. He was in danger of being impressed by that. But her hands were visibly shaking.

“We’re almost there,” he replied casually. “But we can stop for a cold drink—”

“No, I’ll be fine,” Kizzy replied with a determined shake of her head. She rubbed the

small of her back. "I'm right behind you."

Kizzy's heart sank as he turned sharply left and marched up another claustrophobic alleyway, even if it was beautiful with geraniums and bougainvillea in shades she'd never seen before, lit up against ancient creamy stone. She had resolved to stay calm, but was so tired now that a flood of tears was welling up against her will.

"We're here," he announced, in the gloom of an extremely dark and quiet corner, adorned only by the battered frame of a scooter. "You can relax now."

Was he kidding?

Alone, exhausted, vulnerable, and about to pass through a mysterious door in a deserted alley was not the best position in the world for a penniless woman in Greece. A sane person would be telling her to run as fast as she could away from this dangerous situation and Kizzy knew that, but her knees were wobbling and she was so exhausted she no longer cared what happened to her.

Her head spinning, she leaned against the wall to steady herself.

Andreas punched a series of numbers into a keypad set in a recess, and a heavy wooden door creaked open. Kizzy was vaguely aware of being guided through a dark, rocky tunnel and emerging into a basin of honeyed lamplight; a strong arm had somehow been threaded around her waist, warm and powerful.

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The scent of jasmine and lemon blossom flooded her senses as a blurred, round shadow of a person rushed toward them, chattering in animated Greek. Kizzy felt small, cool hands press her down into a cushioned seat and it was only a matter of seconds before she heard the clank of ice cubes and a cool drink pressed against her lips.

The liquid soothed her parched throat as her eyes gradually began to focus. Before her, she saw the concerned face of an elderly woman whose eyes twinkled as she smoothed gnarled hands down Kizzy's smoldering cheeks and tutted over her hot brow.

Another sip of homemade lemonade was gently offered before the woman straightened to deliver a blistering verbal attack on Andreas, hovering silently nearby. A rueful smile of contrition began to form on his face as her finger wagged in rapid time to what sounded like a fierce chastisement. She turned her back on him to give Kizzy her full attention.

"I sorry, my English not so good." Her smile was warm and inquisitive. "I show you room and then you eat, yes?"

Kizzy sighed with embarrassment. "That's very kind of you, and thank you for the drink; it was most welcome. But I'm afraid I can't stay here."

"What Miss Dean is trying to say, Dorinda," Andreas interjected firmly as he leaned on the back of Kizzy's seat, "is that it has been a very long day. I will show her to her rooms when she has had time to recover her composure. We look forward to the meal you've prepared for us."

Dorinda smiled with pleasure as Andreas playfully shooed her in the direction of an open door in the walled courtyard.

“You’ve put me in a very awkward position now,” Kizzy whispered hoarsely. “I said I couldn’t afford to stay in a place like this. Now Dorinda has been so hospitable and kind, I’d feel rude if I just left.”

“So stay,” Andreas replied with a nonchalant shrug.

“You’re going to make me spell it out again, aren’t you?” she said. “I have no money. I’ll have to request an advance on my first salary payment just to cover tonight.”

She pressed her lips together with humiliation and quickly glanced around at the intricate medieval stonework of the walled garden, the copper lanterns and luxurious potted plants. “Assuming my first month’s salary will cover the cost of this place for the night.”

“It will be more than adequate,” he said with a smile. “Villa Madeline has a very low standard room rate as it happens.”

“But you said earlier on the boat that it was about five hundred euros a night!”

“Did you think I had just ignored you during that conversation?” His dark eyebrows rose in question. “Do I really come across as a thug who would deliberately go against a lady’s express wishes?”

“I don’t understand.” Kizzy felt her hands begin to shake with nerves again.

“Welcome to my Lindian home,” Andreas said, and saw her look of surprise. “I hope you enjoy staying here as much as I always do.”

He watched as her mouth opened to form a protest and then snapped quickly shut. She wasn't prepared to slum it on the beach as a matter of principle, then?

Kizzy took a slow sip of her drink as her brain struggled to find a reasonable way forward from this awkward situation. She couldn't think of anything more stressful than sharing an intimate meal with Andreas Lazarides—apart from spending a night under the same roof. Yet what choice did she have? She couldn't easily turn down his generous hospitality. Andreas had acceded to her wishes regarding the hotel and was offering her free accommodation in his home.

The man was behaving in a perfectly respectable manner, for which she should be grateful. If she could just pull herself together and be rational about everything, she would see that things weren't as awful as she imagined.

After all, how hard could staying in this fantastic place be?

"Your home is beautiful," Kizzy managed. "And I'm grateful for your generous offer. But I will only burden you for as long as it takes to secure a suitable place of my own. In the meantime, I'll be as unobtrusive as possible and will earn my keep."

She got to her feet, reaching out to steady her empty glass as it tottered on the table. "And I can start by helping Dorinda with dinner."

"Absolutely not!" Andreas rose to his full height to look at her. "Dorinda would never forgive either of us. The kitchen is her domain entirely and she's very territorial."

"Please, sit back down," he added less harshly. "It's only been a few minutes since you arrived. Let your body recover."

...

Andreas watched as Kizzy slowly resumed her seat. He found her almost overwhelmingly attractive, to the point that he'd come on to her like a teenager on the yacht earlier, and then had brought her to the point of exhaustion, just to see how she would react. He'd been cruel and arrogant, he realized, but now he would try to make amends for his behavior.

"We've been charging across the planet like lunatics for the last ten hours or so, and it's just occurred to me that you must have someone to call, to let them know where you are." He laughed uncomfortably at the angry glare she shot in his direction. "After all, you haven't been kidnapped."

"It does feel like I have."

"You're free to leave at any time," Andreas told her, managing to suppress a surprising feeling of irritation. She was not his captive. "The door's over there, you may leave whenever you wish."

"Don't play games with me, Mr. Lazarides," Kizzy countered sharply. "You know damn well I had little choice in the matter, and it was you who insisted on bringing me here to 'keep an eye' on me until your ridiculous legal document is sorted out. I still can't believe you'd think me capable of deliberately hurting Mr. and Mrs. Antonides. I never would. They mean too much to me."

"You'll also recall how I said I couldn't take a risk on that. Besides, you do stand to gain from this arrangement. I'm guaranteeing you a good job in some area of my business. If you'd stayed in Portsmouth, Timi's Taverna would have gone under way before now and you'd be in a far worse position."

"I could have made it work if you'd given me a chance."

"No, you couldn't. It was on the point of being taken into administration even before

the Antonideses sold. The debts were astronomical.”

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Kizzy bit down on the inside of her bottom lip with fury. There was a flaw in his argument somewhere. What wasn't he telling her?

"So you're a pretty successful businessman then?" she ventured.

"You could say that," he replied with a soft smile.

"Made pots of money?"

Andreas laughed at her line of questioning. "Yes."

"So why on earth would you want to buy a wreck of a restaurant in a rough part of Portsmouth and, presumably, make a loss on the deal? It doesn't make sense."

"Things aren't always as simple as they seem."

"Discovered oil under the foundations, have you?" she queried. "Or a seam of pure gold?"

He studied her for a moment, his chin propped up by his fingertips. "You have a vivid imagination."

"And you haven't answered my questions."

"I'm not going to. I answer to no one for my actions."

Kizzy responded with a defiant jerk of her chin.

“Now,” he continued in a gentler tone and fished her cell phone out of his trouser pocket. “There must be someone you need to call.”

“No.” Kizzy pressed her lips together as if the words had stung. “No one.”

“No one?”

“Well, that’s not strictly true. I should ring the rest of the team at Timi’s. I know they’re all casual staff but they’re great people and I’d hate them to think that I’d abandoned them when they find the place all locked up in the morning.”

“That’s already been seen to.”

“What do you mean, seen to?”

“Checks were hand-delivered to them this morning and they all signed a binding severance agreement. A most generous one, you’ll be pleased to learn. There were no complaints.”

“I see.”

“So, how about your parents?”

“Gone.” Kizzy straightened her back awkwardly and looked into her glass to avoid his gaze. “Both dead. My mother died five months ago—hepatitis.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied gently. “Siblings?”

“No.”

“Another relative? A friend, perhaps?”

“Both sets of blood relatives disowned us twenty-five years ago when I was a baby.” Her smile was feigned. “And my stepfamily kicked us out the moment my stepfather’s will had been read. I’ll be quite happy never to see or hear from them again. As for my friends, they have enough problems of their own without adding mine to them. As you so eloquently pointed out in London, times are hard for everyone. Besides, I’m used to fending for myself.”

She put down her glass with a snap. “The only people I want to call are the Antonideses. But you won’t let me do that. You don’t trust me not to hurt the only people in the world who mean anything to me, the only ones who care whether I’m alive or dead.”

Andreas felt his heart rate pick up and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end in response to her anger.

“Then go ahead,” he murmured, raising his cool, unemotional guard to full alert. He slid the phone toward her across the table. “But I’d like to know what you’re going to say. We’ve been through all this before, I can’t risk you ruining everything.” He ripped a hand through the dark layers of his hair. “I’m not a monster, Kizzy. Can’t you see that?”

She was mesmerized by his earnest, exasperated expression. For just a moment she almost fell under his spell. Then she realized who she was speaking to, and jerkily stood up.

“You scared away a destitute child, Mr. Lazarides. A child begging for help. I can’t get the image of him out of my head, running for his life. How am I supposed to feel about a man as rich as you doing such a heartless thing?”

Andreas rose abruptly from his seat and took two strides around the table so they were face to face. “You speak Greek?” he asked furiously, his accent more

pronounced as his voice rose.

“You know I don’t,” Kizzy replied.

“Then you cannot possibly comment upon what passed between me and the child.”

“So enlighten me.” Kizzy drew herself up, her chin still tipped determinedly back to meet his stare.

“I was sending him away before he landed himself in real trouble,” Andreas replied through gritted teeth.

“Where were you sending him? To an even darker corner of hell?”

“No.” Andreas shook his head gravely. A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Toward the Light of Hope.”

He reached out a tanned hand and cupped her chin firmly, forcing her to meet the intensity burning in his eyes. “It’s a low-key charity run by Orthodox brothers in the back streets. They feed, clothe and comfort anyone they find in desperate need or who is referred by a trusted patron. Unfortunately, it has had to be kept clandestine to deter freeloaders who would abuse their mission. I gave that boy my name and sent him to Carlo’s ice cream parlor. He will have been fed immediately and by now should be tucked up in a clean, warm bed.”

Kizzy stared at him, shocked. “I don’t know what to say.”

“An apology would be gratefully received.” He allowed his hand to fall, still registering the soft, warm, silken feel of her skin against his.

“I’m so sorry.” Kizzy’s voice cracked with mortification. “I said some unforgivable

things. But I was angry.”

“You wished me dead, I imagine,” he agreed. “I can’t blame you, it’s that level of feeling that got me involved with the brothers in the first place. Anger can be a good thing when it’s channeled correctly.”

Kizzy nodded and wrapped her arms around her waist. “Angry is all I ever seem to be these days. Apart from tired, of course.”

“Then we must change that.” Andreas glanced once again into the deep violet of her eyes. “There’s no reason this can’t be a new beginning for you too. If there’s no one at home, no family, no significant other...”

Kizzy felt the breath catch in her lungs as he lowered his head to bring his mouth against hers, gentle and explorative at first. Her lips parted helplessly to welcome him and she felt herself melt into the tough warmth of his body. She should stop this, she thought hazily, even as their kiss deepened in intensity.

His warm hand sliding effortlessly under her camisole, Andreas stroked the soft flesh there with a light, skillful touch.

His body was hard and burning against hers and—and she should stop.

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She should stop her tongue entwining so wantonly with his, and suppress the piercing need that thrust her breasts against the solid wall of his chest.

Yet she couldn't seem to stop. And maybe she didn't have to stop. Maybe she just wouldn't.

### Chapter Five

A creaking door brought Kizzy sharply back to reality. Andreas tore his mouth away from hers for the second time that day. She heard bustling sounds around the kitchen door and knew they should move away from each other as quickly as possible. Yet she was frozen to the spot like a rabbit in headlights.

Her voice was barely a whisper over the frantic pounding of her heart.

“It's Dorinda!”

“So what do you feel now?” Andreas's dark, velvety voice seemed to ripple up and down her spine. “Angry? Tired?”

She did not reply but drew a slow breath instead, steadying herself against the emotions raging inside. Part of her was beginning to believe that Andreas could see right through her, right to the gauche creature that was too eager to please, too hungry, too needy for human closeness.

“Say it, Kizzy,” he said, pulling the flat softness of her belly against the unmistakable ridge of his arousal. He lightly touched his tongue against the corner of her mouth

and saw her eyelids flutter with excitement. “Admit that you want me.”

Kizzy felt delirious. Heated sensations were racing from her mouth to her breasts, to the apex of her thighs. Yet even in the sexual maelstrom consuming her body, her brain still registered that Dorinda was perilously close.

Instinctively, she tried to push him away—without success.

“Tell me,” he said, and skimmed his thumb across the rough lace of her bra cup. “I won’t let you go until you tell me how you are feeling.”

The effect he was having on her, and the tide of emotion threatening to overwhelm her, were like nothing she had ever experienced before.

Her body thrummed with sexual heat. She felt intoxicated. He could do with her as he wished and she knew she would be glad and greedy, burning for his slightest touch.

Her body had almost dissolved on contact with his. Caught in a primitive female state, she struggled against an unbearable current of need. Rendered shameless and wanton, all she could think of was how she craved the firm invasion of his rigid flesh inside her.

But deep down she knew it was impossible. Not with this man. Not with her new boss, of all people.

“Andreas, no.” Her chin dropped as she felt him draw back with a shuddering breath. “I feel very confused.”

He studied her anxious face for a moment as he let his hands fall, and then a shutter seemed to close behind his eyes. He turned to beckon an awkward-looking Dorinda out of the shadows.

“Confused? Poor Kizzy.” He led her by the elbow back to her seat, seemingly oblivious to her flushed features and trembling awareness. “You must be very hungry by now, I’m sure.”

He gestured for her to sit down as if nothing had just happened, though he deliberately brushed the back of her neck with his fingertips. A reminder that their business was unfinished, perhaps.

...

As Dorinda served them flatbreads, tzatziki and olives, Andreas took great interest in being able to observe Kizzy in the presence of a third party. Apart from the thirty seconds with Stephanos aboard the yacht, she had been able to avert her gaze, walk away, and snub him continuously. Right now she was trapped by her own sense of propriety, by good old-fashioned manners.

Watching the two women together, he noted how Dorinda was smiling. The elderly housekeeper approved.

He found that interesting. Dorinda had an innate instinct about whether a person was eligible to be welcomed into the realm of Lazarides. She was as protective as a mother hen when it came to her employer.

Yet each time Kizzy glanced down at her meal, Dorinda shot him a hard look, her eyes bright and her lips set in a line of pure granite.

Kizzy was the first woman he had brought to Villa Madeline, a significant enough act by itself. But now, seeing her hard expression, he was convinced that Dorinda had seen them kissing in the shade of the ancient fig tree.

A kiss meant they were as good as married in her eyes!

For some reason the potential storm brewing did not dampen his upbeat mood. The blood was surging in his veins for the first time in years. He found the sensation exhilarating.

So Dorinda thought Kizzy was his lover?

That could work to his advantage. Admittedly, he would be damned for his morals at some stage, he knew that, but at least it would mean they would not be disturbed tonight. His housekeeper knew when to make herself scarce, of that he was sure. The villa had always been a sanctuary, a place of extraordinary peace amongst the village hubbub, and now—now there was a refreshingly new and vibrant edge to it.

Kizzy Dean bore a halo of intrigue around her, he mused, a shimmering illusion of innocence and vulnerability.

Well, he was going to break that halo, Andreas decided. He would have her writhing in his bed tonight, get this powerful desire to possess her out of his system by morning. Then maybe his life could return to some kind of normality.

“You called me Andreas,” he said, watching Dorinda disappear back into the kitchen. “Twice.”

Kizzy blushed violently. “I’m sorry about that, Mr.—”

“Don’t apologize, I like it better that way.” He breathed in slowly, acutely aware of her discomfort as she fiddled with her fork. “We were being a little too intimate for such formality, don’t you think?”

He wished she would look him in the eye.

“And you can relax without Dorinda here.” He leaned across the table toward her.

“We can talk quite freely now.”

“That’s good,” Kizzy replied with a slight catch to her voice. Their eyes locked once more. “I think it would be appropriate to have a working supper, don’t you? I’ll be out from under your feet by tomorrow and I don’t want to impose any more than necessary.”

“I seem to recall we were having a most interesting discussion before Dorinda interrupted us, and it had very little to do with work or you being under my feet.”

Kizzy cleared her throat and did her best to ignore the unmistakably sexual tone that persisted in his voice. “I think it would be useful to discuss what possible role I could have in your business, don’t you?”

“But I don’t know what you’re capable of,” he replied with a teasing spark in his eye. “I’ve never seen you at work, so how can I possibly make an informed decision?”

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“Well, you could ask me a few questions,” Kizzy suggested, feeling bolder. “As if this were an interview, perhaps?”

“Very well,” Andreas replied, putting on a bored expression. “If you must insist on being so incredibly uptight, we’ll play your game for a maximum of ten minutes. I’m tired of working.”

Which was a lie, he acknowledged, watching her. He was always working on something; his energy and insatiable drive were what made him who he was.

Tonight, though, he wanted to play for a change.

“Fire away,” Kizzy said, a smile dancing on her lips. “I’m ready.”

Andreas said nothing for a few moments, stroking his chin thoughtfully, making her wait just long enough to force out a blush at the awkward silence he was creating between them.

“What was your degree?”

“Honors,” Kizzy said promptly.

“No,” he corrected her. “I meant, what did you study at university? What was your degree in?”

“Oh, sorry,” Kizzy mumbled. First mistake. “Art and classics.”

“Not the most practical of disciplines. What had you planned to do afterward? Become a librarian?”

“I didn’t plan that far ahead,” Kizzy admitted uncomfortably, and then realized she must sound like a complete airhead. “My mother and teachers encouraged me to study whatever interested me most, as I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. They said it would make working hard and achieving good grades so much easier if I had a passion for the subject. I could worry about my future career path later.”

“And that proved to be sound advice?” he asked softly. “Considering your circumstances now?”

“Probably not.” She looked down at her hands. “But at that stage I had no idea we were virtually penniless, and that my mother had taken out huge loans. If I’d known, I would have been a lot more pragmatic, taken something more vocational. Or not gone to college at all.”

“I see.” He speared a shiny black olive on a fork. “But you got top grades, which proves you can apply yourself and see something through to the end.”

“I loved it,” she explained. “I have no regrets, apart from the fact that my earning potential is virtually nil as it stands. And that my mother sacrificed so much.”

“So how old are you? Twenty-two, twenty-three?”

“Twenty-four.”

Andreas noted the flush appearing on the pale flesh of her throat. “You weren’t at Timi’s for two years, surely? You must have been able to get a better job than that in such a time. Or maybe you just couldn’t be bothered.”

“It wasn’t like that. I’d only been working at Timi’s for a few months before they sold, just to tide me over.”

He did the mental calculations. “So there’s a full year missing out of your CV. Do I spy an indulgent gap year in there somewhere? Cheap cocktails and free love in the South China Sea, perhaps?”

Kizzy gritted her teeth at the way he seemed to be laughing at her. “I worked as a temp for a year in Portsmouth before I went to college. To save some money to help Mum out. I didn’t want to feel like a freeloader.”

“Not sufficiently independent that she didn’t have to go into debt to bail you out though?”

He had gone too far now.

“I had no idea about the debts until after she died. She kept them secret from me, told me she had put money away when we were living with my stepfather and that I wasn’t to worry. She was adamant that I should have a good education, that I should develop confidence in myself and never have to rely on a man like...like she had to.”

She paused to catch her breath, which was becoming shaky with emotion.

“And before you even think about saying anything unpleasant about my mother, you need to be aware that she had sensible plans in place for paying back all that money. She had a job, she was managing the payments...and she was only forty-two. I don’t suppose she had any reason to think she was going to die.”

Andreas looked at her. Her eyes might be angry and defiant, but they were also shimmering with tears.

“Five months ago, you said?” He looked discreetly away as a tear slipped down her cheek. He knew only too well the bitter pain she was suffering and how badly he would not have wanted someone see him cry. “Then you are still in mourning. I’m sorry.”

Kizzy was relieved to see Dorinda re-emerge from the kitchen, a large earthenware casserole in her arms.

Dorinda took one look at Kizzy and snapped an accusing glare at Andreas before depositing her burden noisily onto the table between them.

“Kleftico,” the older woman announced gruffly and left, though not before glancing Andreas a sharp, surreptitious blow with her kitchen towel.

“I never asked if you were a vegetarian,” Andreas said as he lifted the lid and flinched backward from a blast of steam. “It’s lamb stew.”

“Sounds good,” Kizzy replied.

“So, getting back to what you were saying earlier,” he ladled a huge spoonful of stew onto her plate, “I’m curious to know how you ended up at Timi’s. If that’s not too intrusive a question.”

“Not at all.” He had a perfectly legitimate right to be interested in her rather shabby career profile, and she needed to be professional and pull herself together. “Mum worked for the Antonideses as a waitress after we left my stepfather’s house. She found us a place to live nearby while I studied. I helped out from time to time, and then did more once I’d graduated, to cover Mum when she started to get ill.”

Andreas noticed her distress. “It’s okay, take your time.”

