



Loving the Greek Billionaire

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Description: She despises the wealthy. He's the billionaire in disguise. It'll take all the wonders of Greece to overcome their differences. When her sister injures her foot, Rose comes to the rescue to nanny for a billionaire despite her reservations. But enduring the rich lifestyle for a month turns out better than expected when the children are darlings and the head of security grows ever more attractive. But a staff romance is against the rules. Leo's been posing as his head of security since his wife died and the gold diggers came crawling out of the woodwork. The new nanny intrigues him, but her prejudices against the wealthy creates an instant barrier. He'll have to discover the source of her distaste so he can overcome it. However the deception he employs to protect himself and his family put a life with Rose at risk. Convinced he'll lose Rose if he reveals his identity, he delays telling her. When the truth comes out, Rose will have to choose to forgive Leo's deception or leave them all in a bigger ruin than the wonders of Greece.

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CHAPTER ONE

Athens Part I

As the airplane wheels touched down in Athens, Rose thought—not for the first time—that she shouldn’t have agreed to take this nannying assignment.

The whine of the brakes surged through the body of the plane, and the man next to her crossed himself and muttered a prayer. At least he wasn’t coughing. He’d hacked for most of the four-hour ride from France, and Rose worried that whatever he had was contagious. She gripped her seat belt. She could stand the thought of being ill but not of infecting the children under her care.

The plane pulled into the terminal, and the engines wound down before becoming silent.

Passengers popped up from their seats, personal items in hand, and pulled down overhead bags before the plane door was open. Everyone was in a hurry, except her. She retrieved her handbag from beneath the seat in front of her.

The beefy man next to her coughed again, and spittle hit her cheek.

Swallowing her disgust, she wiped away the offensive liquid with her linen handkerchief, the initials RB flashing in her peripheral vision. Robert. If he were here, she wouldn’t be a nanny. She pushed her brown wavy locks off her face and pushed away thoughts of him and their past. Nothing would bring him back.

With an apologetic smile, the beefy man stood and trundled off with his suitcase in hand.

Rose watched all the passengers disembark before rising from her seat. She was the last one off the plane with amercito the attendants.

The toe of her shoe hit the tile of the terminal floor, and, just like that, she was in Greece, unable to put off the inevitable any longer. Only for her sister had she agreed to this particular arrangement. Rose nannied for her sister when Marie got in tight spots. She usually assigned Rose to middle-class families. Rose felt comfortable at that socio-economic level and enjoyed spending time with children.

But this case was different, a billionaire. Her stomach roiled. Marie should be here, not her. But poor Marie was laid up with a severely sprained ankle.

Rose followed the signs, passed through customs, and headed for the baggage carousel. A man in a sharp suit holding a tablet caught her eye. The sign read Rose Berret. And so it began.

She approached the gray-suited man, wondering why he wore dark sunglasses indoors.

“I’m Rose Berret,” she said in English, not knowing if the man spoke her native French. She didn’t know enough Greek yet to feel confident in carrying on a conversation.

Dark Sunglasses lowered his tablet and shook her hand. “I’m Stavros. If you’ll give me your baggage claim ticket, I’ll see you to the car and have your luggage brought to the hotel.”

She gave him a cool smile. “I’m quite capable of retrieving my own luggage, thank

you. No need for one car for me and another for my luggage. We can go in the same vehicle.”

A slight contraction of Stavros’s brows was all the indication he gave of irritation. “It’s all arranged Ms. Berret, courtesy of Mr. Papadakis.”

Mr. Papadakis, her new and temporary employer. The name rankled her. Rose took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. No need to get into a fight over her luggage. This was how the wealthy did things, with no thought for the wishes of others.

“Very well, Mr. Stavros.” She dug through her handbag for the claim ticket.

“No, no, only Stavros. No mister.”

She raised a brow and handed him the ticket.

“This way.” He turned on his heel toward the exit, and she followed him.

A sleek black sedan with dark-tinted windows waited at the curb.

Stavros opened the back door. “Plutus is your driver. He’ll take you to the hotel. Feel free to ask him any questions about Athens. He’s very knowledgeable.”

She slid onto the black leather seat.

Stavros shut the door and tapped once on the roof.

The car pulled into traffic.

“Evening, Ms. Berret,” Plutus said in English. “Welcome to Greece. I understand it’s your first time here.”

Rose frowned at the idea that the staff knew it was her first time in Greece. Her employer seemed to have checked into her background rather thoroughly to know that piece of trivia. Or perhaps Marie had divulged that bit of information. She shouldn't jump to conclusions, just because of her past experiences in wealthy circles.

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“Thank you,” she replied. “Good evening to you, Mr. Plutus.” She smoothed her hands over her dress slacks. Marie would’ve worn a skirt to meet Mr. Papadakis, but Rose didn’t care to travel in skirts. What if the plane went down? Pants were more practical, especially for swimming if the plane ended up in the Mediterranean.

“There’s time to take the scenic route to the hotel before dinner, if you’d like,” Plutus said. “Or I can take you straight there.”

“Scenic would be fine. Stavros said you can tell me of the history while we drive.”

“My pleasure. And it’s Plutus. No mister.”

