

The background of the image is a composite. On the left, there is a close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man's muscular back and shoulder, showing detailed muscle definition. On the right, there is a photograph of a coastal town with white buildings and blue accents, situated on a hillside overlooking a body of water. The sky is clear and blue.

**Celia
Jade**

**THE
GREEK
BACHELOR**

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The Greek Bachelor
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The Greek Bachelor
Part of the *Greek
Playboys* Series

By

Celia Jade

Dedication

*I dedicate this book to the untamed beauty and
romance of Greece.*

Chapter One

Alex Marinos tickled his one-year-old nephew until the child squirmed in a peal of giggles and squeals. Alex's mouth curved into a broad smile, pleased with the healthy dose of energy in the little boy.

"That's enough playing for him tonight. Time for bed." Dora held her arms out for the wriggling boy.

Alex pulled his nephew closer for a gentle kiss to his soft, dark hair before handing him over to his sister. "Goodnight, Costa," he said and chuckled as the boy peered at him over his mother's shoulder with a gaping grin.

His brother-in-law eased himself into a chair at the table and gestured for Alex to do the same. "Now it's time for the adults to relax and eat."

Alex pulled out a chair on the large veranda and joined him, eyeing the generously filled platters. "As usual, my sister outdoes herself...not that I'm complaining." He grinned.

"Help yourself, Alex. Dora will be a little while before she returns," Vasilis said.

An hour later, Alex leaned back in the chair, washing down the last morsels of the delicious meal with red wine. A warm breeze caressed his face as he raised the glass in a toast to his sister. "That was most enjoyable, Dora...bless your hands."

"It was my pleasure. What have you been up to by the way? It's been two weeks since we saw you," she said with a note of disapproval.

"Summer's just around the corner. You know what that means," he replied.

"When are you leaving?" Vasilis asked.

"This Friday. Two families are scheduled to arrive the first week of June so I want to be there ahead of time."

Dora leaned forward, linking her fingers together. "Speaking of families, when do you plan to start yours?"

His abdomen instantly clenched. It was a subject his sisters felt obligated to broach on a regular basis.

"Let the man enjoy his bachelorhood...while it lasts," Vasilis cut in.

Alex nodded at his brother-in-law. "Thank you."

Dora gave her husband a meaningful sideways look before turning back to Alex. "You're very good with children. Trust me, you don't want to

be too old when you have them. You see how much of a handful Costa is?"

Alex cleared his throat. "I've got plenty of time. After all, I'm in my thirties."

"Mid-thirties," Dora emphasized.

"Hey, keep this up and I'll reduce my visits here," he warned playfully. "I get an earful from our folks as it is."

He glanced at Vasilis who merely shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. Alex sipped his wine thoughtfully. He loved children—and beautiful women. However, marriage was not on the current agenda.

It was his favorite place in the world. Agios Nikolaos, Zakynthos. His roots...and his private, two-storey villa. Earth-colored stone dominated the drive and the traditional architecture of the house. The evening sun glinted off the red-tiled roof and folding windows.

Alex smiled and leaned toward the young man in the driver's seat, extending his hand. "Bill, I appreciate the lift. We'll hook up soon."

The cool indoor air greeted him as he crossed the entrance of the villa, which opened up to a spacious living room and kitchen. He lowered his suitcase to the floor, reached into the exterior compartment and located a pair of black bathing trunks and a white towel. His eyes moved over

the veranda, clearly visible on the other side of the large glass doors. A vase filled with a lovely assortment of fresh flowers adorned the patio table, proof that his mother had been here earlier. Beyond the veranda, in the distance, an azure sky met the darker blue of the Ionian Sea.

Alex shed his clothes, pulled on the trunks and headed out from the side of the house, down a short flight of stairs. His bare feet absorbed the warmth of the tiled pool area. Dropping the towel onto a chair, he stepped to the lip of the pool and dived in, surfacing near the far end. Brushing water from his eyes, he gazed at the horizon for a long moment.

With a deep-throated sound, his mouth curved upward. "Perfect."

* * * *

Carlie Bowers held up a black string bikini. "How about this one?"

Her best friend, Irene Marinos, smiled approvingly. "Very nice. Black suits you...especially when you get that golden tan. You're so lucky...I end up pink most of the summer."

Carlie's mouth straightened into a sensible line. "You've got that rare porcelain complexion that is too delicate for the sun...a perfect contrast to your

auburn hair." She observed the faint blush that moved across her friend's cheeks, but a modest smile broke the little frown.

Irene waved her hand dismissively. "Ignore me...I'm being silly. You need at least two bikinis by the way."

With two pairs of fashionable bikinis in a shopping bag, Carlie and Irene enjoyed a leisurely stroll and some window shopping, which was a challenge considering the bustling energy on The Magnificent Mile.

"Irene, you know I'd feel more comfortable if you came to Zakynthos in July...for company at least."

Her friend smiled. "I understand Carlie, but you haven't had a restful vacation in ages."

"I'll be working anyway."

"We both know this job will be child's play for you, however, all the more reason for privacy," Irene finished with an even tone that brooked no further discussion.

Carlie sighed with exaggeration. "You are stubborn, girlfriend."

They laughed.

"Now, as I've mentioned, my brother-in-law Alex will pick you up at the airport and take you to the villa. Hector's already given him instructions to take you anywhere you need to go—to treat you with the utmost hospitality. Oh,

you'll love it, Carlie. We should have done this years ago." She paused and looked at Carlie with excited, hazel eyes. "Before you know it, we'll be there too."

The mention of Alex's name provoked a skip in her heartbeat. She had an instant flashback to a particularly cold Chicago winter when she first met him. That was about two years ago—although the memory was so vivid it could have been yesterday.

He had come to visit his brother, Hector, and the family during the Christmas season. She was introduced to him at one of the dinner parties. Any woman would find Alex Marinos strikingly handsome. He represented the perfection of Greek male stock. Tall and lean, dark-haired and tanned...blessed with strong, beautifully sculpted features.

They went to a trendy bar for drinks that night. Despite the fact that Carlie was accompanied by her boyfriend, she wasn't immune to Alex's physical magnetism. She caught herself sneaking glances his way over the rim of her glass, noting the dark brows arched over intelligent deep brown eyes, a perfectly straight nose, proud cheekbones and a sensual, full mouth. She was aware of him with senses she didn't know existed, which was disconcerting. She caught those eyes

observing her in a guarded, yet perceptive way, stirring every nerve ending in her body. Why did he keep looking at her like that? Finally, she excused herself and headed for the washroom.

She took her time reapplying lip gloss, almost absently, as her mind drifted to her troubled relationship and simultaneously fought off visions of the sexy Greek. She let out a long sigh, deciding that she could use a second drink.

Stepping into the dimly lit corridor, she felt warm fingers close around her elbow. Their eyes met and held for several heartbeats while an unusual wave of heat flooded her skin. Alex stood next to her, searching her upturned face with that penetrating gaze. Her mouth parted as she tried to catch her breath.

"You are unhappy with him," he said in perfect English, almost devoid of any accent.

Focused on the seductive timber of his voice, Carlie nearly missed what he said. She gave herself a mental shake. "Um, sorry?" He released her arm, the brush of his fingers sending a delightful frisson over her skin.

"It pains me to see a woman who is unhappy in her relationship...especially one as lovely as you, who could have any man."

Her mouth dropped open. She couldn't tell which of the two statements shocked her more. "You don't know me—how could you presume

something like that?"

A keen light flickered in his eyes. "I know women. It is apparent in your body language...the way you look at him."

Oh, a man like him would definitely be an expert on the subject. Nonetheless, that didn't give him the right to blatantly toss his opinions about. She chewed her bottom lip to control the sudden spark of indignation.

"That is none of your business, actually—and quite rude of you to mention it."

His body stilled, eyes narrowing briefly before he seemed to check himself. Slowly, a smile tugged on the generous line of his mouth. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to offend you."

A shaky breath pushed past her lips and she was about to accept his apology when he caught her hand. His thumb stroked the back of her hand in a circular motion that weakened her knees.

"Take care of yourself," he said huskily and left her standing there to suffer a range of emotions that were too thrilling and too infuriating to deal with. She let them dissipate before rejoining the others. And she ignored Alex Marinos the rest of the night.

They'd parted ways on a sour note. She wasn't looking forward to seeing him again, much less having him chaperone her around the island.

She'd keep this to herself, however.

"Carlie?" Irene repeated.

She snapped back to the present. "Sorry. I got lost in my thoughts." She gave her friend a genuine smile. "I want to pick up a travel book."

Chapter Two

The Venetians named Zakynthos the *flower of the east*. No wonder, Carlie thought while looking at the pictures on the glossy pages of the travel book, which depicted a Mediterranean paradise. The plane slowed and descended slightly. She lifted the window shade a bit more and blinked against the bright sunlight. A dark blue sea spread below, its surface shimmering as brilliant as a jewel.

She sighed in awe as the plane glided toward the island, affording her a stunning view of golden coastlines, splashes of pastel houses within lush pockets of vegetation and rolling hills. The pilot announced their descent toward the airport and she tucked the book in her bag and smiled. Right now, she couldn't agree more with Irene about this much-needed vacation. Once she was done photographing the four villas, she'd spend the rest of her time relaxing. Relaxing at the beach, at the villa...a local tavern—oh, she'd take pictures of

her own of course, but little else.

About thirty minutes later, with her carry-on and suitcase rolling behind her, she made her way to the main exit area of the airport. Alex was expected to be waiting for her there. The fact knocked her out of her daydreaming state, making her heart accelerate with...*anticipation*? No, she reasoned. It was nerves. The last time she saw him, they'd shared an uncomfortable exchange. At least that's the way *she* had felt. She straightened her shoulders and stepped onto the concrete outside, reminding herself that they were adults and what happened so long ago didn't matter.

It didn't take long before she spotted him coming toward her. He was hard to miss. Tall, dark-haired, richly tanned and oozing confidence. He exuded male virility and Greek beauty. Her heart stopped and then raced uncontrollably. *Oh God...don't do this to me.* His lean body filled his fine white shirt and tan linen slacks like a model. It wasn't right that a man could look so handsome. Worse, he was drawing plenty of female attention.

He smiled broadly as he closed the distance between them and her heart performed a somersault. A silent gasp of surprise caught in her throat as he reached out, clasped her upper arms and bent to kiss her on both cheeks. The clean, subtly masculine scent of him was a wonderful assault on her senses.

"Carlie, I'm pleased to see you again. Welcome to Zakynthos." He took both pieces of luggage from her.

His deep, smooth voice coursed through her like wine. She had to kick-start her brain and force her legs to move.

Glancing up at his profile as they crossed to the parking lot, she cleared her throat. "Thank you. I—it's great to be here. I appreciate you coming..."

"Think nothing of it."

He paused behind a sleek, European-looking sports car. "Here we are." He popped the small trunk open and placed her luggage inside.

As he held the passenger door open for her, she was very conscious of her bare legs, exposed by the knee-high skirt she wore. She sensed his gaze on them and blushed. He slid into the driver's seat with natural ease and she couldn't help observing the material of his pants as it stretched across his hard thighs. She let out a slow, unsteady breath and looked ahead.

He handled the car expertly, and before long, they were on a coastal road with amazing views of the ocean and green hills. Despite the breathtaking scenery, she'd never been more aware of a man. He dominated the already tight space of the car and more than once, her eyes were drawn to his leanly muscled hand as it worked the gears.