“When she died, everything came to light—including the debts that I’d inherited. I couldn’t afford to stay in the flat and had to sell pretty much everything in it. Theo and Ana took pity on me, invited me into their home, and treated me like their own daughter. I paid them back in the only way I could—by working in their restaurant.” She sighed. “Everything’s happened so quickly over the past six months. I owe them a great deal.”

Andreas shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The Antonides family had made it a lifetime quest to play the Good Samaritan, it seemed. “Then you will no doubt be comforted to know that they want for nothing now. Their kindness over the years has been rewarded and they have the dream retirement they so richly deserve.”

“Of course I am,” she agreed quickly. “Now maybe you can see why I would never want to hurt them? They’re like parents to me.”

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“Then you will have no hesitation in signing a cast-iron guarantee to that effect.” He smiled with satisfaction as he helped himself to the traditional Greek stew. “I’m sure we can have something drafted up after the weekend and then forget all about that dreadful establishment.”

Kizzy rested her chin thoughtfully on her hand. “I’m still not clear where you come into all this, why Heliades bought up the ‘dead duck,’ as you described it. Property prices in that area of Portsmouth would never be enough for the fantastic villa they’ve just bought in Cyprus, not to mention the holiday apartment in Lake Como and the cruiser. You said their debts were astronomical.”

A dark eyebrow arced upward.

“It’s none of your business now. And I’d hate for us to fall out again if you insist on pursuing this topic.” He poured them both a generous glass of wine. “Now, back to what you were saying earlier, you’re obviously quite informed about real estate. But I’m not convinced you’re up to speed with certain aspects of the law.”

“I never said I was, but—”

“Forget the interview, you’ve had your ten minutes.” He smiled lazily and was pleased to note that she seemed to relax a little. “You said you inherited debts from your mother, so presumably you had acted as a cosignatory? You wouldn’t have been a suitable guarantor, surely?”

Her face was blank.

“Your mother must have asked you to sign something, maybe passed it off as something else?”

“No, never. What kind of woman do you think she was? She would never have done such a thing.” Kizzy’s fork fell with a clatter onto the table as she looked at him in horror. “I’ve never signed anything like that. I wasn’t even party to the tenancy agreement. She kept me out of it completely.”

“Then you can’t have inherited her debts; the law doesn’t work like that. It might be an ass, but it’s crawled some way out of the dark ages. The loan company, the bank, whichever institution lent her the money, would have had to write it off if her estate couldn’t cover it. Presumably nothing much was left?”

Kizzy nodded slowly.

“So that’s brilliant news, isn’t it?” Andreas raised his glass triumphantly. “You have no debts, whatever anyone else has told you. A new, footloose life!”

“They weren’t institutions exactly,” Kizzy murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“Conventional lenders weren’t interested in her business, I’m afraid. She took an alternative route—to the darker side of finance.”

“Loan sharks,” Andreas supplied flatly.

Kizzy nodded.

“It’s okay, really it is,” she said hurriedly. “I’ve been gradually paying them off, although I’ve had to borrow from the bank to meet some of the installments—before

the interest charges went up again.”

The still expression on his face made her voice waver.

“I realize you’ll think me very stupid but if I hadn’t done it that way I’d probably be minus a few body parts by now.”

She pushed her plate away as the air temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. There was no turning back now—he might as well know everything.

“On top of all that, Mum borrowed from most of her friends as well. In a way, those debts are worse as there’s a moral obligation to clear them. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I didn’t pay back every penny.” She raised her eyes to the ink-blue night sky above their courtyard table. “I’ll get there eventually, though they’re happy to wait until I’m on my feet again. There are some decent people out there. But the bank and our local gangsters aren’t quite so accommodating.”

As he wrestled with the shock of her financial situation, Andreas wondered if he would fit into that description. Did Kizzy Dean see him as decent? Probably not, he reasoned, feeling an inexplicable twinge of regret. Yet why should she? No doubt she would lump him into the same uncaring category as her fiscal captors.

“How much?” he said. “How much do you owe in total?”

Kizzy’s eyes widened with embarrassment—she wished she hadn’t mentioned it now. “About thirty thousand pounds, five of it to the bank.”

“Is that all?”

“A drop in the ocean for you,” Kizzy responded awkwardly. “But it’s going to take me a lifetime to clear it. It goes up another two thousand if I don’t make next week’s

installment. So maybe now you will understand my worry about the hotel bill?”

“Then you must concentrate on the bank and forget about the loan sharks,” Andreas announced firmly. “They can’t get you here, Kizzy, unless you do something stupid and tell them where you are. But credit ratings follow you wherever you go. Forget about the gangsters, they’ll lose interest once they realize their easy target’s gone.”

“But they threatened to torch Timi’s.”

Andreas shrugged. “Saving me a few thousand in demolition fees then.”

“Everything I have is in that place!”

“It’s only bricks and mortar, Kizzy. It’s run-down, damp and condemned. Let it go.”

“I meant my stuff, personal things, photographs of my parents, the things that make me who I am. It’s not much but it’s all I have left to prove who I am, where I came from.”

“It’s all been put in storage already,” Andreas replied, and avoided her bewildered eyes.

He was beginning to feel moved by the anguish in her voice, the pain Kizzy was clearly feeling at the prospect of losing those few sentimental trinkets, and he didn’t enjoy the sensation one little bit.

“It’s not that simple,” Kizzy replied with a touch of exasperation. “They know who my mother’s friends are. And mine. One of them has just had a baby and,” her words cracked into a hoarse whisper, “they said they would all get a ‘visit’ if I didn’t pay up or if I told the police.”

Andreas swore angrily in his own language and snatched up the cell phone that still lay on the table between them. “How do you normally pay these animals?”

“They come to the restaurant every Thursday after we close. When I’m on my own.” She sighed miserably. “It has to be cash.”

Andreas stalked away from the table and made some phone calls out in the quiet darkness of the courtyard. By the time he had finished, Kizzy’s palms were damp and cold, her heart beating sickeningly against her ribs.

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“It’s all sorted.” Andreas resumed his seat and dropped the phone back onto the table.

“What do you mean?”

“The sharks will be, let us say, suitably satisfied when they turn up on Thursday. I have a small welcoming party arranged for them.” He flicked her a warning glance. “It is over with regard to them. Funds have been deposited into your account to cover the bank loan and the personal favors you owe on behalf of your mother. There’s also some extra money in there to cover the phone bill I’ve just run up.”

Kizzy’s head began to swirl. “I don’t know what to say, except thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart. But why would you go to such lengths on my behalf?”

“Why?” he repeated sharply. “As you said, the money means nothing to me, and all this misery and worry on your part is becoming extremely tedious. We have no need to discuss this sorry episode ever again.”

He noticed the way she flinched at his harsh words but it was the only way he could explain away his instinctive reaction to her predicament.

Besides, he didn’t need to justify his actions to anyone—he knew exactly what he was doing. He was going to deal with the mind-numbing attraction to this woman that was throwing him off track and distracting him from his work like nothing he had ever known before.

He didn’t have time for an affair—there was work to be done, important work, including rescheduling that abortive meeting in London. Then there was Paris and

Rome. The sooner he could get her out of his system the better.

“You should eat more.” He eyed her neglected plate. “You’ll waste away at this rate.”

“Hardly,” she smiled. “There were always leftovers in the kitchen at Timi’s to pick over, so I’ve got enough reserves to see me through an arctic winter.”

Andreas pursed his lips thoughtfully. Leftovers...scraps...

She had been in no better place than the beggar boy in Rhodes, he thought with a growing sense of outrage: a victim of poverty, crime, and callous rejection at the hands of her stepfamily.

Family.

He ground his jaw, pushing away bitter memories of his own gnawing hunger and the sight of his sister clutching her tiny belly as she gnawed the morsels he had managed to scavenge for her.

“I’d hate to see those curves disappear,” he remarked, hiding his pain. “They have quite an interesting effect on me.”

Kizzy blushed crimson. “I really don’t think—”

“In fact,” he continued, casually undoing the second button of his shirt. “I’d like to become reacquainted with them again.”

“That would be highly inappropriate,” Kizzy said. “We were supposed to be talking about work.”

“For the agreed ten minutes, yes?” He pushed back his chair and stood up, a slow

smile forming on his face. “And then I wrote off all the financial worries you could possibly have, so you must be feeling much more relaxed.”

Kizzy looked up with a startled expression into the seductive amber of his eyes. Awkwardly, she pushed back her chair. “I think I’ll take these dishes into the kitchen and help Dorinda out.”

“Dorinda has gone for the evening,” he countered. “We’re alone here.”

Kizzy’s heart was beating so hard, she was sure it must be audible in the thick, charged silence that hung between them.

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful after everything you’ve done for me. But I’d like to know what job I’m going to be doing here so I can begin to pay you back.”

“What job do you want?” he asked with a shrug of indifference.

“This is ridiculous,” she answered him, frustrated. “How am I supposed to answer something like that? I know nothing about your business interests here.”

“Real estate mainly,” he replied quickly. “Luxury-end sales and renting with the associated finance and administration requirements. My legal and shipping work feeds more out of Rhodes. Then there are a number of other projects in the area.”

Before she could respond, Andreas had circumvented the table and taken hold of both her wrists. He gently drew her body against the firm strength of his, bringing her so close he could almost taste her quickening breath on his tongue.

“You can do whatever job you like as far as I’m concerned, Kizzy. Take your pick. Name your salary. None of that matters because I won’t accept a penny back from you anyway. But there is one particular role that would be perfect for you, one I know

you would excel at and find fulfilling.”

Kizzy could only close her eyes and gasp as he lowered his mouth to brush his full lips tantalizingly across hers, tormenting her with a touch as light as a butterfly’s wing. Desire rocketed through her as she felt the burning rigidity of his arousal ease itself suggestively against her navel.

“You could be my very personal assistant.” His breath grew harsher as he released her wrists and slid his hands around each rounded cheek of her bottom, pulling her even more tightly against him. “And my mistress.”

## Chapter Six

“What did you say?” Kizzy gasped.

Andreas smiled. “You heard me,” he replied. “I want you to be my mistress.”

The serious expression on his face, and the way his eyes had suddenly become hooded and even darker than she thought possible, told her she hadn’t imagined what he had just suggested.

The growing heat of his body against hers and the now-insistent pulse of his arousal against her belly indicated a very intense male hunger that made her own body respond involuntarily. What had previously been a glowing ember of awareness between her thighs was being fanned into warmth, and her breasts were growing heavy with desire.

“Previous lovers have been extremely vocal in expressing the pleasure my body can give them.” His tone was teasing. One hand slid up from her rear and underneath her top. “At least, I’ve never had any complaints.”

Kizzy was beginning to feel delirious with sensation. If the way he kissed her was anything to go by, and the way her body was trembling at his touch, then making love with him would be like nothing she could imagine.

“I can be generous, Kizzy,” he breathed with deepening urgency. “You won’t be disappointed, believe me.”

Kizzy breathed out roughly, her mind whirling nonsensically with the intoxication she was feeling. “Andreas.”

Every brush of his fingertips drew her into wanting more, wanting him to go even further. Yet while each second brought her closer to submitting to the magic spell his body was casting on her, she knew it was madness. Every particle of her body wanted him to carry her off to his bed, but she knew that becoming his lover was not a viable career option. Sliding between her new boss’s sheets could only invite disaster.

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She pushed against his chest and weakened for a second as she felt the thunder of his heart; he was so intensely powerful. “We can’t.”

“We can,” he whispered and skillfully released the clasp of her bra, exhaling with pleasure. The soft swell of her breasts being freed made the silk of her top whisper invitingly. “It’s what we both want.”

“Andreas,” she gasped, and tried to push their upper bodies apart. “It’s not what I want!”

“It isn’t? I think you’re lying to me again, Kizzy.” His voiced dropped to a provocative whisper. He drew a finger across the inflamed bead of her nipple. “You’re really going to ignore me? Is that why you’ve closed your eyes? Why you’re breathing so quickly? Why your heart sounds as if it’s about to burst?”

Kizzy couldn’t have responded clearly even if his mouth hadn’t been coaxing hers into delicious compliance. His kiss came from nowhere and her body was beginning to melt under his incendiary touch.

“Yes,” she said as his mouth trailed kisses along the length of her neck.

Deft fingers dealt with her trouser button and slowly slid down the zip. “That’s better.” A tug resulted in her pants’ slipping to the floor and before she knew what was happening, he had eased her down onto a sofa.

Kneeling between her parted legs, he probed her mouth greedily until she whimpered with surrender, dissolving beneath him with intense pleasure.

He pushed her decisively back against the cushions. Molding one hand around her breast, he brushed his fingertips teasingly over the skimpy triangle of silk that covered her sex.

“This part of you is incapable of deceit,” he murmured with satisfaction and slid his fingers beneath the flimsy fabric to explore the curls between her thighs.

“Andreas, please.” She wasn’t even sure what she was asking for but her pelvis tilted provocatively. “Please.”

Her breath quickened and her chest pushed against his hand, her legs parting even farther in invitation.

“I’ll buy you more,” he growled as he wrenched the gossamer fabric of her panties apart and threw the scrap of material to the floor. “I need to see you.”

Kizzy gasped as his tongue trailed down her neck, his fingers working expertly on the buttons of her camisole. The heat of their desire became almost too much, and she wrenched at her top, sending tiny buttons flying in the process.

“Buy me another of those too,” she muttered. She wanted his hand back between her legs.

Discarding her bra, Andreas ruthlessly dragged one peaked nipple into the heat of his mouth. He drew as much of her in as he could, licking and stimulating her into an almost unbearable state. He then turned his attention to the other breast, until her mouth fell open with raw desire.

“Is that good?” he teased, watching her flushed face.

She heard herself moan deeply. It was a sound she didn’t recognize, low and feral.

“Here.” She guided his strong lean hand back toward the apex of her thighs and circled her hips against him, silently pleading.

He began to stroke his fingers rhythmically against the slick heat of her entrance. One long determined finger eased slowly inside to be fiercely gripped by an instinctive spasm.

She squirmed with pleasure, pressing her pubic bone against the hard joint of his hand.

“So tight, hara mou,” he groaned, and gave a shuddering breath. “So hot, I have to—”

Kizzy’s breathing became frantic as his mouth left her swollen nipples and he lowered his head between her thighs. As her hips writhed against him, she felt the almost piercing touch of his thumb pad against her clitoris.

“I have to taste you,” he finished roughly, and closed his heated mouth over that already stiffened nub of desire.

She laced her trembling hands through his black hair and relished the erotic scrape of stubble against the soft flesh of her inner thighs.

“Yes,” she breathed, and her hands greedily applied pressure to the back of his head.

Teasingly, he withdrew his finger, stimulating her internal muscles to cling tightly and demand more. She heard herself whimper in protest until his finger was suddenly replaced with his tongue. The flickering and twisting feeling inside was almost overwhelming as his fingers insistently stimulated her clitoris.

But now she needed more of him.

Her stomach muscles tightened with arousal. “More,” she gasped as she felt his tongue slip away, leaving her cold to the air. “Please, Andreas.”

“Hush.” He eased her gently apart with his fingers. “Let yourself go. Let me feel you fall apart.”

She moaned as his lips closed once more over her engorged bud and his finger slid easily into her slippery heat. Gently manipulating her clitoris between his teeth, sucking and tormenting, he responded to the bucking of her hips and began to ease a second digit inside her.

Her tense but eager body resisted slightly and she felt him lift one leg high over the back of the sofa to expose her as widely as possible.

Her head spun with delirium as he continued to gently lubricate her with his scorching tongue.

“That’s it, moro mou, relax. Let me give you as much as you can take, let me watch you come.”

Kizzy’s body began to convulse with unbearable intensity around his slow, thrusting fingers. She felt herself tumble out of the real world into one of unimaginable, seismic pleasure. She looked into the dark, smoldering, volcanic arousal of his eyes and could not remember why she had refused him before.

“Yes, I want it,” she whispered. “All of you inside me.”

Then reason vanished from her mind as Kizzy arched her back and moaned, hurtling over a cliff of exquisite sensation as his repeated movements urged her on to an uncontrollable climax.

...

“That shouldn’t have happened,” Kizzy stuttered awkwardly and drew her knees up defensively against her chest.

“But it did.” Andreas rose to join her on the sofa. He pulled her into his arms. “And you are magnificent.”

His tone was gentle but as Kizzy dared to quickly glance at him, she could see a dash of color high on his cheekbones. Desire still burned in his eyes.

What had she done?

She must have been out of her mind to behave in such a way, to have allowed herself to give in to physical temptation in such a sudden and reckless manner.

Hadn’t she learned anything over the years? Wasn’t she still paying the price for her mother’s unconditional love and response to her father?

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She had forgotten in those moments of pure blinding pleasure what usually happened once a man got what he wanted out of a woman, once he had taken his fill and tired of his latest plaything.

On the yacht, she had realized how far out of his league she was, and how Andreas's power and wealth would make it easy for him to pick up and discard the most beautiful women in the world if he wished. She had to put a stop to this flirtation before things got out of hand, even if it meant facing the inevitable consequences of her apparent change of heart, even if he was now going to think she was the kind of woman who enjoyed teasing men.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out, and attempted to get up from the sofa. "It was wrong of me to have allowed things to get out of control—"

"You couldn't help yourself," he insisted smoothly, and grabbed her wrist to prevent her from getting any farther away. "And neither could I. Nature was manipulating us both, doing what she does best."

"This has to stop now. I know I shouldn't have led you on, led you to think that—"

"That we were going to end up in my bed?" His eyes glittered like hot, black glass. "That you were going to be making love to me all night? Crying out for me under the cover of darkness?"

"Stop saying things like that!" She wrenched her wrist away from him.

"I can't help it, pethi mou. I'm a normal, red-blooded male and I'm still extremely

aroused. I want you, Kizzy. And I know you feel the same way, so why don't you just give in and stop wasting our time?"

"I do not feel the same way." She was lying. "And this is all highly inappropriate—"

"In what way inappropriate?"

"You're my boss. Sleeping with you would be against the established rules of any working relationship. It's simply not ethical behavior."

"Not if you're my mistress," he pointed out coolly. "In fact, sleeping with me would be one of the most basic of your aims and objectives."

"I will not be your mistress!" Kizzy snatched up her trousers and began to wrestle them back on. "The idea is preposterous."

"I fail to see why," Andreas threw her top to her. "We're clearly attracted to each other and I have no doubt that your recent enthusiasm, shall we say, would be even greater in the comfort of my bed."

"I'd be grateful if we could forget this ever happened," she said clumsily. "I'll be out of your house tomorrow and then—"

"But I can't forget. And neither, I am sure, can you." He stood over her once more and touched a fingertip to the edge of her cheekbone. "You needed that money, didn't you?"

"I'm not a prostitute! I realize you have a low opinion of me, but I would never sell my body, however high the fee, however close to rock bottom I might be. The shame would kill me." She brushed her tangled hair away from her face to hide the fact that she was shaking with anger. "I'll pay back every penny I owe you, Andreas, even if it

kills me. But I won't earn it in your bed."

Andreas emitted a hollow laugh. He looked slowly and deliberately down at his watch. "We shall see, Kizzy Dean. I don't think you're going to be able to hold out on me for too long, not judging by the way you went up in flames earlier. I will have you, Kizzy. I always get what I want."

"You wouldn't dare—"

"Nothing so crass," he said, with a dark smile, and let his hand fall. "You will come to me eventually. I guarantee it."

...

Kizzy forced her eyes open in spite of the bright light burning down on her.

"Where...?"

She shielded her eyes with her hands and tried to swallow, her throat uncomfortably dry. She forced herself to sit up, and felt a slight tenderness in her body. Then it all came flooding back. The previous evening flashed rapidly through her mind in humiliating detail.

She was in the guest bedroom that Andreas had shown her to after her embarrassing display in his arms.

He had been disarmingly polite and had acted like a perfect host as he had shown her around a suite of rooms that could have been an apartment in its own right. The pretty metal lamps that had illuminated the bedroom the night before had given way to bright shafts of early morning sunshine, filtering through cracks in the shutters and painting clean golden lines across the richly embroidered bedspread.

Pushing through the canopy of white material that hung from the white domed ceiling above her, Kizzy stepped down from the wooden platform of her bed and went to the window.

She pulled apart the heavy wooden shutters using both hands and gasped as an explosion of blue, gold, and green flooded her senses.

As the warm breeze caressed her cheeks, Kizzy felt as if she were flying. She stared out across the bay, awestruck. A heat-hazy, pale blue sky topped a ragged, golden horizon of ocher rock underlined by a slash of deepest azure sea. The wash sparkled and glinted as it eased around the bay and washed up toward a fringe of enormous fig trees, accompanied only by the rustle of a huge frangipani tree against the outside wall.

Taking a step backward into the bedroom, Kizzy noticed for the first time that there was a set of floor-to-ceiling carved wooden doors that must lead out onto the balcony.

With a rush of excitement, she grasped the heavy metal handles and tugged them open.

The generous white balcony was sheltered from the sun's rays by a mustard-colored awning with castellated edges. Underfoot, an elaborately inlaid pebble floor tickled the soles of her feet.

At the outer edge of the balcony rose a tower that looked like an elaborate dovecote with green-shuttered windows shaped like archways. An intricate double rope pattern was carved around the edge of each one, and Kizzy guessed they must have the most amazing panoramic views of the sea when open. The balcony wall had been decorated with a row of lemons, whose skin shone seductively and begged to be touched. Kizzy lifted one to inhale its refreshing aroma.

She knelt on a low sofa covered with Moorish-looking throws and leaned her elbows on the wall to stare out across the bay.

The view was more impressive from here. She could even make out the little fishing boats that were sailing in and out. The blast of a ship's horn broke the idyll and drew her attention toward the jetty and tavernas she had passed with Andreas the night before.

