



Annie West

The Greek's

FORBIDDEN
INNOCENT

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MODERN

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Аннотация

The Greek's virgin bride.....is hiding her royal identity! While helping her friend escape an arranged marriage dutiful Princess Mina finds herself captive on enigmatic Alexei Katsaros's luxurious private island! Mina must convince Alexei that she's his future bride—but she doesn't expect their scorching chemistry to be so deliciously overwhelming... And after a night in the Greek's bed suddenly there's more at stake than just Mina's hidden identity—her heart's at Alexei's mercy too!

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Escape to an island paradise with the billionaire and his royal bride!

Growing up near the beach, **ANNIE WEST** spent lots of time observing tall, burnished lifeguards—early research! Now she spends her days fantasising about gorgeous men and their love lives. Annie has been a reader all her life. She also loves travel, long walks, good company and great food. You can contact her at annie@annie-west.com or via PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW 2282, Australia.

[Also by Annie West](#)

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The Greek's Forbidden Innocent

Annie West

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This story is for Helen Sibbritt

Thank you so much for your enthusiasm,
support and never-failing good cheer!

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CHAPTER ONE

‘TAKE A DEEP BREATH, Carissa, and tell me slowly.’ Mina held her friend’s shoulders tight. ‘And another.’ She nodded encouragingly as Carissa’s breathing grew more normal. ‘That’s better.’

While Carissa focused on her breathing, Mina’s gaze searched for the source of her friend’s distress. But there was nothing unusual in the entry to the other woman’s apartment. No blood. No disarray. No intruder. Just a large pink suitcase.

Yet something was definitely wrong. Carissa, the most easygoing person she knew, had grabbed Mina before she could open the door to her own apartment and yanked her in next door. There was real fear in Carissa’s china-blue eyes.

‘Come and sit and tell me about it.’

‘No!’ Carissa shook her head and a cloud of golden curls spilled around her shoulders. ‘There’s no time. They’ll be here soon. *But I don’t want to go. I can’t go.*’ Tears filled her eyes as her voice wobbled. ‘I want Pierre! But he’s not here in Paris. He’s abroad.’

That at least made sense. Pierre was Carissa’s boyfriend.

‘Don’t fret. No one’s going to make you go anywhere you don’t want to.’ Mina kept her voice calm, ushering her friend into the small sitting room and gently pushing her into a seat. Carissa’s whole body shook and her face was stark white.

Mina had received enough bad news herself to recognise shock. Her mother had died when she was young and just five years ago, when she was seventeen, her father had died unexpectedly from a brain aneurism.

Memories stirred of that terrifying time, held hostage in a palace coup after her father's funeral. Then her sister Ghizlan's sacrifice, forced to wed the coup leader, Huseyn, so he could become Sheikh. It seemed a lifetime away from Mina's life now in France.

'Tell me what's up so I can help.' Mina pulled a chair close and took Carissa's hands. Her face was, for the first time Mina could recall, bare of make-up and her shirt wasn't buttoned right. For Carissa this was a fashion catastrophe. More like Mina's usual look than her own.

Mina's frown deepened. 'Has someone hurt you?'

Her stomach clenched as she remembered the day of the coup, the drench of icy fear as a soldier manhandled her, stopping her escape with brutal efficiency. She recalled the adrenalin rush galvanising her to fight back. It was the first time anyone had laid a hand on her. The first time she'd become aware of the sheer, physical power men could exert over women. Until then, Mina's royal status had protected her.

Carissa was trusting and gentle, always looking for the best in people. If someone had taken advantage of her—

'No, it's nothing like that.'

Mina's shoulders sagged. Relief rushed through her. In the

years they'd studied together at a prestigious Paris art school, and since, she'd never seen Carissa distraught like this.

'So who is coming? Where don't you want to go?'

Carissa's bottom lip quivered and she blinked hard.

'Alexei Katsaros is sending someone. They'll take me to his private island.' A shudder ran through her. 'But I don't want to go. I can't. Even when Dad told me about it, I never thought it would actually *happen*! You have to help me, Mina. Please.'

Mina's worry eased and with it her frantic heartbeat. Not a life-and-death situation, then. She knew who Alexei Katsaros was. Who didn't? He was a megawealthy IT entrepreneur. Carissa's father was one of his executives.

'Is it an invitation to visit your father? I'm sure Pierre would spare you for a short vacation.'

Carissa shook her head. 'This isn't a vacation. It's an arranged marriage! Dad told me he hoped to organise it but I never thought he'd bring it off. Alexei Katsaros can have his pick of women.'

Mina said nothing. Carissa was extraordinarily pretty and sweet-natured. That, plus her innate desire to please, would appeal to lots of men.

'I can't go through with it, Mina.' Carissa's fingers bit into hers. 'I could never love a man like that, so hard and judgemental. He wants a trophy wife, who'll do what he wants when he wants. My father's told him I'm pretty and biddable and...' Her shoulders shook as the tears became sobs. 'I never thought it would come to this. It seemed impossible, laughable. But I don't have a choice.'

My father's *counting* on me.'

Mina frowned. Arranged marriages she knew about. If her father had lived he'd have organised one for her.

'I'm sure no one will force you into anything.' Unlike in Jeirut. Her sister had been forced into an unwanted marriage and Mina remembered feeling utterly helpless at being unable to prevent it. It had been a miracle when, against the odds, the pair later fell in love. The match had seemed doomed to end in misery. 'Your father will be there. If you explain—'

'But he's *not* there,' Carissa wailed. 'I don't know where he is. I can't contact him. And I can't say no to Mr Katsaros. Dad warned me there'd been some trouble at work. He didn't say what, but I think his job's on the line. He's hoping this marriage will smooth everything over.' Carissa clung to Mina's hands, her fingers curling into talons. 'But I could never marry such a hard man. He has a new woman every week. Besides, Pierre and I are in love. We're getting married.' A flicker of happiness transformed her teary features.

'You're getting married?' Mina stared. She shouldn't be surprised; the pair were besotted.

Carissa's smile died. 'We were planning to elope next weekend, when he's back from this business trip. Pierre says it will be easier to face his family with a *fait accompli*.'

Pierre rose in Mina's estimation. He was a lovely guy but he'd never stood up to his stiff-necked family who wanted him to marry someone from old French money.

‘But I can’t marry him if I’m forced to marry Alexei Katsaros!’ Carissa’s tears overflowed.

‘Did Katsaros *say* he wanted to marry you?’

‘As good as. He said my father had told him about me and he was anxious to meet. He believed we’d find a lot in common and that we had a future together.’ Carissa bit her lip. ‘I tried to fob him off but he didn’t hear a word I said. He cut me off and said his staff would be here in an hour to collect me. What will I do?’

Mina frowned. She didn’t like the sound of this. He might be rich but that didn’t excuse rudeness or give him the right to order Carissa around.

‘Tell me again exactly what your father told you.’

But as Carissa spoke, Mina’s hope that her friend had overreacted dissolved. There’d recently been a rift between her father and his employer. After years of faithful service it seemed Katsaros might dump him. Mina couldn’t approve of Mr Carter’s plan to use Carissa to cement his position, but such things happened. Several of Mina’s peers in Jeirut had been married to older men they barely knew to strengthen family or business links.

She gritted her teeth, watching Carissa’s hands flutter as she related the one-sided conversation with Alexei Katsaros. He hadn’t invited Carissa to his island hideaway but simply informed her of the travel arrangements. As if she were freight to be transported, not a woman with a life of her own.

Mina’s temper rose like steam from a kettle.

