

The Hotel on the Riviera

Carol Kirkwood is one of our most loved TV personalities. Millions of viewers and listeners know her for her weather reports on *BBC Breakfast*, Radio 2's *The Zoe Ball Breakfast Show*, Wimbledon fortnight and waltzing into our hearts on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Carol's debut novel, *Under a Greek Moon*, reached no.2 on the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and Carol was inspired to write it through her passion for travel and her love of Hollywood glamour. Off-screen, Carol can often be found buried in a book, singing, dancing and taking long walks in the countryside.

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Also by Carol Kirkwood

Under a Greek Moon

Carol
Kirkwood
*The Hotel on
the Riviera*



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland

First published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2022
This edition published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2023
1

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-839347-2

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Typeset in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity by CPI
Group (UK) Ltd

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I dedicate this book to you, my readers . . . never in my wildest dreams did I think this would ever be possible, but you made it so. Thank you for your support and encouragement. I truly hope you enjoy
The Hotel on the Riviera xxx

Prologue

Tears slid down the woman's cheeks, unchecked. She couldn't stop them now; it was as if all the tears she had been trying to hide – from her husband, the children, and from herself – were now escaping from her in an unstoppable torrent.

She felt as if reality itself was slipping from her grasp. She'd been struggling to keep it together for so long, and now, like her tears, the lies and the secrets were coming out into the open.

'I know what you did!' the man bellowed at her from the top of the sweeping staircase. 'You betrayed me.'

'No! You were going to betray me. I had no choice but to—'

'Liar!' He staggered towards her as she rushed up the stairs to meet him, the handsome, debonair man she had married, unrecognizable in the dishevelled, alcohol-ravaged figure before her. Over the last few months as his situation worsened he'd become angry, suspicious and selfish, but he'd never looked at her with such hatred as she saw in his eyes now.

'You don't understand,' she sobbed, her voice echoing around the cavernous entrance hall. Despite the late hour, her blonde hair was still immaculately coiffed, her clothing elegant on her.

Carol Kirkwood

'You had everything you could have wanted, and this is how you repay me?' he snarled as he advanced towards her. 'Sleeping around behind my back – and I'll bet he wasn't the only one. You've probably screwed half the hotel guests too.'

'How dare you! Don't you speak to me like that.'

'I'll speak to you however I want. You're my wife – even if you don't act like it.'

He grabbed her arm and she gasped in shock.

'Let go of me,' she cried, trying to shake him off.

'You need to be taught a lesson,' he yelled, raising his hand to strike her.

As she recoiled, turning away to escape the blow, he tipped forward, arms flailing, groping blindly for something to break his fall. But there was nothing.

He let out an unearthly cry as he crashed over the banister. She could only watch horrified as his body plummeted to the black and white tiles below, striking the ground with a hideous sound that she would never forget as long as she lived.

And then, silence. Until a piercing scream sliced through the stillness, a scream that she barely realized came from her own lips . . .

Chapter 1

Ithos, April 2009

‘Papa!’ Ariana scrambled out of the chauffeur-driven Mercedes and threw herself into her father’s arms.

It was almost midnight and he’d come out to meet her, the palatial villa behind him illuminated against the blackness, the moon bright and full overhead.

Ariana was exhausted. She knew she looked far from her usual groomed and glossy self after the long journey from Los Angeles but was shocked by the change in her father. He’d lost weight, his handsome features hollowed out, and there were dark circles under his eyes. His once-dark hair was thick with grey, and it looked as though he hadn’t shaved for a week.

‘Yaya,’ Ariana blurted out. ‘Is she . . .?’ She trailed off, not daring to finish the question.

‘Your grandmother is very weak, but she’s still with us.’

‘Oh, thank God.’ Ariana collapsed against him with relief. ‘I was terrified I’d be too late.’

‘She’s been asking for you. Come, I’ll take you straight to her.’