An old ferry was belching into the bay, seeming to list slightly with its burden of sightseers, and it had shimmied a little too close to the imposing bows of Elektron.

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Kizzy laughed, emitting a witchy cackle. “Mess with Lazarides at your peril, little boat!”

She bit down pensively on her bottom lip. The scene out in the bay summed it up for her: sleek super-yacht putting a scruffy old boat in its place. It was a warning from the gods, she told herself wryly, to remind her of the fire she had played with last night.

“I heard that,” came a deep voice from below.

Kizzy gasped and dropped the lemon she had been holding as she leaned over the edge to see where he was. There wasn’t the slightest doubt in her mind as to who had spoken. She peered down into the shady courtyard, and saw her boss staring straight back up at her, tossing the lemon nonchalantly from hand to hand.

Dressed casually in taupe cargo shorts, he radiated pure maleness. A black T-shirt clung to his torso in a revealing and erotic manner, hugging the hard contours of his shoulders and muscular chest. She felt her mouth go dry as her eyes drifted from his chest to his bare legs. Golden skin with a smattering of dark hair fed her imagination as she considered what the rest of his body might look like undressed.

“I didn’t realize you were there.”

“Clearly not,” he replied, and threw the lemon back up to her.

He locked the door at the base of the tower, then slid the key back into his pocket.

“Dorinda will bring breakfast up to you shortly. After you eat, I’d like to get out and about. A few issues have arisen since we arrived that need to be addressed quickly.” He stared at her silently for a few seconds. “And I need to deal with you, Miss Dean.”

Kizzy felt heat flare in her cheeks as Andreas turned and strode away through an archway leading from the courtyard, disappearing down a flight of rugged steps into a lush tangle of greenery.

Miss Dean?

So he had decided to revert to formality in the light of day. He must have seen sense and decided to forget the ridiculous “be my mistress” proposition he had made the night before.

Well, that would be good. It was the only sensible course to take.

She drew the edges of the silk robe Andreas had purchased for her on Rhodes closer across her chest. He was undoubtedly a very proud man who wasn’t used to his offers being refused, so he was pretending that the whole sorry episode had never happened.

She would be wise not to allude to it either, she thought, and pressed her lips together. And as for that odd, disappointed feeling in her stomach?

It could only be hunger, nothing more.

## Chapter Seven

Kizzy wandered nervously down the steps from her room to the sun-drenched courtyard below, comforting herself with the thought that Andreas appeared to have put the unfortunate episode the previous evening behind him and she must do the same. She must forget all about it. And when she saw him again shortly she would

absolutely not allow herself to stare at his body, or wish that she could tangle her fingers through his black hair once more. Or even notice how good Andreas smelled, with that clean, spicy, male scent of his.

She felt a frisson of annoyance and roughly wrenched the strap of her handbag across her body as she reached the table they had shared at dinner the previous night. It had been simply decorated with a potted succulent, all neat and perfectly tidy with no trace of the passion that had burned there previously.

She jerked suddenly as a large hand closed over her shoulder from behind.

“You’ve put your hair up.” Andreas smiled down as her startled face snapped around to meet his gaze. “It looks much prettier down, like you had it first thing this morning.”

“It’s hot,” Kizzy replied feebly and rubbed the back of her neck as if to emphasize the point, though it was really to disguise the blush his observation had caused.

“This morning I’ll show you around some of my commercial interests in Lindos. I also need to visit the property office and sort out a few problems—you may be able to help me out.” He took a notebook out of his back pocket along with a small, scruffy plastic pen, and handed them to her. “I have no idea where your business skills lie but I’m sure you couldn’t have pulled off a degree without being able to write. You can take notes for me when necessary.”

“Fine,” Kizzy replied brightly as she fought the urge to tell him just how condescending he sounded. “I think I can manage that.”

“Good.” He ignored the sour turn of her mouth. “There’s a ridiculous rumor circulating that my office manager is about to hand her notice in. I have no idea where these absurd stories originate, but on this occasion I can’t resist checking it

out.”

“It couldn’t be true?” Kizzy replied as she slipped the notepad and pen into her bag, having made sure their hands would not touch.

“Of course not.” He began to stride toward the large gated front door in the wall. “No one has ever resigned from my employ. Why on earth would they?”

Kizzy resisted the urge to say something along the lines of “Because you’re an autocratic control freak?” and managed instead to mumble, “I can’t begin to imagine.” She kept her eyes firmly focused on the path below her feet and not on the visual temptation of his magnificently broad back as she followed him into the busy streets of Lindos village.

Their stroll through the growing crowds that filled the arterial alleyways was pleasantly brief and, mercifully for Kizzy’s aching calves, downhill.

Andreas paused outside a small doorway set in a shady recess reached via two time-worn, white stone steps partially obscured by a sleeping ginger cat.

The hand-painted blue and white sign of Lazarides’ Property offices was a more relaxed affair than the stern, metalwork plate outside his vast London headquarters. This sign was battered with rust spots and rattled askew as he pushed open the glass-fronted door with one confident hand and walked through.

An ancient bell announced their arrival. Andreas shot Kizzy a glance that seemed to be more about checking to see that she was still there than to reassure her, before turning the sign to its “Closed” position.

He locked the door and strode assertively toward a door at the rear.

“Get Miss Dean a drink, Angie,” was the brusque command he threw over his shoulder. “And I don’t want to be disturbed.”

As the door clicked shut behind him, the petite young blonde behind the reception desk raised her eyebrows in a silent, comical gesture that couldn’t have been more different from the chilly professionalism of Isabella back in London. “What’s gotten in to him today?”

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“I think it may have something to do with a rumor that’s been going round.”

“Oh yes?” Angie replied, her green eyes widening with curiosity. “Would you like a can of something?” she asked, and opened the door of a large drink fridge.

“Yes, please. Something about someone resigning?” She noticed the other woman wince as she handed Kizzy an ice-cold can. “So it’s true?”

“Afraid so. But it’s not like it sounds, honestly it isn’t. He’s the best boss either of us has ever had and we both love it here, but life happens and Liz’s been trying to talk to him for ages.” She took a seat next to Kizzy and curled her long tanned legs up beneath her like the sleeping cat outside. Her eyes rounded on Kizzy with intensified interest. “He hasn’t been answering his phone. Are you being lined up to work here?”

Kizzy was taken aback by the directness of her question but blinked back her surprise. “I don’t think so. That is, I can’t be sure about anything at this stage.”

“Pity. Now that Liz’s pregnant, she’ll be heading straight to Australia with her boyfriend and it’s left me in a bit of a spot—” Angie suddenly looked horrified. “Whoops! I think I’ve just let the cat out of the bag.”

Kizzy shook her head and smiled, comforted by Angie’s friendly company. For the first time in days she felt warm on the inside.

“I won’t say a word, I promise.”

...

“You seem a lot more cheerful since our little trip to the office,” Andreas remarked as he absentmindedly ran a lean finger up and down the icy mist of his beer glass. “Anything I should know?”

“What’s there for me to be unhappy about?” Kizzy took a deep breath of the breeze that coasted up from the bay and cooled her skin beneath the canopy of a tiny rooftop restaurant. “I’ve just had the most delicious meal, the view is amazing, and my indulgent boss has cleared all my debts. It’s a new beginning for me and I’m very excited.”

Andreas quirked up an eyebrow. “I’m glad to hear it. You’re obviously having a better day than I am.”

“Is it so bad?” She tipped her head sympathetically to one side and then averted her eyes before letting the next few words slip out. “Was it bad news this morning?”

“Yes and no. Liz is in fact resigning her position as office manager and leaving Lindos, which is a huge shame—she’s very good.” He pursed his lips together and considered the bubbles that were rising to the top of his drink. A slight edge crept into his voice. “But she’s going to have a baby with the man she says she loves, so what more can one say?”

“I see.”

He shrugged and looked distractedly away toward the nearby acropolis that rose high into a vibrant blue sky. “I can only wish her the best and hope it all works out the way she thinks it will.”

“You don’t sound too convinced,” Kizzy replied cautiously.

“I’m not. They’ve got no money saved, no qualifications, and no property, but they

have love.” He tipped the glass of beer to his mouth. “They seem to think that’s all they’re going to need.”

A waiter drifted close to their table and silence fell for a few seconds before Andreas flicked her an uncomfortable, rigid smile.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Me neither, and that is quite simply because there is no such thing as love. The notion is a convenient myth that’s developed over millennia to facilitate social control and stability—just like all those crazy religions out there. Oh, and throw in a marriage vow and it makes it a lot easier for a guy to get regular sex as well.” He frowned at the pink tinge on Kizzy’s cheeks. “I just hope Liz knows what she’s getting herself into. It beats me how a girl can get pregnant by accident these days—there’s no excuse for it really.”

“You’re not the marrying kind then, judging by what you just said?” She couldn’t help but register the shocked expression on his face. “I mean, as you said, you don’t need to these days. Unless you’re very traditional or religious or—” She could feel she was digging herself deeper and deeper into a very big hole of embarrassment. “Or for financial reasons.”

She coughed away her discomfiture and began to fiddle with the stem of her wineglass, anything to avoid the glowering expression that dominated his features. She should just shut up.

“Marriage?” He lifted his eyes skyward and let out a bitter laugh. “Once was quite enough, trust me.”

His jaw lowered to meet her gaze with ultimate precision, and she felt as if she were being sucked into the eye of a dark storm.

“The institution is pointless—it didn’t stop my father from being a serial philanderer and making my mother’s life a humiliating misery. Why they never divorced is beyond me. Still,” his bottom lip tightened with disgust, “my mother’s dead and the old goat’s so senile now he’s oblivious to the damage he did. As for my own taste of wedded bliss? It was a living hell. So your answer is a definite no. I’d never, ever do anything that stupid a second time.”

His mum had died too...and he’d been married...

Kizzy felt a strange sensation of renewed loss and disappointment. She quickly looked over to his left hand to confirm the absence of a wedding ring. He must have loved his mother, but he clearly had no feeling left for the woman he had once cared about enough to marry. Not because he loved her, of course—he’d made his feelings known about that particular notion. But his revelation was creating more questions than answers in Kizzy’s mind.

What had happened?

Where was his wife now?

Had there been any children from the marriage?

Kizzy was sickened by the pounding of her heart as unbidden images forced their way to the front of her mind: Andreas in his dark, sartorial suit, smiling into the face of his beautiful, ivory-swathed bride; then the image of him naked and determined, rolling over to caress his wife’s slender limbs beneath crisp, white sheets; the sable, downy head of their baby in the crook of his protective arm...

Kizzy shook her head to banish the madness that seemed to be consuming her and said the first thing that came into her head, just to change the subject.

“I’ve got good news.” She smiled as brightly as she could when he quirked up an eyebrow to indicate she should continue, and suddenly realized there was no going back now that she had started. “I can move out of your villa immediately. Get out from under your feet. That’s good, isn’t it?”

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Andreas glared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m moving in with Angie,” she said, straightening her back to reinforce her determination. “She told me that Liz’s room has been empty for weeks and the rent’s all paid up to the end of the month, so my first few weeks will be free. Isn’t that lovely of her? Of course, I’ll show my appreciation in some other way once I’ve been paid. Cook a few meals, bring home the odd bottle of wine—”

“Stop right there.”

Andreas clenched a fist under the table as he battled against the very real but uncharacteristic urge to raise his voice and show how very angry he was feeling. Still smarting from the freshly resurrected and sour memories of his marriage, his failed marriage, he was now faced with the unpleasant situation of having control slipping from his fingers once more.

Women! Give them more than a few minutes together and they would be plotting and planning against you before you could do a thing to stop it.

Well, stop it he would—this was not how things should be happening and not part of his strategy for getting Kizzy Dean where he wanted her. And that was very firmly installed in his bed with the door closed to the outside world.

“I did not give you permission to start making clandestine arrangements behind my back.” His nostrils flared with irritation. “I will not permit it.”

“It’s too late for that, I’m afraid,” Kizzy replied, an uncomfortable dryness at the

back of her throat. “I’ve already given Angie my word. And she’s turned down all the other offers she had in favor of mine.”

Andreas sliced a hand through the air as if trying to bat off an annoying insect. “Leave Angie to me. She will fully understand that an urgent change in circumstances means her new roommate won’t be moving in for a while.”

He leaned his elbows on the table, knotted his fingers tightly together, and glowered at her as his brain went into overdrive, revising his previous plans for a romantic dinner for two, a barefoot stroll in the moonlight, and a magnum of his favorite champagne.

“It’s Friday afternoon. There’s no way I can realistically speed up production of our contract and have it ready for signature today. I e-mailed the bare bones of it to my chief executive in Rhodes this morning while you were asleep, but these things take time to do properly.”

“But—”

“But nothing.” His eyes flashed dangerously. “I warned you at the start that I wasn’t letting you out of my sight until there were some cast-iron guarantees between us. Nothing has happened to alter that.”

“So I am a prisoner, after all,” Kizzy stated quietly. “I suppose I should be grateful you haven’t locked me up in that tower of yours.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic!”

Andreas pushed himself out of his seat and stood against the low wall of the restaurant terrace with his back to her, his fists thrust into his pockets as he stared out toward the open sea.

She was right, he was forced to admit inwardly. To all intents and purposes she was a prisoner in that he wasn't prepared to allow her total freedom for a few days.

But he had to keep an eye on her, didn't he? For the Antonideses' sake.

Who was he trying to kid?

Kizzy Dean was not going to run off and call the Antonideses at the first opportunity and he damn well knew it. He also knew that the legal contract he had been insisting on was completely unnecessary to ensure Kizzy's side of the deal. It had been an excuse—an excuse to keep her within his reach until he could seduce her into his bed and work her delectable body right out of his overheated system.

“You want guarantees too, don't you?” he demanded nonetheless. “Without some form of legal contract, there'd be nothing to stop me from breaking my side of the bargain and abandoning you here with nothing.”

“But you wouldn't.”

He turned to face her. “What makes you so confident of that?”

Kizzy wasn't quite sure what had made her say such a thing, but her mind was instantly drawn back to his office staff, to Dorinda and Stephanos. Their instinctive reactions to Andreas were something no amount of stick-wielding could enforce or money could buy. They were loyal, respectful, and affectionate even.

“I trust you.”

“You trust me.” He shook his head skeptically. “I may have overestimated your intelligence. It's not safe to trust anyone, Kizzy. Especially not men like me.”

Men as flawed and tarnished and warped as me. Men who would deceive and go against their own principles to get a woman like you into bed...

“But you’re young. You’ll learn. Sadly.”

“You’re absolutely right, Andreas. In fact, I imagine you’re rarely wrong about anything.”

“Never,” Andreas said.

He let her barbed remark pass without rebuke but that didn’t mean it hadn’t hit home. It had, and to his surprise, it hurt. Hurt more than it logically should.

Clearly he came across as arrogant and overbearing. And her cold reaction was no more than he deserved. But that little bit of fire she had just shown proved she had a tough inner core, a personality that could give free rein to her inferno of a libido.

“Getting back to practicalities,” he announced in a neutral tone. “Since you are so keen to spread your wings, I’ve decided we need to do some work on your career plans, so they can be properly built into the contract. I have a few possibilities in mind but I need to focus without external distraction. It’s just too busy here—too many demands. I need to attend personally to a number of other matters before an important UN meeting in Paris next week.”

“So we’re going away for a couple of days until the legal documents are ready. It’s the only sensible way forward at this point.” Slowly, his eyes followed a swallow’s black silhouette across the skyline. His voice was deliberately nonchalant. “Besides, you’re looking tired, so I’ve arranged a luxurious weekend on a private island. I’m hoping that should put the color back in your cheeks.”

Chapter Eight

The room Andreas had shown her to, her room was an exquisite, understated palette of ivory-painted floorboards, cream plasterwork, and the snowiest white linen she had ever seen. What she had encountered of his island retreat so far was breathtaking, but what exactly was she supposed to do in her own little piece of this heaven?

Their departure from Lindos had been rapid and ruthlessly efficient to the extent that her unwrapped boxes of new clothing had yet to be delivered. Andreas had insisted that they fly to the island by helicopter immediately before the light started to fade, having arranged for their luggage to follow on by sea, so she couldn't even while away the time with unpacking.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:11 am*

Kizzy moved toward the French windows that stood open, invitingly, onto a balcony with a delicate black wrought-iron rail, and paused for a moment to run her hands across the rough stone that framed it. Its cold grayness contrasted beautifully with the thick, buttery cover surrounding it and the apricot blue of dusk outside.

Her eyes drifted to one of the imposing black picture frames that hung on either side of the door. Beneath the glass was a watermarked piece of fabric embroidered with a sweeping arc of simple flowers tied at the stem with a blue bow. Its bright ensemble of clashing colors and incorrect botanical structure was as delightfully naïve as the sepia photograph it surrounded was severe.

A stiff, unsmiling woman sat with hands primly folded in the lap of her black floor-length dress. Behind her was an equally stern, mustachioed man in a suit who was gripping a bewildered-looking child in a white dress on his knee.

“Those were the days.”

Kizzy jumped as Andreas’s words cut through the silence and turned to see him leaning nonchalantly against the doorjamb, his powerful shoulders almost filling the width of the frame.

“They all look terrified,” she said, and glanced back at the framed photograph. “Are they family?”

“No.” He eased himself upright and took a few steps into the room, bringing him uncomfortably within touching distance. “If you look closely there are a couple of lovebirds hiding in the flowers, not the sort of symbolism most of my dreadful

ancestors would think to incorporate. They're descendants of the original owners, I believe. There was a ton of old stuff lying around when I bought this place. Most of it had to go, but a few pieces, like that one, I've kept. Lends a certain ambience to the building, don't you think?"

"Definitely," Kizzy agreed, folding her arms across her chest and gripping tightly onto her elbows, a defense against the proximity of his body. She didn't dare turn around and face him, he was just too close, and one more lungful of his fresh scent would be her ruin.

There had been no mention yet of the absurd "mistress" proposition from the night before—he had clearly given up quite quickly on that idea—so it was vital that she didn't even think about how much she wanted to kiss him.

In a physical sense, at least, Andreas was everything she could ever have imagined her perfect man to be. Just the memory of his touch made shivers run like wild electricity up and down her spine until she could hardly think straight.

She only prayed he couldn't hear the catch in her breath.

They were together in her bedroom.

Alone.

"Can I assume you have recovered from my handling of the helicopter?" Andreas asked.

He reached around her to close the French doors, brushing his forearm against her bare shoulder as he did so.

Kizzy felt her eyes flutter shut for a second in direct reaction to his touch. She was

forced to moisten her dry lips with the tip of her tongue before she could reply. “I can’t pretend I enjoyed it all that much—very noisy.”

“I’m sorry about that. I was very keen to get here before dark, that’s all.”

“You’ll have to excuse my nervousness, Andreas. You’re used to all this, but for me it’s quite overwhelming.” Kizzy continued to stare out of the window, willing the pounding of her heart to ease up. “Yachts, jets, helicopters—I guess that just leaves me the hideously expensive sports car to get accustomed to, right? No, don’t tell me—Lamborghini? Ferrari?”

“Neither of those.”

She turned to face him but her playful smile faltered at the shadowy expression on his face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—I just assumed it was all part of the image.”

“The idle, reckless, playboy billionaire image, you mean?”

“I suppose so,” she replied. “I didn’t mean to be rude, but you obviously drive something, so I assumed it would match everything else about you.”

“Such as my ego and heartlessness?”

Kizzy looked away, embarrassed. He clearly hadn’t forgotten the vitriol she hurled at him before she discovered the truth about the little beggar boy in Rhodes.

“It was wrong of me to say that about you,” she mumbled. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said smoothly. “It’s quite refreshing to have someone tell me what they think of me—even if it isn’t palatable. I appreciate your honesty, Kizzy.”

“Besides,” he continued, “I’ve given up driving. Lindos village is a World Heritage Site and vehicles aren’t permitted here so I couldn’t anyway. I prefer sailing down from Rhodes rather than taking the road. It’s also a lot easier to get chauffeured about when I’m overseas—not driving is better all around.”

He let out a low breath.

“But my last car was a Lamborghini. It was the most beautiful piece of machinery I have ever seen and the first expensive item I bought for myself once the serious money started coming in. But,” and his whole body seemed to twist in on itself in response, “it wasn’t such a pretty sight when it was written off.”

“Showing off with handbrake turns, were you?”

“No—my little sister crashed the bloody thing,” he replied starkly. “Callista was already dead when it caught fire. Or that’s what the inquest said.”

Kizzy felt a sensation similar to a gigantic boulder plunging to the bottom of her stomach and her mouth dropped open into a silent, painful apology. She took a hesitant step toward him, then stopped herself as she saw the raw emptiness in his face, the way his shoulders were hunched around his folded arms.

“I’m so very sorry,” she began. “It was a thoughtless thing for me to say—”

“That’s okay. No need to feel awkward about it, Kizzy.” Calmly, he unfolded his arms. “It’s not something I usually discuss, so we’ll let the subject drop. But you could always make it up to me if you wanted to.”

“Name it,” Kizzy replied quickly, then realized how dangerous such an open invitation could be to a man like Andreas Lazarides.

He leaned back against the wooden post of the bed behind him and tipped his head toward the ceiling for a moment as though deep in thought.

The seconds ticked agonizingly away. It was almost as if he were deliberately calculating the exact period of silence it would take to stretch Kizzy's nerves to the limit.

"Kiss me," he said finally.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:11 am*

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me,” he replied coolly. “Kiss me like you did last night and I’ll forget every tactless word you just said.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” he responded, without a flicker of concern. “It would make us both feel a lot better—and I know you want to.”

“Because it wouldn’t stop there, would it?”

