

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CINDERELLA CAPTIVE

EXCERPT

All the characters in this book excerpt are fictitious and have no existence outside the author's very-vivid, non-stop imagination. They have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names and are pure invention
(mwah-ha-ha).

All rights reserved. The text of this publication or any part thereof may not be reprinted by any means without permission of the Author.
The illustration on the cover of this book features smokin' hot model/s and, as gorgeous as they are, bears no relation to the characters described within.

First published 2022

(c) Clare Connelly

Cover Credit: adobestock

Contact Clare:

<http://www.clareconnelly.com>

Blog: <http://clarewriteslove.wordpress.com/>

Email: clare@clareconnelly.co.uk

Follow Clare Connelly on facebook for all the latest.

Join Clare's Newsletter to stay up to date on all the latest CC news. www.clareconnelly.com

PROLOGUE

ANYONE OBSERVING ANASTASIOS XENAKIS from a distance would have thought him the same as always—impenetrable, ruthless, unmoving and unmoved—but that assessment would be wrong. Anastasios was, in that moment, deeply moved. The death of his father had shocked him to the core.

At eighty four, Konstantinos Xenakis had been in robust good health, more energetic and astute than men half his age, and yet, his body had failed him. In the whirlwind week since his father's massive heart attack, there'd been a thousand tasks demanding Anastasios' attention, from taking over the reins of the family's trillion-dollar empire, to calming shareholders' jitters, to supporting, along with his brothers, their mother, who had lost, without warning, the love of her life.

He had also been dealing with the bombs that were detonating around him, as secrets—long hidden—were dragged into the light. So far, those secrets rested solely on Anastasios' shoulders—the decision of whether to tell his brothers and cousins, and if so, how much, was for him alone.

There was no space to grieve. Not now. Even when he

knew the absence of his father would be profound, there were more immediate concerns.

Anastasios stood a little away from his family, and the small group of mourners who'd been included as guests at the intimate burial. Their darkly clothed forms were huddled together on this warm, mid-summer's day, where the sun made a mockery of their moods, his mother at the center, even now graceful and stunning, her pale hair pinned into a bun at her nape, her fair skin unmarked by the bright Greek sun, always betraying her English roots.

"Tasso."

The only sign he'd heard the diminutive of his name was the slight shift of his head. His shoulders remained squared, his body as still as if made of iron.

He recognized the familiar tone of their family solicitor and despite a long-held affection for the man, his lips formed a grim line. He was plummeted three days into the past, when he'd met with Georgios and the bombs had begun to detonate.

"I believe it was an ongoing situation." Georgios had struggled to hold Anastasios' gaze.

"For how long?" He asked with icy calm, when inside, his mind was shouting, an affair? His father?

"Their daughter is twenty four."

Icy calm had disappeared. Anastasios, known for his steadfast reactions, practically leaped out of the chair and prowled across the solicitor's office, towards the highly-polished oak desk. "Did you just say their daughter?" He asked, when he could trust his voice to speak.

Georgios nodded.

"Twenty four," Anastasios repeated, lifting a hand and rubbing it across the back of his neck. The reality of this—of his father's lovechild—was almost impossible to grapple with. "Surely it was a brief affair, at the time," he murmured, doing some quick

calculations. "We had just buried Valentina. Perhaps in his grief—,"

"Perhaps at first," Georgios nodded. "But it continued beyond that."

"How do you know?"

The older man's expression showed obvious discomfort.

"Damn it, do not obfuscate. I need to know everything you do, now."

Georgios winced at the tone in Anastasios' voice. "Up until a year ago, they were in his will."

Anastasios closed his eyes on a wave of shock. "I see."

"A year ago, he insisted that they be removed. He was adamant about it. I gather something happened between them."

Anastasios wracked his brain, trying to think of what might have changed one year earlier. His father had begun travelling more frequently to their office in London, which was run by Anastasios' younger brother Dimitrios. But that wasn't necessarily unusual.

"I don't understand," he said with frustration.

"She has a penthouse in New York. Your father purchased it twenty four years ago, and put it in her name."

Georgios was speaking in a matter-of-fact tone, as though it were the only way to get the information across.

"An account was set up, also in her name, and a regular amount deposited into it. Five years later, payments began to a private school in Manhattan."

Anastasios' eyes swept shut, his chiseled face bearing a mask of utter disgust. "At least he had the decency to take care of his responsibilities."

"There is more," Georgios said gently. "But the rest of your family will be here soon. I asked you to come early so I could raise this matter delicately. It is, naturally, up to you to decide how you'd like to proceed."

Anastasios stared at Georgios, but he was lost in thought. If his

mother learned the truth of this, she'd be devastated. That didn't necessarily mean he shouldn't tell her, only that nothing was served by doing so now.

"She is grieving the loss of my father. At this point in time, this stays between us. But Georgios? I want to hear everything, to know everything."

On the afternoon of the funeral, Georgios took the space at Anastasios' right, his demeanour tense. "I need to speak with you."

Anastasios turned slowly, regarding the other man carefully. "And from your body language, I gather I'm not going to like what you have to say."

"A wise assessment."

Anastasios returned his gaze to his family, crossing his arms over his chest. "Then tell me whatever it is quickly. I can't say how long we'll have before being disturbed."

"Your father's estate is complex," Georgios began. "There are the business assets, but also many personal accounts and properties, and he was very specific in how they were to be distributed. As you'll learn, at the reading of the will this afternoon, most everything is split equally between you and your brothers. Your mother's fortune was set up independently a long time ago."

Anastasios was familiar with these provisions.

"There are two more things you should know."

Anastasios gave no hint of the sense of trepidation that was stealing through him.

"I have received a letter from the solicitor of Annie Westbourne."

Anastasios lifted a brow, the name meaning nothing to him.

"The woman we discussed in my office, last week?"

A single breath hissed between Anastasios' lips. Somehow, having her name made it all the more real.

"She is seeking a share of your father's wealth, an amount that she says was promised to her."

"Is this the...mother? Or the daughter?"

"The mother," Georgios said with delicacy.

So she was a fortune hunter, then? What excellent judgment his father had, he thought with sarcasm, before a sense of disloyalty chewed through him. Whatever else Konstantinos had been—and it was becoming clear he'd lived a secret life all these years—he was still Antastasios's father, and he loved him.

"I see."

"While the letter does not carry a threat, *per se*, I get the distinct impression the matter is at risk of becoming public, unless payment is made quickly."

Dislike coated his insides. He had grown up with money at his fingertips, but was still capable of understanding how it motivated people. He knew that wealth had a habit of bringing out the worst in just about everybody, particularly those who craved it.

"Email me a copy of the letter. Do it yourself—no secretaries. This cannot leak out from our end."

"Of course not." Georgios was miffed. His firm dealt with only the upper echelon of Europe's elite and was renowned for its discretion. "What will you do?"

"Whatever it takes to ensure her silence. For now."

Georgios tilted his head thoughtfully. "You intend to tell your mother."

"We will forever be over a barrel unless I do—and I do not particularly relish the idea of being in a position of weakness. Yes, I'll tell her, but when the time is right. Not now. It would devastate her if the news were to break."

"So you'll pay Miss Westbourne?"

"No. I'll enter a dialogue with her—through you. Allow me to read the letter before I advise you further."

Georgios nodded.

“You said there was a second matter?” Anastasios asked quickly, as the group began to separate a little, preparing to move towards the house.

Georgios looked from Maggie Xenakis, the grieving widow, back to Anastasios. “There is something else in his will. A sealed envelope, in fact, that even I was not privy to until after he passed.”

Anastasios’ attention was caught. “And? Are you going to tell me what it contains?”

Georgios also kept his eyes on the family. Though the huddle had broken up, they continued to stand close to the grave, solemn, somber, a group. At that moment, Anastasios’ youngest brother Leonidas looked in their direction, a single dark brow raised quizzically. Despite how much time had passed, it was difficult to look at Leo and not see his twin, Valentina, who hadn’t been lucky enough to see her sixth birthday. Her absence was palpable today, for all of them, but perhaps Leo most of all.

Anastasios shook his head, once: both a reassurance and a command. *Don’t come here. We’re fine.*

“The matter is delicate.”

Anastasios would have laughed if it weren’t so devastating to their mother. “Even more than the threat of a secret affair and twenty-four-year-old love child going public?”

“Yes.”

Anticipation ran down Anastasios’ spine like ice water. What the hell had his father exposed them to?

“There is someone else.”

Anastasios cursed in his mother tongue, the word searing the air around them. “Who?”

“A young woman, in London.”

