Sara
CRAVEN

His Forbidden Bride

MILLS & BOON

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“So, what keeps you warm in bed at night?”

Zoe flushed. “I don’t think that’s any of your damned business. And I thought the point of this lunch was for me to find out about you.”

“Ask what you want,” he said. “I am ready to answer.”

“Well, your second name might be a start.” She tried to sound casual, not easy when her nerves seemed to be stretched on wires. Oh, what’s the matter with me? she wondered savagely. Any other single girl on holiday would relish being chatted up by someone with half his attraction and sheer charisma. Why can’t I just…go with the flow?

“My second name is Stephanos,” he said. “Andreas Stephanos.”

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CHAPTER ONE

‘I’VE been giving matters a lot of thought,’ said George. ‘And I feel very strongly that you and I should get married.’

Zoe Lambert, who had just taken a mouthful of Chardonnay, managed by a superhuman effort not to choke to death.

If anyone else had made a similarly preposterous suggestion, she would have laughed them to scorn. But she couldn’t do that to George, sitting across from her at the table in the wine bar, with his untidy brown hair, and crooked tie.

George was her friend, one of the few she had at Bishop Cross Sixth Form College, where he was a member of the maths department, and after the weekly staff meeting they usually went for a drink together, but they’d never had a date as such. Nor was there the slightest spark of attraction between them. And even if she’d ever been marginally tempted to fall in love with George, the thought of his mother would have stopped her dead in her tracks.

George’s mother was a frail widow with a tungsten core, and she took no prisoners in her bid to keep her son safely at home with her, an obedient and enslaved bachelor. None of George’s sporadic romantic interests had ever thrived under the frost of her pale blue gaze, and she planned that none of them ever would. And those steely eyes would narrow to slits if she found out that her only son was in the town’s one and only wine bar with Zoe

Lambert of all people, let alone proposing marriage.

She took a deep breath. 'George,' she said gently. 'I don't think…'

'After all,' George went on, unheedingly, warming to his theme. 'You're going to find things difficult now that you're—alone. You were so brave all the time your mother was—ill. Now I'd like to look after you. I don't want you to worry any more about anything.'

Except your mother poisoning my food, thought Zoe. Urged on, no doubt, by her best friend, my aunt Megan.

She winced inwardly as she recalled her aunt's chilling demeanour at the funeral two weeks earlier. Megan Arnold had curtly accepted the commiserations from her late sister's friends and neighbours, but had barely addressed a word to the niece who was now her only living relative.

Back at the cottage, after the service, she had refused all offers of food and drink, staring instead, in silent and narrow-eyed appraisal, at her surroundings.

'Never mind, dearie,' Mrs Gibb, who'd cleaned the cottage each week for Gina Lambert over the past ten years, whispered consolingly as she went past a mute and bewildered Zoe with a plate of sandwiches. 'Grief takes some people in funny ways.'

But Zoe could see no evidence of grieving in her aunt's stony face. Megan Arnold had stayed aloof during her younger sister's months of illness. And if she was mourning now, she kept it well hidden. And there'd been no sign of her since the funeral either.

Zoe shook away these unpleasant and uneasy reflections, pushed a strand of dark blonde hair back from her face, and looked steadily at her unexpected suitor with clear grey eyes.

'Are you saying that you've fallen in love with me, George?' she asked mildly.

'Well—I'm very fond of you, Zoe.' He played with the stem of his glass, looking embarrassed. 'And I have the most tremendous respect for you. You must know that. But I don't think I'm the type for this head-over-heels stuff,' he added awkwardly. 'And I suspect you aren't either. I really think it's more important for people to be—friends.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I can understand that. And you could be right.' But not about me, she thought. Oh, please God, not about me.

She swallowed. 'George, you're terribly kind, and I do appreciate everything you've said, but I'm not going to make any immediate decisions about the future.' She paused. 'Losing my mother is still too raw, and I'm not seeing things altogether clearly yet.'

'Well, I realise that, naturally.' He reached across the table and patted her hand, swiftly and nervously. 'And I won't put any pressure on you, I swear. I'd just like you to—think about what I've said. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' Zoe told him, mentally crossing her fingers. 'Of course I will.'

My first marriage proposal, she thought. How utterly bizarre.

He was silent for a moment. 'If you did think you could marry

me at some point,' he said hesitantly, 'I wouldn't want to—rush you into anything, afterwards. I'd be prepared to wait—as long as you wanted.'

Zoe bit her lip as she looked back at the kind, anxious face. 'George,' she said. 'I truly do not deserve you.' And meant it.

It was hard to think about anything else as the local bus jolted its way through the lanes half an hour later, but she knew she had to try. Because George's extraordinary proposal was only one of her current problems. And possibly the least pressing, bless him.

She had come to Astencombe to share her mother's cottage three years ago when she had left university, and not long before Gina Lambert's condition had first been diagnosed. But the property was only rented. It had belonged to Aunt Megan's late husband, Peter Arnold, and he had agreed the original lease with his sister-in-law.

Zoe suspected this had always been a bone of contention with his wife, and, since his death, Aunt Megan had raised the rent slowly and steadily each year, although as a wealthy and childless widow she could not possibly need the money. She had also insisted that maintenance and repairs were the responsibility of her tenant.

Gina, also a widow, had eked out her husband's meagre company pension with her skill as a landscape artist, but it had been a precarious living, and Zoe's salary as an English teacher had been a welcome addition to the household budget. Particularly when the time had come when her mother had no

longer been able to paint.

Finding a local job and living at home was not what she'd planned to do originally, of course. At university she'd met Mick, who'd intended, after graduation, to travel round the world for a year, taking what work he could find to earn his living on the way. He'd wanted her to go with him, and she'd been sorely tempted.

In fact, she'd gone home for the weekend to tell her mother what she meant to do, but had arrived to find Gina oddly quiet, and frail-looking. She had stoutly denied there was anything the matter, but Zoe had soon learned through the village grapevine that Aunt Megan had made one of her periodic descents the day before, and, as Adele who lived next door had put it, 'There'd been words.'

Zoe had spent the whole weekend trying to tell her mother about her plans, and failing. Instead, obeying an instinct she barely understood, she had found herself informing Mick that she'd changed her mind about the trip. She'd hoped against hope that he loved her enough not to want to go without her, but she'd been rudely disappointed.

Mick, she realised with shocked hurt, was not about to change his mind—just his choice of travelling companion. And the love she'd blithely thought was hers for ever had proved a very transient affair instead. Within days she'd been comprehensively replaced in his bed and affections.

But it had taught her a valuable lesson about men, she thought wryly, and maybe it was better to be dumped in England than

the middle of the Hindu Kush. Since Mick, she'd had no serious involvement with anyone. And now she'd been proposed to by George, who did not love her either. History, it seemed, was repeating itself.

If I'm not careful, I shall get a complex, she told herself.

Looking back, however, she had no regrets about sacrificing her independence. The job and the village might have their limitations, but she was so thankful that she'd been there for her mother through the initial tests, the hospital treatments, and subsequent brief remission. And through her mercifully short final illness. Even at the last Gina's warmth and optimism had not deserted her, and Zoe had many memories to treasure in spite of her sadness.

But the fact remained that she'd reached the end of a chapter in her life. And she didn't see the rest of her life being devoted to Bishops Cross college. She had the contents of the cottage, and a little money to come from her mother's will as soon as it was proved. Maybe this was her chance to move on, and make a new life for herself.

One thing was certain. Aunt Megan would not be sorry to see the back of her.

How could two sisters be so totally unalike? she wondered sadly. True, her aunt was the elder by twelve years, but there had never seemed to be any sibling feeling between them.

'I think Megan liked being an only child,' Gina had explained ruefully when Zoe had questioned her once on the subject. 'And

my arrival was a total embarrassment to her.'

'Did she never want a baby of her own?' Zoe asked.

Gina looked past her, her face oddly frozen. 'At one time, perhaps,' she said. 'But it just—didn't happen for her.' She sighed briefly. 'Poor Megan.'