A look passed between them, so many emotions and unspoken words, but now was not the time for questions. Those would come later. Instead, Demetrios Theodosis put his arm around his daughter and steered her into the house.

Shauna, Ariana’s stepmother, was waiting inside. Like Demetrios, Shauna looked shattered. Her thick, red hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and she was dressed casually in lounge pants and a fitted T-shirt.

‘Ariana, it’s lovely to see you. I’m so sorry it had to be under these circumstances.’ Shauna enveloped her in a warm hug, then stood back. She knew this was a moment for Demetrios and his daughter.

Ariana followed her father through the house towards her grandmother’s wing. Her stomach was in knots as the memories came flooding back: running along these same hallways as a child, bare feet slapping against the cool marble floor. Then later, as a rebellious teenager, slipping off her Jimmy Choo stilettos and sneaking back to her room in the early hours after breaking her curfew.

Her heart was pounding as they reached her grandmother’s bedroom. Demetrios squeezed her hand and pushed open the door.

Inside, everything was calm and still and surprisingly peaceful. The curtains were closed and a low lamp burned in the corner, but there was no medical equipment as Ariana had feared; it still looked like her grandmother’s sanctuary, not an impersonal hospital room. Elana’s costume jewellery and perfume bottles were neatly arranged on the antique dressing table, while the familiar

The Hotel on the Riviera

silver-framed portrait of Ariana's grandfather, Aristotle, remained on the bedside cabinet. Only the baroque mirror had been removed – presumably to prevent Elana from seeing how she'd deteriorated. Two nurses were present, checking Elana's vital signs and administering painkillers to make her more comfortable, but at a signal from Demetrios they left discreetly.

Ariana approached the bed, stifling a gasp as she glimpsed the tiny, shrunken figure beneath the sheets. She blinked away the tears, shocked by how frail her grandmother had become, the steely, venerable matriarch almost unrecognizable.

Tentatively, Ariana sat down on the chair at Elana's bedside. Her grandmother appeared to be asleep, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow. Her face looked grey against the crisp, white pillowcase. Gently, Ariana reached for her hand; the knuckles were gnarled, the liver-spotted skin paper-thin over the criss-cross of purple veins. But as Ariana slid her palm into her grandmother's, Elana's eyelids fluttered open. Her once bright eyes were dull and filmy, as though the light had gone out of them.

'Yaya,' Ariana burst out, overcome with emotion. She dropped her head, bringing Elana's hand to her lips, feeling the coolness of her grandmother's skin. Despite everything, Ariana had always thought that by some miracle Elana might recover – that Demetrios had got it wrong, and this wasn't the end. But now Ariana could see that her hope had been futile. She had to accept that her grandmother didn't have long left.

'I love you, Yaya,' Ariana sobbed. 'So much.'

Elana turned her head a fraction, just enough to see her beloved granddaughter. With what little strength

Carol Kirkwood

she had left, she raised her other hand to caress Ariana's cheek.

'I love you too, Ariana. Always,' she whispered, before falling back against her pillow, exhausted by the effort of speaking.

Ariana lay in her childhood bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. She'd barely slept for the past couple of days, what with the jet lag and spending most of her time at her grandmother's bedside. Demetrios had employed a small army of nurses to care for Elana around the clock, and when they'd insisted Ariana should try and rest, she'd reluctantly agreed – although now the idea seemed impossible.

In the privacy of her room, Ariana had broken down and wept for the grandmother she adored, readying herself for the inevitable loss. She'd listened to the comings and goings outside – tyres on the gravel as friends came to say their final goodbyes; low voices in the garden as the nurses changed shift; the local priest making his daily visit to pray for Elana's soul.

Frustratedly, Ariana threw back the covers and moved over to the window seat, staring out at the night sky. The Greek moon was full and dazzling, a panorama of stars splayed across the inky blackness. Below was Ithos Bay, the dark water dotted with pinpricks of light from the boats that sailed by, and the harbour aglow in the distance. Ariana opened the window, the fresh air cooling her hot skin, and inhaled deeply, the familiar tang of the sea bringing welcome solace. No matter where she was in the world, she loved to be by the ocean.