She prized her freedom, appreciating how different her life was in Paris, away from a world where every major decision was made by the male head of her family. Western women accepted freedom as their right, not knowing how precious that was. And here was some billionaire bully, trying to snatch that from Carissa. With the help of her own father!

It wasn't right.

'And there's nothing I can do.' Carissa sniffled.

'Of course there is. They can't force you onto the plane. Or into marriage.'

'I can't not go. What about my father's job?' She hiccupped. 'But if I go, what about Pierre? His family will find a way to stop our wedding.'

Mina wanted to tell Carissa to grow a backbone and stand up for herself. But Carissa wasn't made that way. Besides, she cared for her father, though he'd got her into this mess. Plus it sounded, from other things she'd said, as if Mr Carter hadn't recovered from his wife's recent death. That might explain why he'd slipped up at work. A good employer would make allowances for grief. Mina suspected Alexei Katsaros was a domineering tyrant, considering no one but himself.

Irresistibly, her thoughts dragged back to those fraught days after her father's death. Her future and her sister's had hung in the balance, their fate determined by a man with little sympathy for their hopes and wishes.

Mina remembered the horror of being utterly powerless.

She refused to let Carissa become a chattel to buy her father out of trouble, or satisfy Katsaros's desire for a convenient, biddable wife.

'I've packed a bag. I can't reach my father, so I'll have to go. But it means leaving Pierre.' Carissa wrung her hands and Mina felt something snap inside.

Carissa was sweet but she had as much grit as a marshmallow. Between them, Katsaros and Carter could herd her into a marriage that would make her miserable for the rest of her life. Mina couldn't change her friend into a woman who'd look a thug in the eye and send him packing, or tell her father he couldn't marry her off to a stranger. But she *could* delay things long enough for Carissa and Pierre to marry. A few days, a week at most.

'How long before they collect you?'

Carissa's answer was drowned by a sharp rap on the door. She gasped and grabbed Mina's hands.

The last shred of doubt fled Mina's brain as she read her friend's terror and despair. Carissa was a pushover, but Mina wasn't.

She got to her feet.

* * *

'Still no sign of Carter, sir. He hasn't been home.'

Alexei's grip tightened on the phone and he ground his teeth in frustration. But he refrained from chewing out the head of his London office. It wasn't MacIntyre's fault Carter had done

a bunk. Alexei should have acted sooner, but initially he hadn't wanted to believe Carter's guilt. The man had been at his side for years, the only person Alexei really trusted.

That was why his betrayal cut so deep. Trust came hard to Alexei. He'd seen his mother betrayed and cast aside, made into a victim and her life shortened, because she trusted too easily.

Alexei bore a lot of the blame. He'd been gullible, falling for his stepfather's charm, believing the man genuinely cared. He'd persuaded his mother to let the guy into their lives. Too late they discovered he'd only cultivated Alexei to get to his mother and her dead husband's insurance payment.

No one could accuse Alexei of gullibility now.

That was what made it so remarkable that, despite his caution, he'd come to believe in Carter. It wasn't just his way with numbers. His almost uncanny knack for identifying problems and possible solutions. It was his reticence, his scrupulous separation of business and personal life. He'd been the perfect executive.

Until his double-dealing came to light.

Alexei felt that sucker punch of betrayal. Worse this time because he should have known better. He was no innocent kid.

'Keep me informed. Have the investigator check in daily.'

'Yes, sir. Of course, sir.'

Alexei ended the call and scraped a hand through his hair, telling himself he'd grown soft. He should have acted sooner. Now he had to play catch-up.

He swung round to pace, ignoring the turquoise water and

white sand beyond the window. He didn't want to be in the Caribbean, no matter how restful his private retreat. He wanted to be wherever Carter was. The man's depredations had been deep. Not enough to destabilise Alexei's business but enough to send a ripple of disquiet through anyone savvy enough to discover Alexei had been duped.

Despite his policy of employing the best, most innovative people in the industry, Alexei Katsaros *was* his company as far as the market was concerned. He'd worked hard to establish one of the world's leading software companies and build a reputation as a canny entrepreneur. His nose for success was only rivalled by his company's groundbreaking IT solutions. News of his fallibility would crack that image and damage his company's position.

Damn Carter. Where was he hiding?

Alexei slammed to a halt as he heard a vehicle through the open window.

At last. The ace up his sleeve.

Alexei breathed deep, easing cramped lungs, assuring himself that now, *finally*, he had the upper hand.

He crossed to the window and watched as the four-wheel drive pulled up. The driver's door opened but before Henri could get out the front passenger door swung open and someone alighted.

Alexei's brow twitched into a frown. That couldn't be her. He waited for the rear door to open but it stayed steadfastly shut. Henri walked ponderously to the rear of the vehicle and pulled

out a single suitcase of candy pink.

That was all. One suitcase and one passenger, though not the passenger he expected.

Alexei's frown became a scowl. The call from Paris had assured him that she'd been collected from her apartment and deposited on his jet. Yet surely this wasn't Carter's daughter. He'd expected a fashion tragic with mountains of luggage.

His gaze rested on the svelte figure of a woman who stood, hands on her hips and head back, surveying his home. Far from being addicted to high-end fashion as he'd been led to believe, she wasn't dressed in designer casuals for a tropical island holiday, but for...what? A yoga class? An artist's garret?

Understanding took root. *That* was it.

Carter, when he'd raised the preposterous idea of a match between Alexei and his daughter, had waxed voluble about the girl he'd never mentioned in years of employment. He'd wittered on about her beauty and charm, her sweet disposition and eagerness to please. And her aspirations to be an artist in between shopping. She lived in Paris, playing at an artistic career, no doubt funded by the money Carter had embezzled from Alexei.

Pain radiated from Alexei's jaw down his neck to his tight shoulders.

He yanked his thoughts from Carter's crimes to the man's daughter.

She took her pretensions seriously. Or perhaps the outfit was

for his benefit, though surely it wasn't designed to please a man. Flat black shoes, black leggings and an oversized black T-shirt that gaped over one shoulder.

Definitely not Alexei's style. He preferred a woman who dressed like a woman.

Yet even as he dismissed Carissa Carter as not his type, his gaze lingered on the length of shapely legs silhouetted in black. Long legs, the sort of legs he'd enjoy wrapped around his waist during sex.

His gaze flicked higher, skimming her slight figure. He supposed, in the right gear, she'd be a perfect clothes horse, but personally he preferred a woman whose curves were more abundant.

Then the tilt of her head altered and he found himself face-to-face with her.

She was too far away for him to make out her features properly. Just good bone structure and dark hair pulled ruthlessly back into a bun. He had the impression of a wide, mobile mouth, but he wasn't paying attention. His thoughts were on the sudden throb pulsing through his belly.

It couldn't be attraction. Not for the daughter of a criminal. A woman whose lifestyle had probably fed her father's depredations. He had no proof Carissa Carter knew of her father's crimes, but she'd benefited. Maybe she'd been in on the scheme, eager to fund her easy life in Paris. Alexei couldn't trust her. He'd play the part of eager suitor, pretending he was in the

market for a wife.

As if he needed a third party to find him a woman!

He stared back at her, expecting her to duck her head and pretend not to see him.

Instead she stood motionless, watching as if *he* were under the microscope. It was a curious feeling. Alexei was used to people inclining their heads in agreement or deference. Except women, who tended to stare.

Carissa's bold regard was something altogether different. It sent heat skittering down his spine, drawing every sense to hyperalert.