Megan was taller, too, thinner and darker than her younger sister, with a face that seemed permanently set in lines of resentment. There was no glimpse in her of the underlying joy in living that had characterised Gina, underpinning the occasional moments when she'd seemed to withdraw into herself, trapped in some private and painful world. Her 'quiet times' as she'd called them wryly.

Zoe had wondered sometimes what could possibly prompt them. She could only assume it was memories of her father. Maybe their quiet, apparently uneventful marriage had concealed an intense passion that her mother still mourned.

Her aunt was a very different matter. On the face of it Mrs Arnold seemed to have so much to content her. She'd never had to worry about money in her life, and her husband had been a kind, ebullient man, immensely popular in the locality. The attraction of opposites, Zoe had often thought. There could be no other explanation for such an ill-assorted pairing.

In addition, her aunt had a lovely Georgian house, enclosed behind a high brick wall, from which she emerged mainly to preside over most of the organisations in the area, in a one-woman reign of terror. But not even that seemed to have the

power to make her happy.

And her dislike of her younger sister seemed to have passed seamlessly to her only niece. Even the fact that Megan Arnold had once taught English herself had failed to provide a common meeting ground. Zoe couldn't pretend to be happy about her aunt's determined hostility, but she'd learned to offer politeness when they met, and expect nothing in return.

She got off the bus at the crossroads, and began to walk down the lane. It was still a warm, windy day, bringing wafts of hedgerow scents, and Zoe gave a brief sigh of satisfaction as she breathed the fragrant air. Public examinations always made this a difficult term at college, and she might unwind by doing a little work in the garden tonight, she thought as she turned the slight corner that led to home. She'd always found weeding and dead-heading therapeutic, so while she worked she could consider the future as well. Review her options.

And stopped dead, her brows snapping together, as she saw that the front garden of the cottage had acquired a new and unexpected addition. A 'For Sale' board, she registered with a kind of helpless disbelief, with the logo of a local estate agency, had been erected just inside the white picket fence.

It must be a mistake, she thought, covering the last few yards at a run. I'll have to call them.

As she reached the gate, Adele appeared in the neighbouring doorway, her youngest child, limpet-like, on her hip.

'Did you know about that?' she inquired, nodding at the sign.

And as Zoe speechlessly shook her head she sighed. 'I thought not. When they came this morning, I queried it, but they said they were acting on the owner's instructions.' She jerked her head towards the cottage. 'She's there now, waiting for you. Just opened the door with her own key and marched in.'

'Oh, hell,' Zoe muttered. 'That's all I need.'

She pulled a ferocious face as she lifted the latch and let herself into the cottage.

She found Megan Arnold in the sitting room, standing in front of the empty fireplace, staring fixedly at the picture that hung above the mantelpiece.

Zoe hesitated in the doorway, watching her, puzzled. It was an unusual painting, quite unlike Gina Lambert's usual choice of subject. It seemed to be a Mediterranean scene—a short flight of white marble steps, scattered with the faded petals of some pink flower, flanked on one side by a plain white wall, and leading up to a terrace with a balustrade. And on the edge of the balustrade, against a background of vivid blue sky and azure sea, a large ornamental urn bright with pelargoniums in pink, crimson and white.

What made it all the more curious was that the Lamberts had always taken their holidays at home, usually in Cornwall, or the Yorkshire Dales. As far as Zoe was aware, the Mediterranean was an unknown quantity to her mother. And it was the only time she'd ever attempted such a subject.

Her aunt suddenly seemed to sense Zoe's scrutiny, and turned,

her face hard and oddly set.

'So here you are.' Her greeting was abrupt. 'You're very late.'

'There was a staff meeting,' Zoe returned with equal brevity. 'You should have let me know you were coming, Aunt Megan.' She paused. 'Would you like some tea?'

'No, this isn't a social call.' The older woman seated herself in the high-backed armchair beside the empty fireplace.

My mother's chair, Zoe thought with a pang, trying not to feel resentful. It was, after all, her aunt's house, but it was small wonder there'd been friction in the past if she made a habit of walking in whenever the whim took her.

Megan Arnold was dressed as usual in a pleated navy skirt with a matching hand-knitted jacket over a tailored pale blue blouse, and her greying hair was drawn back from her thin face in a severe knot.

'As you can see I've placed the house on the market,' she went on. 'I've instructed the agents to commence showing the property at once, so you'll have to remove all this clutter.' She waved a hand at the books and ornaments that filled the shelves on either side of the fireplace. Then paused. 'I'd be obliged if you'd remove yourself, too, by the end of the month.'

Zoe gasped helplessly. 'Just like that?'

'What did you expect?' Megan Arnold's mouth was a hard line. 'My husband allowed your mother to have this property for her lifetime only. The arrangement did not mention you. You surely weren't expecting to stay on here,' she added sharply.

‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ Zoe said, with equal crispness. ‘But I did think I’d be allowed some kind of breathing space.’

‘I feel you’ve had plenty of time.’ The other woman was unmoved. ‘And in the eyes of the law, you’re merely squatting here.’ She paused. ‘You should have no difficulty in finding a bedsitting room in Bishops Cross itself. Somewhere convenient for your work.’

‘A bedsit would hardly be adequate,’ Zoe said, keeping tight hold on her control. George must have known about this, she thought with shock. His mother must have told him what her aunt was planning. Or he heard them talking one day at the house. And that’s why he asked me to marry him. Because he knew I was going to be virtually homeless almost at once.

She shivered. Oh, George, why didn’t you warn me instead of trying to play Sir Galahad? she thought desperately.

She drew a deep, steadying breath. Did her best to speak normally. ‘Not all the furniture came with the cottage. Some of it belonged to Mother, and I’ll want to take it with me, as well as her books and pictures.’

She saw Megan Arnold’s gaze go back to the painting above the mantelpiece, and decided, however belatedly, to try an overture. To heal a breach that had never been of her making. ‘Maybe you’d like to have one of them yourself, as a keepsake,’ she suggested. ‘That one, perhaps.’

Her aunt almost recoiled. ‘Wretched daub.’ Her voice shook. ‘I wouldn’t have it in the house.’

Zoe stared at her, appalled at the anger, the bitterness in her tone. She said slowly, 'Aunt Megan—why—why do you hate her so much?'

'What are you talking about? I—hate Gina—the perfect sister?' Her sudden laugh was shrill. 'What nonsense. No one was allowed to hate her. Not ever. Whatever she did, however great the sin, she was loved and forgiven always. By everyone.'

'She's dead, Aunt Megan.' Against her will, Zoe's voice broke. 'If she ever hurt you, I'm sure it wasn't intentional. And, anyway, she can't do so again.'

'You're wrong.' Mrs Arnold lifted her chin coldly. 'She never had the power to affect me in any way. Because I always saw her for what she was. That innocent, butter-wouldn't-melt façade never fooled me for a minute. And how right I was.'

She stopped abruptly. 'But that's all in the past, and the future is what matters. Selling this cottage for a start.' She stood up. 'I suggest you hire a skip for all this rubbish—or take it to a car-boot sale. Whatever you decide, I want it cleared before the first viewers arrive. Starting with this.'

She reached up and lugged the Mediterranean painting off its hook, tossing it contemptuously down onto the rug in front of the hearth. There was an ominous cracking sound.

'The frame,' Zoe whispered. She went down on one knee, almost protectively. 'You've broken it.' She looked up, shaking her head. 'How could you?'

Her aunt shrugged, a touch defensively. 'It was loose anyway.

Cheap wood, and poorly made.'

'Whatever.' Zoe was almost choking. 'You had no right—no right to touch it.'

'This is my property. I shall do what I wish.' Her aunt reached for her bag. 'And I want the rest removed, and all the holes in the plaster made good,' she added. 'I shall be back at the end of the week to make sure my instructions are being followed. Or I shall arrange a house clearance myself.'

She swept out, and a moment later Zoe, still kneeling on the rug, heard the front door slam.

To be followed almost immediately by the back door opening, and Adele calling to her.