“London.” Anastasios took an involuntary step back, as their conversation from three days earlier chimed in his

mind. His father had been going to London a lot in the past year. It was inexplicable. Weekly trips made little sense. He knew from his investigations that he hadn't been spending extra time with Dimitrios.

"Her name is Phoebe Whittaker, and in his estate, he's left her a large sum."

Anastasios closed his eyes as the reality punched him hard in the gut. "I see."

"That's not all."

His laugh lacked humour. "No? I'm sure it's enough for now."

"She is also twenty four years old."

Anastasios' head whipped around, his eyes hitting the older man with the force of a speeding car. "You have to be kidding?"

"I'm sorry, Tasso. I'm as surprised as you."

"Wait a moment. Are you suggesting this is another daughter, or his lover?"

"A mistress." Anastasios compressed his lips. Georgios continued, "I have looked into the matter as thoroughly as I could, without raising suspicion. It's not possible."

"How can you know that?"

"She is Australian, for one, and I found records of her parents, photographs of her at school. Until eighteen months ago, she hadn't left Australia."

"And now she lives in London."

Georgios nodded.

"That doesn't prove she isn't, somehow, connected to him."

"I also had her DNA tested."

Anastasios might have been surprised, but given the delicate nature of things, Georgios's thoroughness was simply appreciated. "How?"

"A discarded coffee cup," Georgios waved his hand to

show that the details didn't matter. "She is not a blood relative of yours."

Anastasios tried to wrap his head around this revelation. "My father was eighty-four when he died. You're saying he was involved with a woman sixty years his junior?"

Georgios lifted his hands in a gesture of appeasement. "I'll admit, I too was surprised. But Konstantinos always seemed younger than he was, and, as you know, his wealth and power would be very attractive traits, to certain women. Particularly young waitresses living in dirt-cheap bedsits. Her finances are, I'm afraid, in terrible straits. To a woman like that, a man such as your father, his generosity..."

Maggie looked over at that moment, a small frown marring her delicate features as her eyes went from Anastasios to Georgios, then, she began to move, her steps slow in the wake of the terrible body blow she'd endured this past week. His mother, always a pillar of strength, looked weak and broken. He hadn't seen her like this since Valentina. Anastasios shifted, turning to block Georgios from view, ensuring privacy.

The idea of his father having fallen prey to a fortune hunter was difficult to contemplate, and yet Georgios was not a man to throw accusations without merit.

"How sure are you?"

Georgios looked uncomfortable for a moment. "I knew your father well, Tasso. I loved him like a brother. His affair with Annie is something I turned a blind eye to, I'll admit. I didn't approve, but after your sister, he wasn't the same." None of them had been. "He never mentioned Phoebe to me, perhaps because he understood I wouldn't take his side in the matter. And yet—"

"Yes?"

"I knew him, very well. For Konstantinos to have left this amount of money to this woman, she meant something very

special to him. Having absolutely ruled out a family connection, it leaves only one conclusion.”

Anastasios closed his eyes, trying to think of anything else that might explain this. He drew a blank.

“There is also this.”

Anastasios opened his eyes to find Georgios lifting his phone from his pocket and pressing a few buttons, then passing it to him. A woman stared from the screen and his breath hissed from his lips. The first thing he noticed was her beauty. It was impossible not to consider her one of the most attractive women he’d ever seen—far more so than any supermodel or actress. From her svelte yet curvaceous figure, generous, rounded breasts, to full lips and dimpled cheeks, glossy chestnut hair and an air that was just incredibly sensual. “How did you get this?”

“I told you, I’ve looked into matters.”

Anastasios knew what that meant. He’d had a detective trail her. “Someone trustworthy?”

“Of course.”

Anastasios handed the phone back with a tight grimace. His father might have been eighty four, but he was a still red-blooded male, and it was difficult to imagine him resisting this woman’s charms, if she’d decided to focus them on the octogenarian.

“This must stay between us. I need any information you have, but then, not another word. I’ll handle it.”

“And the payment your father has specified, for the young lady in London?”

Anastasios’ expression was grim. “Do nothing until you hear from me. I need to look into this further.”

CHAPTER ONE

WEARY DIDN'T BEGIN TO describe how Phoebe was feeling. At the end of her third double shift in as many days, she was practically asleep on her feet. Unfortunately for Phoebe, the classy restaurant on the Kings Road in Chelsea was still half full, meaning there was more than enough to keep her busy, no matter how badly she wished she could click her heels together and be back in the little bedsit she'd called home, ever since arriving in London eighteen months earlier. Just the thought of the crisp sheets Mrs Langham laundered for her each week made her stifle another yawn.

She angled her face away, to hide the telltale gesture from the diners, then moved with innate elegance to one of the tables by the window. A couple sat there, very much in love, if the way they'd held hands all evening was anything to go by. Even when their meals were served, they didn't break apart, each awkwardly using just a fork to eat with. "Would you like to see the dessert menu?"

The woman smiled at her lover, then shook her head. "We want to get home now, please."

“Just the bill,” the man agreed.

Phoebe turned and weaved back to the register, pulling out the docket for their table and double checking the meals and wine—her employer was known to fly off the handle if any table was undercharged, and had docked waitstaff’s wages compensatingly—then carried it back to the couple on a platter. The man removed his credit card and paid straight away, a moment later they had stood and were leaving, arms around each other’s waists, eyes unable to be torn from each other’s faces. Phoebe watched them go, imagining for a moment what that kind of love must feel like, imagining the basking sensation of warmth they must enjoy, knowing that each existed for the other.

Clearing their table quickly, she was focused on the kitchen doors so didn’t notice when a man stepped into the restaurant. Instead, she noticed the effect his arrival had, as several heads angled towards the door, so she turned on autopilot and almost dropped the load of plates she was carrying.

Holy guacamole.

This guy was, without a doubt, the most beautiful specimen of masculinity she’d ever seen in her life. Easily six and a half feet and leanly muscled, he wore a charcoal black suit with a crisp white shirt unbuttoned at the throat, no tie. His face was angular and symmetrical, his features stone like, his eyes the colour of burnt butter, his hair thick and dark and a little long at the nape, so it brushed the collar of his jacket.

She didn’t want to stop looking at him but the plates were heavy. Besides which, the longer she looked, the more she became aware of something disconcerting in his appearance, something almost too handsome, something unnervingly beautiful.

With a small shiver, she turned away, walking with quiet efficiency through the restaurant, oblivious to the caramel

eyes that followed her, to the appraising look they gave as she went.

In the kitchen, she scraped the plates and placed them on the side of the sink, for the attention of Jason, their dishwasher.

They were short staffed that night, but things had slowed down enough, so it didn't make sense that Mr Ridiculously Handsome was waiting at the register when she emerged. Looking around, strangely hopeful someone else would seat him, his eyes landed on hers and a frisson of danger ran down her spine. She had no option but to help him.

With a pulse that was strangely thready and a tummy turning itself inside out, she moved to stand behind the register, pasting a bright smile on her face, completely unaware of the way it transformed her from a woman of beauty to someone almost magical seeming. Her eyes glittered and two dimples scored deep grooves in her cheeks.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I'd like a table."

"For one?"

"As you see." There was something derisive in his response so she almost startled, but years of enduring her father's verbal abuse had left her toughened—or at least with the appearance of it.

"This way." She gestured towards the table that had just been vacated, by the window, but the man stood his ground.

"No. I'd prefer to sit there." He nodded towards a different table, across the restaurant. It was more private, less on display.

"Fine," she smiled again but this time, it failed to reach her eyes, then took a menu from besides the register. "If you'll follow me," she invited, a strange sensation settling between her shoulder blades as she guided him to the table he'd requested.

“Would you like to look at our wine list?”

“Yes.” No word of thanks. Somehow, that suited him.

She handed the wine list to him and without sitting down, he opened it, took a cursory inspection then ordered a glass of the most expensive wine.

“I’ll let you have a look at the menu and be back in a moment to take your order.”

She left because standing close to him was somewhat unpalatable, or perhaps, more correctly, unnerving, and yet, even when she was no longer within his physical proximity, she felt him following her as she continued to work. His eyes lingered on her when she placed the wine glass on his table, and as she served other guests, then, when she came to take his dinner order, which he placed in a matter-of-fact fashion.

There was something about him that called to her, too, so even when distracted by work, she found her eyes flicking towards his table, only to jerk away again quickly when she realized he was watching her.

Being flirted with by customers was nothing new, but this was different. He wasn’t flirting. If anything, he was looking at her as though she were a puzzle he wanted to figure out, or— her breath caught. Or as though he didn’t like her. There was enmity in the depths of his fascinating eyes, and she had no idea why.