Rose withheld her eye roll, but only just. Why were all the staff only one name, like Madonna and Beyoncé? Would she be known as Berret? Or Rose, in case the names were all first names? She didn’t know enough about Greek etymology to distinguish between first and last. She hoped part of her welcome packet included a list of staff names so she could make a good first impression, even if the meeting with Mr. Papadakis went over like a lead balloon.

As Plutus drove, Rose felt a twinge of guilt at putting off the meeting a few minutes more. What if Mr. P didn’t approve of her choice? Then that was his fault for giving her a choice when he really wanted his own way. And the rich always wanted their own way.

Plutus’s chatter washed over her as she caught glimpses of the Acropolis and the Parthenon. She tried to focus on his words, but her thoughts distracted her.

The people she wanted to impress were the children, Nefeli and Adonis, ages seven and four respectively, according to Marie's information. They were the ones Rose would spend her time with. She cared little whether she got on with the father. He probably would be too busy running his olive oil empire to care about his half-orphaned children. Bitterness burned in the back of her throat at the thought of children being inconvenient footnotes in their parents' lives. She'd never do that to her own children if she ever had the chance to marry again and have them.

She ran a hand over her stomach and closed her eyes to relive the feel of fluttering within her abdomen. Tears threatened, and she opened her eyes.

Plutus fell silent as he looked at her in the mirror. "Are you alright, Ms. Berret? May I be of any assistance?"

She straightened her shoulders. "I'm fine, thank you. Only a little tired from the flight. Please go on."

For the rest of the ride, she attempted to see Athens through the darkened windows and to focus on her impromptu history lesson. Before she was ready, the car pulled to a stop.

A hotel attendant opened her door. "Ms. Berret." He offered a hand to help her out.

She swallowed her ingratitude and accepted the proffered hand.

Stavros approached her. "Did you enjoy your little tour, Ms. Berret?"

"Yes."

"Good. Your rooms are ready for you." He gestured for her to accompany him.

“Rooms?” She walked the red carpet inside the front doors. A stunning antique chandelier made of thousands of crystals glittered above. Her flats sank into the plush carpet as they bypassed the reception desk.

“Don’t we need to . . . ?”

“Everything is prepared for your arrival, Ms. Berret.” Stavros led her past the bank of elevators to a private elevator around the corner.

Rose tightened her grip on her handbag.

The golden elevator doors opened with a soft chime, and they stepped in.

Stavros pushed the up button, and after the doors quietly slid shut, they were in motion, ascending to what Rose presumed was the penthouse since there were no lit numbers on the panel. One glowing button for up and one for down. No need for more when you stayed on the top floor with all of Athens spread at your feet. She shook her shoulders in an effort to shake off her growing apprehension.

“Have you worked for Mr. Papadakis long?” she asked.

“About four years.”

“And is he a fair employer?”

“Fair and just.” He lowered his shades a fraction to look at her. “What are you fishing for, Ms. Berret?”

She shrugged. “Simply trying to determine Mr. Papadakis’s character.”

The shades slid back into place. “Seems as if you’ve already sketched him. Might I

suggest reserving judgment until after you've met him. He's certainly extending that courtesy to you."

Rose frowned at the gold tiled floor, her fuzzy face reflected back at her.

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The elevator chimed, and they stepped into a wide foyer.

She covered her mouth to keep a gasp from escaping.

Stavros swept his arm out. “The view is spectacular.”

Rose slid off her shoes and gingerly stepped across the champagne colored carpet to the floor-to-ceiling windows opposite. Athens was literally at her feet on the other side of the glass. She went to touch her fingertips to the pane but pulled her hand back at the last minute, not wishing to leave fingerprints for the staff to clean.

“Are you pleased?” Stavros stepped beside her. He removed his sunglasses and stowed them in the breast pocket of his jacket. His eyes were dark brown, almost to the point of black.

“Quite speechless.”

He gave her a few minutes to admire the view before he said, “Let me give you the tour.”

Rose trailed him through the suite of rooms that occupied the entire floor. Bedrooms, bathrooms larger than her flat, a game room, a play room, a piano room, an office, a gourmet kitchen. Everything from wall to wall was of the highest quality. And that was only two-thirds of the space.

Stavros took her through another doorway. “The staff occupies these rooms.” He guided her through more bedrooms and bathrooms all centered around a living and

kitchen space.

“Where do I stay?”

“Next to the children. There’s a bedroom with an en-suite bathroom so you can be close to them day and night.”

“Of course,” she murmured and gravitated to the massive windows once more. “I thought the family would already be here. Where are they?”

“Mr. Papadakis regrets that he and the children won’t be joining you in Athens. He’s been delayed by some business in Istanbul. They will meet you in three days at Meteora.” He produced a tablet from his pocket. “Your itinerary is here along with any information you may need to make your stay comfortable. Your reserved table in the dining room will be available in an hour, giving you time to relax and freshen up.” He held the tablet toward her.

She folded her arms. “Did he order my meal as well, or do I get any say in my arrangements? Does he really expect me to dine alone in a foreign country?” She’d dined alone more nights than she cared to count, but at least it was in the privacy of her home where the world couldn’t turn pitiful eyes on her.

“Mr. Papadakis wishes you to be comfortable. If you’d prefer to dine in the suite, I’ll cancel your reservation and place your order.” He woke his tablet, stacking it on hers. A few taps later, he turned the screen toward her. “Here is the menu.”