“There’s no reason why it should have to stop at a kiss, pethi mou,” he replied, and curled long fingers around the back of her head to remove her hair clip. He smiled as her black curls tumbled over her shoulders, as undisciplined as the rest of her body. His voice dropped to a seductive growl. “We’re alone and we want to, need to, enjoy each other’s company.”

Kizzy closed her eyes and struggled to wrench out a negative response. But her unspoken words were stolen by the burning touch of his lips against hers. Her mouth trembled as he withdrew a tiny bit to assess her reaction. The intimate warmth of his breath against her cheek made her abandon all reason and professional sense.

Tangling her fingers in the black silk of his hair, Kizzy pulled him tightly back toward her and drew him to her parted lips. As his tongue began gently to explore, she felt his hands slide around her waist and pull her hips firmly into the cradle of his own.

She felt the rigid heat of his arousal, and gave a little moan.

“This is destiny, Kizzy.” He held each cheek of her bottom in the palms of his hand and groaned with pleasure. Bending his head, he kissed her again. “I’ve wanted you since the very first moment I saw you, wanted you so much that I couldn’t think straight.”

Kizzy began to shake her head. “Andreas, I—”

“No, Kizzy,” he told her adamantly, and ran the flat palm of his hand across her breast, lingering over the swollen, heaving jut of her nipple through her top. He inhaled sharply, as though already testing the limits of his control over the situation. “No more denial, no more pretending. Your mouth can do much more exciting things when it’s not trying to deny you the most natural pleasure in the world.”

He stroked both nipples with the pads of his thumbs, anchoring the deep blue of her eyes with his own intense stare.

“Now, are you going to take all these clothes off or am I going to do it for you?”

Rendered speechless by the intoxication that was coursing through her body like a potent aphrodisiac, Kizzy was only able to place her shaking palms on the black cotton of his T-shirt.

His chest lay under her fingers. Stroking him, she relished the sudden tightening of his nipples under her inexperienced touch.

“You do it,” she said, with a voice so altered by sexual excitement that she wondered if she had actually uttered the words or just imagined them as part of the wicked, forbidden fantasy that this must be. Then reality caught up with her. She sucked in her breath as he undid the buttons of her blouse, his fingers swift and skillful. “But

Andreas—before we get carried away, I need to tell you, I don't—I haven't—”

“Don't worry, I have,” he muttered quickly as he slid the blouse off her shoulders. He paused briefly to cup both heavy, lace-covered breasts with reverent hands. “I will take care of you, pethi mou, trust me.”

He reached back to unfasten her bra. His voice was deep and throaty. “You have no idea how badly I've wanted this, to get you alone, to touch your bare skin, just you...” Slowly, painstakingly, he slid the straps of her bra down the length of her slender arms. “And me. And that.”

Her gaze followed his to the bed and her skin tingled with the shock of sudden cool exposure as her bra fell to the floor. Any words she might have uttered vaporized at that point into tiny exquisite breaths of longing.

He inhaled at the sight of her naked breasts, the sinews in his neck taut as he held each one in his warm hands. His body trembled with undisguised arousal. “I could die for just one taste of these,” he whispered, tracing a path of feathery kisses along her collarbone, his fingertips brushing lightly over each nipple until it tightened into a peak.

Kizzy's fingertips sank into the hard strength of his biceps, relishing the feel of his intense maleness. The desire building within her was overwhelming as she took his hand and crushed it hard against the soft swell of her breast.

“Then don't stop, you don't have to be so gentle. It's okay, I...I want it.”

Expertly, he maneuvered her backward against the edge of the bed, and she arched her back in supple compliance, urging him to continue with his kisses. Clumsily, she tried to ease up the fabric of his T-shirt. He quickly shucked it off, barely breaking contact with her body, and she uttered a small moan as the dark, wiry dusting of hair

on his chest brushed against her tender skin.

In a haze of physical sensation, Kizzy watched his upper body muscles ripple powerfully as he lifted her onto the mattress.

His fingers continued to coax her breasts to a peak of excitement. At last, she knew what it was like to feel truly desired by a man.

“Yes...”

She could barely comprehend the pleasure that she was experiencing.

His hot, ragged breath raked her tense body, and she sighed as he seized one taut nipple between his lips and ran the tip of his tongue around its velvet peak.

“You have the body of an angel,” he murmured against her skin, then sucked harder and more insistently, caressing her other breast as the urgency of their need began to take over rational thought.

She helped him ease off her pants, leaving her in the tiny, blue silk panties he had purchased in Rhodes. Needing no further persuasion, he slid his fingers under the lacy trim to languorously explore her soft, velvety curls.

A low noise in the depths of his throat reminded them both of the primitive nature of the act about to take place between them.

Kizzy lifted her hips to help him free her from that last scrap of material, then ran her fingertips tentatively along the waistband of his shorts. The bulge of his erection straining beneath the fabric was as intimidating as it was mesmerizing, and Kizzy bit down hard on her bottom lip as she dared to trail her fingertips over its pulsating heat.

She met the smoldering intention in his eyes.

“Take it all off, Andreas,” she pleaded softly, as she continued to stroke and tease him with a skill that was instinctive and designed to provoke him beyond further endurance.

Purposefully, Andreas produced a foil wrapper from his back pocket.

“Hold this for me,” he murmured.

As he slid the condom packet between her parted teeth, she smiled inwardly at the feel of its sharpness against her tongue, an unfamiliar object, an object that had everything to do with sex and nothing else. An object that would draw him inside her, hold him there, and take her to a place she had never been.

She felt her body soften and melt into the crisp sheets beneath them as his eyes roamed across her naked body. A pause, and then he was unleashed.

Kizzy sucked her breath in at the sight of him: hot, hard, and unashamedly impressive. Her heart lurched in her rib cage as he removed the condom from between her teeth and knelt between her thighs, lowering his head to kiss her most intimate part.

Slowly at first, he tested his warm, probing tongue over the moistness of her outer entrance, allowing its tip to slip inside her to taste the sweetness within. The wisps of his breath cooled against the moist heat of where their bodies barely joined and a tremor shot through her body as his thumb began to circle her clitoris, slowly, gently, and masterfully unrelenting.

The tension coiling at the root of her stomach and the pulsing within her vagina became too much to endure.

“No more, Andreas, no more,” she muttered, her hands running through his hair, coaxing him upward to her by stroking his neck and the powerful bunched muscles of his shoulders.

She pulled him closer, tighter, and felt the feather-light brush of his erection against her inner thigh.

“No more?” His eyes flashed with devilment. “I don’t think you mean that, do you?”

Even though she felt weak at the sight of his erection, wondering how it would be possible for her to take him inside, she craved the exquisite pain his entering her might cause.

“I want you,” Kizzy moaned. “I want all of you.”

“Then you shall have me, pethi mou.”

As he bent over to kiss her, his penis burned against her soft belly. He dealt with the foil packet that would allow them to move beyond the point of no return, and slickly stretched the protective sheath over his penis.

Kizzy mewed with need at the sight of him.

“Hush, soon, soon...”

A guttural breath left his body as he slipped one finger into the searing moisture of her vagina, slowly sliding in and then tantalizing her by withdrawing it again.

He was driving her insane with these caresses, she thought. He could do anything to her now and still she would beg him for more.

Could he not see how much she needed him?

“Are you sure about this, hara mou?” he asked throatily.

He lowered his head to draw with increasing urgency on her eager, kiss-swollen breast, and then suddenly withdrew again. The frustration was killing her. Andreas wasn't immune to the tension between them. He buried his face into the crook of her neck, clawing her intensely feminine perfume deep into his lungs, and felt his arousal jerk with impatient agony.

“Because I don't think I'll be able to stop once I—once I am inside you. You understand that?”

Kizzy moaned her assent and reached between his legs to stroke his erection, lightly brushing the tip and encircling his tightness until he uttered a deep groan.

“I understand,” she whispered, “and I'm sure.”

She lifted her hips to brush provocatively against his swollen length, and slid her hands around his waist, dragging his hard body down between her thighs. She clawed desperately at his flesh as she felt the tip of his shaft nudge against her hot, moist entrance.

Kizzy guessed that he was resisting the urge to plunge fiercely into her, perhaps having sensed her inexperience. But she no longer cared about keeping control of the situation—her own need was too unbearable.

Andreas gave a muffled groan and shifted between her legs. Slowly, with infinite care, he began to ease himself in, inch by inch, backing out slightly before pushing himself in a little farther each time as he felt her tight inner muscles stretch and ease enough to receive him.

“Relax, anasa mou,” he muttered under his breath. His eyes were closed now, and he paused after each tense movement to kiss and tease open the moist heat of her lips. “Let me in.”

She arched her back in response, trying to relax.

Sensing her eagerness, Andreas eased her thighs even wider apart and pushed inside. He felt her inner muscles contract rhythmically around him, coaxing, squeezing, and pulling him farther and deeper inside the mysterious darkness of her body. His chest pressed against the full softness of her breasts, crushing her peaked nipples.

Kizzy's breath was coming hot and furious against the smooth column of his neck, and the mingled heat of their bodies caused a sharp, intoxicating blade of lust to slice through her. She couldn't wait much longer.

"I need you now," she pleaded.

Gripping the hard muscles of his buttocks, she raised her thighs upward, reveling in the coarse rasp of the hair on his hard-muscled legs, and wrapped them tightly around his waist before tipping her pelvis and encouraging the full weight of his large frame to crush their bodies together.

She bit into the flesh of his shoulder to smother the slight gasp of shock that rocketed through her as she took his full, swollen length to the hilt. She felt an intense ache deep within as he began to thrust.

A low, threatening growl came from deep within his throat as his thrusts became more insistent, urgent, heated. She cried out with pleasure as his hands slipped beneath her bottom, dragging her against him, and he pushed himself faster and deeper inside her. Pinned to the bed and almost hallucinating with desire, she moaned as the air between them thickened and pulsed with every fevered movement. Every atom of her being craved and reached for climax. She clung to his undulating, sweat-slicked shoulders. Her lips met his frantically as he smothered her cries of ecstasy with hard, possessive kisses, pulling her to him urgently. She cried out incoherently, the tension in her body reaching intolerable heights

Silver sparks flashed over the darkness of her closed eyelids and she felt the powerful pulse of his body pounding his penis into her, his strength and fury leaving her in no doubt that he had mastered and possessed her, invading the soft, wanton abandon of her own flesh.

“That’s it,” he urged.

Her primitive groans inflamed his furious progress, and sensing the crescendo building, she eagerly rose and fell beneath and around him, willing him to lose control, to lose himself inside her body, but knowing she would be lost first.

“Take me in, let me fill you, let go—”

Her eyes flickered open briefly to find him watching her like a brooding volcano before she threw back her head, her fingers pulling at his raging body, and then heard a low, dark unmistakable female sound as her body shuddered and convulsed. Her eyes swam with stars behind closed lids and a voice cried out his name as she shattered beneath him in ecstasy.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Now...” Andreas clasped her hips firmly, his thumbs pressed hard against the soft angle of her bones. He cursed in his own language as his eyes blazed over the trembling of her swollen breasts and the moist, parting of her mouth. “Yes...”

His eyes fluttered shut as Andreas groaned and shuddered his own release in a succession of hot, pulsating thrusts that seemed to fill her tightness, stretching her even further to increase their intoxicating pleasure, drawing out the very essence of him.

Kizzy writhed licentiously as she felt him come deep inside her, and both their cries filled the air as her body surrendered once again to wave upon wave of swirling, blinding, shocking orgasm.

### Chapter Nine

“Dear God, why didn’t you tell me you were a virgin?”

Andreas lay staring blankly at the ceiling, one arm crooked underneath his head, the other cradling Kizzy’s soft limbs in the heat-hazy silence of dusk. His heartbeat was returning to normal after the most incredible sex he had ever experienced, and his muscles were now beginning to relax. He closed his eyes briefly as he recalled how taut his body had become before he had entered her, and how the crushed-berry color of her lips and nipples had almost driven him to take her too quickly. Hard, fast, immediately.

Somehow he’d managed to hold back—control had never been a problem for him in the past, but something about this woman was bewitching him like no other. He had

summoned all his strength to slow things down, to take his time, savor her tight, silken body, and reacquaint himself slowly with the pleasures of female flesh.

But he'd been so consumed with desire that he hadn't even considered the possibility he might be her first lover.

Andreas was now uncharacteristically confused. And unnerved by the heavy silence that seemed to throb like a guilty pulse in the wake of their incendiary passion.

He turned on his side and stroked the warm satin of her shoulder.

“Well?”

“Was it that obvious?” Kizzy whispered, and squeezed her eyes shut.

“No,” he replied softly. He noted her discomfort, but couldn't let this go. He had to know the truth. “I would never have guessed but—the sheet ...”

Her fingers snatched up the pristine, white cotton to cover her breasts. “Oh God, I'm sorry.”

“So you are a virgin! Or were,” he persisted. “You should have warned me.”

“I did try but I couldn't get a word in at the time.”

Jerkily, she eased herself up in the bed onto her elbows.

“Then you should have been more forceful—made me listen.”

“And just how embarrassing would that have been? It's a bad enough admission as it is, without having to make my lack of experience an issue during foreplay.” She

frowned and twiddled a crisp, white edge of bedding between her fingers. Her voice dropped to a murmur. “And besides, it would have spoiled the moment—it was what I wanted. I never imagined it could be like that, so overwhelming.”

“Did I hurt you?” A flash of anxiety shot through him at the thought that he might have caused her pain and then relief as she shook her head and shot him a shy smile. “But a virgin! I still can’t believe it—a virgin!”

“Yes, all right, there’s no need to try and humiliate me.”

“I’m not!” he replied indignantly and raked a hand quickly through his hair. “I’m shocked. But also very humbled. Your innocence was a beautiful gift but not something I will ever deserve.” He reached out and threaded his fingertips into her hair. “I can’t understand how it could be possible. You’re beautiful and clever—there must have been opportunities at college?”

“Of course there were, but I never met anyone who made me want to...and I had my studies to concentrate on.” She looked down awkwardly and chewed on her bottom lip. “And to be honest I was also scared—scared to death of what might happen.”

Andreas rubbed her earlobe and then pulled her closer in to him. “So now you see there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I don’t mean afraid about it physically—not the act. Mum made a point of making sure I knew how sex and falling in love destroyed her life and the beginning of mine. I don’t think she was bitter and twisted about what happened to her, but she didn’t want me to make the same mistakes. Not that it’s been difficult—I’ve seen for myself what can happen to a woman at the hands of a drunk and angry man. It’s enough to put anyone off sex.”

“You’re talking about the one that died?”

“My stepfather.”

Andreas sat upright and crossed his elbows on top of his folded knees, giving himself enough time to disguise the rage he could feel building at her words. “And where was your real father when all this was happening?”

“He died when I was a small baby. A freak accident—bleeding on the brain following a bare-knuckle fight at a horse fair.”

He paused for a moment, his brow furrowed with thought. “You’re Gypsy?”

Kizzy shot him a dark look. “Technically, I suppose, but I never really knew him or the traveler side of my family. Mum was forced out after the funeral. Nasty rumors about where I came from apparently—they’d never married.”

Andreas nodded silently before digging deeper. “And you said yesterday that both sides of the family rejected you?”

“Mum’s parents were exceedingly middle-class and told her that if she insisted on ‘running away with the fair’ she’d regret it until the day she died. So turning up on their doorstep with me was the last straw. A screaming, little illegitimate Romany child was more than their suburban respectability could tolerate.” She shrugged. “I don’t remember ever meeting them. They knew where we were, but never got in touch, not even when Mum died. I sent a telegram but they didn’t send a card back. So no great loss.”

“It would appear not,” Andreas replied quietly, trying to ignore the sickly fluttering in the region of his heart and the unpleasant ache in his throat.

Kizzy reached out a small hand and rested it briefly on the bronzed curve of his shoulder. “Can I ask you something, Andreas? Something that’s very important to

me?”

He noticed that she was trembling; slowly he nodded.

“Theo and Ana—did they know that I’d be out on the street when they sold? Was I just an inconvenient sitting tenant after all?” She swallowed and blinked away the tears that were beginning to well up. “Not that I would have blamed them, after all they’d put up with from me and Mum.”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:12 am*

“No!” Andreas sat upright. “No, they never lied to you. They wanted the best for you; there was no deception on their part. But I had no choice in what had to be done.”

“But none of it makes sense,” Kizzy replied. “All that money for a bankrupt business.”

“It was my mother’s dying wish.”

Kizzy’s brow wrinkled with confusion. “Your mother?”

Andreas sighed deeply. “The terms of her will were crystal clear. I was to buy Timi’s for five million pounds and then sell it to developers on the understanding that it would be demolished and the land used for housing or local community use.”

“They paid you five million pounds for it?”

“Of course not! There was a massive loss but, as was Mama’s plan, Theo and Ana were suddenly very wealthy without realizing that they’d been left a legacy in her will.” He shot her a wry look. “They would have viewed it as charity otherwise and given the whole lot away, but since they believed it to be a legitimate bit of good fortune on the property dealing front, they were delighted to sell to me.”

“You deceived them.”

“I had no choice. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have fulfilled my mother’s last wishes—she wanted to thank them in a practical way, had wanted to for years, but knew their foolish pride too well. Her will insisted the place be demolished so they didn’t get

any stupid ideas about returning. She said they needed to spend their last years in the sun but never would if left to their own devices. They were never to know the truth about the transaction. So now they never have to worry about money again.”

“But you have to worry about keeping it all a secret.”

“Do I need to worry, Kizzy?” A sudden weariness washed over him. “It’s only us and her solicitor who know about all this.”

“No need.” She rubbed both hands up and down her arms as if she was cold. “I knew they wouldn’t have abandoned me. I knew it.”

Andreas studied her small, hunched frame and realized that he had restored a little of Kizzy’s faith in the world. The Antonideses were the closest thing she had left to a family and even though they were many miles away, she at least had the comfort of knowing that she was still cared about. But his heart felt colder when he realized how inadequate that was for a woman whose unhappy early life experience had left her confidence in tatters.

“They can’t stop being Good Samaritans. They’ve always been that way—it’s how they met my mother and she could never forget their kindness.”

“What happened?”

“Mum was a very spoiled little rich girl—an heiress to a cosmetics empire with too much money for her own good. She got into a vicious fight over a man and needed a hiding place until all the media attention died down. The Antonideses were related to her parents’ housekeeper. They had a quiet little place in Chalcidice and took her in for a year or two to give her time for the scars on her face to heal. She could never thank them enough for that time—she said it saved her life.”

He shrugged and looked suddenly vacant. “Damn shame she spoiled it all by marrying my father.”

He then shifted his large body quickly to the edge of the bed and grabbed one of the enormous towels that had been hurled from the bed onto the floor in the heat of their passion.

“You must be hungry by now,” he said quickly and wrapped the towel around his hips without turning to look at her. “I’ll leave you to freshen up and see you on the terrace when you’re ready. No rush, take your time.”

Kizzy watched him march out of the room with dismay, a cold wave of confusion crashing over her before the leaden thud of rejection landed in the pit of her stomach.

For a small period of time she had been deluded enough to think there had been a meaningful connection between them. Those few moments of intense emotional revelation had been so heart-rending and difficult to bear, but he had listened and held her as she forced out the words and told him things that no one else alive had ever heard. Talking to him like that, naked and warm in the intimacy of the bed, and then listening to him giving his own secrets back had felt like peeling away layers of tissue paper to uncover something beautiful, a gift, a treasure...

Andreas Lazarides hadn’t been able to get out of her bedroom quickly enough. It was obvious now; the pillow talk was simply his way of being polite before making his escape, no doubt bothered both by her revelations and by her inexperience. He didn’t intend to spend the weekend with an inexperienced virgin from the wrong side of the tracks. This wasn’t what he’d bargained for. She wasn’t what he’d had in mind for his island retreat and now she was a problem.

Sickened and humiliated, Kizzy was hit by a blinding need to fight back, to restore some equilibrium and show she didn’t care.

She didn't care what Andreas Lazarides thought of her and more importantly she didn't care about him.

Just who was she kidding?

Acting on a need for self-preservation, she leaped off the bed and violently stripped it of its sullied linens, pulling, twisting, and wrenching them about until she was breathless with the effort. Finally throwing the sheets in the corner, she looked around for a cupboard or drawer; somewhere she would be able to find fresh bedding. If she put everything back in order, in its place, she would feel better. But every piece of furniture was as dark and hollow as Andreas's heart.

There was no way she was going to crumple into a heap and let Andreas know how much his sudden departure from the bedroom had hurt, or how deeply she had grieved for the comfort of his arms around her or some other gesture of affection as he turned his back and walked away.

Freshen up and take your time.

His last words.

Well, she would do just that. She'd wash every trace of him from her body, keep him waiting, and then stroll coolly back into his orbit like the ice maiden she now had to be. It was abundantly clear that he was keen to keep an emotional distance, and so must she.

But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the physical pleasures his body had awakened within her, assuming of course that he hadn't found her so wanting that he wouldn't want to repeat the experience again.

Could that be a possibility?

She'd make damn sure he found her irresistible. She would even seduce him if necessary and get this physical craving for his body out of her system before he had a chance to tire of her. Then she would simply get on with the rest of her life—do all the things she had dreamed of doing now that she had no ties in England, now that she was free.

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There would be other men—lots of them.

She tossed her dark curls defiantly as she strode purposefully toward the room's private bathroom. She wasn't going to let him fob her off and move on to the next female conquest that easily. He'd ignited a flame within her that wasn't about to go out on its own.

No, Andreas Lazarides was not going to dismiss her that easily.

...

What had he done?

Andreas poked a metal tool roughly around in the glowing embers of the woodburning oven on the terrace and flinched as a hiss of fat from the roasting pig dripped and splattered on to his forearm.