"You are prettier than when I last saw you," he

stated, making her glance his way with raised eyebrows.

Carlie recalled that Irene had once informed her about Alex's playboy lifestyle and his family's continuous, unsuccessful efforts to get him settled with a wife. With that in mind, she wasn't sure how to take his comment, although a part of her was flattered. "Thank you...I guess..."

He grinned as though her response amused him. "Agios Nikolaos is about twenty minutes away. I assume you are hungry?"

"I just had a snack on the flight, so I could go for some food. If it's not too much trouble, perhaps we could stop so I can pick something up—"

"Carlie, you are my family's guest. We are your hosts for the entire duration of your visit. My mother has already prepared dinner, which is at the villa. Actually, she expected to have you over tonight, but I explained that you'd likely be fatigued from the traveling."

Indeed, jetlag was kicking in. She doubted that she'd be able to keep her eyes open past nine o'clock. It was very thoughtful of his mother to cook something for her. But...was he planning on eating with her? She bit her lip nervously and glanced at his handsome, calm profile.

"That was very nice of your mother...and you're right...I am tired," she replied, hoping to

dissuade him from extending his company.

"You'll adjust to the time difference in a few days."

Alex pointed out several places of interest during the drive. It was unsettling, however, that she found the masculine timbre of his voice more interesting.

The car wound its way around several rough bends and slowed, pulling into a paved drive. Carlie stepped out of the car and took in the two lovely, grand villas. "Beautiful," she breathed. And welcoming.

Alex retrieved her luggage and they headed to the front door. He motioned to the other villa, which stood a short distance away. "I'm next door in case you need anything."

She stiffened. "You live there?"

He held the front door open for her. "Yes, four months out of the year."

"I see."

A deep chuckle rumbled in his throat as they walked into the sitting area, whose high ceiling was made of angled, wooden beams. "You don't sound pleased."

Color rushed to her face. "Oh...not at all. I mean...it's not an issue, of course."

He turned to her, his steady gaze catching hers. "Carlie, I'm aware that we had a disagreeable encounter once...just as I am aware that I can be

opinionated—but that was long ago. I want you to enjoy your vacation.”

Wow. He’d apologized to her then and he was making amends now. It was big of him, she admitted, feeling her nerves unclench. She smiled. “Yes, it’s in the past. To be honest, I *was* unhappy anyway.” As soon as the words were out, she wanted to kick herself. There was no reason to add that piece of personal information. Somehow, she knew he wouldn’t let it drop.

One dark eyebrow lifted curiously. “I take it you are no longer with him?” Something beyond curiosity threaded his voice.

Was it expectation? “Um, no...not anymore.”

He gave her a limb-melting smile. “Good for you. No sense in being in an unfulfilling relationship.”

That mouth of his was a dangerous weapon. She forced her gaze upward, her heart skipping a beat once she made contact with his mischievous dark eyes. Awareness flowed between them—so palpable it brushed against her skin.

She released an unsteady breath and decided to avert her attention to the house. True to its exterior, the inside of the home was crafted with love. Pale hues of tan and gray stone dominated the walls in the living room and kitchen, accented by an open fireplace and antique-style furniture. Handmade white embroidery covered the tops of

a few pieces, while colorful pillows rested on the sofas. The spacious kitchen was outfitted with numerous wooden cabinets and contemporary conveniences for a long stay and the tiles beneath her feet promised to be cool.

"The entire house is yours, so go ahead and choose the bedroom you like most. There are three upstairs...each with its own bathroom. The kitchen is fully equipped...and the veranda is very pleasant this time of year," Alex said.

It was good enough reason to move away from him and as she approached the glass door, she sighed in awe. "What a magnificent view of the sea."

"Mmm. It's just as magnificent by the pool. You can access it from that door over there."

She followed the gesture of his hand. Irene had mentioned that the villa was equipped with a private pool. She smiled. "I love swimming."

The heat of his gaze swept over her body as if he were imagining her in a swimsuit, increasing the warmth in her face...among other parts. She didn't know where to look.

"There's moussaka and side dishes in the fridge. I would join you, but I shouldn't impose too much." He paused, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I'll take these upstairs."

She watched him carry her luggage with little effort up the winding staircase. Her stomach

growled hungrily when she turned back to the horizon. The sun had begun its descent somewhere on the west side, casting a rich, golden light across the sky. It would be proper to return Alex's hospitality by asking him to join her for dinner. Her female impulse itched to do so, but lost to reason. Besides, her body ached with fatigue, longing for a decent meal and a good sleep.

Carlie stepped away from the door as he returned. "Thank you for today. I think I'll eat and just crash."

He nodded approvingly. "Of course. I will contact Hector to inform him of your safe arrival." He closed the space between them, causing her breath to hitch.

She was forced to tilt her head up to meet his eyes. His features formed a casual yet surprisingly intense expression. Her belly fluttered nervously.

He grasped her hand and squeezed gently. "Don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything..."

Was it her imagination that he lingered on the last word? She swallowed to clear her throat while her hand absorbed the warmth of his. "I won't."

He released her. With a playful smile and an inclination of his head, he wished her goodnight and walked out the front door.

Carlie ate on the veranda, accompanied by a

glorious sunset and the smell of cypress trees and sweet wildflowers. Thoughts of the island mingled with those of her gorgeous neighbor. Alex was a first class charmer—that much was obvious. She wouldn't bother denying her attraction to him. However, she could easily draw up a list of reasons to avoid any romantic involvement with him. At thirty, she was through being single. She wanted a good husband and children. On the other hand, Alex enjoyed his freedom too much to get married. He probably went through women like underwear. After her ex's unfaithfulness, she wouldn't risk another broken heart so carelessly.

Not even a fling?

Carlie dismissed the naughty sprite in her head. "Not even a fling," she stated firmly.

Chapter Three

Carlie stretched languorously in bed the next day. And what a bed it was. Four-poster, elegant dark wood and transparent white drapes. She smiled and purred, feeling nicely refreshed after a deep sleep. Late morning sunlight filtered through the drawn curtains as they stirred with a delicate breeze. Silence and tranquility enveloped the bedroom. Heaven.

The clock on the bedside table registered ten-thirty. She got up and walked over to the window, parting the soft curtains so she could push open the double glass panels fully. She tilted her face up to the sun for a moment before looking at the impossibly blue sky and infinite sea, its smooth expanse interrupted by a single, jagged rock formation.

She turned toward the suitcase lying open on the floor, knowing that she'd have to face the tedious task of unpacking soon. Yesterday, Alex left her belongings just outside the door to this

bedroom, as if predicting she'd choose it. Facing east toward the coast, it had the best view.

Taking a few minutes to freshen up in the washroom, she headed downstairs. After a bit of rummaging in the kitchen, she located a cupboard full of glasses and poured herself some orange juice. She stepped out onto the veranda, looking forward to a relaxing day. Tomorrow, she'd start work. But right now...She sighed blissfully and took a sip.

A splash of water somewhere to the right caught her attention. She glanced over at the neighboring villa, realizing for the first time that she had a good view of its veranda and backyard. She edged closer to the far corner and heard another splash. A stone wall separated the two pool areas, but the veranda stood high enough to provide a nearly full view of the other pool.

She spotted him quickly. He tore through the water lithely, tanned arms rippling with each even stroke, long legs pumping swiftly just below the surface. Her mouth dropped open unconsciously as she enjoyed this beautiful display of manly gracefulness.

He swam three more tireless laps before heading toward a corner of the pool and stepped out, droplets of water sliding off his body. It was one thing to see Alex clothed yet quite another to see him almost naked. Her breath caught. Even

from this distance, the perfection of his physique was arresting.

He pushed his dark hair back with both hands, inviting her to admire the solid breadth of his chest, its rapid movement, the chiseled planes of his abdomen and the pronounced swell in his black swim trunks. The man embodied sexual energy. As he walked along the length of the poolside, he suddenly looked up, catching her watching him.

She swore under her breath, blushing furiously as he shaded his eyes with his hand and waved at her. She forced a smile, hoping to appear unaffected and waved back.

"Carlie! Come have breakfast. Use the gate to get through," Alex shouted, pointing at an iron gate door that connected to the stone fence.

Good going, Carlie. "Em, sure...just give me ten minutes." She went back inside, her pulse already picking up. The thought of eating in close proximity to a sexy, bare-skinned Alex intimidated her in a way she'd rather not contemplate. Instead, she hurried upstairs and kneeled beside her suitcase. Not sure exactly what she was looking for, she went through the neatly folded pile of clothing until she came across one of her new summer purchases—a flowery cotton dress with thin shoulder straps that ended in a gentle wave above her knees. It needed a bit of

ironing, but it would have to do for now. She tossed a pair of panties on the bed and dashed into the washroom for a quick shower.

Inspecting herself in front of a long mirror, Carlie felt like she did when she was preparing for a first date with someone she found attractive. But this wasn't a date. Color rode high on her cheeks and her eyes were bright blue with anticipation.

He's just another good-looking man, for God's sake, she reasoned while slipping on a pair of comfy sandals.

Alex sat at a round wicker table situated under a large, wooden pergola draped in beige cloth. As she approached, his eyes made a slow appraisal of her body, spreading a warm blanket of awareness over her skin.

He rose, coming around to pull out a chair for her. "*Kalimera*."

Carlie knew enough Greek to understand his 'good morning' greeting. "*Kalimera*." That one simple word he uttered sent a silky tingle through her. He sounded even sexier when he spoke his native tongue.

His fingers brushed lightly against the back of her shoulder as he returned to his seat. She suspected he'd touched her intentionally. Naturally, he hadn't bothered to cover himself up a bit, positioning his bare torso just four feet from her. How could she possibly be indifferent to the

display of toned flesh and strong muscles...the small dark triangle of hair in the center of a solid chest, manly forearms with a dusting of hair and long, perfectly shaped fingers? The kind of fingers that would know how to caress a woman's body.

She drew in a sharp breath, shocked by her wayward thoughts and lowered her gaze to the spread on the table.

"I made American coffee for you as I wasn't sure if you drink Greek."

"Thank you...I could certainly use some."

He filled her cup with the dark brew. "I presumed that you'd be sleeping in today and would wake up hungry."

Carlie took in the tasty-looking breakfast treats, namely Greek rusks, biscuits, honey, marmalade and croissants. She prepared her coffee to her liking and began with a rusk. Alex had leaned back in his chair with his own cup of coffee and watched as she spread a spoonful of the rich honey on the rusk.

"A cousin of mine, who lives on the mainland, produces this honey. It's the best I've ever tried."

She took a bite and swallowed, nodding. "Mmm, me too."

"How did you sleep?"

A warm breeze caressed her skin, stirring her hair. She met his gaze as he regarded her over the rim of his cup. "Very well, actually."

“Good. As a reminder, I will be at your disposal most of the time. Not that I mind, of course,” he added silkily, eyes dancing.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Oh...I don’t expect you to be at my beck and call.” She sipped her coffee and shrugged. “I could always rent a car.”

He dipped one of the biscuits in his coffee and took a bite. “We’ll be spending a considerable amount of time together anyway. I’m the only one who can guide you around the villas properly and provide you with the information you need. As for renting a car, there is no need since Hector keeps one in the garage, although our roads are unlike American roads. You should avoid driving about on your own.” He paused. “Besides, you’ll soon be overwhelmed with people requesting your company just about everywhere—from the beaches and taverns to the shops and cafés in Zante.”