She perused the items, noting no prices were listed. The rich didn’t bother with cost. Another wave of irritation coursed through her, and she curled her toes. “There’s a restaurant a few doors down. I’ll eat there and pay for my meal.” She crossed the room and put on her shoes.

The smallest of sighs reached her ears.

“I’d be happy to accompany you,” Stavros said.

“I’m perfectly capable of getting my own dinner.” She scowled at him. “I don’t require a babysitter.”

“However, you do require a bodyguard.”

A laugh peeled from her lips. “A bodyguard? You can’t be serious.”

A hint of a frown graced Stavros’s features. “When it comes to the safety of the family and staff, I am always serious, Ms. Berret.” His stance left no room for doubt about his sincerity.

Rose was taken aback.

“You’re head of security, then?”

“Among other areas. I do whatever Mr. Papadakis requires.”

Since Stavros didn’t elaborate, Rose was left to wonder what the other areas might be. Stavros carried a distinctly military air about himself, and she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to know. Better to plead ignorance than knowledge should anything illegal be among his duties.

“To help you feel more at home, Mr. Papadakis encourages you to use the master suite for your stay here in Athens.”

Rose felt her jaw go slack. She made three attempts to speak before she got words out. “I simply can’t. I’ll stay in my appointed room so as not to incur any confusion

as to where I stand in my employ.”

Stavros’s brows contracted. “Mr. Papadakis is a kind and respectful employer. He regards the staff as an extension of his family.”

Rose sniffed. “My experience has been different with those like Mr. Papadakis. I’ll reserve judgment of Mr. Papadakis until after I meet him, but until then I’ll hold to my past.”

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Stavros cocked his head.

Rose bit her lip. She shouldn't have alluded to her past. He might go digging. She ran a hand over her forehead. If he was head of security and thorough, as she suspected he was, then he already knew. Rose shut her eyes and took three calming breaths.

When she opened her eyes, Stavros extended her tablet. "Here is your itinerary for the next three days. Your tour guide will arrive at nine o'clock tomorrow morning to take you on your tour of Athens."

"I can see Athens on my own." She tossed her hair, and her light chestnut waves skimmed her shoulders.

This time, Stavros didn't hide his sigh. "Ms. Berret, I have a full schedule of my own while we're here in Athens. If you insist on going yourself, I'll need to go with you or fly in another staff member to accompany you. Neither of us have the historical background of the guide. Please allow Mr. Papadakis to treat you to the experience he's arranged."

Rose started to snap at him but took a moment to reflect on her reactions. She wasn't being rational. Her childish tantrum would cause extra work for Stavros and/or another staff member who'd have to be flown in from wherever. Marie needed Rose to keep this client so he'd want to use Marie's business in the future and want to give recommendations to his friends. She needed to put aside her past and feelings and be mindful of those around her. A personal tour of Athens with a knowledgeable guide wasn't the worst thing in the world nor was dining in the suite. If Mr. Papadakis wanted to throw his money around, let him.

She straightened her shoulders and smiled at Stavros. “Please thank Mr. Papadakis for his generosity. I look forward to the tour. I think I’ll dine here this evening. The view is lovely. May I see the menu again?”

Relief evident in his face, Stavros handed her the tablet.

“I’ll have the duck and a salad.” She returned the tablet. “Must I eat alone? I assume you have to eat.”

“I’d be happy to join you for dinner, if you wish.”

“Yes, please.”

He turned toward the staff rooms. “The food will be up in thirty minutes, if you’d like to rest.”

“I’ll unpack.”

The corner of his lip twitched. “The maid has seen to your things.”

“Oh.” Rose ran a toe across the carpet. “Thank her for me, please.”

“Of course, Ms. Berret.”

“And, Stavros, could you please call me Rose? Would that be appropriate?”

He nodded. “I’ll meet you for dinner, Rose.”

She headed to her room to make a more thorough inspection. Her beginning in Athens hadn’t gone as planned, but perhaps she’d made an ally.

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Rose laced up her shoes and then ran the comb through her hair before securing it in a simple, low ponytail. A quick once-over in the mirror told her that her makeup and sunscreen were in place. She scooped up her hat and double-checked her pockets for all the necessary items, including the black credit card Stavros gave her over breakfast.

“For the time you’re with the Papadakis family, Mr. P would like you to use this for all expenses,” he’d said.

Rose turned the card over. “It’s blank. No name, no numbers, only the chip. I’ve never seen a card like this before. Are you sure this will work?”

“Of course. I carry one myself.”

As she headed to the main room to meet Kyrene, her tour guide, she fingered the card in her pocket. Very posh. She waited by the window, taking in the view.

“Still amazing or has the novelty worn off?” Stavros asked from across the room.

She turned toward him. “I’ve been here less than twenty-four hours, so it’s still amazing.”

He adjusted his shirt cuffs beneath his suit coat. “I hope you’ll enjoy your outing.”

“I’m sure I will.” Since she’d embraced, on a micro- level, the fact that she was in the employ of a billionaire, she’d made a valiant attempt to be grateful for what wealth could provide. Still, her memories warned her to be cautious. The rich often thought anyone and everyone could be bought. She didn’t want to fall into that trap again.

