

Simply Heaven

Serena Mackesy

Chapter One

The Proverbial Thunderbolt

People always ask us how we got together, and I suppose you would wonder, him being so conspicuously equipped with silver spoons and me your average ockerina - all thighs and vowels - and we always make a joke of it, say: 'Oh, you know: I fished him out of the sea and he swept me off my feet.' But you know? That was what actually happened. Only, you can't describe that sudden rush of knowing in cocktail language. You can't say to people: I was ripping my knees apart on this pockmarked limestone beach and I'd just given this guy mouth-to-mouth and, once he'd thrown up a couple of gallons of seawater, he touched me on the arm, just a gesture of gratitude, a simple touch, and it was like someone had attached electrodes to us and switched them on at the mains. It would have knocked me off my feet, for sure, if I'd been on them: I've never felt anything like it before, and I doubt I'll ever feel it again. Not with anyone else, anyway.

It was the same for him. We leaped apart like scalded seamonkeys and crouched - well, huddled in his case - five or six feet apart, trying to make sense of what had just happened. And after a bit, once he'd done with the panting and the looking lean and glisteny with his dark hair dripping down over his suntan, he said: 'Jesus. What the hell was that?'

I said: 'I think I just saved your life, mate?' trying, you know, to make light of the situation, and he said: 'No, I know. But what was that?'

And I was doing a bit of panting of my own, I'll tell you, and I wasn't concentrating too well, because I was getting a rush similar to the one you get when you're hanging over the edge of an extremely high cliff without a safety rope, so I said: 'I don't know. It's got me beat. You mean you . . .?' And he said: 'Yes.'

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And then we looked a bit longer.

I saw a man somewhere around my age and maybe a couple of inches shorter, which is pretty tall for the male population. And he had these deep brown eyes flecked with gold, and fringed with heavy, wet lashes that were so long they brushed his full, black eyebrows as he looked up. And he had a beaky nose and sharp cheekbones and a mouth that - I don't know - looked brave. Like he'd been hurt a lot, but wasn't going to give up, you know?

Right now, those lips were slightly parted, revealing flashes of the even, not-so-white-you-don't-believe-it teeth behind, the lower one starting to jut forward in the manner of one who wants to be kissed, and I knew it was an unconscious imitation of my own expression. I know. Crazy, isn't it? But of course, I already had a pretty clear memory of what those lips felt like, having had my own pressed pretty firmly against them, and believe me, they'd felt pretty good. And, Jesus, the guy wasn't even what you'd exactly call awake at the time, either.

Eventually, he spoke.

'Shall we try it again?' he asked.

'OK,' I said. I reckoned that if we set off some sort of spontaneous human combustion scenario, at least we had the Med to jump into. And besides, now I'd got over the surprise, that electrical thing was something I wanted to feel again. Possibly for ever.

'OK,' he said, and sat up. I was suddenly, painfully, aware of just how, well, naked we both were - me in a bikini (I'd thrown my sundress and hat off sometime between dropping my sketchpad and diving headlong into the briny) and him in those baggy shorts English guys think of as swimming gear - and how surprisingly alone we seemed to be. You'd have thought that, Gozo being an island twelve kilometres one way and six the other, that maybe someone would have been around to witness it, but the golden desert landscape remained empty. And we each reached out and grasped the other by the upper arm, and - kablamm! - it happened again.

Only, this time, we didn't let go. The surge of electricity ran from his fingertips, up my arm - bang! - through my brain, down - wham! - through my torso, over the old Mappa Tassie, sizzled down my thighs and calves to the very ends of my toes and - zap! - straight back up and out through my fingers into him. And he was kneeling bolt upright, eyes half closed, and shaking as he felt it too. And I swear, each of us had developed those anti-gravity hairstyles you see on people walking past a supercomputer.

Eventually, he opened his eyes and reached forward with his spare hand and cupped my face - crackle - and the back of my neck, and pulled me towards him. And my skin fizzed with pleasure at the touch, and I swear, if you'd been there you'd have seen St Elmo's fire dance up and down our spines when our mouths touched.

