

CHAPTER 1

T IRED OF LISTENING TO A mechanical woman's patient explanation, *The phone you are trying to reach may be switched off. Please leave a message...* Judith McAllister tossed down her mobile and prowled out into the heat on the open balcony to stare at the early evening light on Sliema Creek.

The creek, one of those deep fingers of sea that cuts into Malta's coastline, reflected the intense blue of the sky. Red-and-white ferryboats shimmied lazily, returned from their day excursions around the island or to the sister islands of Gozo and Comino, and emptied of early summer tourists. Aluminium tables at the pavement cafés had filled up, perhaps with the same tourists keen to cool off with a Cisk beer beneath yellow or blue umbrellas.

Although the sun was sinking behind the building the heat was still intense. She wasn't as resilient as she used to be. In her twenties and thirties she'd basked at every opportunity, but wisdom came with age and now she was wary of blistered skin or pounding headaches.

The Strand, the teeming road between herself and the boats, was busy with cars, orange buses, and *karrozzini* – the traditional horse-drawn carriages. She glanced down into the street, half expecting to see Giorgio sniffing the sea air as he parked his car, a new MG, bright red.

A glance at her watch.

He was very late.

She'd rushed home from work two hours ago, but found the flat empty and silent. After showering, she'd slipped into a floaty dress she knew to be one of his favourites and dried her hair so that it lay sleek over her shoulders. And still no Giorgio. Maybe he'd stopped off for a drink? One with the boys?

She turned her head and narrowed her eyes to gaze inland up the creek towards the bridge to Manoel Island, the smaller craft bobbing at their buoys and the luxury cruisers, the 'gin palaces', in the yacht marina. Giorgio was deliberately late, she presumed, to exhibit his irritation that she had to work this afternoon.

'But it's Saturday, I have the air!' he'd complained, dark eyes unsmiling. 'This dive has been arranged for a week!' Now that she'd introduced Giorgio to sub aqua diving, he showed the beginner's impatience to be underwater all the time, go further, deeper, push his boundaries.

She'd stroked his thick, dark hair. 'It's a pain. But they're important clients, Giorgio. We've been wooing them for months, I can't let Richard down by missing the meeting. It's not his fault they had to reschedule.' She'd invested part of her divorce settlement into Giorgio's business, Sliema Z Bus Tours, but the rest into her Uncle Richard's business, Richard Morgan Estate, so took it seriously. 'We can dive on Sunday. The sea will still be there.'

His eyes had softened as he'd accepted her apologetic kisses, but he'd refused to be put off. 'OK, Charlie Galea will be my diving buddy.'

'No, he's not much more experienced than you, Giorgio-'
He kissed her, thoroughly. 'Am I or not a diver?'

'But so inexperienced - ' Her words had been lost in laughter, every one of her objections smothered with a kiss.

Judith watched the small horses in the shafts of the *karrozzini* whisking their tails at the flies, and sighed. Apart from her instincts rebelling at the thought of novice divers – no matter what their certificates said – diving unaccompanied, her own opportunity to dive this weekend had no doubt disappeared. Giorgio would have let Charlie have her air.

It had been sweltering in Sliema today, inevitably tomorrow would be the same. Fabulous to have escaped it by sinking into her beloved, beautiful, hushed turquoise world of weightlessness, to revel in the water gliding coolly into her wet suit and overexposed skin. To turn to Giorgio to signal OK.

It was wonderful now they could dive together. Special.

Even decompression halts had become a pleasure, the cobalt blue panels of her wetsuit entwined with the scarlet of his as they hung together in the water to watch the elongated beams of sunshine filtering down from the surface.

She let her eyes half-close for a moment as she recalled the delicious sensation, the combination of body warmth and water chill. Sub aqua diving helped keep her from feeling middle-aged.

Curling her bare toes away from the hot concrete of the balcony, she wandered back in to the kitchen where the windows stood wide open in a largely futile attempt to release hot air, and switched off the oven with a kept-warm-for-too-long lasagne inside.