The Hotel on the Riviera

Ithos, and the family villa, held so many memories for Ariana. She remembered Yaya teaching her to bake, the two of them sticky with honey and nibbling on pistachios as they made baklava together. She recalled how, as a child, she'd watched, mesmerized, as Elana made herself up so elegantly every day, with pressed powder from Elizabeth Arden and a classic red lipstick. With her parents frequently away – her father travelling for business, her mother for pleasure – Ariana's grandmother had been a constant in her life, the steady, loving influence she'd needed. Now the sands were shifting around her, and Ariana felt lost. She'd hoped to make Elana proud, but instead her life was one big mess.

Slamming the window shut, Ariana pulled a silk dressing gown over her La Perla slip and strode out of her room. The long corridors were silent and shadowy, the walls adorned with valuable works of art, but already the house felt different, as though her grandmother's influence was slipping away like the woman herself.

She'd intended to visit Elana, but as Ariana passed her father's study, she noticed light spilling out from beneath the closed door. Ariana hesitated. She knew that she and Demetrios needed to talk, but she was ashamed of the things she'd done and the way she'd behaved, scared of the confrontation that would inevitably follow. She also knew that her father was hurting right now, just as badly as she was, and that the two of them needed one another. She tapped gently on the door.

'Yes?' Demetrios's voice was filled with alarm, and Ariana rushed to reassure him as she opened the door.

'It's only me, Papa.'

'Oh, Ariana.' The relief on his face was palpable. 'I thought . . .' He trailed off. They both knew what he'd

Carol Kirkwood

thought – that it was the nurse, coming to get him for the final time.

Ariana took in the scene: after Aristotle had died, Demetrios had taken over his father’s study. He’d kept the same style – grand and imposing, all dark wood and leather-bound books – but tonight, rather than being in his usual spot behind the mahogany desk, Demetrios was sitting on the floor, surrounded by piles of paperwork and overflowing boxes. A photograph album was open in front of him, and he was holding a glass tumbler that was almost empty, just a splash of amber liquid in the bottom.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ Ariana asked softly.

Demetrios shook his head. ‘No. I didn’t want to disturb Shauna, tossing and turning all night, and I found myself here.’

Ariana sank down next to him, wordlessly picking up a photo. It was black and white, and showed her grandparents in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. They looked so young and in love; Elana in a stunning full-skirted dress that Ariana recognized as Dior and Aristotle handsome and distinguished in a three-piece suit and fedora. Ariana turned the photo over to see the date on the back: *September, 1948.*

‘They look incredible. Like movie stars,’ Ariana sighed, with a pang. She couldn’t help but wonder whether she would ever find a relationship like that, with a guy who was crazy about her, the way Aristotle had worshipped Elana. Ariana had been unlucky in love over the years, with a penchant for bad boys that led to broken hearts, and worse . . .

Demetrios smiled sadly as he gazed at the picture. When he spoke, his voice was thick. ‘Would you like a drink?’

The Hotel on the Riviera

He stood up and refilled his own glass with cognac from the bar in the corner.

Ariana watched him, struck by indecision. For the last few years she'd been living in LA, trying to make it as an actress. At twenty-six years old, she was still a long way from realizing her dream and, if she was being brutally honest with herself, she had little in the way of natural talent. What she *was* good at was having fun. Partying. She'd been drinking a lot – excessively, some might say. And it wasn't just the alcohol. There'd been drugs too. But across the villa her grandmother was dying, and right now wasn't the time for Ariana to address her issues.

She nodded at her father. 'Make it a large one.' She took a slug of the neat brandy, feeling the welcoming burn in her throat, and reached for another photograph.