'Jeff's looking after the kids,' she announced as she came in. 'I saw Madam leaving, and came to make sure you're all right.'

Zoe shook her head. 'I feel as if I've been hit by a train,' she admitted. She swallowed. 'God, she was vile. I—I can't believe it.'

'I'll put the kettle on,' said Adele. She paused. 'What happened to the picture?'

'She threw it on the floor. It was completely crazy. I mean, I don't think it's necessarily the best thing my mother ever did, and it spent most of its life up in the attic until she moved here, but…' She paused, lost for words.

'Well, I've always liked it,' Adele said. 'Greece, isn't it? My sister gets concessionary rates, so we went to Crete last year, and Corfu the year before.'

Zoe shrugged. 'It's somewhere in that region, I guess.' She gave it a doubtful look, then got to her feet, holding the damaged frame carefully, and placed the picture on the sofa. 'Only we've never been there. My father didn't like very hot weather.'

'Well, perhaps she copied a postcard or something that someone sent her,' Adele suggested as she filled the kettle in the kitchen.

'Maybe.' Zoe frowned. 'It was one of those things I always meant to ask about, but never did.'

'So, when are you being evicted?' Adele asked as they sat at the kitchen table, drinking their tea.

'I have to be out by the end of the month,' Zoe admitted. 'And she means it.'

'Hmm.' Adele was thoughtful for a moment. 'Do you think she really is crazy?'

'Not certifiably,' Zoe said wryly. 'Just totally irrational where my mother is concerned.'

'Well, maybe that's not entirely her fault,' Adele said meditatively. 'My gran remembers her as a child, and she said she was a nice-looking kid, and the apple of her parents' eye. Then your sister came along, as an afterthought, and immediately she was the favourite. And "the pretty one", too.'

She shrugged. 'That can't have been very nice. And not easy for any kid to handle. So, maybe it's just common or garden jealousy.'

'From Queen of the Castle to the Queen in Snow White?' Zoe

pondered. ‘Well, you could be right, but I have the feeling there’s more to it than that.’

‘And it won’t help that you’re the image of your mum at the same age.’ Adele poured more tea into her mug. ‘Though they weren’t always bad friends—according to Gran, anyway,’ she added thoughtfully. ‘There was a time when they did things together—even went away on holiday. Although even then your aunt behaved more as if she was her mother than her sister by all accounts.’ She pursed her lips. ‘Maybe that’s what caused the trouble.’

She paused. ‘So what are you going to do? How are you going to manage, if she’s turning you out?’

Zoe grimaced. ‘I’m going to have to find a flat—unfurnished.’

‘Or even a small house. You’ll miss the garden.’

‘Yes.’ Zoe’s lip quivered suddenly. ‘Among so many other things.’ She forced herself to smile. ‘Maybe Aunt Megan’s doing me a favour. I’d just been thinking that my life could do with a whole new direction. This could be exactly the impetus I need. I might even move right away from here.’

‘Some place where the wicked Queen can’t barge in, using her own key,’ Adele agreed. ‘Although I’d miss you.’

‘Well, I won’t be going immediately.’ Zoe wrinkled her nose. ‘My contract stipulates one full term’s notice. But I can be looking—and planning.’

‘You don’t think some prince on a white horse is going to gallop up and rescue you?’ Adele asked, deadpan.

One already tried, thought Zoe, but he drives a Metro, and always stays inside the speed limit. And, anyway, I'm not sure who'd be rescuing whom…

'Not in Bishops Cross,' she returned, also straight-faced. 'White horses can't cope with the one-way traffic system.'

She finished her tea, and put the mug in the sink. 'I'd better arrange to have my mother's things taken out and stored in the short term,' she mused aloud. 'Aunt Megan mentioned a skip,' she added with a touch of grimness. 'And I'd put nothing past her.'

'Not after that picture,' said Adele. 'Pity about that. Nice and bright, I always thought.'

'It's not terminally damaged—just needs a new frame. I'll take it in with me tomorrow.'

'It'll be awkward on the bus. And there's a framing shop a couple of doors from where Jeff works. Why don't I ask him to drop it off for you on his way to work? Then you can pop round in your lunch break and choose another frame. Just tie a bit of paper and string round it, and I'll take it with me now.'

'Oh, Adele, that would be kind.'

Adele had always been a good neighbour, Zoe reflected as she hunted for the string. And, after Aunt Megan, her cheerful practicality was balm to the spirit.

'She's made a real mess of it,' Adele commented grimly as Zoe went back into the sitting room. 'Even the backing's torn away.' She tried to smooth it back into place, and paused. 'Just a

minute. There's something down inside it. Look.' She delved into the back of the picture, and came up with a bulky and clearly elderly manilla envelope.

She handed it to Zoe who stood, weighing it in her hands, staring down at it with an odd feeling of unease.

'Well, aren't you going to open it?' Adele prompted after a moment. She laughed. 'If it was me, I couldn't wait.'

'Yes,' Zoe said, slowly. 'I—I suppose so. But the fact is, it has been waiting—for a pretty long time, by the look of it. And, as my mother must have put it there, I'm wondering why she didn't tell me about it—if she wanted me to find it, that is.'

Adele shrugged. 'I expect she forgot about it.'

'How could she? It's been hanging there over the mantelpiece ever since she moved here—a constant reminder.' Zoe shook her head. 'It's something she wanted to keep secret, Adele, when I didn't think we had any secrets between us.' She tried to smile. 'And that's come as a bit of a shock.'

Adele patted her on the shoulder. 'It's been quite a day for them. Why don't I leave you in peace while you decide what to do? You can bring the picture round later on, if you still want it re-framing.'

Left to herself, Zoe sank down on the sofa. There was no message on the envelope, she realised. No 'For my daughter' or 'To be opened in the event of my death'.

This was something that had remained hidden and private in Gina Lambert's life. And if Aunt Megan hadn't totally lost it, and

thrown the picture on the floor, it would probably have stayed that way.

Maybe that was how it should be left. Maybe she should respect her mother's tacit wish, and put it in the bin unopened.

Yet if I do that, Zoe thought, I shall always wonder…

With sudden resolution, she tore open the envelope and extracted the contents. There was quite an assortment, ranging from a bulky legal-looking document to some photographs.

She unfolded the document first, her brows snapping together as she realised it was written in a foreign language. Greek, she thought in bewilderment as she studied the unfamiliar alphabet. It's in Greek, of all things. Why on earth would Mother have such a thing?

She put it down, and began to examine the photographs. Most of them seemed to be local scenes—a village street lined with white houses—a market, its stalls groaning with fruit—an old woman in black, leading a donkey laden with firewood.

One, however, was completely different. A garden guarded by tall cypresses, and a man, casually dressed in shorts and a shirt, standing beneath one of the trees. His face was in shadow, but some instinct told her that he was not English, and that he was looking back at whoever was holding the camera, and smiling.

And she knew, without question, that he was smiling at her mother.

She turned her head and studied the framed photograph of her father that occupied pride of place on the side table beside

her mother's chair. But she knew already that the shadow man was not John Lambert. The shape was all wrong, she thought. He'd been taller, for one thing, and thinner, and the man in the snapshot seemed, in some strange way and even at this distance in time and place, to exude a kind of raw energy that her father had not possessed.

Zoe swallowed. I don't understand any of this, she thought. And I'm not sure I want to.

She felt very much as if she'd opened Pandora's box, and was not convinced that Hope would be waiting for her at the end.

She turned the snapshot over, hoping to find some clue—a name, perhaps, scribbled on the back. But there was nothing. Slowly and carefully, she put it aside with the rest, and turned to the other papers.

There were several thin sheets stapled together, and when she unfolded them she realised, with sudden excitement, that this must be a translation of the Greek legal document that had so puzzled her.

She read them through eagerly, then paused, and went back to the beginning again, her brain whirling. Because the stilted, formal language was telling her that this was a deed of gift, assigning to her mother the Villa Danaë, near a place called Livassi, on the island of Thania.