You’re being silly, Phoebe, she counselled herself. After all, they didn’t know each other—why should he look at her with anything akin to dislike? Nonetheless, she let out a small sigh of relief when one of her colleagues cleared his dinner plate and offered dessert and coffee, so Phoebe didn’t have to be up close and personal with him again.

To her chagrin, he ordered a scotch, and reclined back in the chair, eyes fixed on her. The restaurant thinned of diners, and she looked to closing time with relief.

Despite the fact she told herself she was unnerved by him,

Phoebe's eyes moved to the stranger on repeat and against her will, as though she couldn't control herself. Every time she looked at him, their eyes would meet and a buzz of excitement and anticipation would spread through her.

Phoebe fumbled as she carried a tray of coffee cups into the kitchen, almost dropping them, her cheeks flaming as she disappeared from view. Would this day never end?

X

IT WAS ALL TOO easy to recognize what his father had seen in her. As he'd seen from the photograph, she was not simply beautiful. There were, after all, many beautiful women in the world, so much so they were a dime a dozen. To tempt a man like Konstantinos, there had to be something more, and now, Anastasios saw it.

She was compellingly desirable, with her shimmering dark hair and pouting lips, eyes that were almost black, with thick, long lashes and high cheekbones and dimples deep in either cheek when she smiled at customers. Her build was slim and athletic, and she couldn't have been taller than five and a half feet, her diminutive presence only adding to her physical appeal because it inspired a sort of protector vibe, an ancient, primal caveman urge.

Yes, he could imagine his father being captivated by her. But what had Phoebe Whittaker seen in an eighty four year old man?

The answer to that was all too easy to comprehend. For though Konstantinos had been fiercely intelligent and astute, he was also wealthy beyond most people's imaginings. It was the kind of wealth that would stop most people in their tracks to contemplate. Several private jets, islands, mansions around the world, entrée to any palace in the world as an esteemed guest—it was a whole other way of living. Tempt-

ing? Undoubtedly, for anyone. And for a young waitress with chipped nails, from the Australian outback?

Face grim, Anastasios reached for his scotch, taking a deep sip and letting it assault him as it travelled, his eyes closed for a moment against the tide of pain Konstantinos's betrayal had wrought.

The only saving grace was that Maggie was not aware of Konstantinos's betrayals. His infidelity would have killed her. She'd been so loyal to him, and loved him so completely. To know that her husband had made a habit of sleeping with other women? Of even fathering children with them? Was that why he'd left Phoebe Whittaker such a sum? He knew that Konstantinos had paid for his daughter with Annie Westbourne to attend school, and her general living expenses. Had he wanted to furnish Phoebe Whittaker's child with the same luxuries? Had a child been born to his father and Phoebe?

His grip tightened on the scotch and the full force of his anger barreled towards the woman across the restaurant. It wasn't fair. She hadn't owed their family anything, but given that his father was no longer here to feel the wrath of Anastasios, Phoebe Whittaker was the next best thing.

Soon, he was the only customer in the restaurant, and she the last waitress. He leaned forward with interest, watching as she smothered another yawn. It was easy to imagine why she was so tired. If she made a habit out of seducing older men, it was also likely she'd been kept busy all night. Was that why she worked here? To meet wealthy clients and seduce them in the hope of landing some kind of payoff?

A muscle ticked in his cheek, the thought of his father with this woman unpalatable on many levels, not least because he couldn't look at her without feeling the stirring of interest, a wave of arousal that was pure biological instinct, in defiance of his judgement. If he hadn't come here for this

purpose, if he'd simply walked into the restaurant and met her, would he have wanted to make her his?

Undoubtedly.

What man wouldn't?

Shifting a little in his seat, he felt the evidence of his desire straining against his pants and if anything, it made him angrier with her.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?"

Sir. It only compounded his problem.

"Another." He lifted his glass into the air, eyes narrowing as he saw the flicker of disappointment in her gaze. Had she been hoping he'd say something else? "And one for you, if you'll join me."

The invitation surprised them both, but he was far more adept at concealing his reactions.

"Oh." Her teeth pressed into her soft lower lip, drawing his fascinated gaze lower. "That's very kind, but I can't. I have to pack up."

"Ten minutes won't kill you." He leaned back, crossing his arms. "Join me." The last was uttered as a command and her eyes flew wide.

"I—"

"You won't regret it."

Her eyes darkened, somehow, so they were as dark as the essence of the night sky.

"I'm not in the habit of drinking with customers," she said softly.

It was an objection he presumed she made as part of her routine. After all, he had evidence to the contrary.

"Make an exception."

Her throat shifted delicately as she swallowed and then cast a glance over her shoulder.

"A coffee," she said after a pause. "I don't drink."

He lifted his shoulders to conceal a familiar sense of

triumph. After all, Anastasios Xenakis was used to winning, at all things.

She moved back into the bar, pouring him another measure of scotch and making herself a short shot of coffee, before coming back to the table. He couldn't take his eyes off her, and his desire for her was, frankly, disgusting. He wasn't someone to fetishize his father's mistress.

When she sat, it was a little uncertainly. She wore her wariness like a cloak. With him? Or in general? That didn't seem right, for a woman who was intent on seducing her way to wealth. He frowned as a flicker of doubt ignited in his gut—a doubt which he ignored. His father had bequeathed her over a million pounds. That wasn't a gift you left a waitress as a tip.

He had planned to confront Phoebe ever since learning of her existence, but a simple conversation now seemed difficult to construct. Uncertainty was utterly foreign to Anastasios; he pushed it aside.

“What is your name?”

He found his breath held. Even though he'd seen a photo of her, he found himself hoping there'd been a mistake.

“Phoebe.” There was a hesitation. “And yours?”

Thinking quickly, he offered the diminutive of his name. His father had only ever referred to him as Anastasios, so there was no risk of her having heard of him. “Tasso.”

She lifted a brow, repeating the name, igniting little flames in his bloodstream as her tongue encircled the syllables. “That's unusual.”

His lips curled in derision at the obvious conversation opener. Is that how she flirted her way into men's beds?

“You're Australian?”

“My accent's a giveaway, huh?”

He sipped his scotch without taking his eyes from her face. “How long have you been in London?”

"A year and a half."

"What brought you here?"

She tilted her face away, looking towards the windows just as a red, double-decker bus went past, lights making orange lines, but he barely noticed. He was transfixed by what he could see of her expression in profile, her lips twitching downwards, her fingers gripping the coffee cup more tightly.

"I'd never been anywhere," she said, so softly he had to concentrate to hear it. Then, she turned to face him, pinpointing him with a steady look. "I wanted to see the world and London seemed like a good place to start."

"And?" He lifted a hand along the back of the neighbouring chair, in an approximation of casual. "How is your plan working out?"

"I've seen some of it," a small smile tilted her lips. "A couple of months ago, I went to a tiny island in the Aegean, and the water was so clear I could see schools of fish weaving around my ankles."

He almost choked on a breath. His father had taken her to *Prásina*, one of the private islands their family owned around the world?

"Anywhere else?" He asked, giving very little away.

"No," a wistful expression. "I've not travelled as much as I thought I would."

"Why not?"

"You have a lot of questions."

"I'm inquisitive by nature. Is that a problem?"

She tilted her head, contemplating that. "Not particularly." She finished her coffee. "Anyway, I should finish up. I'm beat." She threw back her coffee then lifted her hand to cover a yawn, as she stood, lithe grace in every movement.

"You're not going to answer?"

She let out a small sigh, her breath brushing over him so his gut twisted with an unmistakable surge of longing.

“I’ve had commitments here.”

Like his father?

“A boyfriend?”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed. “That’s far too personal.” Standing, she offered him a tart smile. “If you’ll excuse me, *sir*, I’ll get your bill.”

His heart thundered as he watched her leave. Desiring her was a very unwelcome complication, but he wouldn’t let it rule his behaviour. He’d come here for one reason, and one reason only. That he found her attractive didn’t change a thing.

“Actually, there’s something specific I wanted to discuss with you.”

Her face tilted to his, and she paused, midway through printing an invoice. She pressed it onto the tray and slid it across at him, then crossed her arms over her chest, drawing his gaze involuntarily lower, to linger on the swell of her cleavage as longing shifted through him.

“Okay,” her voice was uncertain. “What is it?”

“Are you acquainted with a man named Konstantinos Xenakis?”

Her hand lifted to a necklace at her throat and she pulled the pendant from one side to the other, immediately raising Anastasios’ suspicions. Had his father given her this trinket?

“I—yes. Why?”

“How do you know him?”

She bristled visibly, just as she had when he’d asked about her boyfriend. A coincidence? Anastasios didn’t believe in them.

“I—met him through work,” she gestured to the restaurant. “What business is it of yours?”