The time slipped by, father and daughter sharing their memories of Elana, trying to pretend they weren't about to lose her. Although Ariana idolized her grandmother, she recognized that she could be domineering at times, formidable and controlling. She knew that Elana had played a key role in her parents' marriage – that it was merging dynasties, not hearts, which had made Elana push the union between Demetrios and Sofía Constantis. In doing so, Elana had separated Demetrios from his true love, Shauna O'Brien, and it had been almost twenty years and a world of heartache before the two of them had finally reunited. Yet, despite everything, Ariana knew that Demetrios adored his mother and would be devastated to lose her.

She picked up another album and a loose print fluttered to the ground. Aristotle and Elana were pictured with a

Carol Kirkwood

glamorous couple – the woman petite and laughing, with expensive jewellery and thick blonde hair in Farrah Fawcett waves, the man sandy-haired and suave, bearing more than a passing resemblance to Robert Redford. They looked at least a decade younger than her grandparents, all four monied and carefree and clearly great friends. The bright, bold patterns of their clothing put the time-frame as the 1970s, the location likely the South of France, with its palm trees and golden light and distinctive architecture. The building behind them looked vaguely familiar to Ariana, but she didn't recognize the couple.

'Who are they?' she wondered, turning the photo over to find the back was blank.

Demetrios frowned. 'I don't know. My parents knew many people, personally and professionally. Father had so many business interests it was sometimes difficult to keep track.'

'Perhaps—' Ariana began, but she never got to finish her sentence, interrupted by an urgent knocking. Her stomach lurched as Demetrios leapt up and opened the door to a sombre-looking nurse.

The woman's voice was calm as she delivered the words they'd both been dreading: 'You must come, quickly. It is time.'

Ariana scrambled to her feet, choking back a sob, and followed her distraught father out of the room, all thoughts of the photograph forgotten.

Chapter 2

Cannes, August 1987

The day was filled with sunshine, as though the weather had made a mistake and didn't realize the solemnity of the occasion. Alain was to be buried in the prestigious Grand Jas cemetery, situated high on a hill above Cannes, shaded by palm trees and full of grand stone tombs and impressive monuments. But Gabriel paid no attention to his surroundings.

His father's coffin was lowered into the ground, the oak smooth and polished, sunlight reflecting off the gold fittings. The graveside was surrounded by black-clothed mourners as the elderly priest recited words that Gabriel didn't hear. He remained silent and stoic, his head bowed, distantly registering that the sleeves of his suit jacket were an inch too short following his recent growth spurt.

How could it be possible that he'd never see his father's face again? That this man who'd been so full of life, a hero that Gabriel had idolized and worshipped, was now gone? He knew that Alain hadn't been himself recently, but that had done little

Carol Kirkwood

to dent Gabriel's admiration for the handsome, charismatic, gregarious man he was proud to call his father.

How could it have happened? Perhaps if Gabriel hadn't been away he could have prevented it somehow. He glanced over at his mother, now a shell of her former self. She seemed to have aged a decade in a matter of days. It was as though she'd turned inwards, physically shrinking, her shoulders hunched as she stared at the ground, grief etched in every line of her face. Beside Madame du Lac, his sister Constance wept in great, heaving sobs that shook her whole body.

Gabriel was twelve years old and knew that his life would never be the same again. He was the man of the family now and he had to grow up, to support his mother and sister. He would do it to honour his father. He wanted to make his papa proud of him.

Portofino, April 2009

Gabriel du Lac admired his reflection in the mirror – tanned skin, gym-honed body, piercing blue eyes – before pulling on a freshly pressed white shirt and navy chino shorts. His hair was blond and wavy, curling over his collar, his stubble carefully maintained to ensure it remained at just the right length. Yes, Gabriel was pleased with what he saw. He was thirty-four now and almost unrecognizable from the awkward teenager he'd once been, the gangly adolescent whose clothes were unfashionable and ill-fitting, who stammered and blushed crimson when forced to speak to the opposite sex.

