

CHAPTER ONE

His voice made a woman think of short nights, long kisses and a wide bed....

"Soft, plush. Perfect." Large hands, strong but sure, stroked with measured care. "I've never seen anything so beautifully put together."

Inside the rug, Moira Kelly's toes curled. For a traitorous instant her body reacted to the voice and touch of Personique Magazine's Sexiest Man Alive. While she'd never seen Alexi Papagos in person, countless pictures in various scandal rags around the world were stunning enough to shift her vivid imagination into overdrive. Surely he didn't know she hid inside the priceless Pakistani rug like a latter-day Cleopatra?

"How many knots per square inch?" Papagos asked, still stroking appreciatively.

The rug. He was referring to the rug. The fluttering nervousness threatening to levitate Moira's stomach subsided. She told herself she was being ridiculous. The rug was far too thick for her to feel the light stroking. Yet the mere thought of such a man invading the emotional cocoon she'd hidden in for the last few years was enough to make every nerve in her body exquisitely sensitive.

She really needed to start dating again.

"Two hundred, I think. Ya like it then, boss?"

The reply had a distinct Brooklyn ring to it. Odd. In her reams of data on Papagos, Moira had never heard it mentioned that he had an American servant. Still, since Papagos' mother was American, that was hardly surprising....

"You did well, Vinny, in your usual inimitable style. Did you have to break any arms to get it?" The undercurrent of laughter made that deep voice even more melodious.

"Not this time, boss," Vinny replied equably, obviously used to the teasing. "They met your price. Where ya want it?"

To Moira's relief, those skillful hands stopped. Papagos stepped back. However, Moira's panic returned as she and the rug were lifted and braced on several burly shoulders.

Papagos said softly, "In my bedroom. After dinner, we'll haul out the old rug and spread this out so I can admire it at my leisure."

Dammit, there her toes went again. It was almost as if Papagos suspected she hid inside the rug. Why else would he make such suggestive comments? She considered the notion and dismissed it. No way. She hadn't known herself she was going to pull this hare-brained stunt, as Gramps would say, until today.

Just sit tight, stay calm, they have no one but you to defend them...She repeated the advice to herself over and over, trying to focus on nothing but her purpose.

Trying to ignore that rich Stradivarius voice.

Trying not to wonder how many women had smuggled themselves aboard the yacht of this shipping magnate.

Trying not to panic as she was carried willy-nilly down a corridor, down steps, before finally being dumped in a wide space.

The movement stirred up more dust. Her nose had been tickling for some time, and she'd only avoided sneezing by holding her breath. She bit her lip, hard, and the urge to sneeze receded.

She was relieved when a door closed and footsteps retreated, leaving her alone. She

tried to make herself relax, as she needed a calm head and cool body for the coming confrontation.

She was immune to this Greek tycoon's obvious charms. After all, she'd been raised by one of the richest men in Texas. And she'd had the good sense to walk away from her dilettante's life of vacations on the French Riviera, shopping expeditions at Neiman Marcus and lazy lunches at five-star restaurants.

Bor-ing. Nothing and no one could ever draw her back to a life where GQ mattered more than IQ. She was a Mensa member on a mission, and she refused to be intimidated by Papagos' purported 160 IQ. If a male didn't have fins, a perpetually smiling mouth and a bottle-nosed snout, he didn't interest her

A measure of calm descended as she felt the rumble of engines. Thank heavens. They were putting out to sea. Moira waited for what seemed an eternity, until she felt they must have made it to open waters. Then, sweltering despite the expensive hum of air conditioning, Moira shifted experimentally, trying to unroll herself.

The rug didn't budge. The dockworkers had obviously tied it before moving it from the docks at Piraeus. Moira bit back panic and forced herself to breathe slowly. She had enough oxygen, but it was tainted with the smell of lanolin and dusty wool. This was obviously an antique, one-of-a-kind oriental rug like those her grandfather favored, but she was a dhurrie girl herself. The sooner she made it back to her simple condo in Port Aransas, Texas, the happier she'd be.

After her task was accomplished. "Buck up, gal," she told herself in her grandfather's distinctive Texas twang. "I didn't raise no idjits."

However, the longer the minutes wore on, the greater her discomfort grew, and the more

of an idiot she felt. Questions loomed. She admitted this idea had been crazy from the start, but she'd been desperate. She'd tried all the usual steps--phone calls, letters, even E-mail. No one would listen. And so, when she'd found out by chance on her vacation in the Greek isles that the one man in the world who could help her happened to be sailing out of Piraeus, she'd acted on the same instincts that had landed her disinheritance, save for her grandmother's irrevocable trust fund, unemployment and divorce.

But she was almost thirty. Principled passion was her guiding star. She couldn't change that any more than she could alter the freckles on her nose or the sea green color of her eyes. She squirmed, hoping she could break the ties, stopping only when dust filled her nostrils again

The door opened. She froze.

Quiet footsteps approached, graceful but latent with power. From the way her senses went on full alert again, she knew it must be Papagos. He clicked on a stereo, and then approached to examine his prize. As he hovered at her side, she felt the power of that touch even through the heavy wool, but then he moved off. She heard the rustle of clothes and realized he was undressing.

Disturbing images filled her head. Dust lodged in her nostrils, tickling her nasal cavities. She held her breath at the urge, but her arms were caught at her sides. Nature got her revenge--the harder she tried to rule her baser instincts, the more ungovernable her need to sneeze became. This time it exploded, an even bigger honker than usual, instead of the ladylike emission her grandfather thought appropriate for an oil baron's heiress.

The rustling sound stopped. Soft footsteps padded up, purposeful now. She heard a clicking sound, felt a sawing motion near her head and feet. Then she began rolling, faster and faster, ear over ear. Legs spread, disoriented, she spilled out into a confusing vortex of light and

sound, sprawled wantonly on fifty thousand dollars worth of wool art.

She blinked up at the imposing shadow looming over her. A capable hand clutched a flash of steel. She shrank back, shaking her head slightly to clear it of the cacophony blend of Debussy's "Claire de Lune," waves pounding the hull, and a controlled, melodious voice intimidating in its lack of anger.