His eyes bore into hers, assessing her, reading her,

deriding her. She might be sexier than sin, but he couldn't feel anything but disgust for a woman who'd sleep with an old man just for money.

"I came to inform you of his death."

Her gasp was given extra impact by the silence of the restaurant. She reached forward, bracing her weight on the kitchen counter. "He can't be," she murmured, tears stinging her eyes. It was further evidence of their relationship; grief made her features wretched. She lifted her face to his. "When?" A hollow whisper almost made him pity her. Did she have any idea about them? About Konstantinos's family, his wife, children? His other mistress and daughter?

"A little over a week ago."

She lifted a trembling hand to her lips, covering a gasp, as she moved backwards to prop herself against the wall. "I can't believe it. I wondered why I hadn't seen him. Usually, on Mondays, we—," her voice trailed off into nothing as emotions wrapped around her. A single tear rolled down one cheek. So she might have been using Konstantinos for money, but it was clear she genuinely cared about him. The realization brought no relief.

"You?" He prompted, aware that she'd been about to confess to their sordid affair.

"Spend time together." Her eyes closed, blocking him out. "But not this Monday. And he didn't call to explain. I tried, but—oh, I can't believe it."

Another tear fell, and though he hated her, he also felt sorry for her. How could he not?

"What happened?"

She'd moved closer to him again, as though she needed all the details.

"He had a heart attack. He was alone, and it was massive. Perhaps if he'd been with someone, but it was hours before a maid discovered him."

She let out a soft cry. "But he was so young." Her head tipped back as she stared at the ceiling, apparently trying to contain her emotions. "I mean, I know he wasn't, but he *seemed* so young. Age barely touched him."

Anastasios stood taller. "Yes."

Phoebe wrapped her arms around her chest. "Thank you for coming to tell me. When is the funeral?"

"It's happened. Your attendance wouldn't have been appropriate."

Her lips formed a perfect 'o'. "Why not?"

"His wife wouldn't approve."

She frowned. "His wife?"

"Yes. Did he fail to mention his longstanding marriage?"

"No, of course not. He'd spoken to me of Maggie."

The betrayal of that was searing.

"Did he indeed?"

"Just in passing," she whispered, and then, as if only just putting two and two together, she focused on him with renewed intent. "Who are you?"

"I'm his oldest son. So far as we know."

Her eyes widened at that revelation. "Anastasios?"

"I see he mentioned me, too."

"He was very proud of you," she confirmed, her lips twisting in a smile. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine how you're coping. Your father was the most incredible man."

Disgust rolled inside him. "You can say that, even when presented with evidence of why he wasn't?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think you're the first woman outside of his marriage that he stumbled into bed with? Tell me, Phoebe, how long was the affair going on?"

She lifted her hand to the necklace again, tugging it from side to side.

"Affair?" She mumbled, eyes dropping to the bench in front of her. "You're kidding, right?"

"Do I look as though I'm joking?"

"You're completely mistaken. We weren't involved," she denied hotly, but the tears falling down her cheeks belied that. "Not in a sexual way," she conceded, so he leaned forward, outraged and frustrated all at once. "It really wasn't like that."

"Then what was it like?"

But she was defensive now, angry, too. "I don't think it's any of your business."

"He was my father."

"So? If he didn't mention me to you, then he clearly didn't think you needed to know about us."

"Then there was an 'us' to know about?"

Her face paled. "Oh, stop being so sick. I didn't mean that. Only our *friendship*," she stressed, in a way that made it impossible to believe her.

"If this is true," he said, after a beat, "then tell me why he'd leave you money in his will."

She groaned, dropping her head forward. "He didn't."

"In fact, quite a lot of money."

She lifted a hand to her mouth. "I can't believe it. Why would he do such a thing?"

"I suppose he thought you'd earned it?"

She slapped him instantly, so fast that he didn't have time to react and she clearly hadn't had time to think it through. Her hand connected with his cheek and then she jumped back, shaking all over.

"How dare you?" She demanded fiercely. "Get out of here."

He glared right back, lifting a hand to his cheek absent-mindedly, running a hand over the flesh which would surely show a heat mark from where she'd touched him.

He'd dealt with worse, but hadn't expected such a response from her.

"Get out. I mean it. Leave *now*."

He studied her thoughtfully. She was at least a foot shorter than him; there was no contest between them physically, but he'd clearly pushed her too far. Even he was surprised by the approach he'd taken.

There was time to get to the bottom of this, time to get her to confess and admit she'd made a mistake. He'd done enough for tonight.

"This isn't over," he promised, ominously, as he threw some fifty pound notes on the counter then turned and left.

CHAPTER TWO

HE WAS TURNING HER into the focal point of all his rage. He fully conceded that, as he stared out at London from his city apartment, eyes gliding over the well-lit city, the buzz and hum of activity despite the fact it was the small hours of the morning.

She wasn't the woman Konstantinos had been in a long running affair with, nor was she the mother of a secret lovechild. God, at least, he prayed she wasn't. But it was quite clear that they'd had a relationship. His father had visited her often—on Mondays, by the sound of it—which explained why he'd suddenly started spending so much time in London. Had those frequent visits even contributed to his heart attack? Had he pushed himself too hard, in an attempt to keep up with his nubile young lover?

It was impossible to contemplate, but then again, Phoebe was a very particular type of beauty. It was easy to understand how Konstantinos had fallen under her spell. Far easier to believe that than to imagine any man could be close to Phoebe Whittaker without wanting it to become physical.

All that was left to get her to admit it. And he had a fair idea of how to do exactly that.

X

HAVING WORKED three enormous shifts straight, Phoebe was glad to finally have a day off. Her feet were killing her, and her cheeks hurt from smiling at customers. Not to mention the man from last night. Tasso. Anastasios.

Her heart picked up a notch as she remembered the way he'd watched her all evening, the sensation of butterflies beating inside her belly, of a strange anticipation beating like a drum beneath her skin, as her stomach swirled with unfamiliar and unwanted desire. That had been before she'd known his connection to Kon. Now she did?

She moaned softly as fresh waves of grief assaulted her, and she could barely stand. Leaning her hip against her kitchen counter, she allowed the tears to fall, dropping with fat splashes against her breasts as she gave into the sadness. He was eighty four, but so fit and sharp, hardly a suspect for a heart attack.

"Oh, Kon," she whispered, shaking her head, moving unsteadily to the gift he'd given her a month or so ago—a small bronze ballerina after she'd told him of her first ever experience of seeing a ballet show. She'd been so excited, recounting the music and movements, the theatrics of it all, and he'd smiled indulgently and nodded, agreeing that live ballet was a true gift. The following week, he'd arrived with this little statue. *A memento.*

She'd cherished it because he'd given it to her, placing it in middle of the small shelf in the bedsit's lounge area. She lifted it now, running her fingers over the edges, feeling grateful, more than anything else, that she'd had a chance to know this man, that they'd struck up a conversation on her

first shift, when he'd taken pity on her after she'd spilled a bowl of soup across his table. He'd insisted to the *maitre de* that it had been his fault, saving her from termination, for sure. After that, he'd come in often, always sitting at the same table, always making conversation with her. A few weeks after his first visit, she'd finished her shift at the same time he'd paid his bill. They'd walked out together, and without discussing it, had continued walking, all the way to the edge of Kensington garden, where they'd found a bench seat and continued talking.

It was months before she opened up to him about her life before London, and a month after that before he did the same, but after that, there was no stopping their friendship. They were truly kindred spirits, and his interest in her life was heartwarming for many reasons, and one in particular: besides her brother Dale, Kon had been the first person to ever show any kind of interest in Phoebe, to care what happened to her, to want to listen to her speak and encourage her in her dreams.

Anastasios was right—they were in a relationship, but not like the one he was suggesting. This was a deep, special friendship. Somehow, Konstantinos had become a father figure to Phoebe. She loved him, and she knew she'd miss him forever.

But the idea of sleeping with him?

Despite the fact he was a very handsome older man, it made her skin crawl, simply because their relationship was so deep, so important to her.

No, sexual relationships were something Phoebe had given a wide berth. Not intentionally, but her adolescence had really precluded the opportunity to date, and after she'd run away from home, she'd been more concerned with finding food and safe shelter for the night than she had been a boyfriend. In fact, the examples of 'relationships' she

witnessed on the streets of Melbourne were so much like her parents' awful domestic situation that she'd done everything she could to avoid making friendships with anyone.

She'd been a loner for so long.

Kon had changed that.

Another sob wrenched from her gut, and then, there was the knocking at her door.

She suspected it would be Mrs Langham and despite the fact she'd grown fond of the pensioner who rented out this miniscule flat to supplement her grocery expenses, Phoebe really didn't want to be disturbed.