He made himself an espresso, relieved that the noise from the machine didn't wake the woman sleeping in his bed. Carla? Claudia? Camila? It was something

The Hotel on the Riviera

classically Italian, he remembered that much. Her long, brown hair was splayed across her face so he couldn't see her features, although a sunkissed shoulder and the curve of a breast were visible above the Egyptian cotton sheets. She'd said she was a model, in town on a fashion shoot. Or was that the girl from the night before? Perhaps this one was a designer, travelling through the region for inspiration. Well, Gabriel smirked, he liked to think he'd given her a little of that . . .

With a soft click, the balcony doors opened and he stepped out, the warmth of the Italian sun hitting his face as he pulled down his aviator sunglasses. The view was incredible, looking out over lush green pine trees down to the sparkling turquoise waters of the Ligurian Sea. Below was a hidden cove with a private beach, barely a kilometre along the coast from the centre of Portofino.

He'd acted on gut instinct to purchase this property – the first in his rapidly growing empire. Back then, it had been a rundown private villa belonging to an industrialist from Genoa. Gabriel had offered him a good price and spent almost two years renovating the place, stripping it back to the bare bones and overseeing every aspect of the rebuild himself. But it had all been worth it. The Hotel del Mare was an exquisite gem, a luxury boutique hotel frequented by the rich and famous. Right now, Heidi Klum was ensconced in the Venetian Suite. Brad and Angelina had hunkered down here to escape the press. Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes had even spent part of their honeymoon at the hotel – one of the most successful in Gabriel's expanding portfolio.

He checked his Rolex: 7.30 a.m. Time to leave. Gabriel grabbed his Valextra bag and gave the room a cursory

final inspection to ensure that all was in order. Everything looked stylish and refined, from the classic cream décor to the wingback leather armchairs to the vintage Murano chandeliers. He left the woman sleeping and closed the door silently.

'Buongiorno, Signor du Lac,' the receptionist greeted him warmly. She was young and attractive, with a great smile and a curvaceous figure concealed beneath her uniform. *'Can I get you anything?'*

'Thank you, Giulia,' Gabriel smiled, reading her name tag. *'I have a guest in my room. If you could send up a breakfast tray in around thirty minutes, and make sure she's vacated the premises by ten.'*

Giulia didn't bat an eyelid. *'Of course, Signor du Lac. Have a safe journey, and we hope to see you again very soon.'*

In the private car park, Gabriel slid behind the wheel of his Ferrari Spider, retracting the roof and gunning the engine. Within minutes he'd reached the winding coastal road, high up on the cliffs, the sun beating down and the sublime Mediterranean views falling away to his left. Life was good; he wouldn't have it any other way. There was only one thing that blighted his otherwise perfect world, and today he was going to deal with that once and for all.

The sky was a cloudless blue, but Gabriel's mood was darkening as he neared Cannes, the familiar sights stirring mixed emotions. His relaxing start to the day was all but forgotten after spending more than three hours behind the wheel; construction around Nice had brought the roads to a standstill, and vehicles had been bumper-to-bumper on the autoroute.

The Hotel on the Riviera

But it was more than just traffic that had riled Gabriel, and as he approached Le Suquet, the picturesque old quarter of Cannes, he realized that his jaw was clenched, his body held rigid. The Ferrari made light work of the steep climb through the narrow, winding streets and then there it was: the Hotel du Soleil. Gabriel grimaced. It looked even more rundown than the last time he'd been here – half a dozen roof tiles were missing, and it badly needed a fresh coat of paint. The planters were overgrown, the flagstones cracked, and one of the lights above the entrance had stopped working. All so easy to fix – if anyone gave a damn about this place.

Irritated to find his parking spot occupied by his sister's shabby old Citroën, he pulled into a guest space. There was no doorman to welcome him at the entrance; instead, Marie, the ancient receptionist, scowled at him as he strolled across the lobby.

'Monsieur du Lac. We were not expecting you today.'