"...Cleopatra, I presume?"

So, he knew his classics, too. Interesting.

But she had little time to reflect on this many-faceted individual. She gawked up at him in the bright light, trying to focus, but the disgust in his voice was plain enough.

"This isn't the Nile, lady. Lucky for you I'm fresh out of asps."

She rubbed her eyes, and realized he was moving toward a phone next to the huge king-size bed. Sheer determination brought her to her feet. She held out a pleading hand, but she was light-headed from her confinement. She swayed and would have fallen if he hadn't turned back to clutch her arm.

Sighing, he helped her to the bed and shoved her down on the edge, gently grasping the back of her neck to press her head between her knees. "Take deep breaths."

The touch of his hand, unfettered now by thick layers of wool, brought every sluggish nerve cell she'd been denying to aching life. Her eyes finally focused. She saw the shapely, bare feet in front of her, heard the soft sound of unhurried breathing. Slowly, she straightened, visually tracking a path up his body. Shapely ankles connected to strong calves, connected to muscular thighs, connected to....

She bolted rigidly upright. The unmistakable bulge in his tight, worn denims loomed large before her, both symbol and tangible proof of who he was.

A man.

A very rich and powerful man.

A bare-chested, gorgeous, rich and powerful man.

"What's the game this time?" asked the man. "A few torrid nights? Or just a joyride?"

She barely heard him, too engrossed in her visual feast. He not only matched his voice; he was a whole concertina all by himself.

A firm belly and slim waist flared upward into broad, but not overly muscular, shoulders. His arms bulged in the right places. His fit body proved that he hadn't totally forsaken his stevedore beginnings. Maybe she *was* frigid as her ex-husband had insisted, but she could appreciate a beautiful male when she saw one. No wonder women went gaga over Alexi Papagos. If he hadn't a drachma to his name, he'd still have to beat them away with a stick.

Moira took several more deep breaths. Visualizing her charges, she stood, back straight, gaze steady, like the debutante Gramps had tried--and failed--to transform her into. But when she finally looked at Papagos' face, intending to break into her spiel, the words froze stillborn on her parted mouth.

Most of the film stars and playboys she'd met in real life never lived up to their reel life. But Alexi Papagos, in the glorious technicolor of living flesh, put his glamor shots to shame. He wasn't just photogenic; he was flat-out gorgeous. Was it the strong Greek sun, or the generations of evolution that gave so many Greek men and women this sheer purity of face and form?

Feeling like an idiot, Moira still couldn't help herself. She stared.

Like the Apollo of legend, Alexi Papagos seemed born of bright boldness. Flawless bronze skin lovingly molded his symmetrical features: Flaring nose balanced by high, chiseled

cheekbones, wide, unlined forehead. The longest curling eyelashes she'd ever seen on a man, framing eyes the color of the strong sun-streaked tea her mother used to make in the back yard in Houston. Eyes more than a prosaic light brown, or even a poetic mahogany, lit from within by primeval masculinity tempered by gentleness.

His thick, wavy hair was deepest umber striated with molten gold streaks. And a mouth....Wide, sensual, hot with joy in life and a passionate purpose that made something dusty and neglected within her shiny and new again. Her own mouth tingled. She tried to remember the last time she'd been kissed, really kissed, but somehow she couldn't concentrate.

She watched his mouth move as he said, "I confess I find you equally fascinating. Do you want to dispense with the formalities while I give you what you obviously came for?"

Reality crashed back upon her. She scrambled over the opposite side of the bed and looked at him over the barrier. "I...That is, it's not what you think. That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here?" He balanced a casual knee on the bed. His luminous dark eyes glittered in the light of the chandelier blazing above their heads.

For the first time, she realized that, while she stared at him, he'd been appraising her with equal thoroughness. The spandex shorts and sweat-damp teeshirt had seemed appropriate attire for her task, but now she crossed her arms over her too-full bosom, promising herself that breast reduction surgery with her next quarterly check from her trust account.

She cleared her throat. "Well, that is...I'm here because of the marine foundation you established in Texas."

Curiously, he didn't seem surprised. He slowly moved his knee off the bed, the bright acquisitiveness in his eyes shuttering behind boardroom etiquette.

She barrelled on, "The people who run it are--"

A perfectly shaped hand raised, palm out. "This sounds rather complicated, and my crew is already holding my meal. Shall we discuss it over dinner?"

Nodding, she bit her lip. She needed time to collect her scattered wits anyway.

He walked over to a wall of mirrors. Swallowing at the sight of so much flagrant manhood flexing in graceful harmony as he moved, Moira for once did the impossible. She kept quiet.

Which was just as well. She was having a hard time breathing anyway.

Papagos pressed slightly. The mirrors folded sideways, an electronic motor humming. A long line of glittering gowns was revealed. Papagos peered over his shoulder, his eyes travelling her figure analytically now. He pulled out a brilliant green silk dress, whisked it over his arm and carried it to her.

Moira shrank against the wall.

A frown temporarily marred that flawless brow. "Do you think you're the first woman who's tried to stow away on my ship? I assure you, I am alone on this trip by choice. No matter what you've invited by this stunt, I do not intend, for the moment anyway, to sweep you off to bed. But...I'm in no mood to tolerate histrionics from a woman who's invaded my privacy and wants something of me beyond the obvious. It's my birthday and my crew has a special meal planned. I won't insult them by going casual, and neither will you. If, by the end of the evening, you haven't explained your presence to my satisfaction, I will turn this vessel around and take you immediately back to Piraeus." He lifted her limp arm and draped the green gown over it. "I believe this will fit you. I'll meet you in the corridor in thirty minutes." He strode to a different closet, removed a tuxedo and stalked to the door.

He'd opened it before she managed huskily, "H-happy birthday." She really couldn't

blame him for being angry, especially as he'd obviously picked up on her conflicted feelings.

With his hand on the knob, he glanced over his shoulder, his tense back relaxing. He dropped a wicked wink. "Who knows? You could be my best birthday present ever." With a last heated appraisal, he exited.