Red wine, opened ready, waited on the worktop. She poured another glass, ruby, ruby red, and returned to the sitting room to try Giorgio's mobile again. *The phone you are trying to reach...*

A fat lot of use that was.

She sighed, and arranged the layers of her green-shot-with-gold dress, selected to complement her golden-brown eyes and the nutty highlights in her hair. Her favourite colours, like an English late summer harvest.

Slotting a love songs album onto the CD player, she sank into a chair, her bare feet cooling pleasantly on the tiled floor, her head tipping comfortably back. 'Giorgio's playing bloody games, Judith,' she told herself.

It was to punish her a little and pique her appetite, this withdrawal of his company, to make her especially pleased to see him when he finally sauntered in, eyes alight with challenge and skin tasting of the sea.

He'd press his body to hers. 'So, now the work is finished and you have time for Giorgio?' And suddenly being with him would be more important than making complaints about where he'd been until now.

That's how it was. Being with him was always more important than everything else.

They'd met on the promenade that edged Tower Road at Ghar id Dud. She often climbed the hill from The Strand in her lunch hour to walk on the broad paved area high above the rocky foreshore, tall hotels on one hand and the sea on the other. It had been November, then, and the days deliciously warm rather than beating with heat.

She'd paused to watch teenagers jump from the heights of The Chalet, the bones of a concrete pier projecting into Ghar id Dud Bay. Four boys and a girl ran off the top tier, letting out blood-curdling shrieks as they plummeted through the salty air and entered the sea thirty feet below with loud smacks and

plumes of spray. Judith winced with the force of every entry, smiling three seconds later as the youngsters resurfaced in circles of foam, screaming with exhilaration.

Part of her longed to share their youth and blithe disregard for danger, to leap into thin air and slap down into the sea with leg-stinging force, wait for gravity to stop bearing her down then kick, kick, ears aching, for the surface.

A voice at her shoulder claimed her attention. 'It's a little mad, but not too painful.'

She looked around. A man. She returned his smile politely.

He settled his elbows on the rail beside hers. 'This I have done.' He gestured at the foolhardy teenagers clambering back to the upper level. He spoke good English, but, of course, many Maltese did, making things too easy for English-speaking visitors.

Judith glanced at him again. His skin was golden, his eyes as dark as damsons, his hair well cut and neat. Around his neck glinted a gold crucifix on a thick chain. He smiled.

'Recently?'

A laugh, a soft, husky sound. 'When I was much younger, and more stupid. But it is unsafe, The Chalet, is unsafe for many years. You can see there has been a fence to stop people climbing on. It's broken, and the children climb.'

The howls of glee began again, and together they watched the spectacle of young bodies springing joyously into nothingness and plunging down into benevolent blue waves.

'The Chalet used to have a dance floor and an open-air café on two levels, for celebrations, for dances. A balustrade ran all the way round, and there was a grand entrance, here.' He indicated a spot near to where they stood.

Judith frowned at the skeletal structure, trying to envision such imposing flesh to it. 'What happened?'

He shrugged. 'A bomb, in the war.'

She nodded. The war had been very cruel to Malta. Reminders, such as the ruins of The Opera House in Valletta, dotted the island.

'I think it was fixed, but there was too much damage, and in some *grigal* storms the sea took it away.'

'*Grigal?*' She spoke a little Maltese, but this word was unfamiliar to her.

'Storms on the north-easterly wind, they can bring a very big sea. You've seen the breakwater built in the mouth of Grand Harbour? To keep the shipping protected from the *grigal*.' He indicated The Chalet. 'Now, the government wishes for The Chalet to become something safe and new, but there is nothing decided, I think.'

Judith stared at the pier in fascination. At the crumbling remains of balustrades, the immense pillars. Gazed at the rippling turquoise sea, and, even though she'd witnessed violent winter storms herself, had difficulty in imagining it rising and towering in monstrous waves capable of sucking masonry off a big concrete structure.