'Evidently,' he snapped, his practised eye taking in everything from the dirty floor tiles to the vase of flowers wilting on the desk. 'I'm going up. Is she—'

'Madame is in her room—'

'Where else?' Gabriel muttered under his breath.

'And is *not* to be disturbed,' Marie shouted after him, as Gabriel strode off towards the sweeping staircase that dominated the entrance, ascending the steps two at a time. It would be faster than taking the old creaking lift, and a great way to get a quick burst of cardio. He was barely out of breath when he reached the top floor and rapped smartly on the door at the far end of the corridor.

'Yes?' The voice was sharp, suspicious.

'It's me.'

Gabriel waited impatiently as he heard movement within, footsteps shuffling across the worn carpet, then the chain being slid off and the lock undone. The woman standing there was short and extremely thin, brittle and birdlike. She was white-haired, dressed entirely in black, and looked much older than her sixty-five years. The expression on her face made it clear that she was not pleased to see him.

'*Bonjour, maman,*' Gabriel said tightly, bending down to kiss his mother on both cheeks. '*Ça va?*'

'Gabriel.' She raised an unimpressed eyebrow. 'How lovely to see you. I didn't know you were coming.'

'Surprise.' His tone was thick with sarcasm. 'Aren't you going to invite me in?'

Madeleine du Lac stepped aside to let her son enter. The room was shabby but clean, Gabriel noted. At least his mother hadn't gone completely senile and stopped letting the housekeeping staff do their job.

The penthouse was the largest room in the hotel, with a separate bedroom, lounge and dining area, as well as a sweeping terrace that looked out over the port with its flotilla of yachts, and the sparkling azure sea. Unfortunately, his mother kept the curtains tightly shut, otherwise, Gabriel knew, the room also offered a magnificent view of the gardens – currently overgrown, he was willing to bet – within which lay a small, rectangular swimming pool, a secluded suntrap nestled amongst bougainvillea and oleander. It made Gabriel want to weep when he thought of the thousands of euros they were missing out on from not being able to rent the penthouse to paying guests. He'd repeatedly offered to move his mother to a

The Hotel on the Riviera

modern apartment in town, comfortable and convenient, but she insisted on living at the hotel. She was as stubborn as a mule, he thought resentfully.

'I'll call down for coffee and Stefan's pastries,' said Madeleine, picking up the phone and speaking quickly into the receiver.

'Stefan's still here?' Gabriel raised his eyebrows. 'He's too good for this place.'

'Some people show loyalty,' Madeleine shot back, before settling herself in her favourite chair. She sat straight-backed and composed, looking Gabriel directly in the eye. 'So, to what do I owe the honour of this visit? Have you come to check on your dear old *maman*?'

Gabriel sighed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. He hated how his relationship with his mother had deteriorated over the years, the two of them always at loggerheads. They didn't seem able to be in the same room as one another without the conversation descending into an argument.

'Your welfare is always my primary concern, as you know, which is why I'm so worried that you're living like this.' Gabriel swept open the curtains, pretending not to notice the way his mother winced in the dazzling daylight, clouds of dust motes thrown into the air.

'It's my choice to stay here,' Madeleine replied defensively. 'I know what you want, and you're not getting it.'

Gabriel rolled his eyes. They'd had this discussion countless times already. '*Maman*, you make me sound like some crooked conman trying to swindle you out of your life savings. What I'm proposing is for everyone's benefit. Unless this hotel is properly managed, you'll go bankrupt within the year and be left with nothing. What would Father say?'

Carol Kirkwood

‘Enough!’ snapped Madame du Lac. *‘Ça suffit, Gabriel.’* Gabriel exhaled sharply, balling his fists in frustration. He’d grown up in the Hotel du Soleil and knew every nook and cranny. He and his sister, Constance, had spent hours playing hide and seek as children, riding up and down in the dumb waiter, and sliding down the laundry chute. They’d stolen petits fours from the kitchen and, as they grew older, bottles from behind the bar. Back then, the Hotel du Soleil had been one of the most celebrated and glamorous destinations on the French Riviera, a second home for the wealthy, the famous and the international jet set.