She tottered over to the bed and collapsed. Her heart thudded against her ribs. She told herself she was afraid. She told herself she was nervous. She even told herself she was still breathing hard from her recent stifling embrace with the rug.

Liar.

No matter how she lectured herself, she wasn't immune to his famous charm. He'd admitted he found her attractive. Unless she was very careful, she'd wind up on the dessert menu. Cradling her cheeks, she stared at her flushed face in the mirror.

Would that be such a bad thing? Any indiscretions committed here would never be public knowledge. She hadn't had sex in almost four years, hadn't even wanted to. Marital wounds had run too deep, and she'd never been one for shallow, one-night stands. But she'd never been so sexually attracted to a man before, either. Not even Jeremy.

She grimaced. Especially not Jeremy. At least, not after they'd been married a month. Jeremy's idea of foreplay was a talk show monologue. That was the problem with extremely good-looking men. Everything came easily to them, so they hadn't learned the art of finesse. However, Moira shrewdly guessed that Papagos wasn't true to type. He didn't take a breath without a plan. In fact, he hadn't seemed all that startled to see her tumble out at his feet.

Troubled, Moira trailed into a Roman-style bath, eyed the huge round whirlpool tub with longing, but made do with a shower in the granite-tiled enclosure with dual controls. Everything in this suite was tailor made for two. This sybaritic love nest was, indeed, a fitting abode for

Apollo. Normally men of renowned sexual prowess left her cold, but just the thought of Papagos sharing a shower with her, lathering her with those dexterous hands, made her body steam--and not from the lukewarm water.

Dammit, why was he alone on his birthday?

While she contemplated that puzzle, she dried off, wrapped a towel about her torso and used the blow dryer attached to the wall. She sat down at the small, pop-up make-up table and pushed. An array of cosmetics suitable for every skin type and eye color popped up, each anchored in its own little fixed container. She even saw colors appropriate for African women. Her curiosity about Papagos deepened. Unlike most in his social set, he apparently held no racial bias.

But did he have an age bias? He didn't look a day over forty himself, so he probably favored blond babes. Maybe aging redheads left him cold, and her furious debate with herself over chastity and lust was moot.

Still, her fingers trembled as she applied more make-up than usual, using a translucent, sparkly beige eye shadow that threw her large, sea-green eyes into sharp relief and set off her auburn hair. She found a wide, glittering hair comb and twisted her long, wavy hair into a shimmering coil, anchoring it at the back of her head.

Rising, she stared with disgust at her sweaty underclothes and searched the drawers built into a wall in the bathroom. One held an array of expensive feminine undergarments, but try as she might, she couldn't find a bra that fit. A very familiar problem, but one she didn't need on this trip, before this man. A polite knock sounded.

"Are you ready?" came Papagos' voice.

"In a minute." Unable to bear wearing her own sweaty bra, she grabbed the first pair of

undies to hand, a black lace affair that teased more than covered, and wriggled into the form-fitting dress that fit perfectly. If she'd had any remaining doubts about his on-board activities, his accurate estimation of her size settled them.

With one exception...The bodice was too tight. But the heavy silk was lined and so heavily beaded that it offered natural support. Tentatively, she pulled the zipper up. It went three quarters of the way up and stuck.

Infuriated at this familiar problem that usually forced her to buy separates, she gyrated like a gymnast, wriggling and dancing before the mirror, the clear bugle beads flashing in the bright lights.

Another knock sounded, crisper and more impatient. "Our food is growing cold. I don't expect you to be Miss Universe."

"Just a minute!" She stood, back so contorted her shoulder bones almost touched, and managed, with a last yank, to get the zipper up. Her breasts overflowed the deep scoop neck, showing generous cleavage that was barely decent. This dress offered no contest at all between chastity and lust, and since she hadn't made up her mind yet and didn't have time to change, she'd have to cover herself with something. And pray. This was obviously an expensive couture dress with hand stitching, so hopefully it would take the strain.

She grabbed a webby, gold-spangled shawl out of the closet and draped it over her bodice, trailing the ends down her back. Sticking her feet in the green silk pumps she'd found, she took a deep breath and went to the door, glueing a smile to her face. "I'm sorry but...." Her words wheezed to a stop.

Bare-chested, Papagos was a Greek god. Tuxedoed, the tycoon was Cary Grant, Omar Sharif and Tom Cruise rolled into one. Suave, sensual and boyishly charming all at once.

As for what he thought of her, he made no attempt to hide it. His eyes darkened to ebony, running over her restrained fiery curls, lingering at the thrust of bosom even the glittering shawl couldn't hide, down the voluptuous hips sheathed in silk, over the shapely legs exposed from the knee downward from the slits on each side of the gown, pausing on the slim ankles and small feet.

"I was wrong," he said huskily. He offered his arm.

She swallowed as the tips of her fingers tingled at that slight touch. "Wrong?"

"You *are* Miss Universe. And I have a strong urge to explore the unknown."

She stumbled at the sexual inference. He used the excuse to drape his arm around her shoulders. "But later." He led her into a walnut-paneled dining salon with glittering gold sconces and silk-screened wallpaper above the paneling. The long antique Chippendale table was set for two. Papagos seated her to his right, holding her chair for her. As she leaned forward, she knew he'd noticed the strained back zipper of her dress.

Wicked humor danced in his eyes, but he only said, "Would you care for a cocktail?"

She shook her head. She didn't need any more heady influences. White coated servants eased in from a soundless swinging door, serving cream of asparagus soup garnished with red caviar. Moira sipped the soup, discreetly shoving the caviar to the side of her bowl.

He missed nothing. "I assure you it's the best. From Beluga."

She dipped her soup spoon properly, away from her, and answered, "I just don't like it. Too salty."

He quirked an eyebrow, but sipped his own soup with quiet gusto, caviar and all. Next came plates loaded with canapes. Crostini, gnocchi, spanikopita, pot stickers, tiny quiches, buffalo wings--a cosmopolitan sampling for the quintessential globe trotter.