“Won’t you be warm in your suit? I understand Greece is hot in the summer.”

“Unfortunately I won’t be outdoors today. I have other duties to perform. You’ll have to soak in a bit of sunshine on my behalf.”

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“Will I see you later?” The words popped out before Rose could stop them. She was anxious to see him again.

He graced her with a tiny smile. “I hope our paths will cross this evening so you can fill me in on your adventures.”

“No bodyguard necessary today?”

“Kyrene has all the training needed to protect you.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “And she got this training where?”

Stavros buttoned his coat. “Best not to ask.”

At precisely nine o’clock, the elevator chimed, and a woman about Rose’s height stepped out, dressed in a blouse, skirt, serious walking shoes, and a small rucksack slung over one shoulder.

“Kyrene, this is Ms. Rose Berret.” Stavros introduced them.

Kyrene placed kisses on both of Rose’s cheeks. “Pleased to meet you. Come, let us start,” she said in perfect French.

“You’re French?” Rose was delighted to speak her native tongue.

“Mama was French. Papa was Greek. Voilà.”

“Kyrene also speaks several other foreign languages,” Stavros supplied.

The women stepped into the elevator.

Rose gave Stavros a small wave before the door shut.

Kyrene said, “Did you receive the itinerary I sent?”

“Yes, it’s quite full.”

“Then I hope you had a good breakfast.”

“I did.” Rose reflected on her morning meal with Stavros. He’d doubled as the chef because Rose had declined the dining room again. She wondered where the cook was. He’d looked dashing in his apron and made the most divine eggs Benedict Rose had ever eaten. Stavros certainly seemed comfortable in his master’s kitchen and employ. She wondered if there was a bond beyond employer and employee, a connection in their past perhaps. In her experience with Robert’s family, a personal assistant/bodyguard wouldn’t dare cook in the kitchen, even if the family wasn’t there. She mused over the type of man Mr. P must be to allow such familiarity. Perhaps he wasn’t as black as she’d painted him.

Before she knew it, Rose was panting her way up the hillside to the Parthenon. Grateful for her hat to cut the beating summer sun, she slid her sunglasses into place. Perspiration had the glasses running down her nose. Bless the inventors of deodorant and sleeveless shirts, though neither prevented her shirt from sticking to her back. She looked at Kyrene’s skirt with a twinge of envy. A travel skirt was the way to go. She’d have to pick one up, today if possible. Her cropped linen pants were sticking in uncomfortable places.

“Unfortunately we won’t be able to go inside,” Kyrene said. “The structure is too

fragile. We'll walk around to a spot not undergoing restoration so you can get some good pictures."

Rose nodded.

Kyrene rattled off all the pertinent historical information as they made their way around the building. "There were three incarnations of the temple before it was turned into a Christian church and then a mosque. In 1687 it was largely destroyed. Over time, looting of the decorative features added to its instability. Conservation and renovation have been on and off since 1896. Ah, here." She gestured to Rose to stand in front of the ancient structure, or what was left of it.

Rose adjusted her hat, removed her sunglasses, and smiled for the camera.

"All pictures will be loaded on your tablet when you return to the hotel." Kyrene stowed her tablet in the rucksack.

"He's very thorough, isn't he?" Rose slipped her shades back on.

"Mr. Papadakis?"

"Yes."

"Very." Kyrene smiled. "He likes to know what's going on in all aspects of his life and the lives of those around him. Business partners, staff, and especially his children. He's a dedicated father."

"If he's so dedicated, why doesn't he spend more time with them, instead of being in meetings all over the world?" Rose bit the inside of her cheek to stop the bitter stream of words from becoming a river.

“You haven’t met him yet, have you?” Kyrene led them around the building at a leisurely pace.

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“No, nor the children. Have you met them?”

“I had the joy of giving them a tour a year ago, quite by accident. Nefeli spilled her ice on my leg, and that’s how we were introduced.”

“What are the children like?” She hoped they were still too young to be spoiled brats, but their age wasn’t a guarantee.

“Charming, as is their father.”

The way Kyrene spoke, Rose wondered if there was or had been something more between Mr. P and Kyrene but refrained from asking.

Kyrene’s watch chimed. “That’s our cue. Onward to the other sights of the Acropolis.”

For the rest of the day, every time Kyrene’s watch chimed, they moved to the next sight: the Acropolis museum, the Temple of Athena Nike, and Erechtheion.

By the time they headed to a late lunch, which bordered on dinner, in Plaka, the residential neighborhood under the Acropolis, Rose was beat, hot, and sweaty. She wanted refreshment, a shower, and a nap. But the itinerary called for only the first one.

At the café table, she rubbed her right heel. A blister was in danger of forming.

“Blister?” Kyrene asked.

“Not yet.”

Kyrene dug through her rucksack. “Here. Moleskin. Stick it to the spot, and with luck, no blister or, at the very least, a smaller one.”

“Thank you.”

“Any food allergies?” Kyrene asked.

“No, though I don’t care for octopus.” Rose looked around. “Where’s the menu?”

“We go to the kitchen, look at the options, and pick what we would like.”

“Oh.” Rose had never heard of such a thing, and the thought of getting up daunted her.

“I can pick something out for you,” Kyrene offered.