Finally, after she'd looked her fill, she turned to Henri. Alexei caught a flash of white teeth as she smiled but it was the coltish grace of her movements that held his attention. There was a fluidity to her supple body that reminded him of a Russian ballet dancer with whom he'd once shared a fiery affair. Alexei recalled not only the dancer's grace but her athleticism and body awareness that had taken sexual pleasure to a new level.

He watched Carissa Carter saunter towards his house. Shoulders back, head up, yet she didn't march. Instead that loose-limbed stroll was a symphony of sensual femininity.

For his benefit?

Of course.

His guest might play at being the bohemian artist, but if she was her father's daughter, she'd have her eye on the main game, getting Alexei's money.

For the first time since he'd learned of Carter's betrayal, Alexei smiled.

He didn't want the woman here, except as bait to draw her father. The fact she'd accepted his summons told him she'd sell herself into marriage with a man she didn't even know. Though she knew the size of his bank balance. That regularly featured in rich lists around the world.

It could be amusing watching her try to seduce him.

CHAPTER TWO

MINA KNEW ABOUT WEALTH. She'd been born royal. But her family riches and privilege were tied to duty, responsibility and service. The palace where she'd grown up had been the nerve centre for her country's administration.

This was pure sybaritic indulgence.

As if it wasn't enough to own a tropical island rimmed with beaches so white they looked like sugar frosting, Alexei Katsaros's home was the last word in luxury. The pool wrapped around the house so every room looked out on water. There was a bar actually in the pool too, so he and his guests wouldn't have to stir from the water to get a drink.

Four-poster daybeds were scattered around the pool, their gauzy hangings romantic and alluring. Her artist's eye appreciated the cushions in turquoise, teal and jade that reflected the vibrant shades of the tropical garden and the sea beyond. Then there were the sculptures in pale stone, which she glimpsed through the greenery. She itched to detour and investigate.

Forcibly she yanked her attention back to the house. The huge entry door stood open. Beside her, Henri waited for her to precede him.

Strange, this momentary hesitation.

All the way from Paris she'd been buoyed by indignation on Carissa's behalf. Now though, Mina knew an uncharacteristic

moment of doubt. A wariness at odds with her practice of facing problems head-on.

Her impulsiveness, her father would have said.

Why? Mina wasn't overawed by Katsaros's wealth, or cowed by any threat he could make.

Yet for a moment, as her gaze locked on the big man watching her from inside, something unfamiliar quivered through her. Something starkly unsettling.

An inner voice urged her to flee while she had the chance.

Of course she lifted her chin and stared right back instead.

The bright bowl of azure sky above her seemed to drop lower, the air thickening as she drew a slow, steadying breath. Still, he held her gaze.

Her bloodstream fizzed, making her fingers and the soles of her feet tingle. For a second she wondered if she'd been hit by a bolt of lightning out of the clear sky, till reason told her that was impossible.

Deliberately she turned away, feigning interest in her surroundings. Yet the image imprinted on her retinas wasn't the white mansion with its picture windows, but the powerfully built man whose eyes locked on her. Everything about him, from his wide-set stance to that deep, muscled chest revealed by his open shirt, screamed strength.

Well, Mina was strong too. No bossy tycoon would intimidate her.

Nodding to Henri, she headed for the door.

She was greeted by Henri's wife, Marie, whose smiling eyes and lilting accent made Mina relax in spite of herself.

‘Alexei is eager to meet you but perhaps you’d like to freshen up first?’

Mina smiled and shook her head. The flight by private jet had been far from onerous. ‘Thank you, but no. I’m eager to meet my host.’

‘How...charming.’ The deep voice came from beyond Marie. Its cadence drew Mina’s skin tight, as if someone dragged a length of rich velvet across it. A shimmer of heat flared low in her body and she had to work to keep her expression bland.

Slowly, so slowly she seemed to feel each muscle and joint move, she turned her head towards the shadows.

Never had Mina been more grateful for her royal upbringing. She’d spent seventeen years learning to look composed and calm, even if she’d never quite mastered regal. At twelve she’d sat on podiums listening to interminable speeches. At fifteen she’d held her own at royal dinners. Her polite interest expression could fool everyone but her sister.

Which meant the man watching her through narrowed eyes had no idea she felt as if someone had sliced the tendons at the backs of her legs.

Mina’s knees shook for the merest instant before she stiffened them, but her cool smile remained steady. As for the sizzle in her blood, no one else knew about that.

She waited for him to frown and say she wasn’t Carissa Carter.

Yet he simply stared down at her from his superior height. Could it really be that he didn't know what Carissa looked like? That flaw in her plan had kept her awake on the flight from Europe. Yet, against the odds, it appeared he didn't. So sure of himself. Arrogant enough to expect everyone to obey his every whim. So unquestioning.

Mina let her mouth curve slightly. 'Mr Katsaros. How lovely to meet you at last.'

'At *last*, Ms Carter? You've been waiting to meet me? Surely your trip was admirably quick?' His hint of indolent surprise and the tilt of one slashing eyebrow gave him an air of smug superiority.

'Oh, it was.' Mina looked down and flicked lint from her sleeve. 'Admirably so. Why, I didn't even have time to check my diary for commitments that might clash before I was whisked away. Or to arrange for someone to keep an eye on my apartment.'

She let her brow pucker in a frown. 'I hope the fruit I bought doesn't spoil while I'm away. And the milk.' She let her smile widen. 'But I understand. I'm sure you're used to wanting something and having it happen immediately. No time to waste on boring niceties like invitations or queries about whether the dates suited me.'

Below his rumpled black hair grooves corrugated that wide brow. Mina raised her hand. 'Not that it matters. I know how terribly valuable your time is. After all, what could I *possibly* have

scheduled that could be nearly as important?"

From behind her Mina heard a snuffle from Henri that sounded suspiciously like a stifled laugh. Then he excused himself, murmuring something about putting her luggage away and prudently followed his wife down a corridor.

Which left Mina alone with Alexei Katsaros.

He didn't even seem to notice Marie and Henri leave. All his attention was on Mina.

If she were in the mood to feel fear it would have swamped her now, for the man watched her with the hyperawareness of a hunter. Then there was the sheer size of him, not only tall but well-built, all muscled strength beneath those straight shoulders. She'd caught a glimpse of a well-developed chest and taut abdominals that confirmed this man did far more than sit behind a desk, making money. His thighs beneath the faded jeans were those of a skier or a horseman, honed hard and strong.

Without taking his eyes off her, he slowly finished buttoning his white shirt. Then he tucked it into his faded jeans with a casual insouciance utterly at odds with the speculative gleam in his dark eyes.

Mina's manufactured smile solidified as he took his time shoving the material down, his hand disappearing behind the denim. For reasons she couldn't fathom the sight of him dressing made her pulse quicken. Her palm prickled as if her own hand slid down that flat abdomen.

'I'm sorry, did my arrival wake you?' The snap in her words

betrayed her discomfort but Mina compensated for it by slowly taking stock of his tousled black hair and the dark shadow of beard growth across that solid jaw.

His hands fell to his sides and he stepped out of the shadows. The light hit sharply defined cheekbones, a well-shaped mouth and a stern blade of nose, down which he surveyed her. Mina was reminded of precious icons she'd seen. But whereas those old saints had looked flat and unreal, this man exuded raw energy and the glint in his dark eyes was anything but unworldly. Alexei Katsaros was too...physical for sainthood. With his imposing size and posture he could model for a cavalry officer from a previous century, supercilious and deadly in a bright uniform, with a sabre at his side.

Mina repressed the warm shiver that started at the base of her spine and threatened to crawl, vertebra by vertebra, up her back.