She nibbled on a few of them, her hunger already fading. This further evidence of Papagos' sophisticated taste depressed her. What would he ever see in a Texas ex-debutante who couldn't hold a job? She hid a wistful sigh behind her napkin. As tempting as he was, Alexi Papagos was out of her league.

Yes, her hormones reacted to him as they'd never reacted to anyone. And maybe he really could prove to her that she wasn't frigid, after all. Then what? She wasn't constructed for casual sex. She glanced around the opulent room and set her fork down, her ravenous hunger gone. She'd walked away from this lifestyle once, and she had no interest in being trapped in a glittering cage again. Yummy as he was, Papagos was still a means to an end to her.

'Time to do yer duty, gal, and git,' as Gramps would say.

She shoved her plate aside and folded her hands on the table. "Don't you want to hear why I smuggled myself aboard?"

"In due time," he replied, whirling his white wine and inhaling the bouquet. "I don't believe you're about to knife me while I sleep. And I have a feeling you're not here with larceny in mind." He sipped casually, his glance dropping to the two carat diamond on her right hand. "You obviously come from a wealthy background."

"How do you know that?" A chill ran up her spine. God-like or not, surely he didn't read minds?

He spread a hand at the intricate array of sterling flatware. "Table manners like yours are taught only in finishing school. You walk like a debutante and talk like a debutante. Somewhere from the West, I'm guessing. Texas or Oklahoma. You wear an expensive ring and don't like caviar." He broke off when the tournedos in Bernaise sauce were served, along with Duchesse potatoes and steamed snow peas and baby carrots.

While she digested his words, she pretended to eat the delicious food. Either he had deductive skills Sherlock Holmes would envy, or he knew more than he was admitting. At his next comment, her instincts went on full alert.

He said softly, "I can't shake the feeling that you look somewhat familiar. Won't you tell me your name?"

"Moira K-Kiley." Couldn't be too careful.

Oil.

Shipping.

Tankers shipped oil.

Alexi Papagos and Tyrell Kelly could know each other. The last thing she needed was her grandfather's meddling. If he learned she'd even met one of the world's most eligible bachelors, much less sailed on his yacht, he'd put on a full-court press to throw her at Papagos' feet.

She smiled wryly. Wonder how Gramps would feel if he knew she'd already tried that?

"Irish?" he asked, enjoying his own food.

"Both sides. Now, if I've satisfied your curiosity, we need to talk about why I came before we're too far out to turn back."

Something flickered in his eyes, but the emotion was quickly gone before she could read it. He draped his knife and fork properly over the sides of his empty plate. "My curiosity is only beginning, but I cede the floor to you, Moira."

"Mr. Papagos, the Poseidon Institute is conducting--"

"Alexi, please." His eyes dropped to her bosom.

Moira tightened the slipping shawl, trying to ignore her own response to his caressing

gaze. For her own sake instead of his, she knew to keep at least a semblance of propriety between them. "Mr. Papagos," she said firmly, "the director you hired, Dr. Bryce, is using some of my dolphins for illegal research."

His gaze leaped back to her face. "What kind of research?"

"I was investigating that when he fired me."

"You worked there? In what capacity?"

"As an animal trainer. As you know, our primary goal was supposedly to study cetacean intelligence and to see if we could decode their sophisticated language. We've made some progress over the past few years, but it's been slow. Dolphins seem to communicate not only by sounds we could extrapolate as words, but by extremely complex echolocation broadcast over miles under water."

He listened quietly, waving away the servants when they would have brought dessert. The swinging door closed.

Deep into her explanation, Moira barely noticed. She leaned forward to emphasize her point. The loose shawl slipped again as she said passionately, "I think Bryce is trying to train them on the side in illegal tactics. Carrying bombs, deactivating mines, underwater surveillance, that kind of thing."

Gallantly, he watched her face. "But the navy tried that years ago, from what I understand, without a great deal of success."

"Apparently so. Yet I have a friend in Washington who thinks the Navy's still got an active training program hidden in black ops. They say they're just using dolphins in rescue research, for divers and the like, but my friend thinks there's more going on."

"Are you implying Bryce has been retained by the government? I've only met the fellow

once, but I pay him well and he has a good reputation."

"No, I think it's even worse than that. I'm saying that I think the other side believes there's a secret Navy program and they've come to Bryce for their own deterrent. I've seen several Middle Eastern gentlemen meeting with him at odd hours."

For the first time, she saw concern in his eyes. "Palestinian? Iranian?"

She shrugged. The shawl fell to the floor. She started to lean down to pick it up, felt a popping at her back and hastily sat back up.

His gaze finally dropped to her bosom and she sensed he'd been restraining himself from staring. She blushed even as she was touched by this evidence of chivalry. She had to physically quell the urge to drape her napkin over her bodice.

That dark gaze glided over her lush curves admiringly, and his eyes danced with sparks when he looked at her again. "And why did you come to me like this? You could have written, or called--"

"I tried. The Interior Department, your Houston office, even the Texas Department of Health. But I had no proof, and they all dismissed me as a disgruntled former employee."

"I see. So why were you in Greece?"

"On holiday. Before I started looking for another job. But...." She swallowed, lowering her eyes so he wouldn't see her incipient tears. "I can't bear to think of Jules, and Verne and Marie being hurt and abused--"

"What evidence do you have of this?"

"Without explanation, several months ago, Bryce took my most promising pupils out of my class and secluded them in a different area of the institute. At first, he let me see them, but one day...." She trailed off, closing her eyes to finish quickly, "I saw several of them with

bloody strap marks from some heavy object that had rubbed them raw. They seemed agitated, unhappy, talking less than usual. Something was obviously wrong. But of course Bryce denied anything. I came up late the following night and found him meeting with these foreigners. I couldn't hear the conversation, but the next day I searched the file room. Bryce discovered me before I found anything and fired me on the spot."

"I see. Well, I certainly can't tolerate abuse of the very animals we're studying. Still, I can't believe Bryce would do something like this. He came with the highest recommendations."