Zoe felt stunned, not merely by the discovery, but by its implications.

This was a gift that Gina Lambert had never mentioned, and

certainly never used. And that she'd clearly not wanted known. That she'd hidden in the back of a picture, which itself suddenly assumed a whole new significance.

Was it the recapturing of a cherished, but secret memory? Certainly that was how it seemed, particularly when she recalled how it had never been on show during John Lambert's lifetime.

She read the translation through a third time. The name of the gift's donor was not mentioned, she noticed, although she guessed it would be in the original. And there were no restrictions on the villa's ownership either. It was Gina's to pass on to her heirs, or sell, as she wished.

Yet there was nothing in the few remaining papers, consisting of a few tourist leaflets, a bill from a Hotel Stavros, and a ferry ticket, to indicate that she'd disposed of the Villa Danaë.

And she left me everything, thought Zoe, swallowing. So, unlikely as it seems, I now own a villa in Greece.

She realised she was shaking uncontrollably, her heart thudding like a trip-hammer. She made herself stand and walk over to the cupboard where her mother's precious bottle of Napoleon brandy still resided, and poured herself a generous measure. Emergency tactics, she told herself.

When she was calmer, she fetched the atlas, and looked to see where Thania was. It was a small island in the Ionian sea, and Livassi seemed to be its capital, and only large town.

Not very revealing, Zoe thought, wrinkling her nose.

But Adele's sister works in a travel agency, she reminded

herself. She'd be able to tell me all about it—and how to get there.

Because she had to go to Thania, there was no question about that. She had to see the Villa Danaë for herself—if it was still standing. After all, it had belonged to an absentee owner for a long time, and might be in a state of real neglect and disrepair. But I have to know, she thought, taking another swift swig of her brandy as her pulses began to gallop again. And I have some money saved, and the whole summer vacation in front of me. There'll never be a better opportunity.

She wouldn't keep the house, of course. If it was habitable, she'd put it on the market. If it was falling down, she would just have to walk away—as her mother, apparently, had done before her.

But I'm not just going to see the villa, she thought. I want to find the answers to some questions as well. I need the truth, however painful, before I move on—start my new life.

She picked up the photo of the shadow man, and stood, staring down at him, wondering, and a little scared at the same time. Asking herself who he could be, and what his part in this mystery might be.

She sighed abruptly, and hid him back in the envelope with the rest of the paperwork.

I'll find you, too, she thought. Somewhere. Somehow. And whatever the cost.

And tried to ignore the involuntary little shiver of misgiving that tingled down her spine.

CHAPTER TWO

THE rail of the boat was hot under Zoe's bare arm. Ahead of her, the craggy outline of Thania rose from the shimmer of the sea.

Even now, with her target in sight, Zoe could still hardly believe she was doing this. The tension inside her was like a knot, endlessly being pulled more tightly.

She had told no one the real purpose of her visit to the island, not even Adele. She'd pretended that the envelope had merely contained souvenirs of what had been, clearly, a holiday her mother had once enjoyed, but memorable to no one but herself, and consequently not worth mentioning.

'I need a break, so why don't I try and discover what she found so entrancing?' she'd laughed.

'Well, don't be too entranced,' Adele warned. 'And don't let any local Adonis chat you on board his boat,' she added severely. 'We don't want you doing a Shirley Valentine. You have to come back.'

I'm my mother's daughter, Zoe thought wryly. And she came back, whatever the incentive to stay.

Aloud, she said lightly, 'No danger.'

She'd told the same story of her mother's favourite island to Adele's sister Vanessa when she made the booking at the travel agency. Notwithstanding, Vanessa had tried hard to talk her into

going somewhere larger and livelier.

'Thania's never been a typical tourist resort,' she'd protested. 'A number of rich Athenians have homes there, and they like to keep the hordes at bay. The hotels are small, and the beaches are mostly private. It's all low-key and the nightlife barely exists. The ferry runs just twice a day from Kefalonia.'

She brightened. 'Why don't you stay on Kefalonia instead? See all the places where they filmed Captain Corelli's Mandolin. There's plenty to do there, and you could always go on a day trip to Thania if you really want to see it.'

Zoe shook her head, keeping her face solemn. 'Nicholas Cage went back to America a long time ago, so I think I'll pass on Kefalonia this time around. Besides, somewhere small and peaceful is exactly what I want.' She paused, then tried to sound casual. 'I believe there's a Hotel Stavros in Livassi. Maybe you could book me in there.'

Vanessa stabbed frowningly at her computer keys, then nodded with a touch of resignation. 'Argonaut Holidays go there, one of the few companies that do, and they have vacancies, surprise, surprise.' She stabbed again. 'Bath, balcony, sea view?'

Terrace, thought Zoe, with steps leading up to it, and the sea beyond…

She smiled. 'Ideal.'

She'd met with downright disapproval from George, who was still plainly disappointed that she'd gently but firmly turned down his proposal. 'But you never go abroad on holiday.' He sounded

injured.

'No, George,' she said, still gently but firmly. 'I never have in the past, that's all.'

'But if you'd mentioned it sooner, we could have gone somewhere together,' he protested. 'My mother did a tour a couple of years back—"The Treasures of Italy". She enjoyed it, and the hotels were of a high standard. We could have done the same thing.' He paused awkwardly. 'I understand Greek plumbing is—rather eccentric.'

'I know,' she said. 'They told me all about it at the travel agency, and it's not a problem.' She gave him a steady look. 'Besides, George, your mother would never have let you go on holiday with me—even if we'd been married.'

He flushed uncomfortably. 'You're wrong, Zoe. She's always telling people how happy she'd be to have me off her hands—to have grandchildren.'

Certainly, thought Zoe, if it could be done by divine intervention, without having an all too human daughter-in-law in the equation.

'So where exactly are you going?' he asked.

Zoe shrugged, trying not to look shifty. 'I thought I'd do some island hopping—never too long in one place. See what appeals,' she told him airily.

She hated fibbing to George, but she knew his mother would have her destination out of him before his supper was on the table, and Aunt Megan would be next in line for the information.

And, given her aunt's extreme reaction to the picture, this would be bad news.

What a pity, she thought, that I can't go to her. Ask her about it. Because she must know. I'm sure of that.

She hadn't seen Mrs Arnold since that day, not even when she'd taken the cottage keys round to the house and dropped them through the letterbox. Her aunt had probably been at home, but there had seemed little point in another confrontation, whatever its purpose.

And she'd been frantically busy. In addition to the usual end of term workload, she'd managed to find herself temporary accommodation in a top-floor flat in an old Victorian house within walking distance of the college. It was furnished and the rent was reasonable, enabling her to put her mother's cherished pieces in store for the future.

Which was something else she hadn't mentioned to George—the fact that she'd given in her notice at the college and would be leaving at Christmas. Finding another job in a different area. A challenge that awaited her when she got back from Greece.

'Ah, well, "sufficient unto the day",' she told herself silently.

She took a bottle of water from her shoulder bag, and drank thirstily. As she replaced the bottle she heard the crackle of paper, reminding her of the purpose of her visit. She'd brought the Greek deed of gift, together with the translation, and the photographs. But she had no intention of barging in and making a claim straight away.

First, she told herself, I need to find out how the land lies. For all I know, the villa's original owner may have had second thoughts and revoked the gift years ago.

So I'll find the house, and see who's living there now. And if it's obvious that giving it away was just a temporary aberration on someone's part a long time ago, then I'll just enjoy my holiday, and no harm done.

After all, it is a little bit too much like a fairy tale.

The Villa Danaë, she thought. She'd checked in a book of Greek myths and discovered that Danaë had been one of the many loved by Zeus, who had visited her in a stream of golden light. She'd subsequently given birth to Perseus and been set adrift on the ocean with her baby in a locked chest, but they'd both survived and Perseus had gone on to cut off the head of the Gorgon Medusa, and win the hand of Andromeda.

This is my own quest, she thought. My private odyssey. And decapitation will probably not be involved.