"Damn!" he muttered, and then continued with a tirade of profanities in Greek. The burn stung unpleasantly, but that wasn't the real reason for his outburst.

He was angry. Very angry.

With himself.

He had just about managed to calm down in the half hour since hurriedly leaving the bedroom. Kizzy's vulnerability and innocence had threatened to render him irrationally emotional. Her revelations had crawled right under his skin, touched a

raw spot, the deeply hidden wound within him that would never heal. He'd been just a few moments away from making a complete fool of himself. But now he had the situation in perspective. He was in control.

How on earth had he been supposed to know she was a virgin, anyway?

He shook his head and tapped iron on stone as he ran all possible arguments and defenses at his disposal through his mind, but it wasn't looking good. Not only had he taken a helpless, vulnerable orphan away from her home, he had also made sure that she had nothing practical to return back to. But at least he intended to give her a job and a roof over her head.

Though he'd already offered her both, he reminded himself—and been soundly rejected.

He emitted a hollow laugh as he realized how ridiculous he must have appeared—he'd offered her the “job” of being his mistress and a home that involved sleeping in his bed. No wonder she'd told him where to go!

His stomach clenched at the thought that Kizzy must have told Angie what had happened back at Villa Madeline and begged for an escape route, hence the surprising offer of Liz's room rent-free, with no strings attached.

The hormones racing around his body must have rendered him temporarily insane to have behaved in such a way. And then he'd practically kidnapped the woman to bring her to the island. He was certifiable.

A monster!

“Something smells good.”

Andreas twisted his head quickly to see Kizzy standing a few feet away with a broad and mischievous grin dancing on her face, her shiny, chestnut curls floating like bronzed feathers in the breeze.

He swallowed deeply and turned his attention back to the glowing charcoal.

Thee mou, she was so beautiful...

“Orfeas got it started for us before we left this afternoon.”

“Orfeas?”

“An old friend. He lives over the other side of the island and takes care of the place when I’m not here.” He paused. “Which is pretty much most of the time.”

“And he lit all these candles as well?”

“No.” Slowly, Andreas laid the poker down on the hearth. He turned and leaned back against a low wall with his arms folded across his chest. A reluctant smile began to surface; he couldn’t help himself—she looked so mischievous. “I managed that all by myself.”

“It’s beautiful, like a hundred million fireflies dancing around just for us. I love it.” She took up the glass of chilled white wine that Andreas had already poured for her. “I hadn’t pegged you as the romantic type.”

“I’m not,” he replied sharply and straightened up, reaching for his own glass of wine. “It keeps the bloody mosquitoes at bay.”

“Well that’s a relief,” she said, seemingly oblivious to his brusque response. “Can’t have you going soft on me now, can we?”

Andreas's eyes opened wider at her cheeky innuendo, but he resisted the urge to engage in further sexually charged banter in case he had misinterpreted her remark. This wasn't the Kizzy Dean he was accustomed to sparring with; something had changed behind those mystic blue eyes. She seemed to be in an unaccountably high-spirited mood. Or maybe this was the prelude to a vicious fight. He could never tell with women—one minute they were sweet as honey and the next hissing and spitting at him like alley cats.

“Listen, about earlier—”

“About us falling into bed together like a couple of sex-starved teenagers, you mean?”

“If you want to put it like that—”

“I forgot to thank you,” Kizzy interrupted him again and took a quick swig of her wine. “I couldn't have planned losing my virginity any better if I tried. A beautiful Greek island, a powerful and experienced lover—how much better could it have been?”

“Kizzy, about that. If I'd known—”

“You wouldn't have done it?” Kizzy took a couple of steps closer, looking up at him. “I already know that, I'm not stupid. With all the women you could take your pick from, why on earth would you choose to take a chubby virgin like me to your bed?”

“That wasn't what I was going to say,” he replied, with a distinct feeling of unease. “And you're not chubby, you're—you're astonishingly beautiful.”

“Good enough to get the mistress job, then?”

“Ah.” Andreas edged cautiously away as she ran a slender finger up the length of his forearm. “Now, when I came up with that idea I wasn’t thinking things through clearly and—and I can understand perfectly why you turned me down. It was an undignified proposition. I don’t know what came over me, and I apologize.”

“I’d call it lust, Andreas,” she purred, and placed her wine glass carefully on the low wall behind him. “And you did start all this, didn’t you?”

She nudged the flat metal button that fastened his shorts with a knuckle.

“I rather like the idea now, so maybe I can make you a new proposition?”

“I’m listening,” he replied unsteadily and hissed in a breath as her fingers trailed lazily over the sudden bulge between his legs.

“The mistress thing was a bad idea, Andreas, but not because I don’t want to sleep with you—I just don’t want to be paid for doing it. I want a job—a proper one. Independence is very important to me.”

“I understand, of course. I’m sorry—”

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“I haven’t finished yet.” She moved close enough to lightly press herself against the thin fabric of his T-shirt. With a shock, he felt her erect nipples and looked down into seductive blue eyes. “I now know how incredible your body makes mine feel, and I want more. Lots more. I’m only talking about sex, Andreas. Hot, steamy, unrelenting sex until we’ve had enough of each other, really worked this thing out of our systems. No strings, no promises, no commitments.”

“No love?”

“No love.” Kizzy smiled up at him. “We don’t believe in that, do we?”

A slow, incredulous, answering smile began to spread across Andreas’s face too as she peppered small, delicate kisses along his jaw, lightly teasing the corner of his mouth with the tip of her tongue.

“Heaven help me, Kizzy, what have I done to you?”

He took her small waist firmly between his hands and looked down into the swirling dark blue of her eyes to see if part of the innocent girl he had first met was still in there. But all he could see was a fire, a burning, amethyst flame of desire that was drawing him closer and closer with its spell.

“You’ve brought the woman out in me, Andreas. For the first time in my life I feel truly alive, as if I could do anything I wanted in the world. It’s a wonderful feeling and I want to enjoy it while it lasts.” Her eyes flickered uncertainly over his face. “So what do you say?”

“I’m speechless,” he replied with a shrug and noticed immediately how her face suddenly dropped, as if believing she had just made a big mistake, as if sensing she was about to be rejected.

He’d seen that look many times before, just before dumping some overattentive lover who had become tedious and emotionally demanding. He’d always tried to do it in a gentle, sympathetic way, but breaking up a relationship was something he seemed incapable of handling delicately. The trouble was, once things had gotten to that stage he was so thoroughly sick of the situation that he became desperate to get it over and done with as quickly and ruthlessly as possible.

Perhaps he should take note and learn from his own experience to nip things in the bud much sooner in the future—to avoid such unpleasantness. He had to be sure, to be quite certain, what was expected of him.

“No strings, no promises, and no commitments—just sex?”

“Yes.”

“It’s as simple and uncomplicated as that?” Andreas rolled his thumbs over the bony part of her hips. “There has to be a catch.”

“Just one.” Kizzy drew herself up by standing on her bare tiptoes and playfully nipped his chin. “I need feeding at least three times a day.”

## Chapter Ten

Andreas stroked Kizzy’s dark hair as she slept blissfully in the master bedroom, in his bed, tucked warmly into his body. He thought back to the afternoon before when she had given him her virginity. He was now regretting not having prolonged the experience of their first time together—it was a special moment they could never

recapture, but he vowed there and then to make the most of every single second they had together.

He listened to the beating of his own heart for the first time in years as her breath feathered over his chest and a ripple of delirious pleasure zinged through him.

They had spent the previous star-spangled evening eating with their fingers, drinking, and swapping silly jokes into the early hours of the morning. It had been one of the most enjoyable nights he could ever remember and he had laughed, yes laughed, until his belly ached at some of the wild things Kizzy had come out with.

She was irreverent and insubordinate, fresh and intriguing. He'd sat opposite her tiny feet, propped up on the table and grubby from walking around barefoot, and listened as she chattered about nonsense into the night. She had delighted him in a way that he had never thought possible. The still, heady warmth of the night had been fragmented only by the whisper of the ocean and the gasps and cries of their urgent sex.

The hum of his worked muscles and a low nag at the very back of his mind were both trying to issue him with a timely warning. But he chose to ignore it and allowed his head to sink luxuriously back into the depths of the deep, cool pillows.

He breathed in extravagantly and reveled in the moment once more.

This small, rude, velvety, adorable creature was fun, but he resisted the urge to wake her up even though he was missing their playful, waking banter.

He was busy making plans.

So she insisted on having a boring old job? He could deal with that, but how he was going to let her out of his bed long enough to go to it was a problem he'd have to work around somehow. And he'd also have to make sure there weren't any male

colleagues around her, he thought with an uncomfortable burst of possessiveness.

He rubbed quietly at his brow. No, cheating wasn't a possibility he was prepared to even consider—she was his woman now, but the nagging worry would not go away.

Would she be tempted? She had thanked him for taking her virginity, as if it was something she couldn't wait to be rid of—maybe this was just the beginning for her, the start of some pioneering sexual adventure that didn't necessarily involve him any further.

Hell, he was getting carried away in his own head! He was becoming insanely jealous at the mere idea of Kizzy's having another man in her life, and that wasn't the deal they'd made. Not in the long term, anyway.

Andreas rubbed the back of his neck. Somehow she'd gotten under his skin.

His mind went blank for a moment as he tried to untangle his thoughts, and his eyes were beginning to hurt. He needed to get back on planet Lazarides quickly. He needed to keep Kizzy under his control—to protect her from opportunists and those who might hurt her; she seemed so naïve about people.

But before he could do that he needed to get a grip on himself.

When Andreas emerged from the shower ten minutes later, Kizzy was gone, just a crumpled pillow where her head had been. A sense of loss hit him, which was ridiculous as she had every right to get out of bed and wander off if she wanted to. There was no reason she should stay within a few feet every moment of the day.

But a persistent little voice in his head informed him that he wanted her to do exactly that.

Where had she gone?

He wrestled on his robe and shoved his way through the bedroom door, marching much more quickly than necessary down the silent corridor.

...

Kizzy jumped with fright as Andreas's grimly set face appeared through the door, the force of his shoulder causing it to slam roughly into the stone wall.

“What on earth’s the matter?”

He shrugged himself upright, running a hand through his wet, unruly hair.

“Nothing,” he replied in stiff acknowledgement. “I need coffee that’s all.” He must have noticed the bemused look on her face as she stood motionless with a spoon drooping in her hand, because he added, “To wake myself up.”

“I thought we were being ambushed or something,” she half laughed. “Slow down!”

His eyes flickered around the kitchen and, if Kizzy wasn’t mistaken, he seemed to be struggling to say something.

“Are you all right?” she ventured gently, putting down the spoon and taking a step toward him.

He took her by the shoulders, closing his eyes as he buried his face in her hair and breathed in her spicy floral scent. “I just wondered where you were, that’s all,” he murmured.

“Well, it was probably reckless,” Kizzy replied as she wriggled in his embrace, “but I thought I’d make a start on breakfast—surprise you.”

Andreas smiled. “So what are we having, pethi mou?”

“Um, well, I’d gotten as far as finding the coffee.”

“Then let me take over,” he replied as he took the spoon from the table. “Your kitchen slave days are over now, and besides, I want to spoil you.”

“Wow.” Kizzy rewarded him with a wicked grin. “Do I pay for this later?”

“You most certainly do. In kind. You’re quite good at that but I can’t yet vouch for your coffee.” He shot her a look of admonishment. “And if we don’t stop getting distracted, madam, it’ll be lunchtime before either of us gets fed!”

He fended off her playful jab in the ribs with his elbow and felt laughter rising within him as she grabbed the belt of his robe and gave it a suggestive tug.

“I’m serious. If we don’t get out of the villa very quickly, I will be driven to taking you back to bed again.” He stroked a palm over the rounded swell of her bottom. “And that will be the entire day gone, won’t it?”

“It’s so beautiful here, so peaceful. I feel as if I could stay here forever,” Kizzy mused as she brushed breakfast crumbs off the robe she was wearing on to the stones of the outside terrace.

“You can if you like,” Andreas murmured.

Kizzy laughed uneasily as she noticed the serious expression on his face. He was astonishingly beautiful.

Their eyes locked for a few seconds before he lowered his gaze to his coffee cup.

She shouldn’t allow herself to imagine things that weren’t really there. It was just sex—a temporary, no-strings arrangement between consenting adults.

“No, I can’t stay, Andreas. You freed me from my ties in England, gave me my wings

and now... When all this is over and I've paid back what I owe, I have to chase the dreams I never thought I could fulfill."

"You don't have to pay me back, Kizzy. I thought I'd made that clear."

"But I do," she replied with widened eyes. "It's important to me, to stand on my own two feet—to be independent."

Andreas ground his teeth silently before replying. "So what are these dreams, Kizzy? Tell me exactly what you want at this stage of your new life."

Kizzy eyed him warily, unsure if she should open herself up fully to this beautiful man. He'd taken the body she had so eagerly offered up to him over and over again, but was she ready to give him a secret, tender slice of her soul as well?

"They're all a bit low-key."

"Let me be the judge of that," he replied and placed his coffee cup down on the table with a look of intense purpose.

Kizzy took a deep breath. "Well, we never had a decent kitchen. I'd like an ultra-cozy one with enough room to have a long, wooden table and a bashed-up old sofa in the corner—with a fat cat sleeping on it. And copper pans."

She shot him a sharp look to gauge his reaction, but his face gave nothing away.

"I want to ride a stallion across New Forest heathland at dusk." Not even a twitch. "And I want to see what it's like to get my hair done in a proper salon."

Andreas swallowed. "I can give you all that, Kizzy. Won't you let me do that for you?"

“I can’t,” she replied sadly and bit down on her bottom lip.

“Why not? Why not let me look after you? I have the means, you know that.” He glanced briefly toward the ocean, toward the sound of waves crashing against the rocks, and then switched his gaze back to her. “And I’d like to.”

She was almost too scared to continue as she looked into the dark, forbidding depths of his eyes, searching for the chip of ice she knew was in there. It was as if she were standing on a cliff edge over a deep, untested pool, balanced precariously as the wind buffeted her. One foot poised. Jump in? Or jump back?

“Because it’s not enough.”

“What’s not enough?”

She dived.

“One day I might want a baby, a family of my own, and I want to make a proper life for that family—better than the miserable one I had. I can’t bring my mum back, but I can try to keep the promise I made not to follow in her footsteps. But that’s a step too far on the wish list as far as you and I are concerned, isn’t it? “

His brooding silence told Kizzy all she needed to know and for some reason she was allowing it to slice her heart into tiny little pieces as she felt the flutter of something new, fragile, and beautiful die within her. She knew the score and had to stop herself from wanting to change the rules now their little game was under way.

“So, much as I love your kitchen and your island, and know you can buy all those other material things for me, I haven’t got much time to fit everything in.”

Her heart was pounding with sickening force and she was beginning to feel horribly

light-headed. This was terrible, but she had to finish what she'd started. She couldn't back out now. Straightening her back as if erecting an impenetrable shield around herself, she lunged in with a quick conclusion.

“So before I settle down I'd like to see some of the world. Move on, get that Gypsy wanderlust out of my system once and for all—I can't do that with a mortgage and a fat, old cat relying on me, can I?”

Her breath quickened as Andreas tapped a coffee spoon on the table and let out a long, slow breath—the sound of his agreeing with her presumably, and not wishing to continue with this awkward conversation.

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“Now look,” Kizzy announced and waved her hand in the air. “I’ve gone and spoiled our lovely breakfast.”

“Not at all.” He put the spoon down with a profound click, and a muscle worked in his jaw as he stared at the table. “Planning for the future is natural and sensible. Your hopes and wishes just go to show that you’re a normal human being. It’s a good job one of us is.”

Before Kizzy could ask him what he meant by that odd comment, the frantic rasping sound of a horn outside made her jump.

“What the—?”

“That’ll be Orfeas with our luggage. He always was a noisy little beggar and I’m sure he makes such a racket just to annoy me!” Andreas abruptly stood and raised a hand to stop Kizzy joining him. “Wait here while I sort him out.”

It was an order, not a request, Kizzy realized, as he strode quickly off through a tunnel of bougainvillea.

She let out a long sigh as she refocused her attention on the endless, sparkling blue of the sea instead of the broad shoulders she longed to cling to. She’d gone too far, stepped over an invisible line as far as their relationship was concerned.

Relationship.

It was laughable; they’d met only a short while ago, fallen into bed almost

straightaway, and here she was, daring to use the word “relationship” in the privacy of her head. No wonder Andreas had been so keen to distance himself from her suppressed desires—he’d leaped up at the first opportunity and disappeared quicker than a scalded cat. This was supposed to be an exciting affair, a week of sizzling, passionate sex—not a depressing rerun of her inadequate childhood.

She had a lot to learn, especially about when to keep quiet.

But it was done now, she’d blurted out her secret wants and desires to him, and there was nothing more to say on the matter. She just needed to remember not to do anything so stupid again, and then maybe they’d be able to enjoy this luxurious time together—if it wasn’t already too late.

...

Andreas stood with his hands on his hips in the middle of Kizzy’s bedroom and stared silently at the boutique boxes that Orfeas had piled up on the floor and stripped bed.

Andreas had quickly taken the crumpled bed linen that had been left in one corner and hidden it in the bathroom before Orfeas could notice. The bare mattress had taken him by surprise when he’d first gone in; the room looked like a bomb had hit it and blown everything toward the edges of the room. Something dramatic had clearly been going on in her head when all this had happened.

Had she been angry, keen to remove all traces of their lovemaking? Was she ashamed of what they’d done?

Yet he too had hidden the sheets in case Orfeas saw them. Why had he felt the need to do that?

So many questions he didn't have answers to. He shook his head to chase the thoughts away.

Bundling the washing against his chest, he nudged open the bedroom door with one foot and marched down toward the utility room. He hadn't stepped foot in the annex since the building had been renovated, and now looked irritably around for the washing machine. Having located the top-of-the-line appliance and shoved in the linen, he paused for a moment to study the buttons, dials, and digital display on its control panel and frowned.

He rasped a large hand across his chin and felt a growl of frustration building up inside him—he didn't have a clue how to work the damn thing.

It was his house, his bloody laundry room, and he was at a complete loss as to what to do next. It was ridiculous; any normal adult would be able to deal with it—he was sure Kizzy would know how to work this washing machine.

The way he had started to analyze his behavior and lifestyle in the last few days was becoming draining—taking him emotionally to places he would rather not be. He didn't have answers for all the questions in his head, and it unnerved him, and Kizzy wasn't reacting toward him in the way she should, in the way he had anticipated.

He couldn't understand why she wouldn't just let him look after her, give her a carefree life. One part of her wanted stability and security and another craved wild and reckless freedom—she didn't know what she wanted, it seemed to him. But it had also come as little surprise that precious jewels and expensive holidays weren't on her list of priorities; life had been very hard and very cruel to this woman so far.

He forced his brain away from thoughts of Kizzy and back into practical mode. He'd leave a note for Orfeas's wife to sort out all the laundry and unpacking later, and he would concentrate on sorting out Kizzy. He'd make her see sense.

Andreas glared at the washing machine once more before he left the room. Its large, round drum almost seemed to be laughing at him.

...

“You’ll be pleased to hear we’re staying for the week,” Andreas announced to Kizzy’s back as she stared across the infinity pool toward the glittering ocean.

“Pardon?” She turned to face him with a look of surprise.

“Yes,” he continued and rolled his shoulders enthusiastically. “I’ve cancelled everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“So what about the contract, your diplomatic missions next week, and all the other stuff that’s made you so desperate to get your minions moving?”

“Cancelled. Well, not exactly. It’s time my senior executives started pulling their weight and earning their salaries. I have delegated all my commitments to them for the next seven days.”

“But, Andreas, you made me come here because of your ridiculous gag order. You can’t just cancel it!”

“Things have changed.”

Kizzy crossly placed her hand on her hips and cocked her head to one side. “Because we’re lovers now?”

“Yes,” he agreed stiffly. “With regard to the contract—it’s not something I feel necessary any more.”

“Well, that’s all right then.”

“I said that I don’t feel it’s necessary but if you do, of course, then you can name your terms and it will be done.”

“I never wanted it in the first place, remember? It’s unnecessary.”

“So you trust me?”

“I’ve already said I do.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Andreas replied softly, and an unusual feeling of light-headedness washed over him. “Your swimwear is on your bed—get into it and join me back here. It’s time both of us had the opportunity to behave normally again. Do you realize how long it’s been since I swam in the Aegean?”

“Tell me.”

“It’s been so long that I can’t remember.” Which was a lie, he noted inwardly. It had been shortly before Callista’s fatal accident that he had last swum in the Aegean. “Don’t forget to bring a hat and some sunscreen. The sun can be fierce at this time of day, and your skin is very pale.”

...

“So what are you missing in Paris next week?” Kizzy ventured as they bobbed like corks in the sparkling, turquoise sea.

“A key meeting of the Global Roma Rights Committee—I represent Greece there just as often as I can,” he replied. “It’s scheduled as a follow-up to the meeting I missed in London, but a bomb scare stopped that, I’m informed.”

“Yes, it caused chaos didn’t it?” Kizzy commented wryly. “That’s what made me late for our meeting.”

Andreas seemed to drift off into his own little world for a moment. “Isabella never mentioned that.”

“Isabella wasn’t in the mood to listen that day, believe me,” Kizzy replied with a playful grimace. “Sweet revenge for all my annoying phone calls, I guess.”

Andreas raised his eyebrows in silent, ironic agreement. “Yes—Isabella has her difficult moments. And while we’re on the subject, Kizzy, I never did ask why you

pretended to be my tyrannical secretary that day in London.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Kizzy said weakly and lowered her eyes to follow the swish of her hand just below the water’s surface. “It—it just came out, the first name that popped into my head.”