She leaned forward, feeling her breasts straining the bodice to the limit. Another thread popped behind her back. His gaze lowered again, the sparks glowing brighter. This time, she didn't care. For once in her life, she'd use her assets as ruthlessly as most women did. "Please, just check it out." She played her ace card. "Besides, illegal activities at a research institute would not be good PR for Papagos Shipping, would they?" She had a shrewd idea she'd hit his weak spot, for his startled gaze leaped to her face.

"What's your I.Q.?"

"Not as high as yours, but high enough."

A slow, sensual smile started in his eyes and spread slowly over that tempting mouth. Her own gaze dropped to his lips. She licked her suddenly dry mouth.

"Very well. I'll check out your story immediately. On one condition."

She braced her hands on the table. "Yes?"

"You come with me."

She drew a sigh of relief. "I'd be delighted to." And even more delighted to watch Bryce be fired and possibly prosecuted. "If you'll take me back to Pi--"

"No, no, you misunderstand. I want you to sail to Texas with me."

Shocked, she leaned back in her chair. The stitching at her zipper popped twice more. The constricted feeling at her bosom was beginning to ease, but she had other more...pressing concerns at the moment. Her voice was higher than usual when she managed, "But...my things. I was on vacation--"

"Do you value your possessions or your dolphins more?"

She didn't like the gleam in his eyes, but he was making it difficult to refuse. Still, the thought of being so intimately cloistered with him for..."But this will take days." She was amazed at how quickly he made the rapid calculations in his head.

He barely paused. "About fourteen, to be exact. If we hurry. You can have your things shipped to you. But naturally, I leave the choice up to you." He rang the bell at his side.

Discreet servants brought in that tradition of every cruise--flaming baked Alaska. Moira cut into the gooey treat and took a small bite, wishing she wasn't always constrained by so many confounded morals. A drip of ice cream slipped down the side of her mouth. She lifted her napkin, but Alexi leaned forward.

"Allow me." Those earthy dark eyes came closer, closer. The sweet scent of cake and ice cream faded away. Like Apollo, this man seemed the source of all life and warmth, and every secret yearning she'd ever denied reached toward him like tender sprouts pushing upward for sustenance.

Her breath grew ragged as her gaze dropped to his parted mouth. Those lips promised the verdure of life, the forgetfulness of sin, and the sexual fulfillment that would finally fill the empty, aching void she'd never acknowledged until now. God, she was tempted. Who would know? She began to lean toward him, hoping he'd lick the dribble away, but at the last minute, he gently dabbed at her mouth with his own napkin.

A muscle flexed in his jaw, and she had the strangest feeling he was struggling with motivations as equally complicated as her own. And that he welcomed this attraction even less than she.

He leaned back. Finally a smile stretched his lips. "You have no reason to refuse because you fear I shall...pressure you. I admit I want you. Badly. But anything that happens between us will be strictly mutual." He shoved his own uneaten dessert back. "Are you finished?"

She nodded. He held her chair for her, bent and, with a twinkle of regret, handed her the shawl.

Sighing in relief, she covered herself again.

He cocked his head to the side. "You don't like the touch of a man's eyes, do you?"

She bit her lip. When his eyes flared again as he tracked the movement, she said hastily, "Usually, no."

"Usually?" His voice softened to that basso glide.

Her toes curled inside her shoes. Swallowing harshly, Moira turned away. "Might I have that drink now?"

"Certainly." He held the door wide for her and led her down a short corridor to a spacious saloon. She followed, trying to ignore the look of him, the smell of him--not expensive cologne. But salt spray and peppermints. The scent of a self-made man confident enough to do as he pleased, not as society dictated. She had a feeling that even this luxurious yacht was used as much for business as for pleasure. And despite her intrusion, he'd listened to her intently and was even willing to give her the benefit of the doubt over an employee he obviously trusted.

So why did she hesitate? Why not accept his invitation and revel in sin for a couple of weeks? After all, she didn't even need to worry about getting pregnant, not if the doctor was right about her constricted fallopian tubes.

Maybe that's why her dolphins were so important to her. They were as dear to her as the children she would never have. She squelched the stab of longing, and the poignant wish that she'd been constructed differently. Gramps had always told her she was too idealistic, that she shouldn't be so picky. She'd thought Jeremy everything she'd ever wanted, and look how that had turned out.

But still, feeling like a lemming following the leader to the sea, she trailed Alexi Papagos into the luxurious salon. And she had never felt so indecisive, so tempted to be bad, in her entire life...

CHAPTER TWO

As he watched Moira roam his salon, Alexi hoped his rapid heartbeat didn't show beneath his jacket. What was it about this poor little rich girl that slipped beneath his formidable defenses? Damn Tyrell and his machinations. He'd known his granddaughter was gorgeous, and stubborn, and smart, and...totally seductive. And he'd known exactly how his ambitious business associate would react to her.

Yes, at his first good look at her, he wanted her screaming beneath him. But with every moment he spent with her, Alexi felt a powerful longing to experience something far more intangible--and something far more dangerous.

Laughter. The meeting of two powerful intellects. To dance with her, and dine with her, and learn her inner thoughts as thoroughly as he longed to learn her body.

In short, things Alexi seldom found in the women he dated for the simple reason that he didn't seek them. He had demands enough on his time without being distracted by a woman. Once had been more than enough.

Since Diana had betrayed him with another man, he'd put his business and his daughter first. Both had grown and prospered. In the last ten years, women had served a much more basic purpose to Alexi. And he'd expected Moira to serve a different basic purpose--to help him forge a new alliance he badly needed.

Package delivered, deal finalized.

But this package deal was proving much more complicated than he'd expected.

He watched Moira wander over to his expensive sound system and rear projection television, quelling his powerful urge to ask her to dance.

A perfect way to get his hands on her, but that would have to wait. Still, when she trailed a hand over the plush leather sectional sofa of teal green centered before the media center, his spine tingled with the need to pull her down on that inviting couch and kiss her into tomorrow.

Next, she was drawn to the huge bank of windows protruding over the ship's side where the moonstruck sea was framed like God's masterpiece. She sank down on the velvet banquette, her expressive face showing her fascination as she stared down at the waves leaping beneath her feet.