Nonetheless, she wrenched in the door, an approximation of a smile on her face as she looked out, only to be confronted by a wall of abdominals encased in a black t-shirt. Higher she looked, her eyes landing on his face and that same drum beating was back, rushing now, fast, urgent, desperate, so she held her breath and gripped the door much more tightly.

"Anastasios." His name was so addictive. When she said it, her knees went weak.

"Phoebe." His expression hadn't softened at all.

"I take it you've come to apologise?" She couldn't help goading him. After all, he'd behaved like a right jackass the night before.

"For what? Calling a spade a spade?"

"Or a whore a whore?" She challenged, anger firing through her. That was another thing! She'd slapped him! She who had always, always sworn to never give in to physical violence. She'd witnessed too much of it. Been on the receiving end as well. Yet this man had made her feel—too many things.

"Your words, not mine."

"What do you want?"

"To finish our conversation. I told you, this isn't over."

The sun shifted through a storm cloud, casting his thick, dark hair with light, making it shimmer. Her eyes lifted to it of their own accord and her breath was a cyclone inside her windpipe.

"How did you find out where I live?" She asked over a knotted, swallowing action.

"It wasn't difficult." He brushed aside the question. "We need to talk."

"I can't see that we do."

"You don't think you owe me some kind of explanation?"

"I owe you nothing," she said with a bravado she didn't feel. Years of living with her father had taught her to bluff well.

"You say you were *friends* with my father?" He layered the word with a hint of disgust. "Then surely you owe *him* the courtesy of treating his son with respect?"

"Because you've been such a peach to me?" She demanded, nonetheless stepping back and opening the door to allow him to enter.

Konstantinos had spoken about his family. She knew each of his son's habits and yes, she even knew about his great guilt, the affair with Annie that he'd concealed from those he loved most, because he didn't know how to split them in half with the truth. She knew about Valentina, the little girl who'd passed away twenty five years earlier.

And she knew about Anastasios and how hard he worked, how determined he'd been, since birth, to prove himself to his father. She knew Kon regretted his hard style of parenting, how much he'd expected from the boys, and the fact he'd pushed them to achieve their best. They'd all strived to meet the impossibly high bar, every time, but Anastasios particularly so.

For Kon, for her love for the older man, she allowed Anastasios to enter the bedsit.

His eyes flicked around the room, but the judgement she'd expected to see in his face was noticeably absent. Instead, there were simply questions.

"I presume the restaurant pays you?"

She dipped her head.

"Surely you can afford better than this?"

She squared her shoulders. "London is expensive," she said tightly. "Besides, I like my landlady. She's elderly and kind and I help her when I can."

His eyes narrowed speculatively, and she couldn't resist snapping at him.

"No, I'm not waiting for her to pass away so I can stake some devious claim on her money," she muttered.

"Can you blame me for wondering?"

"Blame is irrelevant. I've never met anyone like you," she shivered. "We just met and you think the absolute worst of me."

"My father has been coming for secret rendezvous with you, and has left a small fortune to you in his will. What else should I think?"

She gaped, then shook her head. "He was a generous man."

Anastasios frowned. "That's not my experience."

"I guess we knew different sides of him."

"I think that goes without saying."

"I just mean..."

"Yes?" He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at her straight down the length of his patrician nose. He reminded her so much of Kon, the same arrogant confidence, only she'd seen beneath Kon's. She'd seen his heart, his kind, good, soft, hurt heart and it had so perfectly matched her own. She blinked past the veil of tears.

"Forget it. You're clearly not going to listen to a word I say, so let's get down to why you're here. What can I do for

you, Anastasios?" Again, the name rolled in her mouth and she suppressed a shiver, but not before he saw it, judging by the knowing speculation that lit his gaze.

"I want to understand," he said quietly. "My father was clearly living a secret life behind our backs. You're a part of that."

Something like guilt tightened as a band around her chest, even when she didn't have anything to feel guilty about. Only, she'd never imagined how their friendship might be perceived by those Kon loved.

"We were just *friends*," she said with a shake of her head.

"My father didn't have friends. He worked, and he had family, and that's it. He didn't even have a hobby."

Her eyes swept shut on a wave of fresh grief now, but not for Kon's death, so much as what he'd lost in life. How could his oldest son know so little about him? And why had he chosen to open up to her so much?

But Phoebe knew the answer to that. She'd ignored it for a long time, but it was no longer something she could push aside. She reminded him of the daughter he'd lost, Valentina. He'd taken pity on her at first, but that pity had morphed into something else—a genuine connection that had sustained them both.

"Actually, your father liked to paint," she said, quietly.

Anastasios' face paled beneath his tan. "What?"

"Landscapes. They weren't particularly good," she said with a soft laugh. "But that didn't stop him. Would you like to see one?"

His lips formed a gash in his face. "By all means."

If she'd known Anastasios any better, she might have heard the dark danger lurking in the words, but she was too caught up in pleasant memories of Kon, too filled with reminiscences to take heed.

"Here," she padded through the small entrance way and

into the tiny living room, gesturing to the painting that hung beside the window.

His eyes flew to it, tracing the over-bright shapes—almost bordering on abstract—before dropping lower, to the statue on the shelves.

The noise that erupted from his throat was barely human. “How the hell did you get this?”

Phoebe began to shake all over, and all she could do was watch, as Anastasios moved to the bronze statue and lifted it in his palm, staring at it in shock.

“Did he *give* this to you?”

Goosebumps lifted across her skin, but she wasn’t afraid. Her father had taught her about violence and abuse, and she could tell the difference between anger and violent rage.

“Yes,” because, why lie?

“This was my sister’s.”

The words were raw. Sympathy swallowed Phoebe. “I know.”

He swore under his breath. “He told you about her?”

“Yes.”

He cursed then, in Greek. “He loved you.”

Phoebe’s heart soared, because she really, really hoped that was true. But she wisely said nothing of that to this man.

“I told you, we were friends.”

“My father didn’t speak about Val. Ever. It was as though she’d been erased from the family for him.”

“I think he felt—,”

“Don’t.”

And now Anastasios was moving closer to her, closing the distance between them, staring down at her with a wild mix of emotions tangling in his eyes. “Don’t tell me how my father felt. I knew him. All my life. I’m his oldest son and you’re—,”

“His friend,” she supplied, meeting his gaze head on,

refusing to be covered by his proximity and obvious physical strength.

“Damn you,” he groaned, but he stayed where he was, so close, and something sparked in the air around them, so Phoebe’s senses kicked into overdrive and the anger she’d been feeling, the frustration, changed gear, and unfamiliar sensations throttled her, rolling her, making it hard to breathe, impossible to think.

“Anastasios,” she said helplessly, needing him to rescue her, to help her at least, to control this situation that was threatening to burn wildly out of control.

“You are far too beautiful,” he said with condemnation, but he didn’t pull back, and nor did she. In fact, she leaned closer, or perhaps he did, because a moment later, their bodies were cleaved together and each ragged breath she drew forced them together.

Hell.

“How can this be happening?” He asked, fiercely, angrily, but an anger that was directed all at himself.

“What?” She looked up, losing herself in the depths of his eyes.

His answer was to swoop down and kiss her, claiming her mouth with the desperate hunger of a starving man, his lips parting hers, his tongue pushing into her mouth, punishing her at first then slowing, deepening into addictive inspection, understanding, need.

She groaned, because it was the kind of kiss stories were written about, filled with everything a person was capable of feeling. They were both grieving and hurt, both angry and frustrated, and somehow that had bubbled over to form the most compelling, urgent sense of need Phoebe had ever experienced.

She tangled her hands in his shirtfront, needing—something. More. Everything.

“Damn you,” he groaned into her mouth, as he pushed her back against the wall, propping one thigh between her legs, and she cried out at how *good* that felt. Her pulse was going crazy, her mind in overdrive. Pleasure spun through her, but it wasn’t enough.

Common sense was demanding that she stop, that she take a moment to think about what was happening but Phoebe couldn’t listen to that voice. She could do nothing but feel.

Even when his hand skimmed her sides, lifting the t-shirt she wore, to reveal her naked torso, she did nothing but shiver, because some strange compulsion was driving her, and when he lifted her around the waist, holding her to him, she said nothing. He carried her into the only other room—where a narrow single bed was pressed up against a window.

“It’ll do,” he muttered, dropping her unceremoniously onto the bed and bringing his body over hers immediately, seeking her lips, so the fires in her veins exploded into lava streams and her hands were pushing wildly at his clothes, some ancient, feral rhythm driving her every movement. This defied sense and logic, but she didn’t care.