“Yes, thank you.”

While Kyrene was gone, Rose checked out her surroundings.

The restaurant was situated under the Acropolis but still on the hill, offering a snippet of a view of Athens. She’d originally thought the two-or-three-story buildings were a cream color, but upon further observation, she noticed several buildings were a deep yellow or coral. The streets and walks they’d traversed ranged from cobblestones to large, flat, gray pavers. As no street traffic was allowed in this part of the city, it lacked the sound of cars, car horns, and motorcycles. Vibrantly colored flowers spilled out of window boxes or bloomed around arbors. She ran her fingers over the wrought iron table before setting her napkin in her lap.

Kyrene returned, and after a short chitchat about the neighborhood, they received their food.

Rose looked at her plate, relieved that the food looked familiar. “Salad.”

“Horiatiki salada,” Kyrene clarified. “Too hot for soup.” She gestured to a nearby table with her fork. “Though that isn’t stopping them.”

“What’s that?”

“Lamb fricassee. Wait for a slightly cooler evening. Perhaps in Meteora. Try it then.”

“Meteora is where I go after Athens. Are you coming to teach us history?”

“No. You’ll be on your own with the children then. You’ll have to be the tour guide.”

Rose made a mental note to study up on the area later. She wanted to be a good nanny to the children and teach them, not just be a pair of eyes. She wanted to be their friend and teacher.

She ate a forkful of salad, letting the subtle flavor of the greens mix with the saltiness of the feta and the sharp tang of the olives while the cucumbers and tomatoes provided satisfying crunch. “I may not eat anything else on this trip,” Rose said.

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Kyrene laughed. “Don’t dismiss the rest of our native cuisine so quickly. You haven’t even tried yoursouvlasyet. And if you make it to Hydra, they peel the cucumbers there. This dish is often eaten at breakfast or lunch by farmers with whatever they have on hand.”

“The olive oil is smooth, and I like the hint of oregano.”

“You’ll eat better olive oil than this while you’re with Mr. Papadakis.” Kyrene took a bite.

“Yes, I understand Mr. Papadakis is in the olive oil business.”

“Empire is more like,” Kyrene said around a mouthful of salad. “Try thesouvlas.”

With her fork, Rose slid a cube of chicken off the skewer and popped it into her mouth. “This and the salad, all day, every day.”

“Both dishes are easy to get anywhere in Greece, but I’m sure Mr. P’s chefs will keep you well tempted and gastronomically satisfied.”

“Have you stayed with the family before?”

“From time to time, usually for a few days. Whenever Mr. P needs me to give a tour to guests or the children. We have a good working relationship.”

“Oh.” Rose still sensed there might be more to the story but let it lie. Kyrene and Mr. P’s personal life were none of her business. “What’s on the rest of the agenda?” With

food in her stomach and an hour with her feet rested, she felt more confident that she could handle the rigors of sightseeing for a few more hours.

“The Acropolis museum. We can keep cool for a while. and with the worst of the heat over, we can see the Odeon of Herodes Atticus.”

Rose stood. “I’ll be ready after a trip to the bathroom.”

Kyrene nodded and stood. “Excellent idea.”

CHAPTER TWO

Athens Part II

Leonidas paced by the large window, waiting for Rose to return from her second day of sightseeing. His business had occupied him longer than anticipated yesterday, and they’d exchanged only a few words before she’d excused herself to collapse into bed. This time he made sure to be in the suite before his new nanny returned. Curiosity about her had interrupted his thoughts more than once. Since his wife’s death, no woman had piqued his interest, until Rose. He hoped to have dinner with her and find some answers.

Leo’s phone rang, and the real Stavros’s photo popped up. “Yes, Stavros?”

“The children’s arrangements are in place. They will leave their grandparents and meet you in Meteora an hour after you land tomorrow.”

“Excellent, Stavros. Thank you. Were you able to locate Nefeli’s pink bunny? She was quite upset about his disappearance when I chatted with her last night.”

“A staff member had taken the bunny to the wash, and neglected to have it dried in

time for bed,” Stavros said. “Ms. Pinkberry Bunny is now clean and accounted for.”

“Good. And how did Adonis’s swim lesson go today?”

“He blew bubbles in the water.”

Leo smiled. “I got the pictures. Thank you.”

“Anything else?”

“Any more information on Ms. Berret?”

“No,” Stavros said. “Everything is on your tablet for your review.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Leo ended the call.

He pulled up Rose’s information. She was a film makeup artist, a widow, and sometimes nanny, just as her sister Marie had represented her. He closed the tablet. What the dossier didn’t explain was her resentment of the wealthy. While Leo appreciated all that his family’s wealth allowed him, it was also the very reason people treated him differently, either to gain access to his wealth or to disdain him for it. He wanted to be treated like a normal person.

After his wife died, every fortune-hunting woman had come out of the woodwork in the hope of being the next Mrs. Papadakis. From that point forward, Leo became an unphotographed recluse and swapped roles with Stavros. Only his home staff knew his real identity.

He rubbed a hand over his face, the scruff rubbing against his palm. Five o’clock shadow had set in.

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The elevator chimed, and he turned to see Rose stepping into the main room, with Kyrene, both of them chatting rapidly in French.

“Another good day?” he asked.