She often paused to watch the waves roll in around The Chalet Ghar id Dud, and once or twice a week the man materialised beside her. He was Giorgio Zammit, he lived in Sliema and worked as a tour guide, and was younger than her. The days their paths crossed were either his off-duty days or those when he worked afternoons and met the distinctive Z Buses in front of The Chalet at one o'clock, ready for tourists from the nearby hotels, The Preluna, The Park.

One afternoon duty was to escort a trip to Ta' Qali Handicrafts Village in the centre of the island, what remained of the military airport where the famous Gloster Gladiator biplanes,

Hope, Faith and Charity, had once flown tirelessly against the might of the Germans. Some enterprising person had begun to use an empty aircraft hangar for glass blowing, and then others moved into the old nissen huts, and eventually new huts, and for years the whole thing had been a thriving tourist attraction.

‘Do they still sell the Mdina glass at Ta’ Qali? And the filigree jewellery? It must be a year since I last went.’

‘Come today,’ he suggested. He let his arm touch hers.

‘I haven’t booked.’

‘There is space.’

She glanced at her watch. She had no meetings or appointments that day, November and December were the quiet months in the office. Why not? She took out her phone. ‘I’ll pay my fare, of course. You won’t get into trouble with your employer, will you?’

‘No.’ He smiled, eyes gleaming. It took her a month to realise that he was one of the owner-operators of Sliema Z Bus Tours, the cream coaches with a rainbow that arced along the side above a big Z.

She rang Richard to say she was taking an afternoon off. Yes, she was fine. No, nothing was the matter. ‘Have a good time, then,’ he said. Richard was marvellous, she had such a great relationship with him. Difficult to realise, sometimes, that he was her mother’s brother.

The modern coach arrived, cream paintwork gleaming, a contrast to the island’s bright orange route buses, some of which had been trundling the island’s roads for fifty or sixty years. He introduced her to the driver, installed her in a front seat, grabbed a clipboard and swung down to meet his passengers.

‘Hallo, madam, I am Giorgio, and I am your tour guide today. Your name, please?’ His charm was effortless. It just shone from him, coaxing out smiles and laughs and turning everything into a joke. Still smiling, the guests climbed the steps, giving little puffs of pleasure at the coolness of the interior with the air conditioning and the dark glass windows.

It proved an interesting afternoon. Giorgio spent most of the short journey standing beside the driver, facing the passengers and talking about himself, the bus, the tour company, the areas through which they passed and Malta’s history, swaying easily with the bus’s motion and making jokes.

At Ta’ Qali he took the tourists to a display of filigree jewellery making, then gave them an hour to shop, pointed out their bus number, explained where to get an ice-cream and reminded them not to neglect to drink. ‘It’s no longer summer, but still the sun we give a little respect.’ He talked to the driver, he filled in a couple of boxes on a form, then jumped down beside Judith on the cracked tarmac. ‘Today is an easy job. Everybody will shop. Maybe they spend too much money, but is OK.’

A pleasant way to spend the afternoon, strolling from hut to hut. Judith enjoyed watching the light strike the colours of the glassware, examining the jewellery in glass cases and admiring the intricacies of the Malta lace, *Bizzilla*. And always she was conscious of the man beside her, the smile in his watching eyes.

It was... unsettling. His eyes told her he desired her, but her clear and sensible head found it difficult to believe. Even middle-aged men tended to lose interest in middle-aged women. She had the bruises to prove it. If her ex-husband,

Tom, a decade older than her, had succumbed to the tighter, younger flesh of Liza, why should she expect better from Giorgio, a decade younger?

The shopping over, Judith learned that the trip included first a visit to the magnificent Mosta Dome, and then a folk evening in Qormi.

She sensed his pleasure that he'd tricked her gently into spending longer with him than she'd meant. And felt herself smile.