His chest bare, she stared at him for as long as she dared, unable to process the perfection of his ridged abdomen.

She moaned, needing him, so much of him, but how could she do this, given her lack of experience?

The question died before she could voice it, as his body pressed down on hers and she felt his arousal between her legs and craved the sensation of taking him deep inside.

“Anastasios,” she cried out, aware now of the madness consuming them, trying to summon the hateful things he’d said to her, the accusations he’d thrown at her feet in the past twenty four hours, but damn it, she was driven by other needs now.

His lips shifted, from her mouth to her throat, then lower

to her breast, and when he took one nipple in his mouth, flicked it with her tongue, she cried out, the sensation so unlike anything she'd ever known, she could barely breathe. Stars filled her eyes and she arched her back as an ancient feminine drive powered her movements.

"Please," she whimpered, twisting her hips in a wordless invitation.

He swore softly and then louder, pulling up and staring at her, his expression dazed.

"What the hell?" He jerked to standing, hands on hips, arousal brilliantly on display through his cotton shorts, so her mouth was dry and her heart palpitating.

"Anastasios?" Hope died in the word.

He was stepping back as far as the narrow bedroom allowed.

"You were my father's lover. No way is this going to happen." He dragged a hand through his hair though, his eyes devouring her naked breasts with obvious remorse, so she knew he wanted her still, as desperately as she did him.

"It wasn't like that; you have to believe me."

"Then what was it like?"

"I told you," she pushed up to sitting, her heart still pounding against her ribs with the force of a grenade. "We were—"

"Friends. The problem is, I've been lied to before, and it's impossible to think you're not lying now."

"I've never lied to you before."

"But he has." He growled. "He lied every damned day for the last twenty five years; to me, my mother, my brothers, to all of us. And you're a part of that. You're a goddamned part of that."

She flinched.

"He gave you something that was incredibly precious to my sister. His art has pride of place on your walls, and he left

money to you in his will, a will he updated over a year ago. And let's not ignore the fact you are clearly an incredibly desirable, and willing, woman."

She flinched at that, seeing red, because he was taking a beautiful, innocent, *healing* friendship and turning it into something cynical and *wrong*. He was also implying something else, but it took her a moment to comprehend. Had he kissed her just now to prove a point? To show them both how easily she would succumb to him? Bile rose in her throat.

"Perhaps you see things through the veil of your experiences," she said with quiet pride, wriggling until she was on the edge of the bed and then standing, turning away from him to pull on a loose shirt. When she turned to face him, she wasn't expecting the expression on his face—one of loss.

It softened parts of her she wanted to keep flint hard.

"This is pointless." He raked his gaze over her, from the top of her head to her feet, then turned his back, stalking into the small lounge. He pulled on his jeans and shirt, then reached into the pocket of his pants to remove his wallet. He slid out a piece a paper and discarded it on the narrow bench. "Don't contact my family. There's nothing more for you."

She flinched when he left, then moved to the bench, curious to see what he'd discarded.

It was only after unfolding it completely that she realized it was a cheque, not from Konstantinos but Anastasios, and for a truly obscene amount.

Her stomach dropped to her toes and she sobbed, but not for Konstantinos, so much as for how Anastasios had made her feel. For as long as she lived, she wouldn't give him another thought. He didn't deserve that.

Despite her mountain of debts, she tore the cheque in half in a wild burst of anger, the cathartic act almost convincing

her she could actually succeed in forgetting this whole unpleasant business.

X

ANASTASIOS PRESSED his back against the stone wall of the townhouse, eyes closed, breath coming in hard spurts as he reckoned with what had just happened, mind going into overdrive.

He was no inexperienced teenager.

He'd had plenty of experience controlling his baser urges, but this was something else. He couldn't explain it. There were no words to do justice to the level of need he'd felt for Phoebe bloody Whittaker. He knew only that she'd looked at him and something had exploded in his gut, propelling him across the room, making him kiss her, drag her to her bed. Hell, how close had he come to actually having sex with the woman?

And why was he now racked with a sense of remorse for stepping away from that?

Was this what it had been like for his father?

Disgust wrapped around him, filling his mouth with acid.

How had he allowed this to happen?

Straightening, he forced himself to focus on the world beyond him, on the street, the cars, the facts at hand. They'd kissed, that was all. It wasn't a big deal. And now he was going to push her from his mind. He'd paid off his father's responsibilities, and the matter would never be spoken of again.

CHAPTER THREE

AT FIRST, HE'D THOUGHT she was responsible. The call from a friend of his, Tommy Hardin, who happened to own a tabloid paper in the UK, had a sleazy story about Kon and a young Australian woman being in a secret relationship. There was even some speculation about a baby.

As far as he knew, that part was, at least, false. There had been no evidence of a child in that bedsit, so unless she'd given it up for adoption...

Had Phoebe sold the story to the paper? But to what end? He'd double the amount Kon had wanted her to have, simply to get her out of their lives for good. Perhaps for revenge, against Anastasios?

"Mate, I don't want to run it, but I don't know if I can sit on it forever. The source will just go to another paper. Can you deny it? Give me some proof it's not true?"

Anastasios ground his teeth. "Who is the source?"

"I don't know. Honest to God. They went to one of my photographers."

"What kind of evidence do they have?"

Tommy let out a low whistle. "It's true?"

"I didn't say that."

"I think it's just a report at this stage. Idle gossip."

"Then that's all it is."

"I've always liked your mum, Tasso. I don't want her seeing this. The timing is particularly bad."

Anastasios' expression was grim.

"There's more."

"What?"

"The source reckons he might be able to get your father's alleged mistress to talk. If the money's right. Reckons she's in a real mess, financially speaking. I'm not telling you this because I'm going to buy her story, but someone else might..."

Anastasios swore under his breath.

In the three weeks since London, he'd used every ounce of his focus to push Phoebe from his thoughts, but that didn't change the fact she was there, all the time, those huge, liquid eyes staring up at him, her silky hair falling over those perfect, rounded breasts with their creamy skin and pale pink nipples.

"It's just a heads up. You can do what you want with the information."

"But you'll kill it?"

"For now. Just—see if you can get me a proper denial, then legal won't let us run it."

"The fewer people involved in this the better."

"It might not be a bad idea to brace Maggie for the gossip. If this woman decides to talk..."

"She won't." Anastasios scraped back his chair, taking one last look at the Acropolis before storming from his office, his face wearing dark thunderclouds.

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm going to make sure of it. Thanks for the tip

off, Tommy.”

“No worries—,”

Anastasios had already disconnected the call.

X

WHEN PHOEBE ARRIVED for her shift, he was the first person she saw, occupying the same table as last time, his eyes fixed on the room, brooding, mysterious. Delicious.

She shuddered, but not with fear so much as need. It tore through her instantly, flooding every cell in her body, so she had to force her feet to stay planted to the ground, rather than allowing them to propel her forwards, towards him, into his arms, his lap.

She sucked in a sharp breath and turned, looking desperately for her manager. He was in the bar.

“Edward, any chance someone can cover my shift?”

He let out a laugh. “You’re kidding, right? Fiona’s kid’s sick—again—so she’s out, Raul is getting his teeth looked at,” Edward winced, “And Clare’s in Barcelona, remember? Why? What’s going on?”

“I—nothing. It doesn’t matter.” This job paid above the minimum and the tips were excellent. God knows she needed the money. “Forget I said anything.”

“Atta girl. Table two needs their order taken.”

Table two just happened to be right beside Anastasios. Steeling herself for the inevitable interaction, she grabbed a notepad and pen from next to the cash register and moved with cold determination through the packed restaurant. As she neared his table, his eyes flicked to her and the second they collided with hers, energy sparked between them and her steps faltered.

She forced herself to look away, staring at table two instead.

“Hi,” she smiled overbrightly, trying to tune out the beautiful man who was still watching her intently, trying not to remember how good it had felt when he’d touched her, kissed her, taken her nipple in his mouth... “Are you ready to order?”

She wrote down everything the four diners said, word for word, offered another smile, took the menus, then moved away, but after only two steps, he beckoned her.

“Waitress?”

She ground her teeth.

“My name is Phoebe,” she hissed, when she’d drawn level with him. A hint of his masculine fragrance assailed her and her knees knocked together. “As you’re well aware. What do you want?” It was too late for civility. Her insides were squirming painfully at the sight of him, as so many things came rushing back to her. That he’d given her money after what had happened between them! That he no doubt still believed she was capable of sleeping with his father! The very idea made her skin crawl.

“To speak with you.”

A shiver ran the length of her spine. “I’m working.”

“Until when?”

She gripped the notepad more tightly. “I don’t know. It’s busy. And besides that, I have nothing I want to speak to you about.”