"This is marvelous. I've always envied the dolphins, and now I have an inkling of how they must feel skimming over the waves."

Alexi smiled slightly at her fascination. He was tickled that she had little interest in the expensive gadgetry most people noticed and instead was drawn to his favorite part of the ship. She stared out at the vista, some of her agitation obviously fading as she relaxed for the first time that night. He sensed her total love for the sea. Again, he was both delighted and alarmed at how alike they were in many ways.

Damn him. Tyrell had known that, too.

He cleared his throat. "What would you like to drink?"

"Can you make a Margarita?" she asked without turning her head.

"Certainly."

Moira pressed her nose against the glass. The stars beckoned far above, so the skies were clear, but the wind had stiffened. White-tipped waves pounded against the hull, spray splashing against the glass. Moira's delighted smile lit up her quiet face as a flying fish leaped out of the water, seeming to float for an instant in the brisk wind, its colorful scales glinting a

rainbow-hued welcome in the bright moonlight before it returned home with a splash.

When the banquette next to her depressed, Moira held out her hand without looking at him, accepting the tall glass. She sipped, enraptured by the vista so close and yet so mysterious.

Much like Moira herself, Alexi reflected, sipping his own drink. He'd only known her for a few hours, but already he sensed, with the astute judge of human nature that had taken him from the docks to the boardrooms, that she was as complex and richly layered as the sea they both loved.

Again, she proved that her very thoughts were attuned to his.

"I've always loved the sea," she said softly. "When I'm out here, flying over the waves, the rat race seems as futile as the treadmill it is. Money, power, prestige. We fight every day, and for what? Here, we're just another infinitesimal speck on the planet. The sea gave us life, eons ago, and it can take it away just as easily. There's something comforting in knowing that no matter how advanced our technology, we will never truly be masters here."

Alexi inhaled sharply. The soft sound dragged her gaze around. Arrested, he stared at her, his glass halfway to his mouth. Slowly, he took the glass from her hand and set it on a nearby table, aligning his next to it in a symbolic intimacy he knew didn't escape her. "I've never heard anyone state my view so exactly. Are you a Circe, come to enchant me?"

Lifting her to her feet, he cradled her face in his hands, tilting her head back to delve into her darkening turquoise eyes. For the first time, he let her feel the true power of his curiosity. His growing hunger to know her, in every way, mind and body.

For a heady instant, she met and matched his search, obviously equally curious about him. But then her gaze flickered. She looked away, and he felt a wall go down between them. He remembered Tyrell had warned him she was still nursing wounds from a bitter divorce. At least,

Alexi hoped that was the reason for her abrupt withdrawal, and that it had nothing to do with him.

But it had everything to do with him.

"No," she said softly, as if he'd asked her outright to go to bed with him. She backed away.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "No? Is it me or yourself you deny?" He moved closer for every step she retreated. Pursuit was always so much more titillating than surrender.

She stopped, her chin rising defiantly. "I'm not one of your usual conquests, Caesar."

"Alexander is more appropriate, actually. We believe he's one of my family's ancestors." His gaze raked her, sizing her up with the skill of a seasoned campaigner, and he couldn't resist the taunt. "I see territory I'd like to conquer."

She caught her breath, the shawl trembling over that amazing bosom that had tempted him all evening. But she held her ground, staring him down.

Maybe she was Tyrell's blood, after all. His admiration growing, he took mercy on her confusion and stepped away. It had been years since he felt these primitive urges. But then, he'd never had such temptation literally fall at his feet before. Her mere presence here was suggestive, but he needed to keep a cool head if he was going to convince her to let him take her home.

He gave her his polite host's smile and fetched her drink. She sipped, still admiring his viewing alcove, and finally tapped lightly at the exterior.

"It sounds like plastic, not glass," she said.

How different she was to most of the women he knew. Few of them knew how to spell deductive reasoning, much less use it. But of course, she was a scientist.

"Glass extending so far over the side wouldn't withstand storms in the North Atlantic," he explained. He pressed a button concealed between the banquette back and the glass casing. Windshield washers whirred to life. He pressed the button again and they receded back into their frame. "I had this viewing area designed by Lockheed out of the same material they use in their jet fighter canopies."

Impressed, she tapped the plastic again. "Only the best. But I guess you can afford it."

"Indeed."

Like you. He didn't say the words, but she obviously heard them. She put distance between them again, pausing before a portrait grouping. Three individual pictures of his ten-year old daughter artfully encompassed a larger central grouping of him with the child.

He tensed, waiting for the inevitable question. Moira contemplated Helena's thick dark hair, olive complexion and dazzling white smile, then looked back at him, obviously seeing the resemblance.

"Your niece?"

"My daughter."

Her tension returned. He sensed it even though she kept her face averted. "I didn't know you'd ever been married."

"I haven't." He hesitated, but sheer fairness made him add softly, "Nor do I plan to. If you decide to come with me, you need to be aware of that."

And Tyrell would have to find another suitor for his rebellious granddaughter. Alexi badly wanted Tyrell's business, but not to the extent of giving up his freedom. He'd been about to do that for Diana. The wedding had been two days away, and she was three months pregnant with his child, when he walked in on her and found her with another man.

Alexi Papagos only had to be taught a lesson once.

Apparently, so did Moira Kelly.

She whirled on him, her eyes narrow. "Thanks for the warning, but you needn't bother. I've tried marriage once and failed abysmally. I have no interest in trying again." She turned away from the interest that flared his nostrils. Still, the question seemed torn out of her. "How often do you see your daughter?"

"Often. I have joint custody with her mother."

He watched her file that away for future reference. He wondered how many scandal rag articles she'd read about him. He hoped at least she gave him credit for not shirking his responsibilities as so many wealthy men did with a trust fund and hush money. Under the circumstances, it would have been easy for him to win sole custody from Diana, but she truly wanted the child, so he'd settled for joint. However, Alexi wasn't about to explain the intimate details of his life to anyone, much less a woman who already pushed him to his limits in so many other ways.

Let Miss Priss think what she wanted.