By the midpoint in the evening most of his duties were discharged. Food had been eaten, *brojoli*, beef wrapped around mincemeat, and steaks of the local fish, *lampuki*, with spinach and bitter olives. Songs had been sung and dances had been danced. For the final hours the guests wound down with deliciously moist cakes and cold wine.

They sat on wooden benches in a dim corner of the courtyard with a tin table between them.

'Did you enjoy yourself?' His voice was low, obliging her to shut out other voices to hear.

She drew a little design in the condensation on her glass. 'Oh, yes.'

'I would like to meet you again. I would like very much.' His voice was deep and intimate, his gaze intense.

'Yes,' she repeated.

But, the next day, Richard frowned when she told him about her outing. He mopped the sweat from his pate and studied her carefully.

'What do you know about him?'

Surprised, she shrugged. 'His name's Giorgio Zammit -'

Richard rolled his office chair over to hers, his forehead creasing over his black eyes. 'Bus tours bloke?'

‘Mm,’ she agreed, warily, realising from his tone that she wasn’t going to like whatever he was about to say. ‘Why?’

He sighed, putting his hand over hers. ‘His wife lives in Sliema, too.’

She recoiled. ‘No! He wouldn’t ask me out if – ‘

Her uncle’s round face was solemn and sympathetic. He hesitated, choosing his words. ‘*Some* Maltese men are attracted to British ladies for a specific reason, Judith. Maltese women are brought up strictly. And the majority of British women aren’t.’

Although reluctant to take the hint, she heard the uncertainty in her own voice. ‘I don’t think that’s it!’

‘What better lover than a mature woman from a culture where women expected the freedom to take lovers?’ He looked uncomfortable. ‘I think you’re just a trifle older than him?’

She refused to voice the word *yes*. ‘I’m grateful, in other words?’

He squeezed her hand again. His reply was oblique. ‘I think you’re wonderful. And I think you don’t deserve to be hurt again.’

All morning she toyed with pictures of Giorgio’s smile and the warmth in his eyes. The curve of his eyebrow and the way his cheekbones made her want to touch his face. Obviously, the manner in which their paths crossed so often signalled contrivance on his part, but she was always glad to see him. She mulled over his motives. In the light of Richard’s information, they seemed uncomfortably plain.

The moment he appeared beside her at the railings near The Chalet, she tackled him. ‘Giorgio, I doubt very much that you are a single man.’

Meeting her gaze, he asked, ‘Why do you say this?’

Her heart contracted that he hadn't immediately burst out with a denial. 'It seems unlikely that a man of your age has never married. But there's no divorce here, I know that. So unless your wife's dead, you're married.'

He crossed himself at the mention of death. Then his fingertips tapped gently on the railing. 'You are right. There is no divorce in our country. But some men live apart from their families. Many, many men. Shall we walk?'

They began along the broad, paved promenade between the busy road and the drop to the rocky beach.

Judith's heart was slithering in her chest. 'So you do have a wife?'

Gravely, he nodded. 'Johanna. And I have daughters, Alexia and Lydia. We are all very unhappy when we live together. It's better not. I have lived alone for fourteen years. Alexia is 19, she works in a chemist shop in Tower Road, training. Lydia is 17 and still does her education. I love my children very much. But I do not love their mother, and I have not loved her for a very long time. I doubt whether she ever love me, ever.'

His emphatic tone and the glitter of his eyes moved her.

'So why marry you?'

He shrugged, an exaggerated, frustrated gesture that brought his shoulders up around his ears. 'Many times I ask myself. Maybe her father thought I was best she could do.'

'Giorgio,' she'd said, carefully. 'I *am* divorced. And I don't think we'd better go out together again.'

'I am separate,' he declared forcefully. But he made no attempt to detain her when she turned and returned to the office.

Two days later, he materialised at her side as she ate an apple on a green-painted bench facing the waves that were bigger today, bursting on the rocks. Despite her reservations, somehow she found herself joining another of his trips, this time on a ferry to Gozo, the largest of the neighbouring islands.