“That’s not the way I see it.”

“Yeah, well, you must be looking at something completely different to me then.” She paused, gathering her senses. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to—”

He reached out, curling his fingers around her wrist, so a thousand arrows of need shattered her equilibrium.

“Someone’s been speaking to the tabloids about you and my father. The story’s going to run.”

She stared at him in a state of total disorientation.

Nothing about what he'd just said made any kind of sense. "There is *no* story," she denied hotly. "I've told you a thousand times, we were just friends."

Anger sparked in the depths of his eyes but he didn't argue with her. "I've managed to get them to hold off on running it—for now. But they're going to contact you for a quote. It won't be long."

She stared at him, all the colour and warmth draining from her face. "I can't believe it. How—why—it's not true."

His skepticism was clear. "How? Someone called a paparazzi photographer. Why? Money, Phoebe. As you well know, it's a powerful motivator. In fact, I hear you might even be interested in supplementing the story, for the right price."

It was all too much. She saw red, a haze of mist in front of her eyes, and then, she felt nausea rising inside of her like a tidal wave, so she gripped the empty seat across from him until her fingers hurt. "I—," Indignant anger fired her but so too did grief and confusion and hurt. "This is unbelievable. It's not true."

"Even if that were so, it wouldn't matter. Tabloids make their bread and butter from speculation. You and my father met regularly for at least the last eighteen months of his life. There is even talk of a lovechild."

She gasped, lifting a hand to her mouth. "That's not possible. I'm—," but she clammed up, before revealing the truth of her sexual experience—or lack thereof—to this man. "You've seen where I live," she amended. "Where could I possibly hide a baby?"

"That did occur to me. However, true or not, the paper will run the story unless you do exactly what I say."

She groaned, pressing a palm to her forehead then looking around, as if only just remembering where she was. "I have to work," she whispered, trying to resume an ordi-

nary stance, pulling at her arm as if only just realizing his hand was still clamped around her wrist. He let her go and she felt immediately cold, right to the center of her being.

"I cannot allow the story to run."

"Then stop it," she pleaded. "Not for me, but for your father. He loved your mother very much, Anastasios. He would hate this. It's not fair."

His eyes narrowed. "Very little in life is fair, Phoebe."

As if anyone needed to tell her that. She tilted her chin at a defiant angle. "You have to stop it."

"I intend to, but my plan hinges on you doing exactly as I say."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"Meet me this evening to discuss it."

She wanted to decline. To tell him to go to hell. But love for Konstantinos had her hesitating.

"I wasn't in a romantic relationship with your father," she said firmly, unwilling to say or do anything that might seem like a concession on that score. "But I agree, any hint of gossip has to be managed."

"I'll pick you up at eight."

She stared at him. "I can meet you somewhere."

His look was mocking. "As I said, the only way to avert this is if you do everything I say. Understood?"

X

HE'D HALF-EXPECTED her not to show, so was relieved when, just before eight, Phoebe emerged onto the landing of the little townhouse she was renting modest rooms in. A shadow appeared at the window behind her and Phoebe turned, offered a small wave, then looked up and down the street.

He watched her for a moment, trying to reconcile the cacophony of feelings that were exploding through him.

Anger, for the role she'd played in his father's infidelity, frustration for the fact a paper had gotten hold of the story and also, worst of all, desire. He'd been with enough women to recognize the sensation that gripped him tightly, and yet, this was different. Even in the throes of passion, Anastasios was always in control. Seduction was a game to him, a game that he played within defined rules, and always, always played to win.

Phoebe changed the rules.

She changed everything.

Even her relationship with his father didn't seem to impact the desire he personally felt for her, which was a troubling development. Not ever, in his entire life, had he imagined he'd be lusting after the same woman his father had bedded.

The sooner he got this squared away, the better.

She crossed the street as though it were a stage and she a prima ballerina, so his eyes were glued to her against his will. As she drew near, he stepped out of the car, willing himself to ignore the fierce explosion of need that was already turning him hard.

"Phoebe." He greeted with a cool dip of his head. "I'm glad you came."

"I wasn't aware I had much of a choice."

"Nonetheless, this is better than the alternative."

"Which is?" She challenged, her dark hair caught up in a bun high on her head, with pretty little tendrils escaping down either side of her neck.

"Carrying you kicking and screaming over my shoulder like a recalcitrant child."

Her lips parted, so delectably, pillowy soft and sweet. He couldn't help but stare at them. "You wouldn't dare." Her tongue darted out, licking the outline of her mouth. Did she have any idea what that small gesture was doing to him?

“Want to bet?”

He saw the way she shivered and hardened a little more. Suddenly, he wanted her to challenge him. He wanted an excuse to reach for her, to grab her, to hold her body to his. It galvanized him into action. He walked around to the front passenger door, opening it without looking at her.

“Inside.”

She made a small sound of disapproval. “Barking commands at me? How very civilized. It’s quite clear you didn’t get your manners from your father.”

“Oh, I’m sure he went out of his way to flatter and charm you, Phoebe. Don’t expect the same from me.”

“I only meant that he was a gentleman at all times, in every way. And you, well, you’re—”

“Go on.” He stared at her now, goading her with his body language.

“You’re hateful,” she snapped, stamping her foot before stomping around to the side of the car. “I mean that. You’re absolutely hateful.”

“And it would be best if you remembered that.”

The words held a warning; he could only hope they would both heed them.

X

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, she was capable only of focusing on his extraordinary skill and power as a driver. The thrum of the sleek black sports car—flash without being ostentatious—was palpable, but that wasn’t why she felt heat radiating from low down in her abdomen. No, that came down to her awareness of the man at her side, and the way he flicked the gear stick as he maneuvered the streets, his fingers on the wheel catching her eye and capturing her imagination,

making her all too vividly aware of what it had been like to be touched by him.

So focused was she on the minute details of Anastasios' driving that it was several blocks before Phoebe spun in her chair to question him. "Where are you taking me?"

His fingers gripped the wheel tighter, his knuckles showing white.

"Somewhere that we can speak freely."

"My apartment wouldn't suffice?"

He cocked her a look of mockery. "I barely fit into your apartment." He gave his attention back to the road, turning left then pulling up at lights. "Besides which, we should avoid any situation that puts us within six feet of a bed."

She couldn't stop the small gasp that escaped as he confronted the desire sparking between them head on.

"Then where?"

He turned to her once more, before accelerating the car as the lights turned green. "Does it matter?"

"I guess I like to know where I'm going, yes. Call me crazy, but I'm used to a degree of control over my life."

"Desperate times," he said with a careless lift of his shoulders.

"Wow. You really are an arrogant son of a bitch."

He made no effort to deny it and despite the fizz in the air, she didn't want to argue. Pressing back against the seat, she lifted a hand to her temple and surrendered, for a moment, to his control. It was strange, given the combative nature of their interactions, but he was Konstantinos's son, and it was, therefore, impossible not to trust him, at least on some level.

Twenty minutes later, they crossed Connaught bridge, rousing Phoebe out of her state of quiet acceptance. She sat up straighter, eyes moving from the Thames, to an airport, far smaller than Heathrow.

"Anastasios..." her voice held both a warning and a question.

He pulled the car to a stop and a man in a suit approached, but Anastasios didn't immediately move. "I cannot allow this story go to print."

"I told you, I have nothing to do with it. And there is no story."

"Nonetheless," he leaned closer, his face paralyzingly near hers. "Your cooperation is appreciated."

"And if I don't want to cooperate?"

"Better not to ask, for both our sakes."

She was tempted to push him, to ask just how far he was willing to go to ensure this article didn't get publicized but until she forgot her loyalty to Konstantinos, she couldn't ignore Anastasios' request. At least until she had a little more information. She knew the guilt that had plagued Kon for decades over his extra-marital affair, the pain that had come from genuinely loving two women. She also knew how important it had been to him to protect Maggie from what he viewed as his great failure. He'd have moved heaven and earth to protect her. The idea of a newspaper running a gossip piece about his alleged infidelity with *her*, even when it didn't hold a shred of truth, was enough to galvanize Phoebe into action.

"I'll give you one hour," she said grudgingly, pushing out of the car as another suited man approached to open her door.

Anastasios didn't respond.

A valet took his car keys and then, they were walking across the tarmac. She frowned, looking around.

The idea that he might be leading her to an airplane was so preposterous it didn't enter her head as a credible possibility at all, until he gestured to a jet with a huge golden X emblazoned across the tail.

She stopped walking and crossed her arms. "Absolutely not."

"We need to talk." His voice gave nothing away.