“Kyrene’s been very thorough in my education.” Rose set her handbag on the coffee table.

“Rose, it’s been my pleasure.” Kyrene kissed both of Rose’s cheeks. “Keep in touch, and we’ll get together again once your nanny duties are complete.”

“Of course.”

Kyrene nodded to Leo. “Stavros, lovely to see you again.”

“And you,” he said. “Your fees are in your account.”

“Thank you, though I would’ve done the tour for free. Rose is a pleasure, as I’m sure you’ll figure out soon enough.” She hefted her rucksack from the floor next to the elevator, and with a chime of the doors and a wave, Leonidas was alone with Rose.

“You’re done early today,” Rose observed, joining him at the window.

“Yes. I wondered if you’d like to have dinner with me and tell me about your adventures.”

“Like a date?” She raised a brow.

He pursed his lips. “Like two friends sharing about their day.”

She smiled. “I accept. I don’t think it would be seemly to date another member of the staff.”

“No, of course not,” he said. If she thought a date with the head of security was a no-no, then a date with the boss would be off limits.

“But friends having dinner is harmless. Is there a reservation, or do I have time to freshen up?”

“No reservation, though I can make one. Would you like to eat here or in the dining room? Or we can go out?”

Her cheeks tinted pink. “Actually the dining room. Kyrene recommended a dish that she says they’re world famous for.”

“Very well.” He tapped a few screens on his tablet. “All done. They’ll have a table for us in thirty minutes.”

She nodded and slipped toward her side of the suites, with a wave.

Leonidas watched her go, conscious of the light sway of her hips. When had he started to notice her hips? While he waited for Rose, he sat on the sofa and distracted himself with making a memory book of the children’s stay with their grandparents. He sorted through the pictures on his tablet, loading them onto the site, then laying them out in the book, and adding captions and anecdotes.

He paused a moment to study Nefeli. She was growing up . . . without a mother. In a few short years, she’d have questions about how bodies changed and how relationships worked between men and women. Those duties would fall to him. He

sank his head into one hand while he traced the outline of her straight nose with one finger. She had Nia's nose, mouth, and dark brown, wavy hair. He felt inadequate when faced with the task of being both father and mother. While Nefeli had grandmothers and aunts and nannies to seek advice from, it wasn't the same as a mother, and Leo knew it. Lately the longing to have a companion at his side had increased, a sensation he'd thought, four years ago, would never consume him again.

He focused on Adonis. Those eyes struck him whenever he looked at his son, as if he saw an echo of Nia in them. He smiled. Adonis had never known Nia. Complications from childbirth had taken her life two days after he was born. All he knew were pictures of a mother whose touch he didn't remember. And though Leonidas had tried with all his might to forge a posthumous relationship between Adonis and Nia, he knew his efforts were failing. Even Nefeli's memories were dim.

Leo turned off the tablet and set it on the coffee table. He leaned his head back against the couch and stared at the ceiling. Some of Nia's last words echoed in his head.

"You have a great capacity to love, Leo, and the children will need a mother. There's a special woman out there destined to help you raise our children. Find her. Love her. Hold her in your arms. I will help you from the other side."

"I can't think of marrying again when you're . . ." Tears tracked down his cheeks.

"Dying." She stroked his hair, and he pressed his cheek into her palm. "Being your wife and their mother is my greatest joy. Help them remember me, but fill their memories of their future with her."

He shook his head.

"Promise me." Her breath rattled, and she coughed. Nia's body spasmed. "Promise

me.” She gasped for breath.

“I promise,” he whispered in her ear and held her close to his chest.

Nia’s heart rate slowed.

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He pushed the call button and loosened his grip to see her eyes.

“I love you,” she said through shallow breaths. The last words she ever spoke.

The heartbeat monitor flatlined.

Two nurses entered, pushed Leo away from Nia, and administered lifesaving techniques as doctors and staff poured in.

Leo propped himself against the wall as tears blurred his vision. Nia was gone. There was no bringing her back.

“Help me,” Leonidas whispered to the penthouse ceiling. “Help me find her.” If he let his friends and family know he was willing to try dating again, they’d have a line of women, who’d be “perfect for him and the children” set up from now until Christmas. He’d even considered a dating service or, in desperate hours of the night, an arranged marriage. But he couldn’t stomach the idea. That wasn’t how he’d found Nia. Not that he expected his future wife to come to him in the same way with a baggage mix-up at a hotel. He wanted to find her organically, without a setup.

Rose came around the corner of the couch. “Stavros, I’m ready.” Her brow creased. “Oh, are you unwell? You look as if you have a headache. We can stay in if you’re not up to the dining room.”

Leo brushed off his pants legs to wipe away the sad memories. “I’d be pleased to escort you to the dining room, Ms. Berret.”

“Rose.” She swiped an errant hair off the cap sleeve of her navy blue dress.

“Yes, Rose.” He stood and accompanied her to the elevator.

She pushed the button. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about your tour of Athens.” Not an answer to her question but a truth nonetheless.

She gave a nod but didn’t look convinced.

Once seated in the dining room with menus, he asked, “What’s the famous dish Kyrene spoke of?”

“Fish soup.” That delightful pink tinted her cheeks again.