That was a good deal of information, yet her mind focused on what he said about spending time together. Her female instincts fancied the idea of spending time with Alex. She glanced at him, noting the dark curls of his hair, which were quickly drying, the short sideburns that enhanced his masculinity and the wide bow of his mouth that seemed to be constantly amused if not mischievous. She’d been stirring with sharp awareness all this time—even her breasts felt

heavy and sensitive. However, these very signs warned her to use caution where he was concerned.

She collected herself. "We could play it by ear, I suppose. About the villas...I would like to visit them tomorrow morning and get started, if that's possible."

He inclined his head. "Yes. I'll be working there most of the day tomorrow...is nine o'clock good for you?"

"Perfect. I've never worked in Greece, but I know the sun is particularly bright...I'll need to take several test photos." She bit into a moist croissant.

"I find your work very interesting...a balance of technique and creativity, it seems."

She smiled. "That's an accurate description. I love photography—even if it is limited to commercial locations."

"I'm sure it provides you a decent living."

"I can't complain." She paused and held his gaze. "What about you? Have you always been in the hotel business?"

"Just about. Once I finished my business degree in Chicago, I worked at the Embassy Suites for about two years. I considered living in Chicago, but I never liked the winters. So, I created a bit of balance myself—I returned to Greece and bought a small hotel in Athens. It did well, so then I set

my eyes on a bigger challenge...the Blue Star ...where you stayed the other day."

Carlie instantly recalled the ultra modern, sophisticated hotel and the deluxe suite she'd been pampered with. "I really enjoyed my stay, however short it was. The designer did a fabulous job with the interior."

A low sound of acknowledgement rumbled in his throat. "The renovation took five months, but it was worth it." He paused and glanced at the two houses. "I continued and built the rental villas, which are similar to these. Although I enjoy Athens, this island is my home," he added with an especially pleased expression.

One that made her heart shift. "You have accomplished much in a short time."

"Thank you." Setting his cup on the table, he leaned forward. "You have been invited to my parents' home for dinner tonight. I have a few boring errands to run in Town and I'll be back around six. Should I make arrangements for you to spend the day at the beach—or anywhere else?"

She leaned back in her chair, noticing his gaze fall briefly to her breasts. Her nipples instantly tightened. "Um...I planned on taking a swim in the pool and unpacking my things today."

He observed her quietly for a few heartbeats before standing up. "In that case, I'll excuse myself before the sun becomes unbearable."

Carlie felt heat rush to her face as she took in his gorgeous form, including the pronounced swell in his swimming trunks. When she forced her eyes back up, she read the warm pleasure in his and her breath hitched.

His mouth pulled into that familiar teasing smile. "Oh, and don't go into the pool right after you've eaten. See you tonight." He turned and strode toward the villa, giving her another enticing view she could barely tear her eyes from.

* * * *

Alex watched members of his family draw Carlie into their warm embrace. Any respected friend of their children was considered family. His mother in particular fussed over her with genuine exaggeration, touching Carlie's long hair while remarking on her beauty. Carlie wouldn't understand the rapid Greek, for his mother didn't speak a word of English, but she was smart enough to get the picture.

He'd been tempted to touch the silky mane, tangle his fingers in it since the day she arrived. Neither blonde nor brown, somewhere in between, the straight locks fell like a golden curtain halfway down her back. He lifted his wine glass to his mouth as Carlie blushed and accepted the hospitality in broken Greek. Her effort

was...adorable, making it sexy. Standing off to one side, he could privately admire her graceful beauty. Her long peach dress hugged her body in all the right places, emphasizing her feminine shape. His gaze followed the delicate line of her throat, the soft curve of her shoulders, the rise of her firm, full breasts exposed by the V-shaped neckline...her slender waist and gently curved hips. He knew that under the airy material of the dress her legs were toned and shapely. Instantly, a fantasy conjured itself, involving his hands pushing the dress up, exposing her legs inch by inch, followed by his mouth.

He downed the remainder of the wine in one gulp. Carlie was extremely feminine and beautiful. It was his weakness. A part of him wondered if it had to do with the lack of sex lately. *Lately?* He'd been with Lenora just a week ago. He brought the girl to mind—flawless, model features, a body to die for and a tigress in bed. He didn't love her and Lenora only loved herself and his generous gifts. They had a nice arrangement. Without meaning to, he compared the two women and finally concluded that Carlie possessed a special kind of inner warmth, a genuine sweetness that radiated physically. Despite the reserved, cautious look with which she'd been regarding him, she couldn't hide her tender nature.

Even now, meeting his family for the first time,

the unhindered kindness in her bright blue eyes spoke volumes. Her luscious mouth smiled so warmly it shifted his insides. Returning to his previous thoughts—she wasn't altogether unaffected by him. He knew enough about women to recognize the nuances of her body language, natural and unconscious for the most part. As for him, just watching her eat breakfast had turned him on.

For the first time in his life, Alex was vexed by his attraction to the opposite sex. His jaw clenched as he sat next to Carlie at the dining table, his arm brushing against hers as they ate. He contributed minimally to the conversation, acutely aware of her body, hand gestures and sweet laughter.

He glanced at his sister, Zoe and her husband Niko, who were eager to practice their English with Carlie. The conversation flowed around topics such as the weather and lifestyle in the United States and the pros and cons of living on an island all year round. They also took a genuine interest in Carlie's profession. Meanwhile, his parents shot admiring glances in her direction.

Alex lifted the copper wine flask and turned to Carlie. "A refill?"

She looked at him with large, delighted eyes that inspired a rush of heat from his stomach to his groin, where it pooled into a hard ache. *Manamou.*

"Yes, please," she replied, smiling at him and then surprising him by clinking her glass to his. "Cheers," she added.

Everyone else lifted their glass to the center of the table. "*Stin iyea mas!*"

"Enjoy your vacation on Zakynthos, Carlie," Zoe said and then bestowed a gaze on him, bright with match-making notions, which he disregarded.

The truth of the matter had been nagging him all along yet he'd brushed it off. At that moment, he finally admitted the source of his annoyance: he'd been warned to behave around Carlie. Be a gentleman. And that posed a conflict because he was terribly attracted to her and wanted to be with her in ways that had nothing to do with gentlemanly etiquette.

The moon had taken its place in the sky when he escorted Carlie to the car. The heady scent of jasmine filled the warm, still air. Alex glanced at his passenger, her head resting comfortably against the leather seat, lovely profile cast in soft shadow, calm and content. Long wisps of hair danced near the open window.

A smile tugged at his mouth. She had eagerly tried every traditional dish and dessert. She'd also imbibed almost three glasses of wine. Not placing much significance on the matter, it pleased him that she had enjoyed her time with his family.

She sighed. "What a beautiful evening, Alex."

His breath hitched. He hadn't expected her to say his name, especially the sensual way it rolled off her tongue. God, he wanted to pull over and tug her into his arms. He cleared his throat. "It is."

When he looked at her again, her lids had drifted shut. Long lashes fanned the smooth rise of her cheeks and even in profile, her small nose was the cutest he'd ever seen. Her rosy lips had parted...Heat stirred in his loins and he tightened his hands on the steering wheel while the car hugged the curves of the hillside snugly. He reached the front drive of the villas and cut the engine.

Charlie's lids fluttered open and she appeared surprised to have dozed off.

"We're here," he said. "I'll get the door for you."

He went round to her side and held the door open, taking her hand as she stepped out. He pressed the automatic lock, shoved the keys in his pocket and reached out to clasp a few strands of her hair. He detected her tiny gasp as her wide eyes met his.

"I've wanted to touch your hair...to see if it feels as soft as it looks." It did. He sensed her body tense, realizing that he was making her nervous, but couldn't help himself. He caressed the locks between his fingers and noticed her full lips part

on a tremble that sent a rush of desire through him.

He couldn't stop. She suddenly looked so expectant and innocent. He stepped closer as his hand curved around the side of her neck, his thumb seeking the velvety skin of her cheek. With his other hand, he tilted her chin up a little and closed his mouth over hers. She stilled, her luscious mouth unresponsive. He slanted his head, coaxing her slowly until she opened for him with a whimper.

His heart slammed against his chest and a frisson of heat stirred his senses as he tasted the sweetness of her mouth. His nostrils flared, filling with the soft perfume of her skin, a fresh, delicate smell that had been teasing him all evening. A moan rose deep in his throat when her tongue met his curiously. He explored her moist cavern with long strokes and she exhaled a shaky sigh into his mouth. His hands slid to her waist, and pulled her against him, eager to feel her feminine curves. Her breasts pushed against him, full and round, impelling him to press his arousal to the gentle swell of her belly. She felt so good against him.

She quivered and sighed, arching into him. *Thee mou!* Heat pulsed and surged through his body, making him unbearably hard now.

She responded by lifting her hands to his chest, sliding them up to his shoulders. Pleasure arced

through him and he tore his mouth from hers with a raspy growl. "Carlie..."

He sampled the delicate shell of her ear, her smooth throat, while her fingers curled into his shirt. She gasped as he teased her pulse with his tongue. Her hips shifted against him, leaning into him with female instinct. He cupped her bottom, lifting the apex of her thighs to his erection. They let out a simultaneous moan of pleasure.

Somewhere in the hazy recesses of his mind, he knew he should use restraint. His desire was on the brink of spiraling out of control.

Then as if she'd read his thoughts, she leaned away from him with the help of her hands pressing insistently at his chest. "Stop. No more..." The words gushed out breathlessly.

It was a blow to his stomach – and other parts – but he forced himself to release her. She took a step back, trembling fingers touching the spot on her throat where his mouth had just been. His teeth clenched as his arousal knotted uncomfortably in his body, protesting, unsatisfied. It was his fault. He'd started it.

He took in her wide stare, arousal and shock brimming in its depths, the swollen pout of her mouth and the rapid movement of her breasts.

He swallowed and nodded briefly. "You're right...I shouldn't have done that. I apologize." Never in his life had he apologized to a woman for

kissing her.

She visibly tried to compose herself. “Yes, you shouldn’t have.” Her voice shook. She scooped up her evening clutch from the ground and pulled out a key. “Good night,” she clipped and turned around, crossing the drive in quick steps.

Alex raked a hand through his hair and cursed under his breath. The urge to call out to her was strong. He refrained, though. She would be too angry to listen anyway. Tomorrow, he’d seek her forgiveness. She *had* to excuse his rashness, otherwise working together would be quite unpleasant—for both.

Chapter Four

The man affected her too much for her liking. She'd had a pleasant buzz from the wine and he'd taken advantage of it. *Damned playboy. Womanizer.* Weren't there enough women already throwing themselves at him?

Heat lingered on just about every inch of her body. A body that had practically melted into his. The wet flesh between her legs clenched in protest. She gritted her teeth and tossed the clutch onto the sofa. Crossing to the glass door, she gazed at the sea of dark silk beyond the coast, divided by a single streak of silver.

But, don't try to convince yourself that you didn't enjoy it. That he didn't turn you on.

How embarrassing, really. He was her best friend's brother-in-law. They weren't supposed to be intimate. She wasn't prepared for it, hadn't expected it. When she realized he intended to kiss her, a current of anticipation had sizzled through her. And the second his mouth touched hers—her

senses had whirled with curiosity, longing, weakness, pleasure and many other wonderful things. He was very good at it, too. Skillful, soft and demanding, virile. His scent reminded her of fresh seawater and pines.