She let out a sharp laugh. "Yeah? Well, we can talk here. Or there. Or anywhere that's not a private jet, for crying out loud. You must be delusional to think I'd get on that thing with you. For all I know, you're planning to throw me out a hatch when we reach cruising altitude."

"Tempting," he growled. "But I think that would only draw more media attention, not less."

"Then where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere we can talk privately," he muttered, looking around as if to remind her there were staff milling. "Get in the plane."

She gaped at him. "I cannot believe *anyone* can be as arrogant as you are! Do you really think you have the right to boss me around like this?"

He leaned closer, dangerously close, and spoke into her ear, so her pulse trembled. "Sleeping with my father changed the ballgame considerably."

"How many times do I have to tell you—,"

He pulled back, lifting a finger and pressing it to her lips. "This is not the place."

Her eyes flared wide as warring emotions clashed in her belly, desire chief amongst them.

"Be that as it may, I respectfully decline your 'invitation'."

"To hell with that," he ground out, lifting her to cradle against his chest, just as he'd threatened to earlier, so she was stunned into silence. His long strides carried them both across the tarmac, the inclement sky casting him grey shadow.

"Damn it," she whispered, as he drew closer to the plane—and airline staff. "Put me down."

"Will you walk onboard yourself?"

Her lips flattened into a mutinous line, denial obvious in her expression, and to her surprise, he tilted his head back on a laugh.

"In that case, what option do I have?"

"Not kidnapping me?"

"You agree you don't want this story to hit the tabloids?" He asked, drawing to a stop. "You must have some family of your own you want to protect from this? The idea of you having a relationship with a man almost four times your age..."

"I don't have any family," she said quietly, then, realizing she'd admitted more than she wanted, focused back on the point at hand. "In any event, there is no story here."

"The tabloid thinks there is."

"They're wrong."

"So what do you want to do about it?"

She stared up at him, searching for an answer to that, but the truth was, she had no personal experience with this, and no concept of how to handle the media.

"I can't think when you're carrying me like this," she muttered. "Don't you care what people think?"

"No," was his immediate, cynical reply. "And they will *think* I'm bringing a lover onboard for the purpose of pleasure. I'm sure you're familiar with the concept."

Her cheeks flamed red hot and she looked away quickly, aware her expression would betray her if she wasn't careful. If only he knew how utterly not true that was!

"I suppose you do this all the time?"

"Often enough to understand that no one will be scandalized by the mode of our arrival."

Taking her agreement for granted, he began to walk once more, navigating the metallic steps with ease, then turning sideways to enter the plane. As he'd said, no one batted an eyelid when he carried her onboard, and from the minute

they entered the plane she was no longer conscious of the formally dressed staff.

“Oh, wow.” She shifted a little, which brought her closer to him, and her whole body glowed warm. “This is...like something out of a movie.”

Halfway down the aisle, he stopped walking. “If I put you down, do you promise not to run?”

She pretended to consider it, when something inside of her was keeping her right where she was, come what may. Loyalty to Kon, she chose to believe.

“I’m not going to be the source of pain to your mother,” she said stiffly.

“How noble of you,” he drawled. “I wonder if you were thinking of her when you skipped away to *Prásina* with my father.”

She stared at him, aghast. “*With* your father? How do you make that sound so sordid? I went there on my own, Anastasios. He knew how much I wanted to travel, but how little I could afford to do so, and he offered me a holiday.”

“Heaven forbid you should refuse the offer?”

“I did refuse, at first,” she snapped, but emotions were overpowering her, most notably gratitude for Kon’s kindness. “Put me down,” she said icily, her face pale.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he complied, and the ice in her veins only grew colder.

“He was being a friend, when I badly needed one. That’s all.”

“If you say so.”

She turned to face him, sadness on her beautiful features, so he stilled, his eyes resting heavily on her face.

“What’s the point in me saying *anything* to you, if you’re determined not to believe me?”

“How can I believe you?” He asked after a pause, his eyes probing hers as if hoping she’d have some magical way of

proving her innocence. "I have literally just discovered this side of him—a man I thought I knew better than anyone else. That he's had one affair is beyond doubt. And the evidence, in these circumstances, is compelling."

"If you're a naturally suspicious person."

"If that were true, I would have worked out something was going on much sooner."

She sighed heavily, lifting fingertips to her brow. "So what's your plan? Where are you taking me?"

The heavy doors slid shut and a stewardess appeared. "We'll be pushing back within ten minutes, sir. May I bring you some refreshments before take-off?"

He looked at Phoebe then turned back to the attendant. "A beer, and, for my guest?"

She shot him daggers but offered a polite smile to the woman with the striking red hair. "Just a water, please."

The woman turned and left; they were alone again.

"Sit down," he gestured to the wide, armchairs that formed a row up each side of the aisle.

"Where are you sitting?"

"Does it matter?"

"I just wanted to be sure I'm as far away as is humanly possible."

"But not out of an airlock at cruising altitude," he responded drily and to her chagrin, a smile teased the corners of Phoebe's mouth.

"Not on this occasion, no."

"And why do you want to sit so far away from me? Is it perhaps that you can't trust yourself to be across the aisle without wanting to reach out and touch me?"

Her lips parted at his brazen observation. "Or might it be that I don't want to so much as breathe the same air as you?" She responded acerbically.

He took a step closer. "You must take care not to throw such obvious challenges at my feet, *agape mou*."

"Oh? I'd say it's more of a warning."

"Is that so?"

He was right up against her now, his own challenge passed back to her. Her breath was ragged, her chest hurting with the force of regular exhalations.

"Because to me, it sounded as though you were goading me to touch you again."

"But we both know that's not the case."

"Do we?" His eyes probed hers, mocking, showing her he knew she was lying. Damn him to hell. Was she so easy to read?

"I wonder if you've been thinking about me since that night?" He asked, leaning closer still, lifting a hand now and pressing his fingers into her hair, loosening it at the nape at the same time he shifted her face closer to his, holding her tightly, just beneath his face. "Have you been wondering what would have happened if we hadn't stopped? Have you been wishing we didn't?"

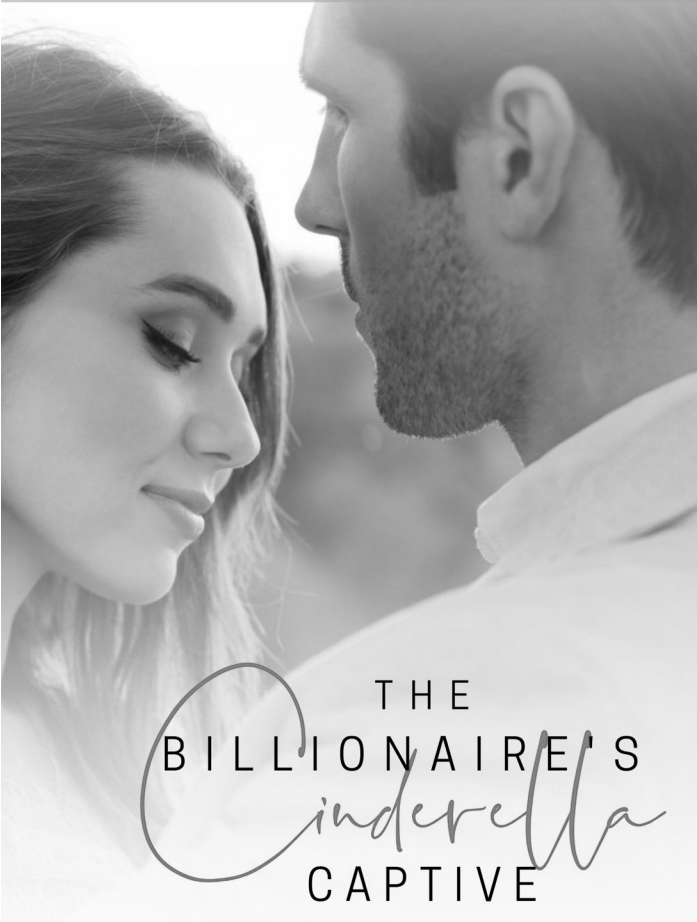
His last words were uttered right against the flesh beneath her ear and a moment later, his tongue darted out, teasing her, so she trembled against him, a moan parting her lips involuntarily.

She hated this man. *Hated* him. She was here by necessity alone, out of loyalty to Kon and an affection for Maggie, whom she'd never met but felt she knew so well courtesy of Kon's stories.

"Don't pretend you don't desire me, Phoebe, or I'll show that for the lie it is."

THE BILLIONAIRE'S CINDERELLA CAPTIVE is coming soon! Preorder on Amazon for 99c.

THE XENAKIS BOOK I



THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Cinderella
CAPTIVE

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

CLARE CONNELLY