'You know you didn't wake me. We watched each other.' His voice was both rough and dangerously soothing.

Mina couldn't explain it but he made the simple words sound almost indecent. As if they'd been naked at the time, or as if she'd watched him doing something—

'So, you're concerned about your groceries, is that right?' One dark eyebrow rose and it took a second for Mina to follow the change of subject. She was still lost in a hazy daydream of Alexei Katsaros stripping his shirt away and reaching for the button on his jeans. 'I can have one of my staff deal with your apartment, Ms Carter, since I put you to such inconvenience.'

Mina wrenched her thoughts back to the man before her. The man whose satisfied smile told her he knew he'd unsettled her. Whose tone conveyed that she'd managed to needle him with her pointed comments about being dragged away.

'That's very kind, Mr Katsaros.' She blinked up at him, mimicking Carissa, then thought better of it. She'd never batted her eyelashes in her life and wasn't about to start.

'Something in your eye, Ms Carter?' Not by a whisker did he betray a smile yet Mina knew he laughed at her.

To her surprise, Mina had to stifle a smirk of her own. He was right. She couldn't pull off such feminine wiles. She was better to stick at being herself.

'Sand, probably.' She blinked again. 'My own fault. I insisted on driving with the window down to enjoy the breeze.'

Carissa would have shrieked at the thought of her hair getting messed up, but Alexei Katsaros didn't know that. Mina would have to get by with pretending to be a Mina version of Carissa. Less fluttery and uncertain, less overtly feminine, less willing to be bullied.

'Thank you for the offer to take care of my apartment but I prefer not to have my home taken over by strangers. I'm sure you understand.'

He understood all right. His smugness fled as he registered that she referred to his staff who'd politely yet inexorably ushered her from Carissa's flat.

'My staff disturbed you? You felt threatened in some way?'

His voice was sharp.

Had he really thought she'd be happy, herded by armed bodyguards?

Mina remembered Carissa's tears and frantic fear. How would she have coped, confronting those big men with cold eyes and suave suits?

They'd been impeccably solicitous but Mina read in them the same quality she'd seen in her father's royal guards. Beneath the polish were men trained to use force. If she'd refused to go, they'd have bundled her onto that private jet without a qualm.

'Oh, I didn't feel at all threatened by anyone else while I was with them.' She paused, letting him absorb her words. Would he understand *they'd* been the threat?

His expression didn't alter.

Clearly he had no idea how frightening it was for a woman not used to close personal protection to have stony-faced men wearing shoulder holsters usher her into an anonymous vehicle.

Suddenly weary, Mina suppressed a sigh. What was the point? He wouldn't care even if he understood.

'Your staff were polite and incredibly...efficient. I'm sure no express parcel could have been delivered to your door more quickly.'

She looked away, letting her gaze rove the white marble foyer, taking in the carved Cycladic figurine in a niche on the far wall. Mina's pulse quickened with interest but she couldn't afford to be distracted. Slowly she turned back to her host, whose hands,

she noticed, were bunched in fists at his sides.

He stepped forward and Mina's nape prickled. This close she realised those intent eyes were a stunning dark green, opaque and intriguing. She'd never seen the like. Momentarily she was mesmerised. Then she dragged her thoughts back to their conversation.

'I prefer to make my own arrangements, Mr Katsaros. I'm sure you understand.'

* * *

Alexei understood all right.

He was being taken to task by a woman who didn't know she was playing with fire. Or did she believe she could set her own rules because he contemplated marriage?

That had to be it. There was no other explanation.

He'd wondered if Carter's daughter was a spoiled princess. As far as he could tell, she'd lived for years off her father's, and by extension his own, largesse, while enjoying a dilettante's life.

Now he had his answer. Carissa Carter was used to getting her own way. Spoiled rotten, he had no doubt. Her father had led her to expect an advantageous match and she seemed sure it would happen.

Yet her words disturbed him. Had she really been frightened of his security staff? Alexei barely noticed them now, just considered them a normal part of life.

He stared down at the woman who continued to surprise him. It wasn't only her plain outfit, or the accent that wasn't quite as

he'd heard it over the phone, but then there'd been interference on the line. He'd imagined someone more eager to ingratiate herself. More overtly charming.

Carissa Carter was more complex than he'd imagined.

She was confident yet not in the way of a woman used to trading on male admiration. She carried herself with an intrinsic elegance that, when she looked down that straight nose at him, bordered on condescension. That intrigued. As did the intelligence shining in those sherry-coloured eyes and in the snarky undercurrent of her conversation.

He'd imagined Carter's daughter more eminently dismissible. The man had said her nature was sweet rather than incisive and that she wasn't cut out for business. Alexei had assumed she was pretty but vacuous.

How wrong he'd been.

Nor was she as he'd expected her to look. He saw no resemblance to Carter in her dark hair, luminous eyes or expressive mouth. Her skin was golden, not pale, and she met his gaze with a direct curiosity that, at any other time, he'd appreciate.

It evoked a hungry gnawing in the pit of his belly, a reminder that, despite his preoccupation with her father, Alexei was a vigorous man with healthy appetites.

He drew a slow breath, marshalling his thoughts, and was fascinated to see that, despite her sugared verbal barbs, Carissa Carter wasn't immune to him after all. Her eyes tracked the

rise of his chest, her pupils dilating as if mesmerised. Then she blinked and turned away, feigning indifference.

Satisfaction stirred. He'd disliked her jabs about the way he'd got her here, had even felt a stirring of remorse. Seeing that chink in her armour pleased him.

'How remiss of me to keep a guest standing in the foyer.' Alexei smiled and watched a tiny wrinkle appear above the bridge of her nose, as if she concentrated on not reacting. Fascinating.

'Won't you come in?' He stood aside and gestured for her to precede him into the main sitting room.

'Thank you.' She inclined her head in the slightest nod.

Alexei caught a hint of perfume as she passed. Another surprise. He'd expected some expensive designer scent but this was one he'd never encountered. Instead of florals or cloying sweetness, she'd chosen a fragrance that hinted at the exotic Near East. Alexei inhaled cinnamon and spice and a warm, earthy richness that made him think, bizarrely, of veiled temptresses in gauzy silks. He canted towards her.

Fortunately she didn't notice. She entered the sitting room with that leisurely, swaying stroll that spoke of casual confidence. As if she were accustomed to a billionaire's luxury lifestyle. But then, given her father's thievery...

He watched as she caught sight of the ancient sculpture against one wall. The torso of a young man, the musculature and veining of chest and arms superbly executed, the filmy fabric of his tunic

the work of a master. She stiffened and drew a sharp breath. A second later she stood before the ruined masterpiece, her hand stretching momentarily towards it before dropping to her side.

‘It’s magnificent.’ There was genuine awe in her words. Alexei recognised it. He felt the same way about the piece.

His mouth twisted. Despite all expectation he found Carissa Carter...refreshing. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so tough pretending to be interested in her till her father arrived.

‘It was discovered at the bottom of the sea.’

As if his words broke the spell of artistic appreciation, she spun around, that oversized black T-shirt swirling wide. What did she look like beneath it? The rest of her was slim and beautifully formed.

‘You have a very nice home, Mr Katsaros.’ Her voice appealed too. It was low and musical. Not high and breathy as he recalled it from the phone call. Though he’d probably taken her by surprise with his invitation.

Alexei’s mouth tightened. She was right. It had been a demand, not an invitation. Carissa had made him sound brutish and that annoyed him. But the situation demanded a swift resolution. He didn’t have time for niceties.