His arousal had been swift and strong. He'd swelled hard against her belly, muscles tensing under her fingers. If she hadn't pushed him away, he would have finished what he started – she had no doubt.

A heavy sigh pushed between her lips. How was she going to spend the day with him tomorrow without thinking about this...incident? Most vexing of all, however, was that her enthusiastic response wouldn't go unnoticed by a man like Alex.

Carlie's dreams had been infiltrated by naked visions of Alex most of the night. Alex swimming naked in the pool. Sneaking into her bedroom at night. Ravishing her thoroughly, exquisitely. She'd woken up aroused. Wet and aching. The fact irritated and angered her. She wasn't supposed to be feeling this way about him. She needed someone ready to commit to a monogamous relationship.

Gritting her teeth, she zipped up her backpack. Work should curb any unwanted thoughts and serve as a good excuse to put some distance

between them. That's it—at least a week of focused activity. Appeased by her reasoning, she headed for the front door.

The sight of Alex standing next to the car, a solemn set to his mouth and hands shoved into the pockets of his trousers, scattered her composure. For a moment.

Schooling her features into a calm appearance, she walked to the car and gave him a curt smile. "Morning."

His gaze moved over her face before he nodded and walked to the driver's side. Once they were settled in the seats, he turned to her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she returned, looking straight ahead.

He exhaled a quick breath. "Carlie, look at me."

The firmness in his voice compelled her to meet his intent expression. Her senses jarred. He was as handsome as ever despite the trace of weary tension around his eyes—the telltale sign of a sleepless night. Perhaps he had more conscience than she assumed.

"Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. I wasn't thinking—it just happened."

Oh, such nerve...to try to justify himself. "It just happened? You expect me to believe that? You know, it's the second time you apologize for your behavior."

"That's true—"

"You took advantage when I was tipsy."

"That's not why I kissed you. I simply wanted to."

She paused, wondering if there was any difference between the two. But there was more to it than that. She was angry at him for rousing her desire, coaxing an embarrassingly passionate response.

"It wasn't fair—I wasn't expecting it...and it was...inappropriate," she blurted, heat rushing to her face.

"Perhaps, but...you were responsive. You must admit that you enjoyed it."

Her jaw dropped. "I did not! And that's beside the point."

He leaned closer and she thought he'd kiss her again. The heat of his gaze lingered briefly on her mouth and her heart quickened.

"Carlie, we're old enough to be honest with ourselves. I thought about you all night." A muscle clenched in his jaw. "I've wanted to kiss you ever since I met you in Chicago. I'm not one to conceal my feelings. I'm very attracted to you and I enjoyed every second of that kiss." He paused. "And so did you."

Conflicting emotions bounced off each other inside her. She looked away. "Congratulations, Alex Marinos. You're a bloody good kisser," she stated grudgingly.

She could practically feel his roguish grin.

"You, too."

An exasperated sigh escaped her. "Let's get going before the sun gets any brighter."

The information and photos in the travel book she'd read now came to life before her eyes. As they turned a bend in the road, she observed an impressive chunk of mountain range in the far distance, which characterized more than half the island. Its fringes softened into long, gentle hills upon which many villages were built. Ionian Luxury Villas, owned by Alex and his immediate family, was tucked into one of those lush pockets on the hillside, in a small village just south of Agios Nikolaos.

On the way there, Alex had filled her in on some details. A five-star category, the four villas offered private accommodation and boasted beautiful design, furnishings and superior amenities. The views were nothing short of amazing. Green hills, olive groves and infinite blue sea. Spa, boat excursions and scuba diving arrangements were also offered.

"We'll also need photos for the website," Alex added as they walked to the administrative building, also designed in traditional stone.

"This is truly paradise," she said, her eyes drinking in the tidy gardens, pink bougainvillea and dense olive trees.

Once they entered the air-conditioned reception area, Zoe flashed them a bright smile that lit her brown eyes. She stood up from behind the marble desk. "Good morning! Carlie, it is so nice to see you again."

Carlie returned the young woman's smile. "Nice to see you, too, Zoe."

Alex rested his forearm on the surface of the desk. "What about me?"

Zoe gave him a playful smile. "Oh you—you are old news." She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

Alex chuckled and leaned forward to plant a kiss on his sister's cheek. "Ouch. My ego," he replied.

Witnessing his sweet side gave her heart a tender tug. The siblings had a striking resemblance she hadn't noticed before. The same thick dark hair, straight nose and wide mouth.

"Carlie will be working at the villas today...the entire week probably," Alex said.

"Yes, I know. Levante is not occupied until this Saturday. I have informed everyone in the other villas that you will be working there. Most of the guests leave for the beach around ten o'clock and housekeeping cleans right after," Zoe explained.

Alex looked at his watch and nodded. "Okay then. I'll take the keys for Levante—Carlie can start there."

Her senses stirred with awareness every second she spent with Alex. She was having a hard time keeping herself impassive, her eyes continually drifting to his handsome face and the loose curls that tumbled over his forehead. Luckily, he didn't stay longer than necessary and returned to the administrative building.

She spent a few hours taking a first round of photographs and planning her work. She'd take a picture of every room in each of the villas, their swimming pools and verandas. The scenic views. She also wanted to include at least one picture of the nearest beach. However, with the sun rising on this side, she would have to work in the latter half of the afternoon, when the light was softer.

The Ionian Villas were the deluxe version of the Marinos' private homes. Stately buildings made of stone through and through, recessed lighting, fine cabinetry, whirlpool baths, luxurious linens, infinity pools and uninterrupted views of gentle, rustic landscape. Most people's dream vacation.

She headed back to the reception area and chatted with Zoe until Alex appeared.

"I'm hungry. How about lunch, Charlie?" he asked.

She hesitated briefly. Well, it was just lunch—and she *was* hungry. "Sure."

He turned to his sister. "Zoe?"

She smiled. "Thank you, but I have food in the

fridge. Niko will be here to give me a break. Now that you talk about food, you two must come for dinner soon, yes?"

Alex nodded and glanced at Carlie with a smile. "We will."

"I'd love to," Carlie added.

Back in the sleek vehicle, Alex turned to her. "Time for you to start enjoying Zakynthos. There's a very nice tavern on the west side with a special view I'd like you to see."

Enthusiasm bubbled inside her. It would be her very first genuinely Greek dining experience. "I look forward to it."

He made a call on his phone and spoke in rapid Greek before glancing at her with a pleased look. "We've got a good table."

As they crossed the mountainous region along the outskirts of small, traditional villages, the landscape became untamed and rugged, a sharp contrast to the sandy coasts and low hills in the east. Still, it was beauty unspoiled. Carlie made mental notes of things she wanted to photograph, like the medieval stone monasteries nestled among cypress trees or perched atop steep cliffs.

About twenty minutes later, Alex turned off the main road, passed an aged structure that resembled a tower, before taking another road that dipped toward the coast.

Carlie's breath caught. The sea spread out in a

vast, endless shimmer of blue with the faintest of ripples, just beyond the edge of a cliff. He parked in a paved area near the tavern, which was built atop a craggy rock near the edge. A middle-aged man greeted them at the main entrance and they were introduced. The tavern's owner was pleased to see Alex and gave her a wide, friendly smile before showing them to a cloth-covered, square table in the far corner of the outdoor patio, shaded by a tall pine tree. Before sitting down, she stepped to the short wall and looked over the edge where the land dipped several dozen feet into a lovely cove etched out of the sun-bleached rock of a jutting peninsula. The crystal clear, tranquil water was very inviting—so transparent that a small motorboat, secured by a single rope, seemed to be floating on air. A small number of bathers occupied the deeper part of the cove.

As she looked along the coastline, which was a high wall of steep, plunging cliffs, Alex came to stand beside her. Just then, the simple, natural urge to wrap herself in his arms swelled up inside her.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" he said.

"It really is."

They shared a perfectly prepared, succulent red snapper—split in two, deboned, seasoned with oregano, lemon juice and olive oil. A large Greek salad, oven potatoes and fine Greek wine

accompanied the entrée.

Thank goodness for the leafy tree, the only protection against the scorching sun. Carlie swallowed a soft morsel of fish and listened to Alex talk about his childhood on Zakynthos, growing up in a large family and the antics he and his siblings carried out on a regular basis. He seemed to be trying to make her laugh. And it worked.

At some point it occurred to her that her attraction to Alex was increasing alarmingly. The connection seemed to go beyond his good looks. Perhaps it was the fact that she was on a beautiful island, it was summer and she was single. Her mind paused in consideration. A fling with him would be exciting and passionate. But, in less than three weeks, she'd be leaving and he'd forget about her. She knew that her sensitive heart wouldn't handle that well.

Chapter Five

Alex shifted in his chair. He was doing his best to be a perfect gentleman and not stare at Carlie's lush mouth, full taut breasts pushing against the snug material of her top and slim, bare arms. He focused the conversation around safe topics, but wasn't prepared for her charming response. Her bright, genuine smile and soft laughter took his breath away and he nearly drowned in her brilliant, sea-blue eyes.

God help him. She was by far one of the most desirable women he'd ever met. He liked seeing her relax in his company, lean back and enjoy the natural beauty around her. Enjoy the meal with a healthy appetite. Just a moment ago, he had to control the urge to reach out and wipe a drop of wine on her bottom lip. And when her tongue darted out to brush over it, he got hard.

He suddenly wished she were a complete stranger, someone he'd met by chance. Then, he admitted, he could behave like the rutting animal he now felt like. There was only so much he could

do to control himself. How was he supposed to get through the next three weeks?

On the way home, she asked him to pull over so she could take a couple of pictures. He admired the way her slender fingers handled the camera. He wondered how those fingers would feel against his skin...wrapped around his—*Stop!* He had to stop this madness. His jaw clenched and his hands gripped the wheel tighter. It was time he paid Lenora a visit. He'd sate his desire and cease lusting after Carlie. Problem solved.

When his sister had them over for dinner, they arrived together as a couple would—minus the typical displays of affection. Alex liked the feeling of being with Carlie. Sitting next to her in his car and at the dining table.

He watched her while she stood at the opposite end of the veranda, the smooth curve of her hip resting against the stone railing. Her gentle laughter floated up into the still, warm night, mingling with the smell of jasmine. She had tilted her head to the side, exposing the soft line of her neck as she talked with Zoe. He'd tasted the skin there, once. Enough to tantalize, but not satiate.

Her hair shone like pale silk in the moonlight. Her smooth skin glowed with the start of a golden tan, emphasized by the white evening dress that hugged her soft curves. A sexy angel, he mused.

The minute Zoe went inside the house, he walked over to Carlie, not able to stay away from her too long. He was seeing less of her these days. She had convinced him to give her access to Hector's car so she could work in the afternoon and avoid delaying him in the morning.

He heard her breath hitch as she turned to look at him, pleased that he affected her.

"I hope you are enjoying yourself," he said.

"Very much. I feel like I'm at home—even better, actually."

A surprisingly pleasant feeling shifted inside him.

"Oh, by the way—I plan to go to the beach at sunrise to take a few photos," she said.

"No problem—I'll accompany you."

She raised an eyebrow. "There's no need for you to get up so early. I look forward to making the trek on foot, actually, because it's so lovely in the morning." Her eyes were bright with enthusiasm.