Leo thought the blush softened her features. “Fish soup can be found throughout Greece.” He adjusted his perfectly placed silverware.

“I know,” Rose said. “But Kyrene said this one is the best, as did several online reviews.”

“And this is what tempted you to the dining room.”

She nodded.

“Since you’re having seafood for an appetizer, may I make a suggestion for the main course?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“The breast of free range chicken from Ioannina. I don’t believe you’ll be seeing that part of Greece while you’re with us.”

They placed their orders, and the waiter cleared the menus, leaving a plate of pita and fava in their place.

“Hummus?” Rose sniffed the dish.

“Fava,” Leo explained. “Hummus is served in other nearby Mediterranean countries, but here in Greece, we eat fava. Very similar in texture and taste.”

Rose shook her head. “Always something new to learn each day.” She broke off a corner of the pita and used her knife to spread the fava before placing it in her mouth. “It’s so smooth and creamy. I’ll add it to my favorite Greek foods’ list.” She wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

“Is it a long list?”

“Quite short actually. I’ve only been here two days.”

Leo noted her even white teeth when she smiled. They reminded him of a pearl necklace.

“Why does Mr. P travel so much instead of spending time with his children?”

Her abrupt question caught him off guard.

He coughed on the bit of pita lodged in his throat. Once he cleared the food, he took a sip of his drink. “Sorry, wrong pipe.”

With concerned eyes, she asked, “Are you okay?”

He nodded and took another sip. “Fine, thank you. Mr. P?”

“It’s easier to say. Papadakis is so long.”

He nodded, letting the shortening of his last name slide. “What makes you think Mr. P doesn’t spend time with his children? They are the light of his life.”

“You mentioned they’re with their grandparents while he was held up in another country. He put business before family.” She shrugged a shoulder. “Doesn’t seem like a caring father to me.”

The corners of his mouth turned down and tension crept into his shoulders. “And what about the need to provide for his family? Or the grandparents’ need to spend time with their grandchildren?”

Rose ran a finger along the rim of her glass. “The business is lucrative, and I would guess it provides plenty of income without much effort on his part. I’m sure someone else could run the company and see over the day-to-day operations with very little inconvenience to or input from him.”

Leo consciously released his grip on his drinking glass before he shattered it. “That scenario might be quite comfortable, even preferable, to a man who’d been spoiled in his youth and didn’t learn about duty and responsibility. Mr. P thankfully had more diligent parents than you may paint. He cares for the company, all who work in it, and especially the growers. He knows everyone by name, from myself to the youth who mulches the trees in the farthest olive grove. A man who cared less could afford to do less and reap the benefits of others’ hard work. But Mr. P doesn’t expect more from those in his employ than he’s willing to give himself.” His voice had risen and attracted a few looks from nearby diners.

Leo took a long drink, adjusted his tie, and resettled the napkin in his lap before speaking. “You make many assumptions about a man you’ve not met. What drives you to malign a stranger so much?”

Looking properly contrite, Rose folded her hands on the edge of the table. “Forgive me. I forgot my place. I don’t usually speak ill of my employers or allow others on the film set to do the same in my presence. Negativity doesn’t breed harmony. I apologize for speaking out of turn.”

The tension leaked from Leo’s shoulders at her placating words. “Thank you for your apology. I accept on Mr. P’s behalf. However, you didn’t answer my question.” He wasn’t letting her off so easily. If his curiosity hadn’t gotten the better of him, he’d have let her go despite the trouble of locating another nanny on short notice.

The waiter delivered her soup and his mozzarella burrata.

Rose swept her waves over one shoulder. “Earlier in adulthood, I spent some time with the well-to-do.” She swirled her spoon through her soup, gathered a bite, and blew on it three times before taking a tentative sip.

Leo watched her wage an internal struggle and waited. He couldn’t tell if she was

deciding how much to tell him or simply trying to find the words to do so.

“At first the people were nice, welcoming, even loving.” She stalled by taking another spoonful of soup.

Leo didn’t touch his burrata. He sensed any move he made might tip her into silence, and he wanted to hear the story, though he didn’t know if she would tell him all at this time. They’d known each other less than three days.

“But later, when life took an unexpected and sad turn, they thought their money could sway me on an important point. When I refused to budge, they offered more money, but I wouldn’t change my mind. They were angry, and their concern for my well-being went out the window when I thwarted them in their desires. We parted ways and don’t speak anymore.”

Her late husband and the circumstances that followed must be what she was alluding to. Sensing that her willingness to share was at an end, Leo cut off a piece of burrata and dipped it in the peach ginger sauce before sliding it into his mouth. He let the saltiness of the prosciutto di Parma mix with the acidity of the tomatoes and the hint of sweetness of the grilled green pepper. “You should enjoy your soup before it gets cold.” He pointed to her bowl with his fork. “That’s what we came for after all.” He shot her a small smile.

She nodded, and they ate their appetizers in silence.

Leo took the opportunity to study Rose. He knew from her dossier that she was barely thirty. In fact she’d celebrated her birthday less than a month ago. Her skin had a healthy sun-kissed glow that he imagined would deepen with the extra time she’d spend outdoors with the children. She had a heart-shaped face, eyes of dark amber, a nose with the tiniest upturn at the end, and a full mouth. She kept her posture erect, yet seemed to carry an aura of ease that kept her from coming off as austere. Her eyes

continually drew him back in with their hint of deep sorrow. She knew the loss of a loved one. Nothing in the world could duplicate that pain. He knew it intimately.