The harbour at Thania was only small, and occupied mainly by caiques rather than expensive yachts. The town itself was built on the side of a steep hill, with serried ranks of red-roofed houses looking as if they might tumble forward into the sea. On the quayside ahead, Zoe could see the striped awnings of tavernas, and among them a larger building, three storeys high, its white paint gleaming in the sunlight, which she knew from the picture in the Argonaut brochure was the Hotel Stavros.

It was mid-afternoon, by this time, and the heat was intense.

Zoe had dressed for coolness in white cut-off trousers, and a sleeveless navy top, knotted at the midriff. She'd covered her exposed skin in high-factor sunblock, and braided her hair into one thick plait, cramming over it a wide-brimmed linen hat.

Ready for anything, she thought, briskly swinging up her travel bag as the ferry moved into its allotted place on the dock. There were few other passengers, and those, she guessed, were locals rather than tourists.

Zoe was aware she was being surveyed with friendly interest, and as she went ashore, treading gingerly down the rickety gangplank, the captain gave her a gap-toothed smile and a hoarse grunt of appreciation.

No point trying to hide herself in the crowd, then, she decided, amused.

She made straight for the hotel, climbing two steps to the terrace with its tables and chairs, and tubs planted cheerfully with pelargoniums. Inside the double glass doors, the tiled reception area was apparently deserted, but Zoe was glad to stand and catch her breath for a moment, in its air-conditioned coolness.

And, as if on cue, the fringed curtain at the rear of the desk stirred, and a girl, plump, red-haired and smiling, emerged to meet her.

'Hi,' she greeted Zoe casually. 'You must be Miss Lambert. I'm Sherry.'

'And you're British.' Zoe shook hands with her, smiling back. 'I didn't expect that.'

‘And I didn’t expect to meet and marry a Greek hotel owner two years ago,’ the other girl admitted candidly. ‘So, it’s a bit of a novelty for me, too.’ She handed Zoe a registration card and a pen.

‘I’ll show you your room,’ she went on, taking down a key from a rack on the wall behind her. ‘Leave your bag, and Stavros will bring it up in a minute.’

‘The Stavros for whom the hotel was named?’ Zoe asked, trying to do mental sums about his possible age.

Sherry shook her head, leading the way up a marble staircase. ‘That was his uncle—a real character. Great eye for the ladies even now. Never married because he thought it would cramp his style,’ she added with a rich chuckle. ‘My Stavros took over the hotel when he decided to retire a few years ago. Now he sits under the trees in the square, playing lethal games of backgammon.’

‘Sounds a marvellous life,’ Zoe said, committing all this information to memory.

‘Here we are.’ Sherry threw open a door, allowing Zoe to precede her into a cool, shadowy room, its shutters closed against the glare of the sun. Sherry pulled back the thin drapes and unlatched the shutters, revealing spotless cream walls to match the tiled floor. There was a cupboard built into one wall with a hanging rail, and a modest chest of drawers beside the low bed, with its crisp, snowy linen, and terracotta coverlet folded back across the foot.

‘It’s lovely,’ Zoe said with total sincerity.

‘If you need a blanket, which I doubt, just ask.’ Sherry opened another door. ‘And this is your shower room. It’s pretty basic—you sit on that little wooden bench to wash, and all the water goes down that drain in the middle, as you see—but you can generally have a warm shower when you want one.’ She paused. ‘I’ll leave you to look round. Can I get you a drink—a cold beer, maybe—or some lemon tea?’

‘Tea would be wonderful,’ Zoe accepted gratefully. Left to herself, she stepped out onto the balcony, finding to her pleasure that her room overlooked the harbour.

She could quite see why her mother had loved it here, no matter what might or might not have befallen her.

A tap on the door, signalling the arrival of her luggage, brought her back into the room.

Stavros was dark and swarthy, with a quiet, courteous manner. ‘My wife wishes to know if you would like your tea in your room, kyria, or downstairs in our courtyard?’

‘Oh, downstairs, I think. I only need a few minutes to unpack.’

The courtyard was at the rear of the hotel, shaded by a massive vine. Zoe sat at a corner, sipping her tea and considering her immediate options. At some point she would have to seek out Uncle Stavros of the roving eye, she thought, and see if, by some remote chance, he remembered her mother. Any information she could glean would be welcome, she acknowledged with a faint sigh.

A large hairy dog, resembling a moving hearthrug, came

sauntering out of the hotel and ambled up to her, panting amiably, and clearly waiting to have his head scratched and his floppy ears gently pulled.

'You're a good boy,' Zoe told him softly as she complied. She would have a dog, she thought, when she found a place of her own to live. Her mother had wanted one at the cottage, but Aunt Megan had instantly vetoed the idea.

'Don't let Archimedes be a nuisance,' Sherry warned when she came to collect the tray.

'Why on earth did you call him that?' Zoe asked, intrigued.

'Because he once climbed in the bath with Stavros and nearly flooded the place.' Sherry stroked the untidy head. 'He's now barred for life from all bathrooms.'

'While we're on the subject of water,' Zoe said, laughing, 'where's the best place to swim from?'

Sherry considered. 'There's the town beach,' she said. 'Turn left out of the hotel, and keep walking. It's not bad, but it can get pretty crowded. There are some good beaches on the other side of the island, but you can only reach them by boat, and Stavros sometimes gets up a trip for guests if enough are interested.

'Apart from that…' She pulled a face, and took a swift look round. 'Not all the villa owners are here the whole time, and we occasionally take advantage of that, and use their beaches when they're away. What the eye don't see,' she added cheerfully. 'But don't tell Stavros I said so, because he gets twitchy.'

She lowered her voice confidentially. 'As a matter of fact,

one villa overlooks a really pretty cove, but it's not used because the place has never been lived in. I go down there sometimes, although Stavros isn't very happy about it. He has a real thing about privacy, and upsetting the owners.'

Zoe swallowed. 'But if it's not used, it sounds ideal,' she said huskily. 'Maybe you could give me directions.' She paused. 'Does it have a name—this house?'

'Mmm.' Sherry nodded as she prepared to depart. 'The Villa Danaë. You could walk there,' she added over her shoulder.

I not only could, Zoe thought exultantly, when she was alone. I will. Tomorrow.

Half-buried in long grass, the small wooden board was shaped like an arrow and pointed down a narrow dusty track. The faded words 'Villa Danaë' were only just legible, as Sherry had quietly warned her as Zoe had eaten her breakfast of warm rolls, flower-scented honey, and thick, creamy yoghurt.

Now she paused, hitching the cream canvas bag that held her towel, sun lotion and paperback novel into a more comfortable position on her shoulder.

Even though she'd been waiting for this moment, she was sorely tempted to walk on. To let the past rest in peace. To go with the flow, and let herself be absorbed effortlessly into Thania's languorous charm. To simply have a much-needed vacation.

But that would not quell the wondering, she told herself. And when she got back, and saw Gina's picture newly framed and

hanging in her bedroom, she might kick herself for wasting a golden opportunity.

She turned with renewed determination, and plunged down the rutted track. It led down through a grove of olive trees, and, although it was still comparatively early in the day, she was grateful for their silvery shade. The air was very still, and the cloudless sky had a faintly misty look that promised soaring temperatures to come.

She was wearing a thin, floating sundress, sleeveless and scoop-necked, in gentian-blue, over a matching bikini, and her hair was piled up in a loose knot on top of her head.

She rounded a steep bend in the track, and saw, beyond the shelter of the olive grove, the more vivid green of grass and colourful splashes of flowers. Not the desolate wilderness she'd half expected. And a little further on, set like a jewel in the encircling garden, was the house, all immaculate white walls and terracotta roof.

Zoe paused, her hand tightening unconsciously round the strap of her bag. Immediately in front of her was the turquoise gleam of a swimming pool, from which a flight of broad, shallow steps led up to sliding glass doors. Behind these was a low, pillared room like an atrium, cool with marble and towering green plants, and furnished with comfortable white chairs and loungers.