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The next time I remember seeing beyond our bubble, the sun had dropped to almost the edge of the horizon, flushing the foreshore a thousand shades of scarlet, and the sea had turned to quicksilver. And there was the two of us, caked in sweat and salt and crumbled sandstone, each gazing with shock at the other and touching the other's skin as though it was precious silk. This was way more than lust. I know about lust - I'm from Queensland, after all - and this was something else. The erotic charge of the near-death experience? Maybe. Or perhaps the proverbial thunderbolt.

'Come home with me,' he said, 'please. You must come.'

I followed him in a dream. Left everything on the beach, damnit - clothes, paints, sketchbook, hat, sarong, towel, everything. I barely remembered to snatch up my purse before I trailed in his wake, one hand still clasped loosely in another, up rough steps hacked into great sandstone breakers carved by the sea, across the wind-bleached tarmac to his 4WD, parked immediately in front of my own battered little hire car.

We didn't talk much. I think we were both still in shock. And speechless at the discovery that such urgent change can come upon you out of a blue summer day. I was thinking: either this is the craziest thing that's ever happened to me, or the most romantic, or maybe both - and despite the heat pumping off the darkening landscape, I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself.

He drove quickly and surely, brown arms and strong hands caressing the steering wheel, eyes fixed on the road. There was a sort of shyness between us - not embarrassment, not awkwardness - an unwillingness to look at each other. I put my heels up on the seat, stared at mellow stone walls, at stone-carved, shuttered balconies, at red plaster onion domes and grand carved doorways, at caper bushes and great trees of prickly pear. I must remember this, I thought, for ever: this is the night I found love. Love, or an unmarked grave. Only time will tell.

'Where are you staying?' he asked.

'Xlendi,' I replied. 'You?'

'Xewkija,' he said. And took his hand off the gear stick and put it on my leg. Stroked the sensitive skin at the top of my thigh with his thumb and set off another paroxysm of shivering. He smiled, said: 'There's a jacket on the back seat.'

I found it, pulled it on. Dirty cream linen with a gold silk lining and that peculiar smell that Englishmen's jackets have: sort of sheep and rain and Granddad's pipe tobacco. The lining felt good against my naked back. I hugged it round myself as we passed through Victoria, wound up through newly active evening streets. Holein- the-wall shops spilled tiny figures, dwarfed by the meat-fed tourists around them.

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Xewkija was quiet and cool, front doors thrown open to the evening air. He pulled in, creaked on the handbrake and turned to me. And the electricity jumped the gap between us.

'You can turn back now,' he said. 'It's OK. I'll take you back . . .'

I shook my head, no, ran a thumb down his cheek. He closed his eyes for a moment, butted against my hand.

'Oh Jesus,' he said, 'if I don't . . . I'll . . .'

I was out of the car like a scalded cat, leaning against the bonnet, jutting my hips, with my hands in the jacket pockets. And he was after me like a fox. Grabbed me round the waist and pulled me up an alleyway: blank sandstone walls and weeds growing bravely up from dusty cart-ruts. And he got me up against a wall, grinding into me, both of us all hands and mouths and fast, hot breaths, and I had my leg wrapped round his backside and he had a grip on my buttocks like a sheep-shearer on a ram. And I was going, 'No, look, we can't do it here, someone might . . .' and thinking: 'oh, God, this is . . . will you just FUCK ME NOW, YOU BASTARD? Can't you see I'm DYING here?'

And eventually, in a voice that was choked and hoarse, he said, come on, come on, and hauled me to a rough, studded wooden door in the wall. And he's fumbling with keys and fumbling with me all at once, and I'm tearing at the tie on his shorts with my fingernails, and then the door suddenly falls open and we burst through it and I briefly catch sight of a courtyard and a couple of glass doors and some pots of bougainvillaea and geraniums, and a stone staircase leading up to the purple sky, and a huge stone table surrounded by large teak chairs, and then to be honest, I don't see anything much but stars for a while.

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