Her eyebrows arched when he didn’t respond to her small talk. ‘Call me Alexei.’

‘Thank you, Alexei.’ Her voice slowed on his name and he felt the oddest sensation, as if she’d reached out one slim hand and trailed it down his chest, right to his belly. Abdominal muscles

clenched in response. 'Please, call me Carissa.'

'Carissa.' He tested the sibilant on his tongue and saw her eyes darken. The sight sent another ripple of awareness through him. She was definitely attracted. 'You have an interesting accent. Not the same as your father's.'

Intriguingly she stiffened as if he'd hit a weak point. It was the tiniest movement but unmistakable to a man who'd spent so long studying the vulnerabilities of business opponents.

'My father's accent is English. But we moved around a lot when I was young. I suppose mine's a hybrid.'

Alexei watched the unblinking way she held his gaze and wondered what she hid.

'Yours is interesting too.' She spoke quickly, clearly wanting to divert his attention.

Alexei was interested to find that despite his fixation on locating and punishing her father, his curiosity about Carissa increased by the moment.

He gestured for her to take a seat and sank down onto a leather lounge, crossing his ankles and leaning back.

'Russian mother, Greek father, moved to London as a kid.' He shrugged. 'Like yours, my accent's a hybrid.' More like mongrel, he silently corrected. He'd spent too long living precariously in places where the predominant language was that of the violent gangs who ruled through intimidation.

Silently Carissa nodded and sat opposite him. In contrast to her casual clothes her posture was graceful. With that long,

slender neck and perfect poise he was reminded again of a dancer sweeping into a low curtsy. He could picture a tiara on her smooth, dark hair and a sheaf of flowers in her arms.

‘Tell me, Carissa, have you heard from your father?’

‘He’s not here?’ Her expression flickered but too fast for him to read it.

‘No, but I’m expecting him soon.’ As soon as Ralph Carter heard his precious daughter was staying at Alexei’s private island he’d hotfoot it here, hoping the marriage he’d suggested would save him from Alexei’s wrath. If that didn’t work, Alexei had the perfect hostage to lure him from hiding.

‘I see.’ She chewed the corner of her mouth and then, as if aware of his scrutiny, offered a small smile. ‘That will be lovely.’ Once more her direct look suggested she hid something. What?

‘So you haven’t heard from him?’

‘No. He seems to have his phone switched off. Do you need to contact him urgently?’

Alexei fought impatience. His desire for retribution against the one person he’d actually *trusted* in decades hadn’t eased. Fury curdled his gut. He couldn’t believe he’d been foolish enough to let Carter con him.

‘Not at all. In the meantime we can get to know each other better.’ That prospect grew more enticing by the moment.

She shifted in her seat, her first overt sign of nervousness. Intrigued, Alexei took his time surveying her, his fingers tracing a lazy circle on the soft leather of his chair’s arm.

‘I want you to be happy here, Carissa. Let me know if there’s anything you want.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Alexei. For that matter, very kind of you to let me holiday here in this glorious place.’

She’d changed her tune. Fifteen minutes ago she’d been complaining about his staff and the speed with which he’d brought her here. What had changed?

Every sense stirred. He scented not fear but caution, as if Carissa suddenly felt out of her depth. Not so sure of herself after all?

She wasn’t his target; her father was. Yet that didn’t stop a frisson of satisfaction at the suggestion Ms high and mighty Carter had second thoughts about her situation. If she was cast in the same mould as her father, it would do her no harm to learn she couldn’t have everything her way. Especially if she’d spent the past few years living off money her father had stolen from Alexei.

‘Oh, I don’t consider it a kindness, given our special situation.’ She stilled. It looked as if she didn’t even breathe. ‘Our special situation?’

‘Of course.’ This time Alexei’s smile was genuine. ‘Since we’re marrying.’

CHAPTER THREE

MINA'S MOUTH DRIED as she watched a slow smile transform Alexei's face. It wasn't a polite expression of friendship or amusement. It was a wide grin that she could only describe as dangerous.

More than that. *Hungry*. As if he wanted to sink those strong white teeth into her flesh.

She shivered as heat licked through her. Disgust, of course. She wasn't some dish served up to satisfy his appetite.

Yet, on the thought, Mina realised her response wasn't so simple. A shiver drew her breasts tight till her nipples beaded. Astonished, she realised she was torn between annoyance and excitement.

As if she *wanted* to satisfy Alexei Katsaros's animal appetites. And hers, as well.

The realisation had her fingers clawing the arms of her chair as she fought the urge to reel back. As much at her own confusing reaction as at his overtly *masculine* perusal. He surveyed her like a man who'd just bought a woman.

She despised him. Yet despite her outrage, Mina felt a thrill of anticipation.

By the time she'd conquered her shock, there was no sign of that feral hunger in his expression. Had she imagined it?

Mina wasn't an expert on sex but she'd had her share of

admirers. Men whom she found it easy to resist. For some reason they were fine as friends, but when they wanted more, Mina didn't. Yet she knew what sexual interest looked like.

She couldn't see it in his face now.

'We've only just met.' Her tone was cool.

One dark eyebrow rose. 'It was your father's suggestion that we'd make a good match. He told me you'd agreed. Are you saying that's not the case?'

Mina swallowed, ignoring the sandpaper abrasion of her throat, and wondered how best to play for time. All the way here she'd told herself Carissa had been mistaken and that Alexei Katsaros couldn't want *marriage*. He didn't need to marry a stranger. He was rich, successful and good-looking.

Also impatient, determined and self-obsessed, if his idea of finding a wife was ordering her to his island and giving her no choice!

What had she landed herself in? Surely he hadn't brought her here for a wedding!

Shock jagged through her, stealing her breath. If so, then this masquerade would be over before it began. Mina forced herself to take a deep breath and think.

'He did mention a possible marriage, but...'

'But?'

'We don't know each other! I can't agree to marry someone I don't know.'

He said nothing, just crossed his arms, the movement drawing

Mina's attention to the depth of his broad chest and the muscled power of his biceps. He was a man whose physical size and fitness could daunt a woman who wasn't strong enough to stand up for herself.

'So you're here to what? Get to know me?'

'Is that so unreasonable?' Mina jumped on the idea like a lifeline. 'We're talking about a lifetime commitment.'

The hint of a smile flickered at the corner of Alexei's mouth. 'That's a refreshingly...old-fashioned view.'

Mina let her eyebrows climb. 'Marriage is a serious commitment. Why enter into one if you don't plan to make it work?' She wasn't sure why she didn't simply shrug off his comment. But marriage, like the right to make her own decisions, was something she felt strongly about. Her mother had married her country's Sheikh not for love but because her family decreed it. It hadn't been a happy match.

'I see your point.' Alexei nodded.

'So you understand I need time to determine if a marriage would work. Surely you want that too.'

'To assess if we're *compatible*?' Alexei didn't move, nor did his expression alter, yet the quality of that stare flicked a warning switch. Adrenalin surged in Mina's blood. Heat consumed her as if he'd surveyed every inch of her body with that searing scrutiny, instead of merely holding her gaze.

How did he do that?

More important, why did she react so?

Mina wasn't oblivious to men but she'd never been swept off her feet, or into bed, by one. Her history made her cautious about ceding control to any man. Before his death, her father had mapped out her life, giving her no choice, even about the clothes she wore and the subjects she studied. Since leaving Jeirut for Paris she'd devoted herself single-mindedly to art, determined to carve a career in the field she loved. The guys who tried to sidetrack her into a relationship had never caused a ripple in her world.

Now it wasn't a ripple she felt but an earth tremor.