Trying not to feel too much like an intruder, Zoe skirted the pool, climbed the steps and tried the doors, but they were securely locked.

It's like looking into a showcase, she thought as she walked on. You can admire, but not touch.

And halted abruptly, her heart jolting as she reached the foot of another flight of steps, so immediately familiar she could have climbed them in her sleep. Pale steps, she recognised breathlessly, dusty with the faded blossoms of the bougainvillea that cascaded down the side of the house. Steps that led up to a terrace, its balustrade supporting a large stone urn, heavy with clustering flowers. As she'd known there would be. And beyond that the dreamy azure of the sea.

She steadied herself, then, quietly and cautiously, she climbed up to the terrace. She found herself standing on a broad sweep of creamy marble that ran the entire length of the house. Stone troughs massed with more flowers marked the length of the waist-high balustrade, while below it, from a gated opening, another curved flight of steps led down through cypress trees standing like sentries to a perfect horseshoe of pale sand, and the vivid blue ripple of the sea.

Behind her, shuttered glass doors masked the ground floor rooms completely. But what had she expected? The place laid open for her inspection, and a welcome mat waiting?

I should have gone to see a lawyer, she told herself restively, walking along the terrace. Had the whole legal situation checked out. Approaches made.

She found the main entrance round the corner, a solid wooden door, heavily carved, and growing beside it, in festoons of

blooms that softened the dark wood and white walls, an exquisite climbing rose, its petals shading from creamy yellow to deep gold.

Zoe found herself thinking of the shower of radiance in which Zeus had come to Danaë in the legend, then told herself she was being fanciful. Whoever had planted the garden had simply loved roses, that was all. The troughs and urns along the terrace had been fragrant with them, and she could see even more in the beds that bordered the lawn. And sexual predators in Greek mythology had nothing to do with it.

Without knowing why, she stretched out a hand and touched one of the heavy golden heads, almost as if it were a lucky charm. Then she reached for the heavy iron door handle and tried it.

To her amazement, it yielded, and the door opened silently on well-oiled hinges. The Villa Danaë was welcoming her, after all.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, standing for a moment, listening intently for a footfall, a door closing, a cough. The sound of a human presence to explain the unlocked door. But there was nothing.

She found herself in a wide hall, confronted by a sweep of staircase leading up to a galleried landing. On one side of it was the glass wall of the atrium. On the other were more conventional doors leading to a long living room, where chairs and sofas were grouped round an empty fireplace. A deep alcove at the far end of the room contained a dining table and chairs.

Everything was in pristine condition. No one had ever lounged

on those cushions, she thought, or lit a fire in that hearth, or eaten a meal at the table.

On the atrium side, she found a tiled and fully fitted kitchen, with a walk-in food store, and a laundry room leading off it, all of them bare as if they'd been somehow frozen in time, and were waiting for the spell to be broken.

Taking a deep breath, Zoe went upstairs, annoyed to find she was tiptoeing.

The first room she came to was the master bedroom, dim and cool behind its shutters. She trod across the floor, unlatched the heavy wooden slats and pulled them open, then turned, catching her breath.

It was a vast and luxurious room, with apricot walls and an ivory tiled floor. The silk bed covering was ivory, too, as were the voile drapes that hung at the windows.

There was a bathroom with a screened-off shower cubicle, and a sunken bath with taps like smiling dolphins, and a dressing room as well. There were toiletries on the tiled surfaces, and fluffy towels on the rails. Everything in its place—an enchanted palace waiting for its princess. But for how long?

Zoe walked slowly back to the window, and slid it open with care, then stepped out onto the balcony, lifting her face to the slight breeze. Before her were the misty shapes of other islands rising out of the unruffled blue of the Ionian sea.

More roses here, too, she saw, spilling over the balcony rail from their pottery tubs in a cascade of cream and gold. Their

scent reached her softly, and she breathed it in, feeling herself become part of the enchantment.

She thought, Can this really be mine?

And in the same heartbeat, realised she was not alone after all. That there was someone below her on the terrace.

She froze, then peered with infinite caution over the balcony rail.

A man, she registered, with his back to her, moving unhurriedly along the terrace, removing the dead heads from the blossoms in the stone troughs.

The gardener, she thought with relief. Only the gardener. One of the support team employed to keep Villa Danaëin this immaculate condition.

He was tall, with a mane of curling black hair that gleamed like silk in the sunlight, his skin like burnished bronze against the brief pair of elderly white shorts that were all he was wearing. She saw broad shoulders, and a muscular back, narrowing to lean hips, and long, sinewy legs.

The kind of Adonis, she thought, with a faint catch of the breath, that Adele had warned her about.

Of course, she could only see his back view, so he might well have a squint, a crooked nose, and dribble. But somehow she didn't think so.

And anyway, his looks were not her concern. What she needed to do was get out of here before he looked up and saw her.

With infinite caution, she backed away into the room. She

dragged at the windows, tugging them together. They came with a whisper, but, to Zoe's overwrought imagination, it seemed like a rumble of thunder in the stillness of the morning. She waited for a shout from below. The sound of an alarm being given, but there was nothing, and, biting her lip, she closed the shutters, too. So far, so good, she thought with a tiny sigh of relief.

His work seemed to be taking him to the far end of the terrace, away from the main door, so if she was quick she could be out of the villa and back into the shelter of the olive grove before she ran any real risk of discovery.

And she would content herself with just this one visit, she promised herself silently as she let herself out of the bedroom and closed the door quietly behind her. After all, she had seen everything she needed to see.

From now on she would stick firmly to the town beach, and let her lawyer investigate whether or not the Villa Danaë was her inheritance.

Well, she thought, smiling. I can dream, I suppose.

She had taken three steps down the stairs before she realised she was not alone. And just who was standing at the bottom of the flight, leaning casually on the polished rail, watching her—waiting for her, a faint grim smile playing round his mouth.

She checked with a gasp, turned to stone at the sight of him. Her instinct was to turn and run back the way she'd come, but common sense prevented her. This staircase was the only way out, and the last thing she wanted was to find herself trapped in

a bedroom with this half-naked stranger in pursuit.

She was frightened, but at the same time—incredibly—her senses were registering other things. Telling her that the man confronting her with such cool arrogance was as seriously attractive as her instinct had suggested. Not conventionally handsome, maybe. His high-bridged nose was too thin, and his mouth and chin too hard for that. And his eyes were darkness. Meeting his gaze was like staring into impenetrable night, she thought, tension tautening her throat.

But, at the same time, she knew instinctively that there wasn't a woman in the world who would take one glance and not want to look again—and again. Because he was totally and compellingly male.

He said quietly, 'Kalimera.'

Maybe, she thought breathlessly. Maybe there was a way she could bluff her way out of this.

She spread her hands. Tried an apologetic laugh. 'I'm sorry—I don't understand. I don't speak Greek.'

He shrugged. 'Then we will speak in English. It's not a problem,' he added drily as her face fell. 'Tell me what you are doing here.'

She said swiftly, 'I'm not a thief.'

'No,' he agreed thoughtfully. 'Because there is nothing here that you could conveniently steal.' The dark glance swept her, assessing the flimsy blue dress, the canvas beach bag. 'Or hide,' he added.

He looked her over again, more searchingly. 'So, I ask again—what is your reason for being here?'

'Someone mentioned there was a house for sale round here,' Zoe improvised swiftly. 'I thought it might be this one, as it's obviously empty.'

'No,' he said. 'It is not this house.' He paused, his gaze steady and ironic. 'And no one would have told you that it was.' His voice was low-pitched but crisp.

'You don't think the owner might have put it on the market and not told you?' she parried.

'No,' he said. 'That would not happen either.'

'Well, it's still a fabulous house.' Zoe lifted her chin. 'Maybe the owner would be prepared to rent it out.'

His brows rose. 'You have nowhere to stay?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Of course I have. But this is such a lovely island. Perhaps I could come back—stay longer.'

'You arrived—when?' His mouth twisted. 'Yesterday?'

'It doesn't take long,' she said. 'To find something—beautiful. And decide you want more.'