He didn't like the idea of Carlie being alone on a deserted beach, which could be the case at that hour. "Carlie, it's safer if I come with you."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I'll be fine, Alex."

He let it go, not wanting to sound overprotective or worse—possessive.

The next day, he found himself pacing about the kitchen, a cup of Greek coffee in his hand. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Six-thirty. He expelled an impatient breath. She'd probably be there already, he thought and resumed pacing. He finally sat on the sofa and turned on the television, flicking to a news channel. When he realized that nothing was registering, he cursed under his breath and turned it off.

Carlie had somehow managed to plant herself in his mind. And she was taking up a lot of space. Never had he focused on one particular woman this much, not even in the overzealous days of early manhood.

He recognized the problem as soon as he'd left Lenora's apartment a few days ago. She'd been expecting him—dressed like the ultimate seductress. He'd kissed her and expected his male instinct to take over. But hell, he'd barely been aroused, something that *never* happened to him. A most distasteful sensation had scaled inside him, stopping him in his tracks. He'd mumbled some lame excuse, leaving a disgruntled tigress snarling at his back.

Before he got home, the general feeling had turned to restless frustration. The only obvious solution was to sleep with Carlie—get her out of his system. She hadn't welcomed his kiss that time, yet he was keenly aware of her involuntary

response to him.

He took a long sip of coffee and placed the cup on the table. She wouldn't be happy to see him, but he didn't care.

As he expected, the sandy beach was empty except for Carlie's beach bag and towel. The sun had risen considerably, splashing deep gold and orange across the sky. He frowned as he scanned the smooth surface of the water. When he saw her shadowed shape in the distant depths, his frown increased. She was too far out. What was she thinking?

He strode to the gently lapping shore and started waving, hoping to catch her attention. No luck. He shouted her name and she turned about, not moving any closer. With an impatient sound, he took off his shorts. He'd had the foresight to don his swim trunks. He cut through the water until it was deep enough to break into a regular swim. The water was ideal this time of the day, tranquil and comfortably cool.

Carlie had noticed him and was swimming his way. Several minutes later, they paused a few feet from each other and he met her puzzled gaze.

"Alex, is everything all right?" she asked with a lilt of reservation that chafed him.

"Look, I know you didn't want me to come along, but it wasn't right—you being here alone. Anything could happen—you could get a cramp

and then what? And you were swimming too far from shore."

Her mouth closed tightly for a moment, eyebrows coming together. "I'm a big girl. You don't have to protect me," she retorted.

He could see the golden flesh of her breasts in the clear water, swelling over the copper triangles of her bikini top. Heat tightened in his cock.

He forced his eyes to hers. "Even seasoned swimmers avoid swimming alone."

A flash of annoyance crossed her face and she lowered her eyes briefly. "I suppose you have a point. I couldn't resist taking advantage of the tranquility. It's heavenly." She offered a smile.

She was heavenly, he thought. "Come, let's get closer to shore."

He stopped when he was sure their feet touched the bottom and turned to her. Raw awareness flowed between them like an electric current. He was certain she felt it. "Did you manage to take any good photos?"

"Several," she replied breathily as a delicate blush touched her cheeks.

Desire pulsed through him insistently and he ached to pull her against him, seal his mouth over hers. Her body visibly tensed as he closed the distance between them and caught her hands. She drew in a quick breath, blue eyes widening.

"Carlie, you don't think I'm a jerk, do you?"

Her bottom lip dropped. "Of course I don't. Why would —"

"Good." He pulled her to him, releasing her hands to clasp the narrow curve of her waist. He held her alarmed gaze steadily.

"Alex, please..." she started, lifting her hands to his chest.

He lowered his voice. "You're driving me mad...I want you. God, how I want you, Carlie." He pressed his mouth against her damp forehead and felt her tremble in his hands. Blood rushed through his shaft and he crushed her to him, her soft flesh molding into him perfectly. He dipped his mouth to hers, his heart racing as she lifted her chin.

Just as his tongue flicked out to lick her plump bottom lip, she turned her face and tried to arch away from him.

She exhaled a long breath and glared up at him. "Why? Why are you pushing it, Alex?" she demanded.

"There's a strong attraction between us, Carlie. It can't be ignored."

Her jaw clenched and her eyes turned the color of a turbulent sea. "I won't deny it, but what does that mean? That we should carelessly jump into bed?"

Almost unconsciously, his fingers caressed her skin in tiny circles and slid down to her rounded

hips. "Yes, although not carelessly."

A dumbfounded look passed over her face briefly. She shook her head. "It's not right. God, don't you have a girlfriend or two to occupy yourself with?" she blurted and then nibbled her lip.

His fingers pressed into her hips as he brought her closer. "No one that matters and why isn't it right?"

She seemed to be turning his reply over in her head. Finally, she said in a low voice, "Because I'll be leaving in a few weeks and I don't want to get hurt."

His heart clenched and he lifted a hand to her face. "I would never hurt you, Carlie. I promise. There is more to this than taking you to bed. I really like you...I enjoy spending time with you." He'd never forgive himself if he hurt her.

She swallowed. "I do, too...but...I think we're looking for different things."

He understood. "Neither one of us can predict outcomes of this nature." He lowered his mouth to her ear. "Let's just see where it goes." One thing he was certain of was the fact that he wanted this woman to be his—now, tonight, the following day and as long as it lasted.

He felt her resistance crumble as she leaned into him with a sigh. His heart nearly tripped over itself. He nibbled her ear, her body shuddering

against his. “*Moro mou...*” He planted kisses along her jaw, cheeks and nose. He straightened, pulling her higher against him, the tips of her breasts brushing against his chest. The desire that smoldered in her eyes nearly felled him.

Alex placed one hand at the small of her back and buried the other in the wet strands of her hair, coaxing her head back a little. He closed his mouth over hers slowly, tasting, nibbling, teasing the moist cavern just beyond her lips. It took great willpower to ignore the throbbing erection that rose against her tummy.

She wrapped her arms behind his neck as an urgent mew sounded in her throat. He moaned and thrust his tongue into her. She returned his exploration, dancing with him, arching into him. She was soft and supple—utterly feminine. His nostrils flared, recognizing her delicate natural scent, mixed with the coconut fragrance of her sun lotion.

He dragged his mouth from hers and glanced at the beach. “We’re still alone.”

He didn’t want to take her here, but he’d sample her enticing charms before returning to the villa. With his eyes fixed on hers, he slid his hand between their bodies. He moved over her breast, a tempting mound of flesh above the water. He cupped her, feeling her fullness and the taut peak of her nipple. He circled his finger over it until she

gasped and shivered. He went lower, stroking the smooth skin of her abdomen, then reaching around to squeeze her round buttocks. He clasped her thigh and raised her leg slightly.

She made to pull away from him. "Don't move yet. Keep your hands behind my neck." A corner of his mouth twitched upward. "You'll need the support."

He sought the female flesh between her parted legs. He rubbed his palm over her, enjoying the rapture that crossed her face.

"Alex..."

He slipped his fingers under the band of her bikini and made contact with the silky soft, wet folds of her sex. He closed his eyes briefly, forcing his attention on Carlie, not on his raging hard on. He caressed her, feeling her swell and open for him. She whimpered, turning her face into his throat. He found her clit and stroked it. She writhed against him, curling her fingertips into his neck. The tiny, primal sounds erupting in her throat nearly drove him over the edge.

"Do you want me inside you, Carlie?"

She gasped. "*Oh...mmm...yes.*"

"Not here...soon though. Come for me, baby."

He applied skillful pressure and within seconds sensation ripped through her body in a fierce wave of tremors—a sensual display of abandon. Her cries of pleasure were muffled against his

throat and he held her tightly until her body lay limply against him.

Before she could fully recover, he lifted her in his arms and carried her out to the beach. On the drive back to his villa, she was quiet and a bit flushed. He clasped her hand tightly, sensing her sudden awkwardness. She seemed to be fighting with her conscience, but he knew her physical desire would overwhelm it.

He planted kisses on her cheek as they entered his home, and whispered teasingly in her ear until the last traces of reservation disappeared from her eyes, and she responded with feminine laughter.

The air-conditioned environment barely cooled the fire in his skin. There was nothing but Carlie at this moment, in his bedroom, willingly giving herself to him with a look of timid longing. His chest clenched. She was achingly lovely. If he didn't make love to her soon he'd die.

Not taking his eyes from hers, he got rid of his shorts, revealing his clinging swim trunks, and stepped toward her. "Carlie..."

Her gaze fell and she sucked in a quick breath, making him pause. His jaw clenched, aware that his erection was as big as Mt. Olympus. At least it felt that way.

He closed the distance between them and lifted her chin. "That's what you do to me," he said hoarsely.

Chapter Six

Shattering into hundreds of pieces in silky seawater while clinging to the hard body of a gorgeous man was *the* most erotic experience in her life. Her legs were still shaky and they'd barely had sex. Carlie wanted him so badly it hurt. She'd reacted fiercely to Alex. It was unprecedented for her. Her base urges and every cell in her body had reached out for him, hungrily seeking his promise of pleasure.

Right this moment, being in his bedroom about to make love with him felt like the most natural thing in the world. Her scruples had vanished without a trace. Oh, they'd tried to get her attention just a short while ago, but she'd stomped on them. Her hands itched to run over the perfectly sculpted muscles of his torso, the small triangle of hair on his chest, the rippled planes of his abdomen, his hardness.

She lifted her arms as he pulled off her tank top, eager to be rid of the damp bikini. He unfastened

her beach skirt and tossed it to the side. She sensed the restrained control of his motions, belying the apparent urgency of his arousal. It was hard to believe that a man used to bedding beautiful women would be so affected by her. Vanity was generally foreign to her—she didn't consider herself a beauty.

She held his gaze, barely breathing as he reached around to untie the strings of her bikini. She heard his breath catch as her naked skin came in contact with the air. Her nipples tightened. He eased her bikini bottom down and it joined the rest of her clothes. A pang of insecurity gripped her.

Alex caught her hands before they covered her breasts. "Don't." His eyes darkened hungrily as they swept over her body, heating every inch of her skin. "You're exquisite," he said thickly.

He walked her to the bed and pressed her against the edge, lowering his mouth over hers. She sat and moved near the center of the large bed. He joined her, not breaking the kiss. His hands cupped her face as he slanted his mouth, parting her lips with hungry pressure. He thrust, delving thoroughly into her mouth. Their ragged gasps mingled. His body pressed hers into the mattress, crushing her breasts against his bare chest. He folded his fingers between hers and raised her hands on either side of her head,

deepening the kiss.

Carlie moaned and arched against him, enjoying his virile passion. His teeth nipped carefully at her lips and soothed with his tongue. His body rubbed against her, teasing her nipples until they ached for attention. She could feel his erection straining against her thigh, through the material of his swim trunks. She was eager to see him, touch him intimately.

She managed to tear her mouth from his. "Alex, take that off," she requested between gulps of air.

He got to his knees and hooked his thumbs into the waistband of the trunks. She bit her lip in anticipation. God, he was practically bursting out of them. A whimper escaped her as he removed the piece of clothing. She shut her eyes for a moment, feeling her sex clench in response. Then she raised herself to a sitting position and admired him. He was generously endowed. Thick and very hard.

She looked up at him from under her eyelashes. A muscle was working in his jaw. She leaned forward and took him in her hand, tentatively at first. His body jerked and he made a guttural sound.