Mina wouldn't let that daunt her.

She lifted one hand negligently. 'Before we worry about *compatible* perhaps we should start with finding out if we'd survive the marriage without killing each other.'

Alexei gave a crack of laughter. 'Good point, Carissa.' The light dancing in his eyes made him look completely different. Like someone she wanted to know.

Mina stiffened.

The first time she'd seen Alexei Katsaros, something happened that had never happened before. Her certainty had wavered and with it her confidence. Mina couldn't abide the idea of being tentative around him, like some gullible, awed girl. It was easier to confront him. She suspected if he exerted himself to be nice it would be too easy to feel the force of his charm.

Now, abruptly, as she met his smiling look, the events of the last twelve hours took their toll.

Exhaustion slammed into Mina. Despite her determination not to back down before this man, she felt herself slump. Adrenalin had kept her going. Now that dissipated, leaving her overtired limbs shaky and her head swimming.

She had to get out of here before she made a mistake. Mina was too weary to guard her tongue and thinking straight became harder by the second. This man with the piercing green eyes would trip her up, especially since she wasn't practised at lying.

If he discovered the truth, all this would have been for nothing. Carissa needed time to get away with Pierre and cover her tracks.

'I'm sorry, you'll have to excuse me.' Mina lifted her hand to cover a yawn, only to discover the fake yawn was real. 'I'm suddenly very tired.'

'You didn't sleep on the flight?' He looked surprised.

Mina shook her head. She'd been ushered onto the private jet late in the evening for the overnight flight to the Caribbean. But despite the comfortable bed, she'd had too much going on in her head to sleep.

'It's been a very long day.' She glanced at her watch, trying to calculate the time difference but to her surprise, her mind was too foggy. Tiredness and stress took their toll. 'I've been awake more than twenty-four hours.' And yesterday had been a long day, even before Carissa had dragged her into this mess. Or, to be fair, since she'd thrust herself into it to protect her friend.

Time to regroup before she said something she shouldn't.

Mina pinned on a smile, the multipurpose one she reserved

for royal meet and greets. She hadn't used it in years and it felt rusty. 'I'm sorry, Alexei, but I'll have to leave you for now.' She rose, surprised at the effort it took to stand tall. Her knees were unsteady, and for a second she swayed.

'Could you point me towards my room, please?'

He loomed before her, the beginnings of a frown creasing his forehead. 'You look pale.'

'I'm fine,' she lied. How many hours had it been since she'd eaten? She hadn't been in the mood for food on the plane, refuelling on coffee and lots of it, but now the caffeine had worn off and she felt as powerful as a dandelion in a strong wind. 'If you could show me the way?'

When Alexei didn't immediately answer, Mina swung round towards the entry, remembering Henri heading down a corridor from there.

As she turned, another wave of tiredness hit and her movements lost their usual precise control. Her foot caught the edge of the plush carpet.

She didn't trip or stagger, just paused, swaying as she caught her balance.

'I'll take you.' The deep voice came from beside her ear as, to her astonishment, Alexei bent and curled his arms around her back and legs. An instant later she was in the air. Or, more precisely, in his arms, pressed against a hot body that seemed to be all solid muscle.

Mina's breath stalled, then released on a shaky sigh at

how extraordinary this felt. No one had ever held her like this. She registered conflicting feelings: shock, pleasure and an unexpected desire to burrow closer. As if Alexei were someone she trusted. Or desired.

‘There’s no need.’ The words were crisp, at odds with the strange wobbly feeling in her middle. It was impossible to sit straighter and assert control when she lay in his arms, unable to get any purchase.

Alexei ignored her words, marching out of the room.

With each step Mina felt her body move against his in a swaying rhythm that was surprisingly appealing. In other circumstances...

In other circumstances this wouldn’t happen, ever.

‘Thank you for your consideration,’ she said between barely open lips. ‘But I prefer to walk.’

That made him pause. He angled his head to look down at her and Mina was bombarded with impressions. The hard perfection of his squared-off jaw. From this intriguing angle, it was a study in obstinate power. The soaring, proud cheekbones that spoke of ancient Slavic heritage. The flare of arrogant nostrils and the fly-away effect of his winged eyebrows. The steady pump of his heart against her ribs and the power of those iron-hard arms encircling her.

Something shivered to life in the pit of Mina’s belly. Something that grew as she inhaled a tempting cedar-and-citrus aftershave that melded with the hot, salt scent of male skin. Her

nostrils twitched appreciatively and the shiver amplified.

Astounded, Mina watched his eyes darken, the pupils dilating.

The world eclipsed to the dark mystery of that shadowy stare, heating her in all sorts of places.

When he spoke the sound vibrated from his chest into her body. She'd never experienced anything as intimate as his voice reverberating through her while his eyes devoured her.

'Relax. I'm not going to hurt you.'

Despite the certainty he wouldn't drop her, Mina couldn't ignore the inner voice screaming at her to get away. Being this close to Alexei Katsaros was perilous, whatever his stated intention.

'I prefer to walk. If you'll kindly put me down.' Tiredness vanished, replaced with quivering watchfulness.

'And have you trip and hurt yourself?' He shook his head, his rumpled locks swinging free. 'I wouldn't forgive myself.'

His tone was admirably sincere yet Mina read the tiny creases at the corners of his mouth and knew he was enjoying himself. Could he feel her heart hammer? She hated being vulnerable to him.

Before she could read any more, he looked away and began walking down the hall, carrying her easily, as if he carted unwilling women around every day.

Maybe he did.

'Contrary to what you might have heard, Mr Katsaros, women are capable of thinking for themselves. We don't appreciate he-

men making our decisions for us. I—'

'Is that what you think I am?' Annoyingly his pace didn't falter. 'What exactly does that mean?' His jaw jutted as he ruminated. 'Someone very masculine? Someone who sees an exhausted guest and looks after her so she doesn't hurt herself?'

Mina counted to ten. If she thought it would do any good, she'd struggle against his hold. But, though fit, she was no match for all that hard-packed muscle, especially given his superior size. He was well over six feet. If Alexei Katsaros didn't want to release her she couldn't make him. The knowledge infuriated her and she began stringing together curses in her own language that she couldn't say lest he wonder how she knew Arabic.

She forced her gaze away from that annoyingly superior chin, focusing on the play of light and shadow on the ceiling as they passed down the hall.

'After all,' he continued, 'as you pointed out so eloquently, it was my fault your trip was so...precipitate. If I'd been more conscious of your comfort I'd have organised for you to travel during the day, or ensured the bed on the plane was more comfortable. I'll have it replaced.'

'There's no need for that. The bed was quite comfortable.' Even to her ears her voice sounded thin. She held on to her temper by a tiny margin. All her life she'd been taught not to reveal anger. This time she dared not lose control because he'd see it as a victory.

'Then it's a wonder you didn't sleep. Perhaps—' she caught

movement in her peripheral vision and turned to see him send a teasing look her way ‘—you couldn’t sleep because you were excited about visiting me.’

Excited! About as excited as if she visited a zoo to see a rattlesnake. Mina sucked in a rough breath, then stilled as the movement made her more aware of Alexei’s big hand on her ribs, close to her breast.

‘Perhaps I didn’t sleep because I was busy contacting people to reschedule things for the period I’ll be away. Since I had no opportunity earlier.’ She slanted him a frosty stare only to find that smile lurking around his mouth.

‘Ah, yes, no doubt your agenda is full of priority appointments.’ His expression didn’t change but his tone revealed how unlikely he thought it.