She did, and her thoughts were obviously not kind. Slowly, she turned, drained her glass and said coldly, "I've decided. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell your captain to turn around. I'll be happy to meet you at the institute on a date and time of your convenience, but I really don't want to leave my things behind."

His nostrils flared again. Dammit, he'd pushed her too hard. If she left him now, he'd never get close to her again. Wondering why that thought alarmed him more than the possibility of losing Tyrell's business, he took a short step toward her, opening his mouth to argue. But her gaze was so implacable, and at that instant she reminded him so much of her indomitable

grandfather, that he bit back his retort.

Maybe it was better this way. This woman brought out his best, and his worst. And he'd only known her one day. With smooth, angry strides, he went to the intercom next to the bar and snapped it on with an impatient finger. "Captain Athos, my guest wishes to be returned to Piraeus. Do we still have time to turn around and meet our schedule?"

A pregnant pause followed, and then a click preceded a courteous female reply. "Storm warnings have been issued for the entire Greek coastline. We're approaching Albania. Do you want me to radio ahead for permission to dock?"

"Just a moment." Alexi turned to Moira, his face carefully expressionless. "What is your wish?"

A harsh laugh caught in her throat. Moira turned and walked back to the windows, pressing her palm flat on the plexiglass. Alexi saw his own reflection standing watch over her shoulder, but he didn't possess either the guile or the good sense at that moment to shield his keen interest at her answer.

Why was it so important to him that she go with him? he saw her wonder, staring at his reflection.

And then he saw something else of her grandfather in her. The same gut instinct that had brought Tyrell Kelly from one wildcat well to a worldwide conglomerate lit a fire in her belly. Recklessly, she turned back to stare at him, her glowing face lambent with the same sexual hunger he knew he exuded. They stared at one another. He saw his own truth in her eyes.

Right or wrong, smart or stupid, she'd always regret running away from this attraction that both frightened and fascinated her. To his great relief, she said rapidly, "Tell your captain not to bother. I'll go to Houston with you."

Elation sizzled through him, and the erection he'd been fighting all evening made him turn away. He pressed the intercom again. "Never mind, Captain. But we do have a change of destination. Plot a course for Port Aransas, Texas, instead of New York. I'll have to rearrange my meetings. Tell the porter to prepare the best guest stateroom. Miss Kiley will be sailing with us."

That calm, cultured voice answered, "Yes, sir. Athos out."

Amusement tinged Moira's voice as she observed, "Your crew is obviously prepared for any eventuality. Apparently I'm not your first stowaway."

"Actually, you got farther than most. The other women who tried to smuggle themselves aboard weren't quite so inventive." If Tyrell hadn't insisted she'd find a way to sneak aboard, he wouldn't have been so vigilant and noticed the unusual lump in that rug. Of course, he wouldn't have left the expensive carpet on the docks so long, either.

He poured them each another drink from the pitcher he'd made up, nodding at the plush sofa. She hesitated, but she went to the couch and sat down. The leather made that expensive slurping sound as if it, too, wanted to gobble her up. He smiled as he sat next to her, for he heard a very slight popping sound and realized the strained zipper at her back was finding itself as difficult to contain as he was. He'd recognized, of course, that she was unusually endowed for a size ten, but he hadn't realized the dress he'd selected had such a small bodice.

Sipping thirstily, hoping the alcohol would distract him, he crossed a knee over his leg. But thankfully, she was too occupied in pulling the inadequate shawl over her breasts to notice his own discomfort.

She took a tiny sip. "How often do you visit Houston?"

"I live there part of the year as many of my business partners are based there. I have a

house in River Oaks."

From the way she abruptly lowered the drink, the information had some significance.

She stared down at the drink, swirling it in one hand, holding the precious shawl close with the other. "My ex-husband's parents live in River Oaks. Jeremy's father sometimes golfs with George Bush, his neighbor."

Ah, that explained it. Alexi's mental intensity about this woman only increased his body heat. Why was Moira so alienated from the life of wealth and privilege she'd been raised in since her parents died when she was a child? She was such a delicious bundle of contradictions he longed to solve. Two weeks wouldn't be enough.

Impatient with his own unusual inability to quiet his rioting thoughts and body, Alexi thumbed the table top beside him. A space-age console popped up, displaying a dizzying array of lights and rheostats.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Garth Brooks?"

His nose wrinkled at her choice, but he pressed a couple of buttons. A massive CD stacker hummed and then Garth Brooks came on. Wincing, he turned the music down slightly.

She smiled at his pained expression. "Why do you keep country music if you don't like it?"

He looked at her askance. "Many of my clients are from Texas. Why else?"

"Have you ever really listened to him? Some of his songs are pretty touching."

He shrugged. They sipped in silence for awhile. But when "Unanswered Prayers" came on, she grew restless. Alexi listened to the lyrics for the first time, really listened, and he realized that the words struck a bit too close to him as well. Especially in this company.

Had she said the same unanswered prayers about her husband that he'd said about Diana? And was he about to make the same mistake again, by letting a woman get too close? Or had fate brought her to him, as much as her manipulative grandfather?

Before he paused to think, he caught her hand and kissed her palm. "Don't be afraid. We both love the sea, Moira, for the same reasons. It challenges us, takes us away from safety, makes us live life to the fullest. The best things in life are often the most unexpected. Why do we not let these next two weeks set their own course, and wander where fate takes us?" He kissed her wrist, running a burning trail up her arm.

He felt the tremor that ran through her, and it took every last measure of his slipping control not to press her into the couch and finish the job the zipper had started. God, he wanted her, with a desire so acute he hurt with it. It hadn't been more than a week since he was with that lovely model from Milan. Now what was her name?

Staring at Moira, he couldn't remember. And didn't care.

Her eyes were slumberous with her own needs, but still she resisted. Forcing a yawn, she rose. "If you don't mind, I'll retire. I've had a long day."

Tamping down his own urges, he rose with her, taking the half-finished drink from her hand to set it next to his on a table. "Certainly. I'll show you to your cabin." He put a courteous hand on her back, but she flinched away.

At first he was offended, but then he realized that her bodice gaped slightly. She had to pull it up under the shawl, being careful to cover her front and back with the gilded nonsense. "I'll follow, if you don't mind."