At the end of the excursion he halted her as she made to follow the tourists from the boat. 'Tomorrow is my rest day. I spend a day on a beach. To help me enjoy this, will you be my company?' He thought for a moment, then amended, 'My guest.'

She failed to resist his charm. Once couldn't hurt.

They spent the day on the white sand of Anchor Bay at the north end of the island. Talking, laughing, swimming in a cooling sea barely ruffled by the breeze. That evening they ate in Rabat, in a small cellar restaurant aromatic with goat's cheese and herbs and lit by dancing light of red candles in wine bottles.

He drove her home in the early hours, the stars bright against a black sky. Parking outside her flat beside the slack night time sea, he cradled her face gently and kissed her, a deep, carnal kiss, a kiss of clear intent, a kiss that made her muscles melt. 'Today we've made a good beginning. It's a big thing we begin.'

A sudden bleak regret encompassed her heart. It was all very well to take pleasure from a single day to be enjoyed and allowed to sink into the past.

It had been so innocent.

Even if the air crackled. Even if his eyes burnt with hunger.

It could be glossed over. And one single kiss.

But now his words were forcing her to face facts, and she responded with a deliberate misconstruction. 'You're right, it would be big, if we allowed it. But, although you say you've been separated for years, you take me to places far away from home.'

He grew still. 'I do not hide you.'

'I think you do. I think your wife lives in Sliema.'

He stared at her for several long moments. 'I apologise,' he said, at last. 'Yes, is true, a little. Johanna and me have been separate for fourteen years, but I do not make people talk of her by making a parade of my feeling for you. Why give her that pain? We will be always apart, but still we consider for each other, and for our daughters. They are good daughters and Johanna is a good mother. Also, my parents, they are unhappy their son cannot have a good marriage, and I try not to make them more unhappy. They are my parents. My Uncle Saviour and Aunt Cass, my cousins and their children, we all live in this big village, my parents would hurt to feel the family embarrassed by me. You live in Sliema, you know Sliema. People know other people.'

'Difficult,' she acknowledged, sighing. 'I understand.' But that didn't make it any easier. The street lights and the moonlight glittered together in the ripples of Sliema Creek and flecked Giorgio's eyes. 'Perhaps it's impossible. I'm not sure I'm the right woman to be tidied away, a secret from your family.' And she kissed his cheek, a fleeting farewell, hurrying from the car and safely through the entry door to the flats where he couldn't follow.

The next day he surprised her at the office a few minutes before she would normally take her lunch. He'd never visited the office before. Very solemn, he faced her over her desk. 'Is *not* impossible. If you want, we promenade ourselves. We go

now to Tony's Bar on The Strand, and eat at a table on the pavement where everyone in Sliema can see. Every day, if you want, we do it.'

His eyes were almost black and her head spun with how much she wanted him. She could *not* let him make his life so uncomfortable, either for himself or for those he loved. Instead she allowed their love affair to begin. Discreet, if not quite secret.

He was, after all, separated from his wife.

In England, she would've thought nothing about going out with a separated man. The only difference was that Giorgio would never take the next logical step – to divorce.

Richard was brilliant, though he never approved. Richard, who married Erminia, a Maltese woman, when he'd been stationed on the island with the British Army in the sixties, at least understood. Probably too clearly.

'It's dangerous to go into these relationships half-heartedly,' he counselled. 'If your partner's Maltese and you want to live in Malta you're well advised to embrace the whole thing, race, religion – and marriage.' He'd told her this as they worked together at polished maple desks, guiding foreign buyers through the labyrinth of acquiring property on the island. He tried to tell Giorgio the same over a palely gleaming Cisk beer at a pavement café overlooking the creek that bobbed with boats in blues and reds.

Giorgio just grinned. 'We make our own rules.'

But no, they didn't. They worked around those of others.