Mina didn’t bother to disabuse him. She might not run a multinational corporation, but nor was she idle. As well as the exhibition she was preparing for, she volunteered with disabled kids and at a nearby nursing home, doing art therapy. Plus, there was some admin work at a women’s shelter, the latest design commission for the perfumery in Jeirut and another from a French company that had seen her perfume bottle designs and wanted something similar.

‘Mr Katsaros.’ Her patience was perilously close to failing. One more jibe and she’d forget her resolve. ‘I really must—
‘Alexei, remember?’ His voice rumbled through her like an intimate caress. It was the final straw.

‘Put. Me. Down.’ Her voice rose from request to imperious command. ‘Now!’

Mina caught a flash of white teeth, a glimpse of glinting eyes and suddenly the world fell away as she dropped from his arms.

‘As you wish, Princess.’ He spoke as she landed with a puff of expelled air on her back. She was on a bed, looking up into dark, laughing eyes. But Mina was too tired and stressed to be amused. She didn’t appreciate being the butt of his jibes or his arrogant certainty that her life was of negligible importance.

Mina jackknifed to a sitting position, swiping a cushion off the bed with one hand and throwing it in the same, fluid movement. She had the satisfaction of seeing it hit him square on his superior chin.

‘Be thankful that wasn’t anything heavier. My aim is as good as any man’s.’ She heaved a breath that, to her horror, felt far too shaky. ‘Now, if you’d have the decency to leave, I’d like to catch up on some much-needed sleep.’

* * *

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Alexei stalked away from the guest wing to the master suite.

What had got into him? Half an hour with Carissa Carter and he’d veered between anger, attraction, approval and amusement. And far too much of all of them. He always controlled his emotions; he wasn’t undercut by them.

He hadn’t expected to be impressed by Carter’s precious princess. He’d been ready to write her off as a pampered bimbo

who viewed the world through the prism of her greed for an easy life. Instead he'd discovered someone witty, incisive, challenging and sexy. Ridiculously sexy, given her defiantly unfeminine clothes.

On Carissa Carter even a baggy T-shirt and leggings made his hormones surge. And that mouth. She was sharp-tongued in a superior way that made him want to take her mouth and discover what sweetness lay beneath its cutting edge.

There was definitely sweetness. He'd been surprised, when he held her, at the fretful way her pulse raced. He'd been mesmerised by her contrary reactions as she pretended not to respond. Her breathing had quickened, her pupils dilated, and he'd read confusion beneath her scorn and defiance. Even her awe as she admired the sculpture in the sitting room had charmed him.

He'd lit from within at the feel of her, supple, streamlined and, he discovered, curved in the right places.

What would happen if he followed her down onto that bed? He couldn't remember the dark frenzy of desire ever being so immediate or urgent.

The very fact he'd thought about it was a concern. Did he really want an affair with Carter's daughter?

Logic demanded an unequivocal *no*. Instinct screamed *yes*.

Which was an excellent reason to pull back. Apart from the fact he didn't take advantage of vulnerable women.

Alexei rubbed a hand across his jaw as he entered his suite and

crossed to the window to stand staring across the infinity pool to the sea beyond.

Guilt trickled down his spine. Bad enough that there'd been a kernel of truth in Carissa's accusation about how he'd got her here. It had solidified into a jagged shard of ice when he'd heard the hint of a wobble in her voice as she stared up at him from her bed. She'd been flushed and furious and he'd revelled in his power to rile her, till he'd heard the tiny crack in her façade of superiority. Suddenly it hadn't seemed amusing.

It hit him that he'd behaved like a kid pulling a girl's pigtails, desperate to get her attention any way he could.

Him, desperate?

Hardly. Certainly not for the likes of Carissa Carter.

Except she wasn't as he'd expected.

He scraped his hand across his chin, feeling the stubble he hadn't bothered to shave. He shouldn't allow himself to be diverted by her. She was incidental to his plans.

But, pending Carter's arrival, there wasn't much he could do to bring those plans to fruition. Steps had been taken to contain the damage, and while Alexei checked in daily, working via computer and phone, his team was working hard.

Which gave him leisure to ponder his would-be bride.

Alexei's brow scrunched. Funny. He'd assumed Carissa would be eager to marry. Her father had come up with the idea, no doubt desperate to cement personal ties that would save him when his embezzlement came to light. The fact a woman in her

mid-twenties was willing to go along with such a plan pointed to her being venal, marrying for money and position.

Too many women had tried to tie him down. Not for love, but as their ticket to wealth and privilege. Alexei didn't fool himself into believing they were attracted by his character or sense of humour. Some were drawn by his looks but money was the deciding factor.

Yet Carissa hadn't given an unequivocal yes.

Why? Did she believe if he had to work for what he wanted, he'd appreciate her more? Because men enjoyed the chase?

He huffed a breath. Maybe she had something there. If she'd walked in the door and promptly agreed with everything his interest wouldn't have been piqued.

Except by that delectable body, which he'd discovered was curvier than he'd first thought.

Except for her intelligence and sensitivity.

Alexei shoved his fists in his pockets and rocked back on his feet, annoyed. He'd been so caught up in the need to draw Carter out of hiding, he hadn't bothered researching the man's daughter.

He'd acted rashly, driven by fury that the one person he'd trusted since his mother died had betrayed him.

That was a slashing wound that wouldn't heal till Carter was made to pay. It upset Alexei's equilibrium, evoking unwanted feelings that interfered with his decision-making.

It wasn't so much the money, but the personal affront of betrayal. The cold slap of horror that he'd let himself be gulled

into believing the man, *liking* him.

Carter had made a fool of him, conning him into giving his trust. Not just because of the man's work qualities.

But because Carter reminded him of his father.

Like Alexei's father, Carter appeared taciturn to outsiders, but his features broke into smiles when he mentioned his family. Uncannily, Carter also had a mannerism, a tilt of the head, that echoed Alexei's precious memories of the father who'd died when Alexei was six.

Then there was his utter devotion to his spouse. There'd been no mistaking the man's devastation when his wife was diagnosed with a terminal illness. His stoic determination to do all he could for her had touched a chord with Alexei. Plus there was that unexpected weakness for silly puns and his scrupulous honesty, both hallmarks of his dad.

Alexei shook his head. Scrupulous honesty!

For years Alexei's motto had been trust no one. He and his mother had suffered because they'd been taken in by a conman. After his stepfather there'd been others, loan sharks, employers, landlords, vultures who'd preyed on his vulnerable mother, turning her life into a misery till finally loss and disappointment crushed her.

Alexei scraped a hand across his jaw, dragging himself back to the present. To the woman in one of the guest suites.

He'd acted instinctively, securing her to give him an edge. He should have ordered a dossier on her so he knew something about

her before acting.

All he remembered from Carter's conversations was that she lived in Paris, where she'd attended an exclusive art school. She loved fashion and shopping and wasn't cut out for a commercial career. Alexei had gained the impression of a pampered airhead pretending to be an artist. A blonde airhead, he remembered from the photo Carter had waved before him and which he hadn't bothered to take in.

So Carissa Carter had dyed her hair. That was one extra fact about her.

Alexei considered ordering a full report on her. But why bother?

She was here. Whatever Alexei wanted to know, he'd find out for himself. He'd enjoy the process.

CHAPTER FOUR

MINA STARED AT the bathroom's enormous, full-length mirror and suppressed a groan. She looked like a stranger.

Carissa had said pink calmed her and made her feel centred. It was proof of how stressed she'd been that she'd packed only for her favourite colour. Almost everything in the case was pink. Candy pink, flesh pink, cerise, rose madder and more.