"You're beautiful, Alex."

Her hand moved up and down his silky length, lingering on his pulse, brushing over the swollen tip.

He hissed and stilled her hand. "No more. I wasn't done yet."

She released him and he reached into the bedside table, producing a condom foil. "Lie back down, Carlie," he ordered softly.

A moment later, he was between her legs, cupping her breasts while his mouth teased her ear, the pulse at her throat, her shoulders. Goosebumps raced across her skin. She arched as he flicked his tongue over her nipples, alternating between sucking and licking them. Frissons of pleasure unfurled from her sensitive peaks. Her fingers dug into his hair, pressing him closer. Without warning, one of his hands slid down her body and covered the aching folds of her sex. She gasped.

He began a rhythmic stroking—sweet agony—exploring her outer lips and then her inner lips, gently opening her before inserting two long fingers as far as they could reach. He pumped her while sucking her nipples tightly into his mouth.

"Oh!" She writhed under him like a woman possessed. She felt herself slicken as her womb contracted. She wanted him inside her now, craved the thick hardness of him deep inside her. And not gentle and civil—but hard and untamed.

He caught her mouth in a fervent kiss that left her breathless before shifting lower, dipping his tongue into her navel, spreading tremors over her

body. He clasped her thigh where he planted a line of moist kisses on the inner side. He repeated this with her other leg until his warm breath fanned against her sex. He caught her gaze with burning intensity before dipping between her legs.

When the tip of his tongue touched her flesh, Carlie whimpered and bucked. His sinful tongue swirled over her with incredible skill—well tutored in the art of pleasing a woman. She swelled under his seductive lashing while she bit down on her lip not to scream. Her fingers curled into the bed sheets tightly. He ran his tongue up to her clit, flicking wickedly, extracting a ragged moan from her. Then he parted her with his fingers and sucked the sensitive bud into his mouth.

She nearly came apart. “Alex, *please!*”

He straightened and looked at her, his full mouth moist with her lust. “Tell me what you want, *moro mou.*”

She licked her trembling lips. “You...inside me.” Her voice seemed foreign to her.

He rose between her thighs and the bulbous tip of his shaft entered her slowly. He held her gaze as he leaned over and plunged all the way in. Her cry mingled with his groan. He began moving inside her with long, even strokes. She grasped his shoulders and yielded to him completely.

“So wet,” he moaned.

Her nails grazed a path down to his tight buttocks in an attempt to take him deeper. He responded by throwing one of her legs over his shoulder and driving into her fiercely. Sensations curled and unfolded inside her, stirring her nerve endings, shuddering through her body. She vaguely felt her nails tear into his skin, heard his ragged moan before unbelievable pleasure tore through her. His climax followed quickly, gripping him in a strong release.

They rolled sideways in a tangle of damp limbs. Carlie closed her eyes and followed the sound of his heartbeat under her ear. No need for talk. She was in a state of nirvana. She sighed and nuzzled into his warmth, drifting into a light sleep.

When she woke, she was covered in soft sheets. Movement caught the corner of her eye and she turned to see Alex walking toward the bed, naked. A sun-bronzed Greek god in the flesh. She blushed as the memory of their unbridled lovemaking flooded her thoughts.

"Hello beautiful," he said huskily and slipped under the sheets, strong arms pulling her against his chest.

"Hi...I just woke up. What time is it?"

He dropped a soft kiss on her mouth. "Mmm, time for another romp..." He chuckled, his eyes glowing with need.

She rested a hand on his shoulder. "I have work to do." She glanced at the sun's glare reflecting off the windows.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Let's skip it today."

She was certainly tempted, but she shook her head. "Alex, I won't finish on time."

His eyes held hers for a silent moment before his mouth became a crooked grin. "Tell me, did you like our time together?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Like?" She chuckled. "It was absolutely amazing."

He grabbed her hip and crushed her against him. "Do you believe that I want you even more now?"

His erection was like hot steel against her thighs. Unconsciously, she rubbed herself against it. "I'd say it's quite evident."

He acknowledged this with a throaty sound and pressed her flat on the bed, one of his legs parting hers. She could barely protest as he caught her mouth in a swift kiss while his hand trailed over the mounds of her breasts, her tummy and settled between her thighs, cupping her possessively.

She couldn't help the rough sigh that broke from her throat.

"We'll go to the villas together...but tonight we play again," he murmured against her mouth

before releasing her.

That was something she would look forward to.

Concentrating on her work turned out to be a surprising challenge, especially those few times she saw Alex through her camera lens instead of the rooms in the villas. She had to take a break and refocus. Muscles she hadn't used in a long time were already sore from their passionate lovemaking. Otherwise, she felt wonderful. The sex had been the best she'd ever had.

The voice of reason tried to spoil it for her, but she wouldn't allow it. Now that she'd made the grown up decision to sleep with him, she'd just enjoy it while it lasted. They were consenting adults – nothing more, nothing less.

Finally, she was done with the third villa. Glancing at her watch, she smiled. Luckily, these guests normally spent the entire day at the beach. It was nearing five, and Alex would be waiting for her. Her heart skipped expectantly.

They dined at a charming tavern near the shore. She let Alex place delicious pieces of grilled squid in her mouth as they sat so closely she could feel his body's heat. He whispered erotic things in her ear that quickened her pulse. He seemed to enjoy pleasing her any way possible. Not that she minded being spoiled by her handsome lover. Her mind paused at the thought. She'd never actually

had a lover before. Boyfriends weren't exactly lovers. There were significant feelings involved with them.

As for her situation with Alex, she'd had a good talk with her mind and her heart today—they'd been armored.

He proved to be more romantic than she expected. They ended up in her villa where he made her stay in the living room while he went upstairs. He reappeared at the staircase ten minutes later and asked her to follow him.

Her hand rose to her chest when she entered her bedroom. The white veils of the poster bed draped about the wooden frame like a beautiful silk cocoon. The panel at the foot of the bed had been swept in a sideways arc to reveal the white bedcover, sprinkled with red rose petals. Candles of various sizes glowed on the side tables and dresser.

Warmth swelled inside her heart. She turned to him. "Alex, this is so lovely..."

He stepped closer and clasped her waist. "You're lovely."

This time they came together slowly, the initial surge of sexual longing having been satiated, but not smothered.

Chapter Seven

Alex let her explore his body, feeling a tug of guilt for depriving her of the pleasure this morning. He couldn't help himself—he'd desperately wanted her. He let out a low sigh as her hands moved over his shoulders, his chest, followed by her ripe, rosy mouth. His muscles tensed and shivered. Having Carlie make love to him while they sat up on their knees in bed, was incredibly erotic. She circled his nipples with her tongue and a dart of sweet pleasure shot through his flesh. She squeezed his buttocks as she went lower, moving over the backs of his thighs, then the front. He was already fully aroused.

Her soft hand touched him gently, sliding up and down his shaft, increasing the knot of heat in his stomach and groin. He clenched his jaw and watched her, equally turned on by her wide, captivated eyes. Her fingers tightened around him and pumped with just the right pressure. When she leaned forward and flicked her wet tongue against the tip, his knees nearly buckled and he

shut his eyes for a moment. She pulled him into the wet warmth of her mouth.

"Oh, baby..." He ran his fingers through her hair, clutching a handful. She looked incredibly seductive loving him this way. It gripped his heart. The tug of her mouth nearly drove him mad. The pressure in his cock increased, tightening every muscle in his body. Not wanting to climax so soon, he forced himself to pull away.

He traced her jaw with his thumb, the curve of her bottom lip, then down her throat to caress the fluttering pulse at the base. His fingers followed the delicate line of her shoulders and arms. He kissed the back of her hands. Carlie had an exquisite body—soft, supple curves and silky smooth skin. With her golden hair, blue eyes and a backdrop of moonlit drapes, she looked like a goddess. She robbed him of breath.

He caressed her back and shapely buttocks before slipping between her thighs. Her folds were wet and swollen. He stroked her until she gasped and clung to his arms. He moved her over his hips as he lay down. He wanted her on top this time, to watch her tempting body as she took him in.

Their eyes locked as the silken heat of her womb closed around him. His breath hitched. Something deep and unreadable flickered in her blue depths and then she rotated her hips, setting a slow, sensual pace that was nearly his undoing.

His body's response to this woman was unusually intense.

She tossed her head back, drawing his eyes to the slim line of her throat and the lush mounds of her breasts topped by rosy nipples. His hands closed over her breasts, squeezing, caressing her pale skin, the pebbled, rosy peaks. He raised himself to fasten his mouth on one of those peaks, sucking it hungrily. Her delicate scent flared his nostrils, quickening his arousal. He shifted to the other nipple and felt her clench around him, drawing him deeper still. He nibbled the hard tip lightly and soothed it with his tongue.

Hot pleasure throbbed in his loins, bringing him back onto the pillow. He grasped her thighs, thrusting upward to join her rhythm. She was so hot and slick. Tiny moans slipped past her lips. He caught her gaze and knew that there was nothing more beautiful than this. He shut his eyes against the force of his release as it tore through him, long and hard.

He was so overcome that he barely noticed Carlie's climax. She collapsed against him and he stroked the moist skin of her back. "Are you well, *glikia mou*?"

She raised her head and gave him a languorous smile. "Mmm...very."

"Somewhere along the way I sort of...fell into space." His smile was apologetic. "Was it amazing

for you as well?"

She chuckled. "Oh yes." Her fingers caressed the muscular curve of his shoulder. "What did you say before...in Greek?"

"My sweet."

God help him. They were still joined and he was getting hard again. The fact frightened him for a passing moment. Would he ever get enough of her? The brutally honest part of his conscience knew that there was more to this than sex. Not wishing to analyze these thoughts now, he shifted and pulled out.

* * * *

The awkward thing about visiting Alex's parents was that she prayed they couldn't tell she was sleeping with their son. Otherwise, they were a joy. She exchanged goodbye kisses with them and waved once more. He'd surprised her by bringing her over to see them again. She sort of expected him to avoid it—now that they were intimate.

"You have an amazing family," she said as they entered his villa.

He made an acknowledging sound. "Speaking of family...how do you want us to handle things when Hector and Irene arrive tomorrow?"

Carlie had been turning that question over in her head for the past few days. "I don't know, but

we can't behave like we're a couple," she replied, grateful to be out of the scorching afternoon heat. They weren't a couple in the typical sense. What she had with Alex was a sweet escape from her uneventful, ordered life back home. The sweetest escape, actually.

His expression sobered. "I wouldn't mind. Plus, it won't be easy pretending otherwise." He clasped her hand as he led the way upstairs.

"Of course you wouldn't mind, Alex. You're so bold about things."

"Shh," he said, placing a finger on her mouth once they were in the bedroom. "I'm forthright," he corrected.

"I'm just not sure —"

"Stay put. I have something for you," he said smoothly and went over to one of the nightstands.

She watched as he shut the drawer and retraced his steps. He lifted her hand and placed a square jewelry box in her palm. Carlie's heart skipped and she looked at him questioningly.

"Go ahead. It won't bite."

She read the gold print on the white box, noting that it came from a jeweler in the town of Zakynthos. Her fingers eased the cover up and her eyes fell on a pair of sparkling blue earrings. She drew in a sharp breath as the gems caught the light. Their fine quality was unmistakable.