Andreas laughed softly. “What’s wrong with good old Kizzy Dean?”

“You were a stranger,” she replied quietly.

Andreas placed his fingertips under her chin and gently pushed her face up to meet his gaze. “I don’t understand.”

Kizzy swallowed. “You’ll think me very peculiar.”

“I won’t,” he insisted. “Tell me.”

She frowned, and then shrugged. “A lot of bad things happened to Mum when I was a baby—she was very vulnerable and learned a lot of hard lessons. One of the things she drummed into me as soon as I was old enough to understand was never trust a stranger. You don’t tell them your age, where you live or even your name, because they might be trying to ‘get’ you.”

Andreas curved the palm of his hand against her cheek as she spoke. He was trying to comfort her with its warmth, to encourage her. And then he realized that everything seemed to feel so much better when he was touching her.

“It’s a hard habit to break—I’m not sure I ever will.”

Andreas eased her gently against his chest so she couldn’t see the look of despair that he could feel ricocheting across his features. “I’m not a stranger anymore, Kizzy,

you're safe," he murmured, and closed his eyes with the effort of keeping his voice level.

And I'll take care of you now whatever happens...

Kizzy took a deep breath and pulled away from him, tipping her chin up to convey a steeliness of spirit that he knew she didn't possess. Andreas was used to discovering what was real and what was not from years in courtroom battles. He could see through charades and artifice—there was always something that gave the game away: a chink in the armor, a look, a gesture, a catch in the voice. And he could tell that Kizzy was trying to keep him at a distance, putting on an act, raising a barrier to protect herself from something—even from him.

She smiled brightly and fixed her eyes upon a distant fishing boat. "Do you find it easy to hand over the reins with your work? Relinquish control?"

Andreas reflected briefly, feeling somehow cheated that she had changed the subject and put them so decisively back on neutral territory. He wouldn't push it, though. Not right now, at any rate.

"I'm always in control," he stated, only half playfully. "However, I'm confident that my number two can deal with it all; he seemed enthusiastic when we spoke on the phone earlier."

"So this committee is how you make so much money?"

"No!" He laughed and pushed his hair back from his brow; thick, black, and glistening from the sea. "I don't get a cent from all that. The money's been built up with commercial legal work over the years and some very shrewd property investments over the last decade. Plus some luck on both scores."

He reached out to wipe away a drop of water that was hanging like a diamond from her earlobe. He'd buy her some nice jewelry, he decided. He knew she'd never ask for it, and she was beautiful enough without adornment, but he wanted so badly to spoil her.

"I owe it to people like Orfeas to put something back in the world now that I have so much." He ran his fingertips around the fine bones of her jaw. "And to be honest, I've needed to keep myself occupied over the last few years."

"Orfeas is Roma?"

"That's right."

"So I'm not the first person with Romany blood to cross your path?"

"You're not." He smiled his agreement. "Orfeas saved me from a beating one morning when I was playing football instead of sweeping up donkey droppings. He tipped me off that the boss was coming around the corner, so I had a chance to run away. At the time, he and his brothers were doing their best to scrape an existence out of singing on doorsteps and collecting kitchen scraps to survive."

"That's awful," Kizzy said with undisguised horror. "And they lived like that?"

Andreas shot her a knowing look and a crooked smile. "Orfeas was probably guilty of some petty crime too, but he had little choice. The local school wouldn't accept Roma children on their registers and no one would give them work—it was hopeless. That discrimination made me sick then and it still does today."

"Today?"

"Unfortunately, yes, and not just in Greece. The discrimination and xenophobia goes

worldwide. Even your own little nation, so lauded for its tolerance, has had its moments of censure from the committee's reports in the past."

Kizzy nodded slowly, as though remembering her own experience of that discrimination as a child.

"Which brings me neatly to another matter." He relished her little gasp as he threaded his arms around her waist. "If you still insist on a job other than being my mistress, then I think there's something very worthwhile you can do for me."

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He could have sworn he felt her heart leap with a jolt of excitement.

“Yes?” she said.

“There are hundreds of us trying to get to the root of the Roma problem but it takes time, a long time. And while we’re doing all these reports, having all these meetings and lobbying governments, there are Roma children who are reaching adulthood unable to read. They lack the basic skills that will help them to integrate and be accepted, so I’m trying to tackle this at the same time.”

“Unable to read?”

Andreas nodded gravely. “The settlement here on the island is well-established and runs itself. It was an experiment Orfeas helped me with and it’s been an incredible success, so I’m using land I bought up a few years ago to roll the scheme out in Rhodes. We’ve got the basics up, the sanitation’s in, and the staff are ready to start as soon as they can, so how do you feel about supervising the construction of the school kitchen?”

“Me?”

“Yes, why not?”

“Well, I’ve never done anything like—”

“Kizzy, you ran a kitchen single-handedly at Timi’s, didn’t you? I’m not asking you to physically install the stuff, but there’s no reason you can’t project-manage it.

You've catered for large numbers, you know what equipment will be required, you have all the basic hygiene knowledge—you'll be perfect!" He pulled her in closer so he could admire the jewels of her eyes. "I'd been intending to oversee it myself but the foreman speaks good English and can deal with all the municipal forms and regulations."

He was also in his sixties, devoutly religious, devoted to his family, and would keep the younger builders in check around Kizzy.

"I'll do it!" Kizzy blurted with joy. "I can't wait; it sounds amazing. I won't let you down, I promise."

"I already knew that, pethi mou," he laughed, and slipped the strap of her bikini off one shoulder. "So you're happy now?" He reached around, tugged at the string bow tied around her back, and smiled with satisfaction as the white fabric floated away.

She nodded, content.

"Good, in that case you can relax and enjoy being here without worrying about a thing. Including getting dressed in the mornings."

## Chapter Eleven

She could never say the words but she would always be wildly happy when she was with him.

Kizzy breathed in the jasmine-scented air of another golden morning in Villa Madeline. It had been wrenching to leave their blissful existence on the island six weeks earlier, but the prospect of her new role had sugared that particular pill. Not only had Andreas given her a good job here, it was a fulfilling one—a position with a purpose, not just a means of survival.

And she loved him for it.

She loved him in spite of it too.

And the trigger for this realization? It had to be the moment when she'd stepped into the villa on their return and discovered that all her possessions from England were already there. Every last cotton bud and paperclip had been packed into crates and brought thousands of miles for her.

By his order.

She didn't understand it—couldn't—but the effect had been devastating, and then he had asked her to stay. To stay with him and live in his beautiful home. It defied belief now that she had ever considered him a cruel and ruthless corporate monster; all her preconceptions and impressions about him had been proven wrong. The beggar boy in Rhodes—Andreas had guided that child to a new start. His mother's dying wishes had been fulfilled, and the Antonides family had a life they could only have dreamed of before.

Andreas was beautiful, kind, compassionate, proud, and almost unbearably protective at times. Yet she should be irritated by the way he insisted she wear a hat and stayed out of the midday sun. She should be put off by the way he glared at any man under fifty who came near her. She should feel the urge to run when he rubbed her shoulders at dusk and whispered that Greece could offer her all the things she had ever dreamed of.

Except him, of course.

Kizzy felt his possessive cloak of affection constantly around her shoulders, but in many ways he was still a stranger—just a few steps back from the intimacy that would make her life complete. She had realized too late that she should have guarded

her heart more closely, because now it ached and longed for him, tearing her to pieces with the impossibility of it all.

They had spelled it out from the word go: no strings, no love, just sex.

Whichever way she jiggled their conversations over the last couple of weeks, nothing had changed on that front, and she couldn't even be sure that she wanted it to, either. The longing for freedom, the wind in her hair, a rootless life without responsibility—that was what she had always dreamed about in that council flat in Portsmouth.

This wonderful new existence in Lindos would come to an end soon enough, so she had to savor every moment. She would enjoy every dusk and dawn. She would cherish every kiss and store them in her memory, because there would never be another man to match him. None of this could last, and Kizzy knew it.

“Up early? Is anything wrong?”

“No.” Kizzy managed a smile as Andreas appeared behind her. “You were dead to the world, so I thought I’d let you sleep, and it’s so beautiful here when the sun comes up. The gorgeous colors of the sky and sea, everything was tinged with pink today. I never tire of it.”

“And I hope you never will, pethi mou. No one leaves Lindos for good unless they have to. This place has magical powers.” He flicked her a teasing look before sliding on to the wicker sofa and draping a long arm over her shoulder. “Or at least that’s what Dorinda says.”

“Then it must be true,” she replied and tucked her legs up as she snuggled into the comfort of his embrace, secretly wishing that it could be true for her.

“Talk of the devil,” Andreas murmured and quickly tightened the belt of his robe. “She must have been waiting for us to emerge.”

“Kalimera!” Dorinda waved at them from the top of the terrace steps, balancing a tray in the other hand. “Food for hungry lovers!”

“Oh dear,” Kizzy gasped and felt heat tingle through her cheeks. “It looks like we’ve been caught.”

Andreas’s chest trembled with suppressed amusement. “She’s known since the first night, Kizzy. Dorinda’s no fool. And she does keep asking me if we’d like breakfast in bed for a change.”

“Really? I assumed you would want to keep all this discreet.”

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“Of course not!” He frowned. “How many people have I introduced you to in the last six weeks?”

“But that doesn’t mean they know we’re—that we—”

“That we’re red-hot lovers?”

“Hush!” Kizzy wriggled loose of his arm as Dorinda approached them. “We might embarrass her.”

“I doubt it,” Andreas chuckled, but he got up and brought her a little occasional table.

Dorinda slid the tray in front of them and fussed for a moment with the coffeepot. “This morning I bring you meat and cheese with your yogurt and fruit. To give you strength.”

“I need strength, Dorinda?” Andreas replied with a wry expression as he poured them two cups of coffee.

“Your trip to the conference in Geneva. A long way and all those delays... You must both be very tired.”

“We are, but it was worth it. Wasn’t it, Kizzy?”

“It was amazing,” Kizzy concurred, hurriedly hiding her smile. Being stranded by a volcanic dust cloud in a luxury hotel for a few nights had been exhausting. They’d barely slept with the trauma of it all...

“Then you must both eat and rest. Important party tonight, remember?”

Kizzy scooped some feta cheese and marinated red pepper onto a flatbread and rolled it up in her fingers. Once Dorinda had bustled away, she looked at Andreas, puzzled. “Party?”

“It’s St. Peter and St. Paul’s day here. There’s a big traditional celebration this evening in St. Paul’s Bay, and everyone will be there. Including us.” Andreas slid a warm hand beneath the silk of her robe and stroked his fingertips along the smooth top of her thigh. “I can’t wait to show you off again.”

...

Kizzy was silent as they walked hand-in-hand through the bustling, whitewashed honeycomb of alleyways. But inside, her heart seemed to sing with happiness. They might be surrounded by hundreds of noisy, boisterous partygoers, half-deafened by the festive music blasting out across the village, and confronted by locals peddling their wares on every corner, yet with his strong hand clasping hers, somehow she felt cocooned against the outside world. Andreas made her feel safe and treasured, a feeling she had never experienced with a man before. She loved being with him—in fact, she’d be happy if they never had to see another person again.

Suddenly, Kizzy had a deep longing to be back on the island, to be totally alone with him once more. It had been so perfect.

“Not far now,” Andreas said as they turned left onto a quiet street that quickly tapered into a narrow path. “Not going too fast for you, am I?”

“I’m fine,” Kizzy replied with her eyes fixed on the intricately pebbled path and her sandals. “But I do sometimes wonder if I’ll ever get to wear heels again.”

Andreas laughed and slid his arm around her shoulders. “Not if you want to walk around Lindos without breaking your neck. Besides, you don’t need them. I love your legs just the way they are.” He came to a halt and stroked his large hands down around her waist, pulling her into him so that their faces were just millimeters apart. “But there’s always indoors if you really must. I have no objection to you wearing them in bed from time to time.”

“Don’t!” she giggled and a thrill shot through her as he gently pushed her against a low wall overlooking the sea. The rough stone wall rasped intimately against her bare skin, exposed by her black halter-neck dress.

“Why not?” he demanded. “I intend to kiss you senseless before we have to behave ourselves in front of the great and good of the metropolis.”

“This is positively indecent,” she murmured, before his lips pressed hard against hers.

...

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Andreas asked later as they stood in the tiny, paved courtyard outside St. Paul’s church. “Not too hectic, I hope. Everyone seems to want to talk to us tonight.”

“It’s fabulous. I didn’t think Lindos could get any more beautiful, but tonight—all this? It’s beyond magical.” She sighed deeply. “Just look at that.”

The rising moon had turned the sky and sea blood red, streaked with wisps of violet, indigo, and orange, which were reflected with eye-watering effect in the mirrorlike water. Fairy lights twinkled around the lagoon, and the harsh rocks surrounding them glowed like molten ore.

“They say the apostle Paul was almost shipwrecked on the rocks here in a violent

storm,” he told her, “but miraculously the ship escaped harm and found shelter in the bay. This little church marks the spot.”

She leaned on the low whitewashed wall that was fused into the savage golden boulders, and took a deep breath of night air.

“It’s hard to imagine a storm in such a beautiful place.” She jumped with surprise as a soft flutter of black velvet brushed her arm and left a trace of expensive perfume.

“Efharisto! Thank you!” Kizzy called after the small, elegant woman who had appeared from nowhere with two flutes of champagne for them, and then discreetly left again. She whispered to Andreas, “That was Olympia Parnassus, wasn’t it?”

“The mayor’s wife, yes.”

“That was nice of her.”

“You have a high social standing in Lindos now. And largely thanks to you, her husband has pledged a large amount of money to the school project.” He raised his champagne flute to her. “So, well done.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“You’ve been working on a hot, dusty building site when you could just as easily have been enjoying a life of luxury as my companion. People respect hard work here.” Andreas lifted her chin slightly to look her in the eye. “They also talk. You have no idea how many dinner invitations I’ve turned down this week.”

“Really?”

“Do you mind being the center of attention?”

Kizzy took a moment to quell the little voice in her head that suggested he was too embarrassed to take her to private dinner parties. Restaurants, public celebrations, yes, but not the inner sanctums of his world, places unsuitable for the mistress of the moment.

“Actually, no,” she replied, and forced a brittle smile as she pulled away from his hand. “I’m enjoying tonight, and the summer festivals every few weeks are fun. But I prefer it when it’s just you and me.”

Andreas smiled, threaded his arm around her waist and pulled her close to his body. He stared into the distance toward the floodlit acropolis. There was a heavy silence for a moment.

“Do you miss England, Kizzy?”

She looked at the ground. There were rose petals scattered over the mosaic of paving slabs. It was a question she hadn't expected to hear from him tonight—they were supposed to be celebrating, not thinking about the future. She didn't even want to think about what lay ahead—not right now, anyway.

“I miss my mother.”

Andreas's jaw clenched. “I'd bring her back if I could.”

“I know,” Kizzy whispered, and stooped to pick up a handful of rose petals. “There must have been a wedding here today.”

“It's Friday,” he pointed out. “So there will have been a number of weddings. Couples come from all over the world to get married here. It's big business.”

“I can see why.” She bit nervously down on her bottom lip as if it would stop the words from coming out of her mouth but the compulsion was too strong. “Did you get married here?” She sensed his body stiffen but carried on regardless. “You must have been happy with her once—at least on your wedding day.”

“We married in Athens.” Roughly, he drained his glass. “And I could do with another drink. Let's get back to the taverna. We should make more of an effort to be sociable.”

Kizzy was grateful that the tension in Andreas's body seemed to ease once they were

back in the noisy crowd on the beach. The small taverna set into the rocks was the focus of the night's celebrations, a glowing beacon in the blue velvet night, fizzing with warmth and excitement. There, the clatter of a busy kitchen and the tantalizing scents of fish and meat being seared on a hot grill helped to distract her from her fears, and Andreas's possessive arm about her waist made everything feel wonderful again.

She had taken a risk in asking him about his marriage; he never talked about it, and she knew that was the way he wanted things to stay. However much she longed to know about his past, about this woman he must have cared about enough to marry, she would have to be satisfied with his silence.

"Dorinda's been telling me about Prasonisi at the southernmost tip of the island, where the Mediterranean meets the Aegean," Kizzy murmured into his ear as they danced to the bouzouki music on the sand. "She says that just before you reach it, on the top of the hill, you can see huge, rolling waves on the right of the point and calm, sheltered sea to the left—a natural wonder. Could we go there sometime? I'd love to see it for myself."

"Of course we can," he said, and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "It sounds like the perfect day out before I leave for Paris next week."

"Paris—I'd forgotten about that trip."

"It's only for a few days, and it will be incredibly dull. You'll forget all about me once you're back to scrabbling around and getting dirty at the school."

"I won't!" She nudged him playfully in the chest. "I always miss you terribly when you have to go away and I can't come."

"Good, because I will miss you on that trip to Paris too," he replied, and slid a hand

lower to skim her bottom. “Abstinence verges on the painful these days, believe me.”

“So we can go tomorrow?” Kizzy asked excitedly. “Shall I ask Dorinda to make us a picnic?”

Andreas nodded and a broad smile lit up his face. “If you like, and I’ll tell Demetrios. He’ll be driving us down at about nine in the morning.”

“Demetrios? I’d hoped we could go alone.”

Andreas looked taken aback for a moment, then his expression darkened as she pulled away from him with surprised eyes. “No, I don’t think so, Kizzy.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t drive these days, don’t you remember? I’ve always found driving tedious and I’ve been successful enough in business to ensure that I don’t have to do it anymore.” To her puzzlement, he broke eye contact. “It’s also a matter of status—you wouldn’t expect me to clean my own bathrooms just because I can, would you?”

“It’s not quite the same thing.”

He forced a hollow laugh. “Anyway, the hill roads here are near suicidal. You haven’t offered to drive, I notice.”

“I haven’t got a license, I’ve told you that before,” Kizzy replied irritably, frustrated by how helpless she still was in so many ways, so reliant on him. “I always wanted to learn but I couldn’t justify the cost of lessons.”

“Well, I wouldn’t let you even if you had a license,” he replied firmly. “Some of these hill roads are treacherous. Narrow, steep—that’s why the tourist coaches can’t

get down there. That's why it's still so unspoiled."

This wasn't like Andreas, she thought, trying to read his expression. Capable, can-do, dynamic, world-beating Andreas Lazarides. She knew she ought to let it go, but somehow she couldn't. "But you used to drive a Lamborghini. That's got to take a ton of skill. Perhaps if we hired one of those little Jeeps, it wouldn't be too taxing. That's what all the surfers do. It will be wonderful, you'll see. Just the two of us alone for once."

"Demetrios is an advanced driver," he said and took a step back from her, his expression suddenly deadly. "He has Special Service training—a safe pair of hands even over the most difficult terrain. I will not risk your safety on a whim, Kizzy, however much you urge me to. It would be reckless and irresponsible and—and I refuse to waste Demetrios's skills when I'm paying him so damn well."

Kizzy had overstepped the mark and irritated him with her persistence. All she wanted was to be miles away from everyone and alone with him for a change. They had the peaceful grounds of the villa, their sanctuary from the cheerful hubbub of Lindos village, yet there were always staff around in the day and however discreet they might be, Kizzy was uncomfortable with their constant presence.

Her heart twisted as she realized this was the first time Andreas had ever said no to her.

"Demetrios must drive us then, since you won't humor me," she replied with a sigh, hoping that he might change his mind later. "But it would be a good idea if I started learning to drive, so that I can be more independent."

"More independent?"

"Yes, there's no reason Demetrios should drive me to work every day. I should stand

on my own two feet a bit more, and it's not exactly dangerous there, is it?"

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“I’m not funding this willful, unnecessary folly, Kizzy.”

She was taken aback by his sharp tone. “Don’t worry. I’ll pay for it myself. I’m not content to rely on other people for the rest of my life.”

Andreas firmly took hold of her wrists, pulled them away from her chest, and covered her mouth with his before she could utter another word. She tried to stay tense and annoyed with him, but it was not long before the seductive effect of his kiss worked its magic and she softened in spite of herself. The man’s charm was irresistible.

“You don’t need a driver’s license,” Andreas murmured against her lips. “Stop fighting me on this. You have me to look after you now. Just let me take care of you.”

Kizzy sensed a change in him, and was suddenly reminded that she couldn’t risk relying on him being there forever. That was not the deal they had struck. A dark, brooding foreboding seemed to glide over and between them. “Tell me the truth, Andreas, there has to be more to your refusal. What’s the real reason you won’t drive me to Prasonisi?”

He loosened his hold on her and slowly straightened his shoulders, his face a mask. “The real reason?”

Kizzy nodded solemnly and took a deep breath. “I deserve to know.”

He sighed heavily and ran his hands through his hair. “The real reason is that I was planning a surprise meal for us at an exclusive mountain restaurant I know at Prasonisi. I was rather looking forward to sharing a bottle of champagne with you. I

thought it would be good to chat for a few hours over a leisurely meal—just the two of us. But I can't drink and drive."

"Oh."

"Exactly." He traced a line with his fingers around the smooth contour of her jaw. "I think it's time we went home to bed now, don't you? No more arguing. No more Kizzy Dean defiance. Please?"

"I'm sorry," Kizzy murmured. "I don't know what got into me, behaving like a spoiled child—"

"Don't worry about it. We're both tired. Besides, you can make amends for spoiling my surprise with that amazing body of yours."

...

Sitting on the picturesque lower terrace of the villa, Kizzy closed her eyes for a leisurely moment and inhaled the salt air from the bay. She had missed Andreas more than ever over the last few days while he had been attending his conference in Paris. The trip down to Prasonisi had been wonderful and had made their parting even more unbearable, so she had decided to wait at the villa for him to return, rather than go into work as usual, to ensure that she saw him as soon as possible.