The dark eyes looked her up and down again with mockery in their depths—and something infinitely more disturbing. 'Well, we agree on something at least,' he drawled, and laughed as the sudden colour drenched her skin.

She was suddenly stingingly aware of all that tanned bare skin, so negligently displayed, and also how little she herself was wearing. And how this had not escaped him for a minute.

She wished with all her heart that she were sitting at her table under the vine leaves, finishing breakfast, and contemplating nothing more risky than a day on the town beach. Because she was in danger. Every nerve in her body was telling her so.

Just let me get out of here, relatively unscathed, she prayed silently and wildly.

'Now let me tell you how I see the situation,' he went on, almost casually. 'I think you are staying at the Hotel Stavros. That Stavros' wife has told you the cove that belongs to the house is good to bathe from, and that she comes here herself—not often but enough, and thinks that no one knows. And that once here, because you are a woman, you could not control your curiosity. So, you found an open door, and came in.'

She hated herself for blushing. Hated him more for having made her do it. She said coldly, 'You're right, up to a point. But I was intrigued to hear the house was empty, because I might actually be interested in—acquiring it.'

'And I have told you,' he said. 'It is not for sale.'

'Really?' She shrugged a shoulder. 'Well, that's not something I choose to discuss with the hired help.' She paused to allow that to sink in, and was annoyed to see his smile widen. 'Is the owner on Thania at present?'

'No,' he said. 'Athens.'

She wanted to say, That's what you think, and wave the deed of gift in his face, yet caution prevailed.

But, there will come a time, she promised herself. And

anticipation will make it all the sweeter. Because the first Greek phrase I shall learn is 'You're fired'.

She allowed herself a slight frown. Regaining lost ground, she told herself. Deliberately establishing a formal distance between them. Someone with business to transact dealing with a minor member of staff. That was how to handle things.

'That's a pity,' she said. 'But I suppose there's someone on the island who can tell me how I could contact him.'

'Why, yes, thespinis. You could always ask me.' His face was solemn, but his voice quivered with amusement, leaving her with the uneasy feeling that he knew exactly what she was doing.

She lifted her chin. 'I hardly think I should approach him through his gardener,' she said sharply.

'But I am not merely the gardener,' he said, softly. 'I take care of a great many things for him. But if you wish to speak to him directly, he will soon be here on Thania. Within a week, I believe.'

'And staying here?'

'No,' he said, after a pause. 'He never stays here. He has a villa of his own quite near.'

'That's such a shame,' Zoe said, and meant it. 'It's a wonderful house, but it's bound to deteriorate if it isn't lived in—and loved.'

'You are wrong, thespinis,' he said. 'One thing this house has never lacked is love. It was built into every wall—every beam—every stone. Love is the reason it exists.'

She was shaken by the sudden passion in his voice—and by

the odd raw note of anger, too.

She said, with a touch of uncertainty, 'I'll wait, then—and speak to him. When he arrives.' She paused. 'And now I'd better go.'

'And where will you go?' That strange, harsh moment had passed and he was smiling again, the dark eyes speculative as they studied her. 'Down to the cove as you intended?'

Zoe bit her lip. 'No—that was a bad idea, and I'm sorry.'

'Why?' he said. 'The sea is warm, and the sand inviting. And you will not be disturbed.'

She was already disturbed, she thought. Stirred in every fibre of her being, and it was not a sensation she relished, or even wished to admit.

Turned on by a good-looking Greek, she derided herself. How shameful—and how pathetic.

She shrugged, attempted a smile of her own. 'All the same…'

'You like his house,' he said. 'I am sure my employer would wish you also to enjoy his beach. There is a way down from the terrace. I will show you.'

'I really don't think…'

'Is that why you came to Thania—to think?' He straightened in a leisurely manner, moving back a little. Offering her, she realised, free passage past him. 'Then stop thinking, thespinis. Learn to relax. Begin—to feel.'

'Perhaps, then,' she said. Adding primly, 'But I don't want to take you away from your work.'

‘You will not,’ he said. ‘But my work, alas, will take me away from you. So, you see,’ he added gently, ‘there is nothing to fear.’

Zoe stiffened. ‘I’m not in the least afraid,’ she told him curtly. ‘I can’t believe your employer lists harassing tourists among your duties.’

‘Ah.’ He sent her a glance that glinted with amusement. ‘But I am not always on duty.’ There was a tingling pause, then he turned, and walked to the main door. ‘Make your decision, thespinis,’ he added briskly. ‘I am waiting to lock up.’

Biting her lip, she followed him out of the house, and round the terrace to the gate she’d noticed earlier, which he courteously unlatched for her.

‘I suggest you come back this way,’ he said. ‘The track that Stavros’ wife uses is rather too steep.’

‘Thank you,’ Zoe said coldly.

‘Parakalo.’ He grinned at her. ‘It has been my pleasure.’

As she descended the steps she was conscious of his gaze following her. Knew the exact moment he turned away, as if a wire joining them had suddenly snapped.

A few minutes later, she heard the sound of a Jeep starting up, and driving away.

Alone at last, she thought. And was shocked to discover her relief tinged by something very like regret.

CHAPTER THREE

I'M MAKING altogether too much of this, Zoe told herself determinedly. He's gone. And it's time I pulled myself together, and forgot about him.

She'd had a wonderful swim, and now, having applied sun lotion to every exposed portion of her skin, she was stretched out on her towel with her book. But she could not concentrate on the printed words. They seemed to dance away out of reach, leaving her to focus almost helplessly on a dark face, with eyes that smiled, looking up at her from the foot of a marble staircase.

In a way it was understandable that he should be imprinted so firmly on her mind. After all, he'd caught her in the act of having a humiliating snoop on private property. He could have handed her over to the police, or even exacted a very different form of retribution, she thought, swallowing.

But she had to put all that behind her now, and plan her next move instead.

I'm here for a purpose, she told herself strongly. And I'm certainly not a lonely heart tourist looking for a holiday romance with some Greek version of Casanova.

Or even a mild flirtation, she made the hasty addendum. Although, to someone like him, it would probably be as natural as breathing. See a woman. Chat her up. Tell her that she's beautiful and desirable. Make her day.

Well, it hasn't made my day, she thought, broodingly.

She sat up, rummaging in her bag for her bottle of water. There wasn't a great deal left, she realised with a frown. She would have to ration herself.

She tossed her book aside, and turned onto her front, undoing the clasp of her bikini top. A little serious sunbathing, she decided, and then she would go back to the hotel, and sit in the shade with a cold drink.

She pillowed her head on her folded arms, and closed her eyes. The murmur of the sea seemed to fill her head, soothing away the doubts and alarms of the day.

It's just so perfect here, she thought drowsily as everything slid away. It seemed that she was standing in front of Gina's picture, stepping into it like Alice, and entering its world. Retracing her steps in slow motion through every room. Taking a dream-like possession.

She did not fall deeply asleep. She was aware of sand under her fingers, the texture of the towel beneath her bare breasts, and the strength of the sun on her back, like the caress of warm hands. She sighed a little, wriggling her shoulders slowly and pleasurably, then let herself drift again.

Until she found herself once more at the top of the stairs—looking down. Meeting his gaze. And, this time, watching him walk up the steps towards her…

She came back to reality with a sudden jolt, heart thudding. She propped herself up on an elbow, staring around her in

sudden, inexplicable alarm, but the rest of the beach was deserted.

She sank back onto the towel with a little groan of relief, then paused, her brows snapping together. Because the bottle of sun lotion that she'd replaced in her bag after use was there in front of her on the sand, propped against an insulated cool-box, which had appeared from nowhere.

Both of them telling her quite clearly that, although she might be alone now, she'd had company quite recently. While she'd been asleep, in fact, and vulnerable.

Her throat tightened as she smelt the distinctive scent of freshly applied lotion on her skin, and remembered the vivid sensation of stroking hands on her bare back. And her drowsy, sensuous reaction…

Oh, God, she thought, he'd been here—touching her. Seeing her next door to naked. And making no secret of it either. Feverishly, she snatched up her bikini top, and fastened it round her with shaking hands. Locking the stable door, she realised, after the horse was long gone.