Lust surged through his veins, but he only politely averted his gaze and led the way down the corridor back toward the bedrooms. He shoved open the door next to his and led her inside.

His room had a decidedly masculine tinge, with its navy velvet spread, navy and green drapes and dark paneling. This room was feminine, with white Irish lace curtains and a collection of antique delft anchored in a corner cabinet. The antique rice bed had a white Irish lace canopy, accented by a dainty dressing table on one wall in matching mahogany. A fainting couch upholstered in blue watered silk sat before wide french windows that opened onto a balcony facing the sea.

She obviously loved it. She slanted a teasing glance at him. "No garish gold light fixtures, mirrored round beds or tacky suede furniture?"

He laughed. "You've obviously sailed on a bachelor's yacht in the past." And he'd bet those other bachelors had wanted her, too. Just not as much. He'd never wanted a woman the way he wanted this one. The mere thought of another man having her pained him. He had no rights over her, nor any reason to want any.

But the feelings rioting through him had nothing to do with reason....He had to force himself to listen over the pounding in his ears when she wandered to the dressing table to look at the pretty trinkets. "Did you decorate this?"

"No, my daughter picked everything. She stays here when she sails with me. This suite just seemed to fit you better than the others."

She froze in the act of picking up a dainty perfume bottle. "You couldn't possibly know my tastes."

Slowly, her gaze lifted to meet his in the dressing table mirror. She watched him walk closer, his stride soundless on the plush carpet. The shawl over her bosom shook with her heartbeat, and her agitation heightened his own.

Even the power and remembrance of unanswered prayers couldn't stop him from saying

what he must. He spoke soft and low and sincere. "I know enough, but I hunger to learn more. In every way." He set gentle hands upon her shoulders. "I know that you despise artifice, and hypocrites, and the idle rich. I know that you're passionate, and principled, and caring, and reserved. I know that you're lying about who you are, and you're not quite certain yet who you want to be."

His head dipped as she stared, mesmerized, into the mirror. He nuzzled the back of her neck, loosening the shawl, his voice a deep rasp. Gooseflesh raised on her skin. "And I know that I want to spread you beneath me and fill you with the life, and the joy, and the passion you suppress."

Three things happened in quick succession. Three little things that, in that odd way of compounding events, would change the course of his life.

The antique perfume bottle fell from her nerveless fingers.

He lifted his head, automatically moving to catch it, making her shawl slip off her shoulders to the floor.

As she instinctively grabbed for the expensive bottle, the strained zipper of the dress, with a mournful pinging sound, ceded its battle with pressure. Her bodice, abetted now by the heavy beading as she bent slightly from the waist, traitorously fell off her shoulders.

Three sounds met and mingled in the heated atmosphere.

Shattering glass.

A masculine gasp.

And a feminine screech.

The bottle hit the table leg and broke into bits. Half bent, Alexi froze, one long arm extended, still reaching for the bottle. He stared at the large, beautiful breasts reflected in the

mirror. Too late, Moira grabbed at the bodice, trying to pull it up, making a humiliated sound in her throat, but her fingers were clumsy.

Abruptly, Alexi surged upright, his high cheekbones colored with a hectic flush. And then, for the first time that night, Alexi Papagos acted as he'd wanted to since seeing her sprawl wantonly at his feet: primitively, spontaneously, eagerly. It was his birthday, after all.

He reached for what he wanted....

At the first touch of her soft flesh, the furious debate between his body and his mind ended. The victor was obvious, the stakes, priceless. A strange sense of certainty settled over him.

This passionate, principled, beguiling creature would be his. This very night. Because she wanted him. Almost as much as he wanted her. His eyes ebony black and velvet soft, Alexi sighed his gratitude at the best gift a man could ask for. He tenderly caught each of her breasts in his hands, learning their texture and weight, trying to communicate his sense of honor and wonder. All the while, he watched her in the mirror.

Her pupils had dilated until her eyes were more black than blue. She stared back at him, shocked and trembling, her heartbeat frantic against his palms. But she didn't pull away, even when he let his thumbs drift, thistle-light, around her stiffening nipples, but not touching their upthrust desire. She bit her lip, her neck bowing back against his chest. Her shaking hands caught his wrists.

He froze, a protesting groan escaping his lips. She couldn't send him away. Not now. But to his great relief, she merely brought his hands higher, to rub his palms over her nipples.

The feel of her stabbing, hot and passionate, into his hands made him acutely aware of his own raging male need. He spun her around into his arms and kissed her. Deep, raw and aching

as the feelings he aroused in her, he taught her the taste and feel of his desire. Her lips trembled shyly in response. He felt like a teenager again, and he already knew enough of Moira to realize that she was not a woman who'd ever bedded a man on first acquaintance. His mouth gentled, sliding back and forth in a hot slide that could take them both to perfidy, and make them thankful for the fall.

God, she tasted good. Sweet, strong, and true as her values, her lips as soft and yielding as the curves pressing urgently against him. She needed, and deserved, careful handling. Total honesty, not seduction.

The veins in his neck standing out with his effort, he stepped back. "This has to be what you want too, my passionate little prude. Shall I leave you to your proper bed? Or take you to my own?"

She swayed without his support, her face flushed, her eyes glazed, but then she caught the edge of the vanity and straightened. Her breasts, full and round, pointed at him provocatively, almost tempting him to take up where he'd left off, but then she spoke.

Her voice was so husky he scarcely recognized it. "I think you know my answer. I'm...tired of being practical. I want to feel a man's arms again, to know if I can respond at last..."

"At last?" He stared at her, shocked. "You did not respond to your husband?"

She looked down, her knuckles gleaming white as she gripped the vanity edge.

He wanted to shout with laughter at the ridiculous notion. He wanted to punch her ex-husband for demeaning her so that she actually doubted her own ability to feel passion.

And then he shuddered, his eyes going black again, as he wanted nothing more in life than to prove to her she was wrong.

Frigid? If they didn't set the ship afire, it would be a miracle.

Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her to his own room.