She glanced at her watch and began to feel a little uneasy. He should have been back a few hours ago, according to his flight plans. Still, somehow she managed to smother the unhelpful thoughts that were beginning to invade her mind. She should be used to his frequent business trips by now. Andreas was an incredibly driven man, almost to the point of being a workaholic, so she wouldn't put it past him to drop in on a few local business concerns before he actually came back to the villa.

Kizzy twitched as she felt a velvety brush around her bare calves. “Diablo,” she crooned, “what’s up with you?”

Callista’s cat had almost as much influence as Dorinda in the villa. Andreas seemed to dote on her even when she hissed and scratched, and he tolerated her kittens too, now that they had all been spayed. His patience with them was infinite, however unreasonable their behavior or demands. But then, they were the only survivors of the crash that had killed his sister, she had discovered from Dorinda. Andreas’s sister had been desperate to get the semi-feral cat to a vet when the animal was struggling to give birth. It was this act of compassion that had cost his sister her life.

Suddenly, Kizzy’s heart leapt at the sound of his familiar voice.

He must be taking a call on his cell phone, she thought, and stood up from her seat under the shade of an ancient fig tree to greet him, brushing out the creases from the new red dress he had bought her—it was the one she had refused to try on in Rhodes, and somehow it seemed right to put it on for him today.

She pressed her lips together to ensure just a trace of cherry-tinted lip balm remained, but not so much that she would cover him in smears when they kissed.

Then her excited heart shuddered and almost stopped.

Andreas had emerged from behind a stone wall on the upper terrace and was heading back toward the main villa courtyard. He was laughing. And so was his companion.

She was as petite as a shop mannequin, with blue-black hair that fell below her waist like a silk curtain. Andreas had her tucked neatly under one of his broad shoulders as he stopped and turned to place a kiss on the woman’s forehead. Kizzy’s hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a small cry of shock and then struggled to prevent the sudden rise of physical sickness that she could feel welling up inside her. They were chatting

in Greek, so she couldn't understand what they were saying, but the air of intimacy that surrounded them was undeniable.

Kizzy clenched her hands into fists to stop them from shaking and forced them against her lips while she silently watched the pair disappear into the villa, still laughing. Acid tears burned the back of her throat as her fight to suppress them failed.

So this was how it was going to end.

She had known it would happen one day—it had been inevitable, but so soon?

A dark cloud fell over the memories of the last six weeks since their return from the island, as Kizzy faced up to the realization that he must have planned all this some time ago. It was obvious now—once Andreas had decided she wasn't the type of mistress material he was after, he had found her a job to keep her safely out of the way while he lined up a replacement!

Anger rose up in her throat and manifested itself in a small guttural cry of self-preservation as her decision was quickly made. She had no choice, not if she had any pride left, nor if she had any respect for her mother's memory and the promise she had made never to let a man grind her into the dust.

He was not going to discard her and there was no way she was going to hang around until he finally decided to break the bad news to her.

She was going to walk out on him.

Her front teeth bit down hard on her bottom lip and she forced her heavy limbs toward the wooden door that led to the outside world. She needed time to think, to regroup, and work out a way to maintain a shred of dignity when her heart was shattering into a million tiny pieces. Yet all she seemed able to think about was

Andreas's new woman—and scratching her eyes out.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:12 am*

The strength of her enmity toward the unknown woman was frightening, jealousy and bitterness raging uncontrollably inside her—making the nausea she had first felt on seeing them swell almost to physical sickness. It was madness, of course—she knew nothing about her replacement. It wasn't the new mistress's fault; this was all Andreas's doing. Andreas, the man who could turn her body into fire with just one touch. The man who had a mechanical pump where his heart should be.

She had to walk. Walk fast to clear her head and get as far from the villa as she could before she did something really stupid. Something stupid like confront them in his bedroom and slap him around the face so hard her hand would sting.

She wouldn't humiliate herself by risking an emotional scene. She'd walk up to the acropolis, something he'd forbidden her to do alone unless she took a donkey ride, plenty of water, sunscreen, and her bloody sunhat.

Well, damn his rules.

She was taking back charge of her life. She'd go up to the acropolis and stay just as long as she wanted to and...and... Well he probably wouldn't even notice.

...

“What the hell were you playing at?”

Kizzy could hear Andreas's voice, but was finding it difficult to open her eyes against the dazzling light that seemed to surround and envelop her. And the strange smell...

“What’s going on?” she murmured, her voice cracking with dryness. “Where are we?”

“We, Kizzy Dean, are in a private hospital room in Rhodes,” he said. “So how are you feeling?”

“Hospital? I don’t understand. How... How did I get here?” she asked groggily, blinking at the brightness of the room as she forced her eyes open.

“I drove us here yesterday in Angie’s decrepit Fiat, that’s how. It’s a complete heap but still a lot quicker than hanging around for an ambulance once we’d hauled your dead weight down from the top of the acropolis.” He took her small, weak hand in his and raked his other hand through the tousled darkness of his hair. “How long had you been up there? You were in a terrible state by the time some passing tourist got hold of your cell and phoned me.”

“You drove?”

“I had no choice,” he replied flatly and broke eye contact. “I thought you were going to die on me, woman. How many times have I told you that you’re not used to the heat we have here? You were mad going up there at the hottest time of the day without any water or even your hat.”

“I didn’t care about the stupid hat!” Kizzy replied stubbornly. She glanced at the drip in her arm and began, with growing horror, to recall the events that had led her to being where she was now. A flash of anger surfaced as she remembered his pretty visitor at the villa. “I’m sorry to have spoiled your afternoon by obliging you to take the wheel of a car when you clearly had more exciting things planned.”

“Such as?”

Kizzy winced as she eased herself upright against the crisp hospital linen. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter any more.”

“Well, it matters to me, Kizzy. I want you to tell me exactly what was going on in your head—”

His words were cut off as a broad man in a white coat thrust unceremoniously into the room with an official-looking clipboard and nodded a greeting.

“Kyrios Lazarides and Miss Dean, I’m pleased to tell you that all the test results are back and that you can leave today on the strict understanding that you rest and stay out of the heat for a few days.” He bestowed a paternal frown in Kizzy’s direction. “A policy that will apply even more strictly over the next thirty-five weeks or so. The baby has suffered no ill effects from this episode, but I must stress how important it is that it doesn’t occur again.”

The doctor handed over a discharge form for Kizzy to sign, oblivious to the stunned look on her face. “I’ll need to get some notes forwarded to the doctor overseeing your pregnancy, so if you could leave the details with my receptionist when you go—”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Andreas interrupted quickly as he took the man by the shoulders and hurried him toward the door. “I will take care of everything, I assure you.” He slapped the doctor on the back. “We’ll be having an evening wedding—much cooler for them both. You must come, file mou, and we will thank you properly for all you have done.”

## Chapter Twelve

“We can’t get married,” Kizzy said firmly as Andreas placed a jug of iced lemonade in front of her on the terrace. It had been a difficult journey back to the villa, trying not to make eye contact with a triumphant, purposeful Andreas as she wrestled with

her conscience all the way, those unanswered questions burning a hole in her head.

“We must,” he said, shrugging dismissively. “We’ve been over this, Kizzy. You are expecting my child—it is the only respectable thing to do.”

“No we must not!” Kizzy waved away the drink he was trying to press against her lips. “And stop fussing around me; it’s driving me nuts.”

“This is just your hormones talking, Kizzy.”

Kizzy took a deep breath as she prepared herself for what she was about to do. It was clear that she would have to spell out the harsh and unpleasant reality of the situation, as Andreas was not going to budge on the issue.

“I understand that you want your child to be legitimate, even though its mother is not.” She swallowed hard as she glanced up to see the flint glittering in his eyes. “But you must also understand what a mistake it would be to bring a child into a loveless marriage of convenience.”

“Don’t worry so much, kardia mou,” he replied lightly. “It’s not good for either of you.”

“I’m serious, Andreas.” Her unsmiling expression silenced him. “My mother did it with my stepfather and your parents did it too—could you honestly wish that misery on your own child? Besides, you told me you would never marry again—it must have slipped your mind in all the excitement.”

“Our marriage wouldn’t be like that, Kizzy,” he responded firmly and went to take her hand in his. “What we have is very different.”

Kizzy shot him a look of incredulity. “It is?”

“Of course!” Andreas withdrew his hand from hers, stood up and hid it in his trouser pocket, almost as if it had been stung. “These last few weeks have been amazing; we complement each other perfectly. Every partnership will have its moments of disagreement, naturally, but I see no reason why we can’t build a successful marriage together based on compromise and mutual respect. And there’s certainly no problem for us in the bedroom.”

...

Andreas looked down into her accusing blue eyes and reminded himself not to lose his temper, however hurtful her remarks. Kizzy was no doubt still reeling from the discovery that she was in the early stages of pregnancy and trying to come to terms with that information—as he was too. The news of her pregnancy had come as a visceral shock to Andreas when one of the nurses had casually mentioned it, rattling off the blood tests they would have to perform—the staff had clearly assumed that he knew.

Kizzy had still been unconscious then and so had missed the look of elation that must have crossed his face. This meant she had to stay with him in Greece now. She was carrying his heir and they would, of course, have to get married.

Andreas had watched his lover sleep and felt a wave of possessiveness flood his body at how small and fragile in the white nest of the hospital bed she looked. The mother of his child. The two most important things in his life seemed so dangerously vulnerable—they needed him.

He had vowed there and then to protect them both with his life.

The feeling of dread and entrapment he might have expected to feel under such circumstances had not materialized. He thought he had been meticulous about contraception, yet somehow this baby had happened, so it was clearly destined to be. His heart swelled at the thought that in a few months he would be holding his very own child in his arms and that he would have such a perfect wife. He felt warm and excited. And protective and proud.

He was going to make his new family the biggest success of his life. More than ever it was essential not to show any kind of weakness though. Kizzy had to know that she could rely on him, that he would be her rock to cling to and the best father there could ever be.

Now though, he was finding it surprisingly hard to hold on to those feelings of strength and self-control, when every look she shot him seemed to accuse Andreas of not matching up to her ideal husband.

“I couldn’t bear to be tied to a man who cheated on me,” Kizzy continued relentlessly, meeting his stare. “Not even for the sake of my baby. Don’t you remember what that did to your mother?”

“I will not cheat on you, Kizzy. That’s one promise I can make.”

“Is that what you told your first wife?”

“I didn’t need to; we made solemn vows in the house of God in front of everyone who was dear to us. I was never unfaithful to her during our marriage.”

“So what went wrong? I need to know, Andreas. I need to know a lot of things before I can even begin to consider becoming your wife.”

“It’s all in the past! My first marriage has nothing to do with you or what is happening now. She is gone and won’t be coming back. There is nothing to be gained from raking over old wounds and I will not be manipulated into talking about such things.” His chest rose and fell with exasperation. “You have to trust me on this, Kizzy. It’s for the best.”

“But how can I trust you?” Tears were brimming behind her lashes now and she bowed her head in anguish. “I saw you, Andreas! I saw you with your new girlfriend

at the villa. That's why I took off to the acropolis, I was so humiliated—"

Roughly, Kizzy swiped her forearm across her face—no, she would not let him see her cry. He must never know how much his infidelity had affected her, how it crushed her soul.

"You both seemed to be having a nice time of it while I was supposed to be at work." Kizzy glanced up at his uncharacteristic silence, and noted, with bittersweet agony, the look of guilty confusion on his face. "A lovers' tryst in the tower, was it? I guess that's where you must go together. It's the only part of the villa that's been resolutely locked since you asked me to move in. Your secret lovers' hideaway—"

"Stop it!" Andreas suddenly bellowed. "Stop it now! The heat exhaustion has clearly affected your mind as well as your body!"

"Oh no, you won't brush me off that easily," Kizzy replied with a swift, answering anger. She drew a painful breath. "I saw you both with my own eyes. I saw you kiss her. Explain that, if you can."

Andreas pushed himself away from the back of the chair he had been leaning on. It rattled over onto the stone tiled floor, its impact echoing in the heavy, torturous silence that had fallen between them.

"What you saw was me kissing Liz goodbye. She'd come by with the keys to the safe and wanted to thank me for her going-away gift."

Andreas struggled to retain control. The emotional turbulence within him had blurred his vision to the extent that all he could register was the paleness of her face and the thunder raging beneath his chest wall. Nonetheless, he managed to keep his voice level.

“Remember Liz? Liz, the office manager who believes in love?” He waited, breathing heavily, and watched the uncertainty begin to grow on her face. “Think about it, why the hell would an engaged woman throw all that away for a quick fumble with the ex-boss?”

“She—she didn’t sound very Australian,” Kizzy replied hesitantly. “In fact, she looked like a picture-perfect little Greek girl from where I was standing.”

“For God’s sake, she is Greek! Liz is short for Lizandra. Her boyfriend’s the Australian; they’re going to start married life back in his country.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed,” Andreas replied with a sudden look of despair on his face. “And you would deny our child its birthright because of this delusion? I thought better of you,” he added harshly. “I never thought I’d see you put yourself before your child.”

His words lanced through her with such painful force that Kizzy was momentarily unable to act rationally and her first instinct was to lash out verbally in retaliation for the way he was making her feel.

“You’ve never even stopped to ask if I want to have this baby, have you?”

Andreas’s face seemed to fuse into pure gray granite for a second or two of agonizing silence as he digested what she had said.

“Don’t ever say anything like that again.” His voice was husky, laced with pain. “You said yourself that having a baby was one of your dreams. Well, now a miracle has occurred and, God willing, you will have your baby. Just don’t try to pretend that my genes aren’t good enough for you now, just to hurt me. I warn you, Kizzy Dean, I will only be pushed so far.”

Kizzy had felt burning shame beneath her breastbone the second the words had passed her lips. It had been an unforgivable thing to say and he was right, she'd just wanted to hurt him. In the process, however, she had hurt herself even more.

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“I’m sorry. It was a terrible thing to say—of course I want this baby,” she whispered and summoned the courage to look him in the eye. She was met with a man simmering like an angry volcano. “But I still can’t marry you.”

Andreas swore in Greek and slammed his palm against his forehead. “What do I have to do to convince you? I’m running out of ideas here but I’m telling you now—I will only ask once. I will not be humiliated into begging for your hand in marriage.”

“I don’t even recall being asked. As with most things that come from you, it was more of a command than a request.”

“An assumption, perhaps. What difference does it make? I thought you’d be delighted.” He paused briefly and his expression softened as he stared at her. “You’d make such a beautiful bride.”

She felt her resolve begin to melt and tried hard not to fall under the spell of his tempting words. Instead, she hoisted up an emotional shield to hide behind. “This time you assumed too much, Andreas. As it happens, I will consider marrying you for the sake of our child, but only if certain conditions are fulfilled.”

“Conditions?” Andreas took a step nearer, frowning. “I thought we’d gone beyond contracts and deals.”

“We have,” she said, agreeing. “No one else needs to be involved. We can sort it out between us right here. This minute.”

He crossed his arms. “Fire away.”

Kizzy took a deep breath. “I must insist on exclusivity in this marriage. I will not live with an adulterer.”

Andreas nodded slowly, and a flush of hard color tinged his cheekbones. “And I will expect the same from you, pethi mou. I won’t pretend I’m a man who is used to being told how things will be. But if you are to be my wife, an equal partner in our marriage, I suppose I had better get used to it.”

“There must be no secrets between us if I am to trust you with my dignity and the well-being of our child. There are two things I must know. Firstly, I need to understand what happened in your first marriage.” She paused at his sharp intake of breath, then plunged on regardless. She had to know the truth if this was going to work. “And secondly, I insist on knowing why you keep that tower locked all the time, if it’s not a lovers’ hideaway.”

“This is ridiculous!” He unfolded his arms, his face taut with exasperation. “Why do you insist on dragging my first marriage into this? It’s not relevant. And this constant obsession with the tower—it’s just an outbuilding!”

“I need to know.”

“But why?”

“How can there ever be any trust between us if you won’t tell me something as simple as this?”

“And how can you insist on this insulting question-and-answer session with the father of your unborn child? It’s undignified.”

“Yes, it is. And now it appears the matter is settled—I will not be taking your name.”

“This is stupid.”

“No, it’s very sad,” Kizzy whispered and stood up, gathering her strength to leave. She still felt a little dizzy and light-headed. “Andreas, I’m not asking you to fall down on one knee and profess undying love—you’ve made your feelings quite clear on that score and I was prepared to accept a civil and pragmatic marriage to secure the future happiness of our child.”

Her thoughts were becoming scrambled and clouded with the intensity of the emotion she was feeling. And each glance at Andreas’s tempestuous features increased her struggle even further.

“But I also firmly believe our baby should have two parents who at least respect each other. We can’t possibly have a future together if we’re not honest and open from the start. Secrets poison everything—they will tear us apart in the end.”

“It seems to be you who is trying to tear us apart,” he replied, running both hands through his hair.

“I’ve kept nothing from you, Andreas,” she continued desperately. “I’ve been completely open with you about my past, yet you seem incapable of doing the same for me. And it hurts.”

“So that’s what it will take, is it? Complete honesty?”

Andreas could feel his heart ramming ferociously against his rib cage as he battled with his pride, his rage, and his fear.

“If I tell you my secrets, if I reveal myself to you, you will marry me?” He grabbed her by the arm and began to pull her along the terrace. “Very well, we’ll do it your way. But I’m warning you now, Kizzy, you may not like what you discover.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Kizzy stumbled along in a daze as Andreas propelled her mercilessly to the foot of the tower. He put an arm down into a clay urn that was beside the imposing door and retrieved a large iron key.

“You could have done this yourself if you’d been more dishonest and devious,” he said, turning the key noisily in the lock, throwing open the door she had only ever seen closed.

As he guided her up the dark, musty stairwell inside, he shielded her shoulders from the coarse stone walls by wrapping an arm around her and squeezing her to his body.

“Just a few more steps,” he muttered in a voice that seemed different from the one she was used to. He came to an abrupt halt. “Stay here and don’t move.”

Kizzy obeyed him—it seemed to her that they were both breathing heavily in the silent gloom of a stone tomb. Thin shafts of gray-brown light were the only hint of an outside world until Andreas wrenched open the first set of wooden shutters. Her hands flew to her eyes as she struggled to adjust to the fierce burst of sunlight streaming in.

Another shutter was flung open, followed by another and another until she was drowned in summer light that burst into every crevice of ancient gray stone. Looking around in bewilderment, she blinked her eyes into focus: a battered chair; a tumble of old jars; crumpled-up newspapers in every corner, and a pile of filthy rags.

“Satisfied now?” Andreas asked stiffly. He indicated that she should look behind her.

Satisfied?

Slowly, Kizzy turned and smothered a shocked gasp. “I had no idea that you—that—it’s beautiful!” She took a tentative step toward a huge canvas fixed to an easel.

Her gaze ran excitedly over the bold swirls of color and she inhaled the unfamiliar smell of artists’ materials—oil paints and turpentine. Brutally aware of his stony silence behind her, she resisted the almost overwhelming urge to brush her fingertips over the thick ridges of oil paint on the canvas and folded her hands together beneath her chin to keep them away.

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It was an incomplete work but what he was trying to achieve was clear. A disturbed sky as stormy and gray as the wall surrounding it was slashed into focus by a tumbling heap of burning gold, red, amber, and black. Four horses, still tethered to a chariot, were falling and twisting toward earth in a firmament being torn apart from all sides. Winged creatures were trying to hold the beasts back, but failing in the fiery blaze of destruction, and there was the beginning of a body falling from inside the chariot—a pale foot was as far as the artist had gotten.

“This is your work?” Kizzy asked in wonder as she turned to face the dark storm of his expression. “This is what you do in here?”

He nodded silently and then looked pointedly out the nearest window, a muscle working rhythmically in his jaw. “There you have it. My dark, shameful secret...”

“What?” Kizzy fixed him with an unyielding look of fascination. “I don’t see anything shameful about this.”

“It’s a weakness. The forbidden fruit I’ve never been able to leave alone, however much it cost me.” His face twisted. “At least that was the case until you came on the scene. I’ve not managed a single brush stroke since I met you.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No,” he said more gently. “It’s a good thing.”

“It is? But I don’t understand, you obviously have such talent—”

“Then I will explain it to you. Step by shameful step, every single detail, if that’s what you genuinely want. Do you want to know everything, Kizzy?”

She nodded, despite being aware that she might be opening a forbidden box of secrets. It was as if a great shadowy beast was approaching both of them from some outer ring of darkness, ready to pounce and tear them to pieces, but she refused to run from it, not so long as Andreas needed her. Transfixed by what she had seen in his face, she took a deep breath and waited to hear his explanation.

“Any artistic inclinations that I showed as a child were forbidden by my father. There were no pencils or paints in our house, just a couple of ink pens locked away in his study. If he caught me so much as etching a line or two in the sand he would tell me I was pathetic—a mommy’s boy who needed to toughen up. Then of course he would beat the living daylights out of me.” He swallowed hard. “I pressed some flowers between the pages of a schoolbook once. He found out and had our cat put down as punishment.”

Kizzy gulped back a lump in her throat. “Andreas, I—”

“You wanted this, now hear me out.” He placed a hand on the edge of the canvas, staring blindly down at his own work. “I know I should put all this behind me, that I’m stronger than my father now, yet I can’t seem to shake off those feelings of shame. Every time I pick up a paintbrush, it feels like I’m doing something dirty and furtive—I still have to hide myself away, ensure that no one ever discovers what I do up here.”