Her eyes widened as she met his. "Alex, this is

obviously expensive. You shouldn't have."

He took the box from her and freed one of the earrings. Stepping behind her, he tucked the loose strands of her hair behind her ear and held the delicate piece to her lobe. She turned to the mirror just a few feet away. The dangling gem was a close match to the color of her eyes.

He smiled with pleasure. "It suits you. Blue topaz set in white gold. When I saw it I immediately thought of you—lovely, delicate and blue-eyed."

Heat suffused her cheeks. His gesture delighted her feminine nature, but what did it mean? "It's the most beautiful set of earrings I've ever seen, but...Why Alex?"

He caught her gaze in the mirror. "Because I like you and I enjoy every minute spent with you. And before that apprehensive mind of yours jumps to the wrong conclusion—that includes the time we share *out* of bed."

He'd read her thoughts clearly, she admitted silently, and decided to take his word for it. She turned around and deposited a lingering kiss on his mouth. "I love them. Thank you."

His hand cupped the side of her face. "Wear them the next time we go out, yes?"

Carlie nodded.

He unzipped her skirt, his fingers brushing over her skin as he removed it. He ran his hands

back up her legs as he straightened. He kept her panties on and removed the rest of her clothes. His mouth caressed her shoulder, sending warm tingles down her arm.

His breath fanned her ear. "Will you join me for a nap?"

"Um...nap?"

His teeth nibbled her earlobe. "Yes, aren't you sleepy?"

Among other things, she thought hazily. Her sensitive regions stirred, but the heat had been draining today. "I could use a nap," she agreed, heavy lidded.

He stripped down to his underwear and she accompanied him to the bed where she snuggled nicely into his arms.

Carlie surfaced from a highly erotic dream. A wistful smile curved her mouth as she stretched and yawned like a satisfied cat. When her dream suddenly felt all too real, her eyes shot open. There was no mistaking the large hand brazenly stroking her from behind. Air caressed her bare backside.

She gasped loudly when he found a particularly sensitive spot. "Alex," she breathed, straining to look over her shoulder, but his leg restricted her.

"Relax, Carlie. Let me please you," he

murmured.

There was something distinctly erotic about being caressed this way and she was barely shocked to find her hips arching upward encouragingly. With Alex, she'd turned into a wanton. Biting her lip, she clutched the pillow and surrendered, body and soul. Mercilessly, he brought her to a strong orgasm. Tears sprang to her eyes.

She was still whimpering when he lifted her hips and plunged into her. She shut her eyes against the onslaught of sensation. He felt like silk stretched tautly over steel as he filled her completely.

"Thee mou! You're perfect...so perfect," he groaned, clasping her hips.

She didn't want to be anywhere else, with anyone else. God, it *was* perfect. They held nothing back from each other. His desire kindled hers, her pleasure was his, give and take, breath for breath—the ultimate union of man and woman.

It was an incredible trip to paradise. Pleasure overcame her in exquisite waves, obliterating all form of thought. In its wake, she felt Alex pulse inside her and shudder. The limp weight of his body pressed her into the mattress for several pounding heartbeats.

Carlie sighed. She'd died and gone to heaven. It was so...so...

Oh no. She wiggled under him and his weight lifted. She rose up on her knees and looked at Alex's handsome, content face as he lay on his pillow, one hand tucked under his head. She glanced down his body nervously and confirmed what she suspected. Her stomach clenched

"Alex," she pointed to his groin. "No protection."

His features froze as he glanced down his body. "Oh, damn." He let out a ragged breath. "Carlie, I'm sorry. It completely slipped my mind," he said gravely.

"How could you be so irresponsible? I wasn't thinking straight. I was half asleep for goodness sake!"

He sat up, dark brows pinching together over his eyes. "Carlie, honey—I swear I didn't mean to do that."

She yanked her hand away when he reached out and shook her head, staring at the pillow. "I knew something like this would happen." Her feet hit the floor and she rushed to the washroom, locking the door. With her hands over her face, she sagged against it. The blame was also hers. She'd tossed away all reason in exchange for physical pleasure. As a woman, she should have been more cautious. If she got pregnant, the problem would be hers.

In a fit of panic, she ran a shower and scrubbed

herself pink, fighting back angry tears. As she wrapped herself in a fluffy towel, Alex knocked on the door.

"Carlie, are you well?"

She sighed and swung the door open. "I'm fine," she muttered, brushing past him.

His hands came down on her shoulders, forcing her to stop. He turned her to face him and lifted her chin.

Concern shadowed his eyes. "Carlie, you have every right to be angry at me. I screwed up."

She gave a heavy sigh. "Look, it's my fault, too."

His hand cupped the side of her face. "No, I was thinking with the wrong part of my body," he said seriously and pulled her into his arms, pressing his face against the top of her head.

Involuntarily, her hands circled his waist. "You truly are a beast, Alex," she muttered, injecting a dose of reprimand in her voice. She felt his chest rumble. "Most men are," he replied.

"Well, the chances of pregnancy are slim, statistically speaking."

He pushed her gently away from him and held her gaze. "Now hear this. If it turns out that you are pregnant, I want to know. Do you understand?"

Inwardly, she winced. Why would he wish to know? Surely something like that would be bad

news. A baby didn't fit into his lifestyle.

"Don't worry about it. I don't think—"

"Carlie. I'm dead serious. Don't you even think of keeping this sort of thing from me," he warned.

Tension edged its way up her spine. She eased out of his embrace and purposely went about picking up her clothes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. I mean, it's too early to know...so there's not much point in discussing it." Being pregnant with Alex's child would be an unpleasant scenario. She was almost certain he'd despise himself—and possibly her for upsetting his carefree life. God, she didn't want to consider it.

As she got dressed, he closed the distance between them with a displeased expression. "You're upset. However, this is my responsibility as well." His eyes searched her face, apparently trying to read her thoughts.

Unwillingly, she met his eyes. "Look, Alex, let's keep things real. If I were pregnant, I wouldn't expect you to give up your present life and...well, settle down..." The words just spilled out.

Alex's face turned dangerously dark. He took another step toward her and she flinched.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," he growled and spun around. He shoved himself into his clothes and left the room.

Chapter Eight

Carlie was somewhat relieved once Irene and Hector arrived. It interrupted further conversation concerning her possible pregnancy and served as a temporary buffer between her and Alex. The tension between them, however, was stretched like a tightrope. Even Irene cast them a few questioning glances and finally cornered her privately.

“Is there a problem—I mean, did you and Alex have a fight or something?” she’d asked with concern.

Telling Irene about the affair was out of the question. At least not on Zakynthos. So she’d assured her that all was fine.

Although Alex seemed to spend more time working, he’d drawn the line a few days before she was scheduled to leave the island. He’d taken her out to dinner and told her that he wouldn’t allow unpleasant feelings to fester between them—and that he’d be going to Athens on the

same flight.

"And why is that?" she asked, attempting to hide her bubble of joy.

"Why am I going to Athens or why am I on the same flight as you?" he responded amusedly.

She cocked an eyebrow. "Both I guess. You didn't mention anything until today."

"I booked the flight yesterday because I have to attend a meeting at the Blue Star. And, I want to see you board that final plane safely."

She leaned her head against the seat of the taxi and closed her eyes. She'd been suspended in a strange, indefinable mood during most of the trip back to Chicago. About fourteen hours ago, she was at Athens International Airport with Alex. His solid warmth and familiar voice still lingered on her. Her mind replayed the last few hours she'd spent with him.

He had put her up in one of the grand suites in his hotel. Once he was done with his meeting, he'd come to see her with wild need and they'd practically torn each other's clothes off. Naturally, she wondered if there really had been a meeting—or was it an excuse to be with her until the last minute? Then she accused herself of being a hopeless romantic, destined to suffer broken hearts with the wrong men.

Just before her boarding time, Alex pulled her

tightly to him and she all but melted into his lean, hard frame. Her heart wrenched as she looked into his eyes.

"I wish you could stay longer," he said while his thumb caressed her cheek. "Last night wasn't enough." He pulled her closer to him and she gasped as she felt the bulge of his arousal. They'd spent half the night making love.

Two and a half weeks of amazing passion, including an unprotected romp and they could barely keep their hands off each other. It was madness.

Charlie glanced at the shrinking line of passengers at the gate. "Alex, I should go." Her voice felt lifeless.

His eyes darkened with intensity. "Remember what I said. You will call me once you have news—yes?" It was a demand that brooked no argument.

She nodded, blinking back tears. "I will."

He bent his head and caught her mouth in the most delicious kiss ever. Gentle, but possessive. It branded his essence and every moment they'd shared into her flesh. When he finally pulled away, she had to grasp his shoulders so as not to crumple to the floor.

He framed her face between his hands. "I plan to visit Chicago before Christmas."

His gaze moved over her features slowly, so

yearningly her breath caught. She had been staring at him too, unconsciously stamping his handsome face to memory.

Abruptly, he removed his hands. "Go, Carlie...before I take you back to the hotel." A muscle was working in his jaw.

She hesitated as a swell of conflicting emotions rose up to her throat, nearly choking her. She forced herself to swallow the lump.

"Goodbye, Alex," she blurted and turned swiftly toward the boarding gate without looking back.

The driver brought the car to an abrupt stop, disrupting her daydream. Carlie glanced at her familiar red brick townhouse and instantly wanted to run inside, soak in a warm bath and crawl into bed.

Carlie phoned Irene the following morning to inform her that she'd arrived home safe and sound, apart from the jetlag.

"Are you absolutely sure you're fine?" Irene asked for the third time.

"I am, and stop asking me that," she said firmly.

"Well, I still think you're keeping something from me."

When Carlie rang off, she sighed. She'd wanted to ring Alex as soon as she got home, but held

back. What was she supposed to say, anyhow? *Hello, Alex. Your former lover here. How are things with you?*

She frowned and went into her bedroom, where she kept a little personal calendar in one of the nightstands. She'd sort of lost track of time on Zakynthos, which was expected. She kept track of her menstrual cycle on this calendar. Locating the last note she'd made, she began counting. Her period was due in two days. Recalling the date she and Alex had unprotected sex, she counted again and cringed. It was close—just missed the peak of her ovulation. She'd been holding her breath and let it out slowly, not sure how relieved she should feel.

In about two or three days she'd know for sure. She decided not to think about it until then. Today, she'd go grocery shopping, listen to the phone messages that were blinking for attention, go through her emails and perhaps catch up on some more sleep.

That afternoon, Carlie put a bite of grilled chicken in her mouth and listened to her messages. The first two were from her sister and mother, one was job related and the last was from Alex. Her heart performed an excited dance and she replayed the message.

His voice was deep and sensual as usual. "Carlie, it's Alex. I'm happy you got home

safely...although I *was* expecting to hear from you. I'll call you later."

She kept playing the message until she was disgusted with herself.

"Carlie dear, you're a smart girl, right? You know what you have to do." She nodded. "*You absolutely have to get him out of your mind.*"

Unless she was pregnant. She chewed her bottom lip nervously. "Unlikely," she reminded herself. But whom was she kidding? In the deep recesses of her heart, she knew she was in love with him. To her dismay, she sensed the feelings went beyond that, because she had enjoyed being with him more than anyone else in her life. So much for protecting her heart.

Alex didn't call later and she suffered a sharp stab of disappointment.