He'd said he was leaving, she thought numbly. She'd heard him drive off. And now he'd come sneaking back. All Adele's warnings returned in Technicolor to haunt her. To tell her to get out while the going was good.

She grabbed her bag, and pushed her book and the sun lotion into it. He'd mentioned another way off the beach that Sherry used, and she didn't care how steep or stony it was. It would

certainly be safer than going up to the villa, and encountering him again.

Then as she reached for her dress she saw him coming down the steps, a sun umbrella under one arm, and a bottle of water in his other hand. And a towel, she noted, draped round his shoulders.

Too late to run now, she thought, cursing under her breath. She got to her feet, and watched him approach, hands on her hips.

She said glacially, 'I thought you had other duties elsewhere.'

'I also have a lunch break.' He indicated the cool-box, apparently oblivious to the hostility in her tone. 'I thought you might like to share some food with me.'

'Then you thought wrong.' She gave him the full glare that worked so well with stroppy teenagers, both eyes like lasers.

'As you wish.' His own tone was equable. 'But at least drink some of this water I have brought for you. It is dangerous to become dehydrated, and your own supply has nearly gone.'

He pushed the tip of the umbrella he was carrying deep into the sand, and adjusted it, so the shade fell across her towel.

'You dared to go through my things…'

He shrugged. 'I was looking for the lotion to put on your back. You were in danger of burning. I saw then how little water you had.'

Oh, God, he made it all sound so bloody reasonable, she raged inwardly. As if his motives were of the purest.

She said stiffly, 'I'm sure you meant to be kind…'

‘Is that what I intended?’ He grinned at her. ‘Well, maybe. A little. Or, perhaps, I was thinking how angry my employer would be if he found you were in the clinic with first-degree burns or heatstroke, and unable to talk business with him.’ He held the bottle of water out to her. ‘Now drink some of this.’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ she denied swiftly. ‘I’m going back to the hotel. I can get a drink there.’

‘I see.’ He was quiet for a meditative moment. ‘Have you been to Greece many times before?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘This is actually my first visit, but…’

‘But it is wiser to rest in the heat of the day,’ he supplied decisively. ‘And not go walking when there is no necessity.’ He put the bottle down on her towel, and paused. ‘Don’t you like the beach?’

‘It’s perfect,’ Zoe said shortly.

‘Until I came to spoil it for you,’ he added drily. ‘You have a very eloquent face, thespinis.’

‘Yet you seem determined to stay, all the same.’ She observed him spreading his towel on the sand with misgiving.

‘I come every day at this time,’ he said. ‘Whereas you, thespinis, are here only at my invitation.’ He allowed that to sink in. ‘And the beach is surely big enough for us to share for a short while.’

‘I’m not sure your employer would agree,’ she said tautly. ‘Does he know this is how you spend your time?’

‘He would certainly consider it one of my duties to offer

hospitality to his guest.'

'I am not,' she said. 'His guest. Officially. And you have a very strange idea of hospitality.'

'Why?' His brows lifted. 'I have brought you food, drink and shelter.' He stood, hands on hips, and looked her up and down slowly, and with unconcealed appreciation, his eyes lingering on the smooth rise of her breasts above the flimsy cups of her bikini. 'But if there is any requirement I have not supplied, you have only to tell me,' he added silkily.

'Thank you,' Zoe said through gritted teeth. 'You've already done more than enough.'

He laughed. 'Then shall we declare a truce, thespinis? It is too beautiful a day to fight. And if you won't eat with me, at least drink some water.'

Zoe gave him a mutinous look, then knelt, and carefully decanted some of the water he'd brought into her own container. 'Thank you.' Stonily, she placed the bottle on the outermost corner of the towel, where he had now stretched himself, very much at his ease.

'Efharisto,' he corrected, lazily. 'If you are going to stay on the island for any length of time, you need to learn a little Greek.'

'I have a phrase book,' she said. 'So I don't need personal tutoring—thanks.'

His brows drew together. 'You also have attitude,' he told her drily. 'Maybe you could learn, instead, a little philoxenia—the Greek warmth towards strangers. Because others may not

understand.'

'Perhaps,' Zoe said, lifting her chin coolly, 'this is not a situation where warmth is advisable.'

He propped himself up on one elbow and looked at her measuringly. 'What makes you so nervous?' he asked. 'You think that I intend, maybe, to force myself upon you?' He shook his head. 'No, thespinis. In the first place, it is far too hot. In the second, rape has no appeal for me.'

He lay back, looking up at the cloudless sky, lacing his fingers behind his head, his voice meditative.

'I prefer a cool room, with the shutters drawn, a comfortable bed, a bottle of good wine, and a girl who wishes to be with me as much as I want her.'

He turned his head, sending her a faint smile. 'And nothing less will do. So, you see, you are quite safe.'

Her face warmed. She said huskily, 'You paint—a vivid picture.'

'And, I hope, a reassuring one.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Oh, yes.' And tried to subdue the betraying quiver deep inside her.

'Enough to tell me your name?'

She hesitated. 'It's—Zoe.'

'A Greek name,' he approved softly. 'And I am Andreas.' He paused. 'So now that we are properly acquainted, will you share some lunch with me?'

There seemed no good reason to refuse. And perhaps it would

be sensible to be a little conciliatory to someone who might be in a position to help her.

So she gave a constrained smile, and murmured, 'That would be—nice.'

The cool-box contained cold chicken, a bag of salad leaves, black olives, tomatoes, feta cheese and some fresh bread. There was also, she noted, a plastic box containing dark grapes and peaches, as well as two chilled bottles of beer, two glasses wrapped in napkins, paper plates, and some cutlery.

This had never been planned as a solitary meal, she thought. And her agreement, it seemed, had been taken for granted. But then he probably didn't get many refusals, she thought, with an inward grimace. And at least he'd brought beer, and not the bottle of good wine he'd mentioned earlier. So attempted seduction did not appear to be on the menu.

It was also clear that she was expected to set out the plates, and divide the food between them. Woman's work, she supposed with irony. And found herself wondering who had assembled the picnic in the first place.

Yet, in spite of her reservations, she enjoyed the meal. The chicken was succulent and the olives and tomatoes had a superb tangy flavour that made those in the supermarket at home seem pallid by comparison.

'Would you like a peach?' He peeled it for her deftly, and she watched his hands, observing the long fingers and well-kept nails. Pretty fastidious for a gardener, she thought. And although his

deep voice with its husky timbre was faintly accented, his English seemed faultless.

Andreas, she thought, and wondered…

The fruit was marvellous, too, ripe and sweet, although she was embarrassed to find the juice running down her chin, and into the cleft between her breasts. Something that was not lost on him, she realised with vexation, trying to mop herself discreetly with her napkin.

To deflect his attention, she said, 'Do you like gardening?'

'I enjoy seeing the results,' he said. 'Why? Are you thinking of hiring my services when you come to live at the house?'

She dried her fingers. 'I haven't given it a thought,' she fibbed.

He shrugged a shoulder. 'Then think of it now.'

'Are you so much in demand?'

'Of course,' he said promptly. 'But I could be persuaded to make time for you in my busy schedule.'

He either had the biggest ego in the western world, Zoe told herself seething, or it was a wind-up, and she was sure it was the latter.

But whichever it was, it remained light years away from the taciturn attitude of Mr Harbutt, who wore heavy boots and corduroy trousers summer and winter, and smelled faintly of compost, and who'd done the heavy digging at the cottage for her mother.

She said coolly, 'I think you could prove too expensive for me.'

'You devastate me,' Andreas said lightly. 'Perhaps we could

work out a deal together—some kind of reciprocal arrangement.' He watched her stiffen, then went on silkily, 'Much of the island's economy is conducted on the barter system. If you are to live here you will have to accustom yourself.' He paused. 'Tell me, Zoe mou, what do you do for a living?'

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