“But you know in your heart that’s not the case, don’t you?” Kizzy reached out to touch his hand, and he moved it away. The thought hurt her deeply but she persevered, hoping to salvage something from their relationship. She could only guess how he was feeling. “There is nothing wrong or bad about creating such beautiful work.”

He gestured toward the dark, swirling colors of the painting. “This has become a twisted form of punishment for me, for what happened to my sister, an attempt to remind myself how weak and selfish I am—how unworthy of any genuine respect.” He placed his fingertips over Kizzy’s mouth as she began to protest. “No, hush. Do you know I even let my father hound me into an arranged marriage that no one but he and his second cousin wanted?”

Kizzy’s sharp intake of breath made his fingers drop from her lips.

He looked away.

“My father told me that he was terminally ill, and that if I married Sophia he could die happy, that he would forgive me all my supposed transgressions. He even got my mother to back up his story with tears as added leverage. So I did it. I married Sophia.”

“What happened?”

The musty air hung with thick silence. “My father made a miraculous recovery after the wedding and Sophia went straight to Ibiza on my credit card to be with her current girlfriend. Our marriage was never even consummated. All the same, she couldn’t resist humiliating me with her druggy, swinging antics spread all over Europe’s gossip magazines.”

Suddenly, he seized Kizzy’s chin, twisting her face away from his own and pointing it toward the painting. “Do you recognize these images, Kizzy? You really should.”

Kizzy blinked back the shock she felt at the intense pressure of his fingertips and pulled herself free. She had recognized the scene almost immediately.

“It’s Phaëthon’s Fall.”

“Very good.” He inclined his head, studying the painting with hard eyes. “That degree has come in useful after all. Yes, mischievous, bigheaded Phaëthon disobeyed his father, took the sun chariot out for a spin but couldn’t control it, and almost destroyed the world. Until Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt.”

“You should finish it,” Kizzy ventured carefully. “It’s incredible—”

“I can’t,” he replied abruptly and pointed to the unfinished corner with the foot. “Because I can’t decide if this person here, the one where the demigod should be, should look like me or Callista.”

Slowly the pieces began to fall clumsily into place. Kizzy looked back at him warily. This canvas was a cathartic ritual for Andreas, a punishment as he’d said, all tied up somehow with his father, the too-fast Lamborghini, and his sister’s death.

“You can’t blame yourself for what happened to Callista. It was a tragic accident.”

His voice deepened alarmingly. “You know nothing about it.”

“Dorinda told me. Your sister crashed your car trying to rush Diablo to the vet. It’s as simple as that. It was a tragedy but not your fault. You have got to stop blaming yourself for it and move on.”

“You discussed me with Dorinda?” He shot her a look of disgust. “What makes you think she knows everything that happened that day?”

Kizzy opened her mouth to try and calm the inner forces that were making him look so angry, but it was clear he was not going to allow her to speak.

“I’ll spell it out to you once and for all. I couldn’t be bothered to take the bloody cat to the vet myself—I was too busy. I was always too busy trying to better myself, to

make more money, to be the best. Callista went on and on about the cat until I got so annoyed I threw her the keys and told her to get on with it. She was just like you, Kizzy. Stubborn and rebellious to the end. She took the keys and, well, you know the rest.”

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He stooped to pick up a stray paintbrush from the floor and put it carefully in an earthenware jar. “She’d only been driving a year and couldn’t control a car as powerful as the Lamborghini. I might as well have doused her with gasoline and set her on fire myself.”

“Oh no, stop.” She made a grab for his hand. “This is all wrong—”

“Don’t lecture me, Kizzy!” he said, pulling away. His voice shook. “You have no idea what it feels like to lose a sister and know that you are responsible.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she replied, and heard an answering tremor in her own voice. “I lost a sister too. A half-sister. Alice came into the world a month too early and I only had a few minutes to love and hold her before she slipped away.”

“Not your fault, Kizzy,” he said and rubbed the back of his neck ferociously. “No comparison.”

“But I think it is! Mum only stayed with my stepfather because of me. He gave us a roof over our heads, a chance of an education for me, an awful sham of stability. I never told her that I didn’t care about those things and that I wished we could just run away.”

Kizzy took a step toward him, desperate for his touch, some morsel of warmth to soothe away the terrible ache building to a crescendo inside her body. But all she could register was the dull, black look in his eyes that spoke of something beautiful that had died before its time. Or was just about to.

“She stuck it out and protected me from some terrible things—my stepbrothers were animals—but she paid a terrible price for that protection.” A tear began to seep from the edge of her lashes. “Alice was violently conceived and her death was just as brutal. My stepfather pushed Mum down the stairs during one of his drunken rages, and she went into premature labor.”

...

Andreas saw the acute pain and bewilderment on her face and his stomach constricted.

Kizzy was hurting and he couldn't help her, because he was in as much pain himself, selfishly consumed by his own raw feelings. She had forced him into an emotional corner, drawn out the hidden poisons that had dominated his life for so long, and now he just wanted to get away from her, to hide his vulnerability. But that wasn't how Andreas Lazarides worked.

He felt his heart pulse with renewed shame and humiliation. He was used to fighting back. Fighting dirty. He was used to slamming down the lid of the sarcophagus that held his heart.

“I'm sorry about your sister. I had no idea—any more than you knew the secrets of my life, the details you've just forced me to reveal. Things I wanted to keep secret.” He took a sharp breath. “It was a bad idea to get into all this, and it only happened because you refused to trust me. It should all have remained unspoken—buried in the past. You should have trusted me, Kizzy. You should have let it all be.” He paused. “I hope you're satisfied now.”

Andreas turned and walked silently to one of the open windows. He leaned both hands on the rough ledge and stared out to sea, the light breeze lifting his hair. He couldn't face her a moment longer, was unable to bear the revulsion that would

inevitably overshadow her face. He couldn't keep looking at those deep blue eyes, knowing he would only add to the distress and suffering within them. His unrestrained anger and resurgent feelings of uselessness would chip away at her, catching at the open wounds she already had.

And she wouldn't be the first person he would ruin. His sister had died because of his negligence, his mother following closely behind, consumed by grief. Even his own father despised him with the few functioning brain cells he had left.

Yet he loved Kizzy.

Andreas loved her more than anything he had ever known, and it would be like ripping out his own heart to allow her to leave.

But he had to. It suddenly became clear to him that the best way to demonstrate his love was to let her go before he polluted her any further with the darkness in his soul. Somehow he had to stop himself from taking her in his arms and telling her that he would take care of her and make everything wonderful. Because he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't end up making her life as miserable as her mother's had been.

He had already tried to force Kizzy into marriage so that she would stay with him. So he could keep her in close captivity like a beautiful, caged bird.

"You're right, Kizzy. I should have listened to you from the start. Of course we shouldn't marry—it would be a disaster. Not because I would stray, but because I simply don't have the time to work at it." His fingertips scraped the stone of the window frame until he felt the skin split and bleed. "A marriage between us could never work."

"But, Andreas, it can work!" she replied breathlessly and took a hesitant step toward

him. “Now we have no secrets, now that I know I can trust you—”

“Trust me?” He uttered a harsh and brittle laugh as he realized just how cruel he was going to have to be to her. “Now that you’ve forced me to my knees and ground whatever pride I had left into the dust, you’ve decided we can forge ahead with a futile marriage after all? Is that what you mean by trust?”

Kizzy halted in her tracks. “It’s not like that,” she said.

“It will be,” Andreas replied hollowly. “I can never become the husband you want or deserve, Kizzy. It’s impossible. You’ve made me see that now.”

“No, you’re wrong,” she pleaded. “Listen to me.”

“Oh, I’m never wrong, Kizzy,” he replied, his smile tight and ironic. “Don’t you remember that? And I’ve listened to quite enough today.”

Andreas closed his eyes briefly. Somehow, he had to find the strength to rip out both their hearts and destroy their hopes of a happy ending. He knew it was for the best. She, at least, would eventually recover from this and meet a better man than he could ever be.

“You said you trusted me before today, but you were lying, telling me things I wanted to hear, sweet, poisonous little nothings.” He ignored the determined shake of her head and thrust her small hand away. “You couldn’t leave it, could you? You couldn’t resist sticking in the knife and twisting it to see how far you could push me?”

“This is madness!” she cried.

“I agree, but this is as far as the madness goes. I don’t want to be your husband. Or

your lover. It's been difficult recently. Maybe it's the pregnancy. I don't know. Please leave now, Kizzy, it's for the best and we both know it."

“I can’t believe you mean that,” she whispered hoarsely.

He looked at her, forcing a light contempt into his tone. “Just give it up, will you? Desperation is very unattractive in a woman.”

He watched tears fall heavily from her cheeks, and turned away before the despair in her eyes sliced any deeper into his heart.

The raw hum of silence between his shoulder blades urged him to provoke her into a response. Perversely, he wanted Kizzy to fight him, to hurt him back, to hate him with everything in her soul. Not stand silently by while he destroyed what they had built together.

“I will provide financially for the baby, of course, and in return expect full access and rights. And don’t think for one moment that you can run off with my child—I have contacts all over the world.” He waited for a shrill, ferocious outburst but it never came and now he just wished for darkness and oblivion, a place where he could hide from the terrible things he was saying and didn’t mean.

Andreas waited for a response, his blood pulsing nauseously around his body as he felt the weight of what he had just done collapse like a tower of blocks onto his shoulders. She would speak soon, she had to.

The heavy wooden door at his back clicked softly shut and he knew that she had gone.

“Right.” Nurse Walczak folded her equipment back into her bag and smiled gently. “Everything’s fine, but I do recommend you make an appointment for your first scan in a few weeks.”

“Scan?” Kizzy was feeling shell-shocked at the speed everything was happening. “Oh that, yes. I will.”

“It’s perfectly routine, nothing to worry about, and a wonderful opportunity to see baby for the first time.” She patted her lightly on the hand and smiled. “Perhaps you’d like to take a friend along with you? Or I can arrange to be present if you prefer?”

Kizzy shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you’ve got my cell number.” The midwife slid a bundle of forms across the table. “You also need to fill these in before your next appointment—nothing complicated, take your time.”

Nothing complicated...

Kizzy had told the midwife that her baby’s father wasn’t around anymore, as she knew she would need all the support she could get as a single mother. But Nurse Walczak was her sole confidant. Kizzy hadn’t gone into detail about Andreas and hadn’t been pressed, but it had been a small step in her new isolated world.

She still had time, she thought erratically. It would run out, but at this stage she still had time. She flicked through the forms. Basic details, like home address, next of kin...

What would she put there?

Birth plan. Who did she want to be there when her baby was born? Any genetic history?

Kizzy closed her eyes.

She had no one. There was no one! She really was completely alone apart from her new neighbors and coworkers.

Kizzy suddenly wanted her mother.

And she wanted Andreas more than she wanted to continue breathing.

But she couldn't have either, so she swallowed down her misery and got to work.

“Water—need to fetch more water.”

She would have a wash, do the dishes, and scrub the place to within an inch of its life—that would occupy her this Friday afternoon, now that work had finished for the day. It was just as well there was no Internet connection, or she'd be tempted to e-mail her friends back in the UK. But that wouldn't be fair. She'd made her bed and she would be fine in it.

However, she was starting to worry about bringing a newborn back to this place eventually. This must have been what it was like for her mother, she thought. A baby, no fixed home, and no visible support network. History repeating itself...but she'd make it better this time. She'd do all she possibly could for their baby, a child who would be unquestionably beautiful. With Andreas's looks and brains and her unconditional love and devotion it would be perfect—a little demigod even.

And a strict march to the communal tap in the midday sun would be the beginning of her new resolve not to feel sorry for herself in the slightest.

...

Andreas had let her walk out of his life with a modicum of dignity, Kizzy reflected as she filled a large water container from the tap. She still suffered a sickening sense of awfulness that the love she had been nurturing so silently was not reciprocated. His intimate revelations in the tower had been distressing to hear, and she had longed to reach out and comfort him. Yet at the same time she had also recognized that this was his only way of letting her in. Making her a part of his damaged life.

She had believed she could help him mend, and that if they had worked at their marriage she could have loved him from a safe distance. She had hoped that maybe his feelings for her would grow into something stronger, maybe even love one day.

But even that hope had been forlorn.

Her stomach turned over at the memory of how horrified she had been at his declaration of the way things were now going to be. Spoken to the sea and sky, not even directly to her—her very presence had become repulsive to him, it seemed. She had also realized with growing terror that she had no cards to play in this nasty new game.

If only she had just said yes when he'd insisted on marriage, seized the proposal with both hands. Then it almost seemed as if her worst fears were coming to life and sneaking up on her in physical form, as a shadow fell over the white plastic canister.

Just a cloud, surely?

She needed to get more sleep when the morning sickness eased, she decided—it rarely rained out here. Now her mind was playing tricks on her.

“What are you doing here, Kizzy?”

Andreas?

She did not turn around. She had recognized his voice immediately, but could hardly believe it was him. Her body rigid with tension, she had to force herself to reply.

“I’m living here until the school kitchen is finished, just like everybody else.”

“But I terminated your position,” he replied flatly. “For the baby’s safety.”

“And I ignored that piece of paper when it reached me here.” She roughly screwed on the water bottle lid. “No one else seems bothered.”

“You haven’t even looked at the villa I arranged for you.”

“No.” She heard the gravel underfoot crunch as he took a step closer.

“Not good enough for you?” Was that a sneer in his voice? “It’s usually rented out to millionaires, oligarchs—”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:12 am*

Angry now, she turned to face him. He looked terrible. “It’s been a good couple of weeks since you dismissed me from your presence, Mr. Lazarides, so why the sudden concern?”

He looked at her without speaking for a moment, his face oddly haggard, a dark shadow about his jaw as though he hadn’t bothered to shave that morning.

“I’ve only just found out that you aren’t where you were supposed to be,” he muttered.

“As I thought,” she responded sourly. “I was clearly at the forefront of your mind.”

“My father died, Kizzy.”

She blanched at that news, wishing she could call back her too-hasty words.

“The phone call from the nursing home came almost immediately after you left,” he said, looking away from her. His face was grim. “They said he didn’t have long, so I had to fly straight to Athens. I only just made it. We had a few hours together before he died.”

“Oh no,” Kizzy whispered and without thinking cupped his rough jaw in her palm. She closed her eyes briefly as he turned his head to kiss her wrist.

“He was lucid at the end and we made our peace,” he said quietly. “He apologized for being so hard on me as a child—he’d wanted me to grow up a strong man, not a drunken loser who sponged off his wife like he did. He regretted so much, just hadn’t

been able to swallow his pride and admit it. He was smaller than I remember—frail and helpless.”

He took Kizzy’s hand and threaded their fingers softly together.

“Dad told me about my mother too, about her secrets. She wasn’t as pure as she’d led everyone to believe.” He looked down at Kizzy’s feet, shod with cheap, simple sandals. “She had affairs, lots of them, but there was one man in particular. He was an artist. Dead now but—but most probably my natural father.”

Kizzy’s mouth fell open. “You had no idea?”

He shook his head and his voice cracked “And Mum never told me she was ill either—cancer. I always assumed she’d died of a broken heart when she lost my sister, that her death was my fault as well.”

Kizzy nodded as a fat tear coursed down her cheek, unable to speak a word of comfort. Nothing seemed sufficient at that moment.

“The funeral took place straightaway. That was what my father had wanted. Quiet, discreet. I wanted to rush back to you, but there were things I had to do first. I had to build my case before asking, begging you to come back to me.” His face contorted. “It’s not much of an excuse, but from the day I returned until this morning I’ve been in the tower trying to sort my life out.”

“All that time? Then it’s no wonder you look such a mess.” Her face crumpled as she touched the dark, rough stubble on his jaw. “Have you finished it? The painting, your punishment?”

“Yes.”

“Is it beautiful?”

“It was. Briefly. Until I set fire to it once and for all.”

“You burned it? All those months of work?”

He stroked the top of her brow. “Don’t look so shocked. I burned it and started something new. Something I’d like you to see.”

“You can’t mean that, Andreas,” Kizzy murmured, not daring to believe that even after such dramatic events, there could be a grain of hope for them. “I can’t go back to your house, not after everything that’s happened and was said. It’s over between us, you made that quite clear.”

“I was an angry, bitter, egotistical mess. I didn’t know what I was saying. It was the only way I could get you to leave before I showed myself up by breaking down. I lost control, don’t you see? You’d taken me to the point where I felt totally exposed and I couldn’t cope with it. It was wrong, I was wrong, and I realized that very quickly after you’d left.”

He reached out to brush her mouth with his thumb, but she moved her chin away, her deep blue eyes questioning and wary.

“You hurt me badly, Andreas. I’d been hoping you’d feel more for me than that, but—”

“So why didn’t you stick up for yourself, Kizzy? It wasn’t like you to just do exactly as I said and walk away—it completely threw me.”

“There didn’t seem much point in fighting,” she replied quietly. “You clearly couldn’t stand the sight of me and...and...I always knew in my heart that I could

never force you to care for me. However much I wanted you to.”

She twisted her feet awkwardly in the dry soil; she had frightened herself by almost using the word love.

“It was always going to be safer for me to be independent anyway.” Her voice was brittle, steeling herself for the inevitable good-bye. “Safer and tidier to make my own way, and not rely on anyone but myself.”

“I want you to listen to me now, Kizzy,” Andreas said seriously. “And I want you to think very carefully before you say anything. Agreed?”

Kizzy nodded, her heart thundering with the bewildered pain of not knowing what was going to happen next.

“I spent a long time alone in that tower. It was so painful going over everything in my head that sometimes I would just say it all out loud, like a madman, to face up to what I had done and what I needed to do to. But I soon realized, once I’d swallowed my pride and arrogance, that there’s a gaping hole in my life without you. A chasm that no end of painting or successful court cases can ever breach.”

Kizzy pulled the water canister away from him and attempted to straighten the buckled lid as the water heaved about inside.

“This is such a mess, isn’t it?”

Andreas gently took her chin between his fingers and forced her to look him in the eye. “What’s the point in me trying to make life better for others when my own life is in tatters?” He saw tears brimming at the edge of her lashes. “I suddenly saw that, in time, without you, I would end up wandering the world, spending endless days in courtrooms and conferences and my nights in miserable, lonely hotel rooms. I would

never stop wondering where you were, who you were with, what our baby looked like.”

“There would never be another man, you must know that,” Kizzy exclaimed.

A look of agony crossed his face. “I can’t lose you, Kizzy. I never want to let you go again. This time away from you has been more painful than any bereavement. You were right when you said my sister’s death wasn’t my fault, but sending you away, hurting you—well, that was my fault. Everything went so dark, and I apologize for that, for my actions, my words.”

He let his hand fall.

She stared at the ground, wet-eyed, scraping her sandal in the dust.

“The sun comes out when you’re around, agape mou,” he said softly, watching her. “I don’t know how you did it, but you took my pain and guilt away with your laughter and kisses. You showed me that we have so much to live for, and that sometimes bad things just happen; it doesn’t have to be somebody’s fault.”

He forged ahead, hoping against hope that she would forgive him. “But now I want my future back. A future with you, our children, our horses, our cats. I want it more ferociously than anything I’ve ever wanted before. I know it’s going to be the biggest battle of my life to convince you that I love you. I’ve behaved like a bastard toward you. Now somehow I’ve got to capture your heart and make you love me back.”

Kizzy let the canister finally drop with a dull thud. “I can’t—”

“Wait!” He dragged his cell phone out of his pocket and started urgently unfolding a piece of paper. “You want to travel, I understand that, and I won’t stop you. You can have the jet, the yacht, the car. But everyone needs roots, a place to return to, somewhere to call home and a nursery with a rocking horse.”

He thrust a document toward her and held his breath as she began to look at it.

“Those are the plans I’ve been working on,” he said, barely daring to hope. “Look, there are stables, grazing, and hectares to gallop across. An enormous swimming pool, a vineyard, a wooden playground for the little one. You can have all the

freedom you want. You can come, go, stay, do as you please. All I ask is that you visit me as often as you can. As often as you want to, and that—that you call this place your home.”

“It looks beautiful,” Kizzy stammered, looking up from the plans. “But it’s all too much.”

“I’m not going to let you say good-bye, I won’t let you, I can’t. Listen, everyone has to have somewhere to call home. Even you. You don’t realize it now but when you’ve wandered around as much as I have, you’ll see that I’m right. And besides, once you’ve chosen your horses, they will miss you...” He swallowed painfully. “I’ll wait for you. For as long as it takes.”

Quickly, he showed her a photograph on his cell phone. “I bought the island last week. The building work can be finished and ready before the baby comes if we start soon.” He flicked to another photograph. “And here’s the new canvas, an impression of our dream home, and this time it is something beautiful—totally inspired by my love for you. Or at least it will be if you say yes.”

“Andreas,” Kizzy began unevenly as she studied the picture with blurred eyes, “I don’t believe this is—”

He was suddenly breathless with dread that she would turn him down, walk away again. “It was wrong of me to try to force you into marrying me, so let’s forget all about that. All that I ask is that our child bear my name, Baby Lazarides.”

“No,” Kizzy replied rigidly, tears now trickling down her face. “That’s just not good enough.”

She shushed him as agony streaked across his features and he tried to interrupt.

“Let me finish, please. It’s not good enough because I love you more than anything

on this earth and—and I want your name too. I want to be Mrs. Lazarides. I want strings attached, legal ties, and never-ending roots. So,” she placed her palm flat over his pounding heart and stared purposefully into his eyes, “I think it’s time we started to do things properly. Will you marry me, Andreas Lazarides?”

“I have no choice, Miss Dean,” Andreas replied with a slow incredulous smile, and his heart soared with joy as he closed the most important deal of his life, binding them both together, forever, with a kiss.