But those happy days of his childhood had ended abruptly. Gabriel still didn’t know the exact reason behind the change in circumstances – his mother had done her best to shield him and Constance from the arguments and the accusations – but it was obvious that his father, Alain, had got into financial difficulty. Looking back, Gabriel suspected there’d been alcohol and gambling, perhaps even infidelity.

And then Gabriel’s world fell apart. He’d been staying with a schoolfriend for the weekend when the accident happened. He still remembered the boy’s poor mother having to break the news to him that his father, Alain, was dead, driving him back home while he sat numbly in the passenger seat. He hadn’t cried – not even at the funeral. He’d still been in a state of disbelief, in denial. His sister had shed enough tears for the both of them; her sobs from the next bedroom had kept him awake night after night. Only a few weeks later, his mother had suffered a nervous breakdown. Since Alain’s death, she’d been a virtual recluse, cutting herself off from the world and barely leaving the hotel.

The Hotel on the Riviera

A knock at the door pulled him back from his painful memories.

‘Oh, Gabriel.’ It was his sister, Constance, holding a tray with coffee and pastries. ‘I didn’t know you were here.’

Gabriel snorted in disbelief. He knew full well Marie would have run to find Constance the second he’d left the reception desk. ‘I thought I’d pay a visit to see how much the place has declined in my absence. Maybe I’ll stay the night – I’m sure you’ll have a room available. What is the current occupancy rate? Twenty per cent? Ten?’ His sister coloured, and Gabriel knew he’d hit a nerve. ‘Do you have any guests staying here at all?’

Constance placed the tray on the coffee table and turned to him angrily. She was three years older than him and tall, like their father, slim, with a thick waist and flat chest. Her mousy blonde hair was scooped up in a bun, and she didn’t wear a scrap of make-up. She’d never married, and remained devoted to Madeleine with an intensity Gabriel found hard to understand.

‘Gabriel, what do you want?’ she asked haughtily.

Gabriel ignored her, crouching on the floor beside his mother’s chair and taking her hands in his. ‘*Maman*, I’m trying to do this for us. All of us. Give me twelve months and I could transform this place. You’d have so much money, you’d never need to worry again.’

‘Some things are more important than money, though you don’t seem to realize it. Security. Stability. *Family*.’

‘Keeping this place the way it was when Papa died won’t bring him back!’ Gabriel regretted saying the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. His sister looked appalled and his mother’s face hardened.

She spat out a single word: ‘*Non*.’

Carol Kirkwood

‘Maman, je t’en prie. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—’

‘I don’t want your apologies.’ Madeleine cut him off furiously. The room was silent, the tension palpable. Gabriel and Constance were both waiting to see what their mother would do next.

There was a long pause before Madeleine spoke. Her voice was calm and controlled, her words slow and deliberate. ‘Besides, even if I wanted to give you the hotel, it is not in my power to do so.’

Gabriel frowned, trying to make sense of what his mother had just said. ‘What do you mean?’ he demanded. Had his sister somehow persuaded Madeleine to give the hotel to her? Had his mother sold it to a competitor for a price Gabriel would have more than matched?

Madame du Lac pursed her lips and sat back in her chair, closing her eyes. ‘I’m tired. I don’t wish to speak about it anymore.’

Gabriel fought the urge to shake her. ‘You can’t just . . . You have to tell me!’

His mother remained mute, mouth clamped, eyes shut.

‘I think you should go,’ said Constance, crossing her arms over her chest.

Gabriel stared at them – at these two implacable, infuriating women who made his life so difficult. It was impossible to fight them together.

‘Fine,’ he fumed, knowing he’d been temporarily defeated. ‘But I’ll be back.’

He stormed out of the room, sprinting down the stairs, pulling out his phone to speak to his lawyers. He didn’t know what the hell was going on, but he was damn well going to find out.