He woke her up at seven in the morning. She'd fallen asleep on the sofa. The second his familiar voice came through, her entire body had sprung to life. It was a beautiful caress against her ear, one she drank in as if parched. He'd called her "sweetheart" and asked how she was feeling. She nearly told him that she missed him, but stopped herself in time. He apologized for not calling sooner due to a few problems that had come up at the hotel. He was still in Athens.

His ending the conversation with the 'pregnancy' topic bothered her, though. Was that

the only reason he'd called? Would he have called if the issue didn't exist? She scolded herself for wondering. It was pointless torture. Alex was a decent man—a man who respected family and responsibilities. He wouldn't neglect his own child no matter the circumstances. His interest in her at the moment was due to obligation.

Carlie threw herself into her next job. She took breaks just to eat, keeping her mind from straying to Alex and her period, which had yet to come. After work, she drove to her mother's place in the suburbs and filled her in on her trip to Zakynthos in *almost* every detail.

Day three rolled around and still no sign. She went to yoga class. Read a novel.

On day four, Alex called and she let the answering system take the call. He sounded a bit impatient, yet she decided to wait one more day.

A throbbing headache woke her up in the middle of the night. It felt worse when she stood up. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she stepped into the bathroom and took something extra strong. Blinking at her reflection in the mirror, she noticed the pallor of her skin.

A weary sigh rushed through her lips. It was bound to happen with all the stress. She was about to step out when the thought occurred to her. A few minutes later, Carlie dropped down on her bed, relief washing over her. Her period had

arrived. Thank God. She'd been spared. She rolled to her side and clutched her pillow to her protectively. She drew in long, even breaths. Now, she could call Alex with the good news. He'd certainly be relieved.

The seconds passed and in the stillness of the room, a most unpleasant feeling slowly replaced all others. It couldn't even be named, but she understood it clearly. No pregnancy meant her connection with Alex was severed. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled. She curled up and wept through the rest of the night and somewhere along the way, she began hating Alex for doing this to her, more than she hated herself for getting involved with him against her better judgment.

Her mood hadn't improved much when Alex phoned that morning. She wanted to hide from the world for a while. Heal.

"Carlie, you don't sound well."

"I'm fine," she muttered.

He let out a ragged breath. "Are you pregnant?"

"Leave me be, Alex."

"Damn it, Carlie! What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

A tense pause. "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

Uncontrollable emotion shot through her. "Yes, Alex. I am," she replied unwaveringly and hung

up.

She walked to the kitchen and poured a glass of orange juice. "There. Now it's your turn to worry your handsome head." She allowed herself a smug smile. He deserved it, after all. He'd kissed her first. He'd turned on the full power of his charm. Lured her into bed with him. Life wasn't always fun and games.

She took a couple of healthy sips and put the glass down on the table. Oh, Lord. What had possessed her to do such a thing?

She rushed to the phone, retrieved Alex's incoming call and pressed the dial button with shaky hands. *Please answer.* It rolled into voice mail. She swore under her breath while she waited for the *beep*. She left a clear message, emphasizing the fact that she wasn't pregnant. That she lied because she'd been angry.

The need for fresh air compelled her to walk to the nearest park, where she cried some more and hoped no one noticed.

Chapter Nine

The overcast sky and patter of rain over the next five days suited Carlie's mood well. Unable to dispel the weight of emptiness in her body, she went about doing things mechanically. Alex had not returned her calls and she'd decided to give up and let things be as he was understandably angry with her for lying to him.

Regardless of the circumstances, she cared for him deeply. He was considerate, tender and made her laugh. Surprisingly, they had many things in common as well. As for their passion—it had been the most intense experience she had ever known.

A glance at the clock propelled her to the front door so she could beat the morning traffic. She fumbled for her keys and swung the door open, nearly colliding with the man standing on the doorstep.

She glanced up as his hands reached out to steady her and froze. Alex.

A surprised little scream escaped her as she

gawked at him.

His handsome face was composed as his eyes took her in from head to toe. "Carlie..." he began as he noticed the leather cases that contained her photography equipment. "You shouldn't be carrying things like that," he stated and pulled them out of her grip.

Ignoring his comment, she found her voice. "What are you doing here, Alex?"

He frowned and motioned for her to go back inside. "Let's talk."

She hesitated only because a bunch of emotions were jumping around inside her. Pushing the door open, she held it until he walked past and set the cases next to the wall in the corridor.

"There was a long flight delay. I arrived in Chicago at three this morning," he said and she suddenly noticed the fine lines framing his sensual mouth.

As they entered the living room, Carlie tried to paste an impassive look on her face. Seeing him wreaked excited havoc all over her body. She longed to press herself against him, breath in his scent, feel the steady beat of his heart.

He paused near the sofa and looked around. "This is a nice place. Very cozy," he said. He looked at her with a look so intense she nearly melted.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I better

make a phone call." Work was out of the question. When she returned, he was sitting on the sofa. She lowered herself in the armchair.

His mouth tensed. "Did you really believe I would turn my back on you?"

Her eyebrows came together. "What do you mean?"

He sighed roughly. "Carlie, you're pregnant—it isn't a trivial matter."

Oh God. This couldn't be, she thought. She dug her fingers nervously into her thighs. "Alex, I left you a message about that." She stressed each word slowly.

A muscle clenched in his jaw. "You expected me to believe that? It was obvious you were afraid of my reaction so you decided to fabricate a lie." He shook his head reproachfully.

She moved closer to the edge of the armchair. "Alex, listen to me. I am not pregnant and I'm really sorry—"

He reached out and grabbed her hands. "What is it—did you miscarry?"

Unexpected pain tore through her and she jumped to her feet, shaking. "Damn you, Alex! Don't you get it? I was *never* pregnant! Never. It was a lie."

He shot up and stepped toward her.

She landed a fisted blow to his chest and pushed him back a few steps. "I hate you. I hate

you for coming into my life and making me feel wonderful and special when it was just temporary! I lied to you about being pregnant because I was angry—angry that I had to leave and forget about you.”

She paused to drag in some air, ignoring her burning tears. “Half of me is relieved, but the other half wishes I was pregnant because I want to be a mother. The crazy thing is that I wanted to have *your* child, Alex.” She wiped her eyes. “I wanted to share so much with you. It’s just that...you’re a sworn bachelor,” her voice dipped.

Something that resembled disappointment or regret flickered in his dark eyes. He raked fingers through his hair and scowled. “Don’t make assumptions about me. Your notions are poorly conceived.”

Carlie stared at the floor, trapped within her doubts and her feelings for this man. She heard the release of a weary sigh.

“Carlie...please.” He touched her chin and she turned her face away.

“I never meant for you to be hurt,” he continued, placing a hand on her waist. “It breaks my heart to see you like this.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I’m sorry you wasted your time coming here.”

Two firm hands clasped her waist, pulling her to him. “Not a waste. I was going to come

anyway—your news just hastened the trip,” he replied.

She shifted her gaze to his questioningly, trying to ignore the heat pulsing off his body.

“The truth is, *moro mou*, that I have missed you terribly. I can’t focus on my work, my responsibilities—nothing really.” His hand cradled the side of her face, one long thumb brushing her cheek. Light danced in his eyes as he smiled. “When you told me you were pregnant, I was shocked at first. It was unplanned, after all. Although, the more I thought about it, the more excited I became. The thought of you having my child was absolutely beautiful. I couldn’t wait to see you.”

Carlie felt like she’d been slapped. It was not the kind of reaction she had expected. She gave a mental shake and unconsciously put her hands on his chest. “Alex...it’s okay. I’ll get over it.”

A shadow came over his face. “What do you mean?”

She sighed. “Do you really not see? We’re two different people. We’re even separated by an entire ocean.” She tried moving away, but his hands tightened.

“The only thing separating us is your fear of trusting me—trusting your own heart,” he asserted, pulling her firmly against him. His eyes silenced her with their intensity. “I love you,

Carlie," he said thickly.

His words permeated the air around them, making it sizzle like a firecracker. When she continued staring at him, dumbfounded, he slid his hand to her back and pressed her close enough to feel the quick thud of his heart, his solid build and the hard swell of his arousal.

"This bachelor has had too many empty days and nights. No woman has filled that emptiness like you have." His fingers brushed through her hair, tilting her head back. His gaze reached her soul. "I want you in my life—always."

"Alex—"

Her protest was muffled by his mouth. It slanted against her hungrily, forcing her lips apart. When her body softened against his, he scooped her up and started walking around the house.

"Where is your bedroom?"

"Upstairs," she answered, trying to catch her breath.

He located the staircase. "Watching you board that flight in Athens was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," he told her as he reached the top. After glancing into a couple of rooms, he found the master bedroom and lowered her to her feet.

His comment about her fear of trust finally sank in. She had unfairly cast him into a stereotype without giving him a chance.

She brushed her fingers over his jaw. "I'm sorry

for reacting the way I did. I shouldn't have lied and..."

He pressed her hand to his mouth. "Luckily, you wear your heart on your sleeve," he responded and grinned so seductively her knees almost buckled.

Carlie stared in excited awe as he practically ripped off his clothes, scattering them on the carpet. He never took his eyes from her the entire time. God, she had missed him badly. Missed their intimacy. She ached for him in ways she couldn't describe.

He stood naked before her and cupped her face. "*Karthia mou.*" When her eyes widened curiously, he added, "My heart."

Happy tears swam in her eyes.

He removed her clothes and they fell onto the bed together. "I need to hear you say it, Carlie."

Her mouth curved into an emotional smile as she cupped his cheek. "Of course I love you. You're the sweetest beast," she chuckled and writhed under his roaming fingers.

His hand swept down to her tummy. "You know what I want?"

"It wouldn't be hard to guess," she teased.

"I really do want children. I'm very fond of them."

Warmth swelled in her chest and she covered his hand. "So am I."

He moved over her, nestling between her legs. "I plan to work hard..."

She gasped as the full head of his arousal slid between her folds. "Hard?"

His mouth pulled into that familiar, playful smile as he eased deeper. His breath came out sharply. Desire burned in his eyes. "...to make babies..."

He slid into her and she trembled with raw pleasure. Their breath mingled as he lowered his head to hers.

"Oh, yes..." she breathed and arched to him. "Our babies..."

He moved inside her. "Yours and mine," he murmured, pulling back before plunging to the hilt.

She cried out and clung to him as the fiery tremors in her womb engulfed her.

Alex whispered tenderly in her ear and caught a stray tear in his mouth.

Carlie surrendered to their passion and sighed blissfully when he filled her with his release.

Wrapped tightly in his arms, she nuzzled his throat. "I'd like you to teach me Greek so I can understand those sexy endearments."

"Whatever your heart desires, *agapi mou*," he said as his hand caressed her back.

Carlie smiled, the feelings of comfort and affection warming her from within. She traced

lazy circles on his chest. "Alex, I don't care where we live as long as we're together."

In response, he let out an approving moan and settled her on her back. "That's a good thing, Carlie, because I intend to keep you close by."

The sensuous depth of his voice sent a delicious frisson through her. His mouth hovered over hers temptingly. Their eyes met, communicating unspoken thoughts.

"Very close," he added, and Carlie sighed as his mouth found hers once more.

About the Author

Celia Jade lives in Montreal and loves her wonderful family, outdoor cafés, gardening, animals and just about anything chocolate. She feels blessed with a passion for literature and has been reading and writing for years. Every book she writes turns a new page in the story of her life, doing what she most enjoys.