Mina's mouth curled in an unwilling laugh as she surveyed herself. She wore a candy-pink skirt with matching strappy sandals and a pale pink top with a silver logo that incorporated a highly stylised Eiffel Tower and an open book. Carissa had designed it for an indie book festival in Paris, one of her first commissions.

Had Carissa really planned to wear these clothes to visit Alexei Katsaros? If so she'd clearly had the Caribbean's casual, sunny reputation in mind, rather than any desire to dress up.

Or was her friend savvier than Mina gave her credit for? Maybe this wardrobe was her secret weapon, to prove she wasn't cut out to be a billionaire's wife.

That stifled Mina's humour.

Carissa needed her help and Mina wasn't quite as sure now about her ability to deal with her host.

Especially in a skirt that rode high on her thighs and a top that was more fitted than anything she usually wore. Mina wasn't

ashamed of her body, but she covered more of it than her friend did. Plus Carissa was shorter and smaller in the bust, so the top was a snug fit. As for the miniskirt...

Mina shrugged. She had more to worry about than how much bare leg she displayed. Her only clothes were what she'd worn on the plane and the ones Carissa had packed. Besides, she was on a tropical island. Alexei Katsaros would be used to guests wearing shorts or swimsuits. Or, given his reputation and the knowing gleam in those remarkable eyes, nothing at all.

How many beautiful women had he seduced here?

Mina blinked as she caught the direction of her thoughts. *That* wasn't her concern. Deftly she caught up her long hair, winding it round and up into a tight knot at the back of her head. She jabbed in a securing pin and turned away.

If Alexei dismissed her because of her clothes, or because she wasn't the biddable woman he'd imagined, all the better. Clearly he hadn't expected her to voice her opinions or have more than a couple of brain cells to rub together.

It would be better if he concentrated on running his multibillion-dollar empire than on her. It hadn't even occurred to him that getting to know the woman he planned to marry was a good idea.

Remarkable!

Unbelievable!

What sort of man thought like that?

One who didn't expect to be questioned.

Who expected everyone to bend to his wishes.

Mina put away the hairdryer she'd used and entered the palatial bedroom where she'd slept like the dead for hours.

Her gaze rested on the bed she'd remade after her nap. Inevitably the image that filled her mind was of looking up from there into that fabulously sculpted face, into eyes alight with mockery, and knowing that physically she was at his mercy. It had infuriated Mina, for she'd had no choice but to put up with his macho posturing and derision.

That still smarted. She drew taller, pushing her shoulders back, as she relived the scene and wished she still had the small jewelled dagger she'd worn as a ceremonial courtesy in Jeirut. It had been decorative but deadly, and Mina had insisted on knowing how to wield it. Would he have taken her more seriously if he'd known she was fully capable of looking after herself, no matter what the situation?

The idea conjured suitably satisfying images, but her smile faded as she faced the real source of her concern.

Her reaction to Alexei Katsaros.

It wasn't only fury she'd felt. He'd been *interesting*.

Lips twisting, Mina shook her head. He'd been fascinating. That combination of bold assurance and blatant sexuality would catch any woman's attention. Especially since physically his form was...pleasing. But add to that occasional glimpses of humour and penetrating understanding that punctured her initial estimate of a smug bully, and you had a man who left her unsettled.

Mina tried to tell herself the disorientation of tiredness had made her react to him. But innate honesty wouldn't let her pretend.

She had to face the truth.

She disliked Alexei Katsaros and his high-handed ways. He was exactly the sort of man to make her hackles rise. Yet he made her blood heat.

She was attracted to him.

The situation she'd rushed into for Carissa's sake became fraught with unseen snares, like the notorious patches of quicksand in the desert of her homeland.

She hadn't reckoned on anything like this when she'd blithely decided to help her friend. Dimly, she heard her father's voice in her head, the memory of his disapproval as he complained of her impulsive ways. She'd tried to make him proud, do her duty no matter how dull or out of tune with her own interests. But she'd been a source of frustration for him.

Face it, Mina. Nothing you did could satisfy your father. He didn't want a daughter who craved love, but an automaton who could be diplomatic on every occasion, no matter what the provocation.

She'd failed there, hadn't she?

Abruptly she spun on her foot and crossed to the glass doors that gave out onto a crystal pool and, beyond that, the tropical garden.

Mina's eyes were drawn to the profusion of flowers, cadmium

yellow, pale ochre and magenta. She felt the old temptation to reach for her sketchpad. To find peace by losing herself in art.

Instead she simply stood a little longer, inhaling the fragrance of salt air and unfamiliar floral perfumes, then set her shoulders and turned away. She couldn't hide forever. It was time to face her host.

* * *

She found him on a deep, shaded veranda. Overhead, a fan rotated lazily and the combination of wicker furniture and wide, wooden floorboards hinted at gracious days gone by, though the sprawling villa was modern.

Alexei sat, feet up, on a lounger, typing into a tablet. His hair was ruffled as if he'd combed his fingers through it and his shirt was open again. Mina saw the dark smattering of hair on his sculpted pectorals and jerked her gaze away.

That tiny sizzle deep inside didn't bode well. She'd felt it before, when he carried her in his arms. Now just the sight of him set it off.

Frowning, Mina surveyed the garden, trying to control feelings she couldn't fully identify. On the other side of the pool, a sculpture caught her eye.

'You're awake. Excellent.' Reluctantly Mina turned, fixing a bland expression on her face. She'd known this would be difficult but she'd hoped her earlier response to him had more to do with fatigue than genuine attraction.

Fate was clearly laughing at her naivety.

Alexei set the tablet aside and swung his feet to the floor.

‘Please don’t get up on my account. You’re working. I’ll come back later.’ She was only too happy to delay being alone with him.

‘No, I’ve finished.’ He gestured to the seats grouped around him and she had no choice but to take one.

Instead of a recliner, Mina selected an upright chair, conscious of the way her skirt rode even higher up her legs as she sat. Resisting the urge to tug her hem in a futile attempt to gain an extra few centimetres, she crossed her ankles and tucked her feet under her chair. She didn’t look directly at her host but *felt* his gaze. It raked her from head to foot, then lifted again to linger on her legs and higher—

Mina swung her head up abruptly and met his enigmatic dark gaze.

Had she been wrong? She could have sworn he’d been ogling her. Or did her sensitivity about wearing Carissa’s clothes make her imagine things? The way her breasts tingled—

‘What would you like to drink?’ As he spoke Marie rounded the corner of the veranda, as if in response to the summons of a silent bell.

‘Something cold would be good.’

‘Champagne? A cocktail? Gin and tonic?’

Mina glanced at her watch. Early afternoon. Obviously his usual guests indulged themselves. Mina, on the other hand, needed a clear head. Besides, she was in no mood to kick back and pretend this was a holiday. She felt too agitated around

Alexei Katsaros.

‘A juice would be lovely, thanks.’ She smiled at Marie.

‘Of course, ma’am. And I’ll bring some food.’

Mina was about to protest that she wasn’t hungry, then remembered she hadn’t eaten in ages. She’d feel stronger after food. She’d better!

Marie turned to Alexei, a question on her face. In response he shook his head and gestured to a half-full jug of iced water. ‘I’m fine.’

So he expected Mina to indulge while he stuck to cold water. Interesting. But then, he’d been working and he hadn’t built a hugely successful corporation by drinking the day away. Mina shot a glance at that firm chin and those uncompromising features and guessed Alexei Katsaros was good at discipline and control. Then her gaze collided with his and the impact sent a silent shudder of reaction through her.

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