With the first course cleared and emotions returned to equanimity, Leo believed the time had come to venture into safer topics.

He pointed to her phone, which lay on the table above her plate. “I believe you were going to show me your pictures.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve seen it all in person. I don’t want to bore you.”

“I don’t think you could ever bore me, Rose.”

That delightful blush tinted her cheeks, and she placed her phone between them. As she shared her pictures and experiences, she grew more animated, adding in bits of history Kyrene had shared with her. Images of the Acropolis, Plaka, the Parthenon, Erechtheion, the Temple of Hephaestus, Ancient Agora, and Herod Atticus Odeon flew under her nimble fingers. Her neatly trimmed fingernails made the lightest of tapping sounds against the screen.

“There’s a crack in your screen,” Leo said.

Rose ran a finger over the corner. “I dropped it at the temple. Thankfully the case did its job, and only the corner suffered minor damage. It’s nothing really.”

“I’ll see that it’s repaired immediately.”

“That’s really not necessary.”

“You’re right. You need a new phone instead.” He tapped away on his phone, requesting that Stavros have a new phone for Rose when they landed in Meteora.

Rose’s expression turned pinched. “I can get a new phone if I need one.”

“Mr. P usually supplies his new staff with a phone upon arrival.” He didn’t add that the phone was given partly out of courtesy but also so that Stavros could track them.

“Then why didn’t I get one when I arrived?” She stabbed a piece of her ravioli filled with feta cheese foam, and swirled it in the green bell pepper cream and mint tomato sauce.

A little wave of guilt swept through Leo about giving her the honest answer. But if he was going to lie to her about who he was, then he’d better be honest about everything else. Hopefully it would lessen the blow when his true identity was revealed.

“Because the decision of whether you were staying was left up to me.”

“Oh, I see.” She turned off the phone, slid it into her lap, and twisted it in her hands.

“I guess that means you’ve decided I can stay.”

“I have.” He tapped an index finger on the table, instead of reaching across the tablecloth for her hand. “Please don’t look insulted.”

She released the phone to stroke the waves of her hair.

Leo wondered if the gesture was a habit or a show of nerves. Either way, he wondered if her hair was as soft as it was shiny. His fingers itched to find out. Those thoughts weren't helpful. He clasped his hands in his lap.

"I'm not insulted," she said in an unconvincing tone. "I thought since I was offered the job and flown here that it was mine."

"Would you entrust your children to anyone, no matter how well vetted, without meeting her in person first?"

Her hands stilled. "No. But Mr. P had you do the personal assessment."

"True, but his trust in my judgment is absolute."

"Never a doubt?" She raised a brow and dug into her ravioli once more.

"No." Leo took her resuming the meal as a sign that the uncomfortable moment had passed. How many uncomfortable moments would they share?

"You must have quite a history for his trust to be complete. Were you in the military together?"

"How did you know I was in the military?"

She smiled and dipped her head. "Your posture and something in the way you move signals time spent in service, perhaps even combat."

"The military does leave its mark," he acknowledged.

With their plates empty, he asked, "Would you care for dessert?"

“I haven’t had any experience with Greek desserts yet. Are they good?”

He chuckled. “Yes.” With a nod of his head, Leo invited the waiter to bring the dessert cart to tempt them.

Leo watched Rose wage an internal war over which item to pick. Her eyes flickered between two dishes.

She rested against her chair. “I can’t decide. I think I’ll pass.”

Leo shook his head. “Indecision isn’t a reason to pass, only a signal that more information is required.” He addressed the waiter. “Please bring Le Macao and Le Fraîcheur citron.”

The waiter whisked away with the cart and menus.

Rose traced the edge of her drinking glass and turned appraising eyes on him. “How did you know what I wanted?”

“I watched you.” He took a sip of his drink.

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“Powers of observation would be a required trait in head of security, I imagine.”

“They’ve served me well.”

She leaned forward, and Leo caught himself doing the same.

She dropped her voice. “Can you ‘read’ people and situations like the famous Sherlock Holmes?”

He leaned even closer, catching a whiff of her intoxicating perfume.

She matched him, inch for inch.

He could see light green flecks in her irises and paused a heartbeat as a strange sensation washed over him. “No.”

She straightened, disappointment evident in her posture. “Pity.”

“I’m afraid no one could match the famous detective’s skills gifted to him by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle despite how television and film make him appear. I’m an ordinary man with some honed skills. Nothing more.”

“Shame. I’m rather a fan of Sherlock.” The corners of her lips twitched.

“Of Mr. Holmes himself or the actors? Do you prefer the American or the Englishman?”

She adjusted the neckline of her dress. “The Englishman.”

Dessert arrived with two clean forks.

“You presume I’m going to share.” She snatched up both forks. “What if I like them both so much that I decide to eat them all myself?”

“I’d never stand between a woman and her dessert. I know better. I’ll order my own to keep my head attached to my shoulders. Those forks look potentially lethal.”

With a laugh, she handed him a fork.

Their fingers brushed in the exchange, and Leo pretended a nonchalance he didn’t feel. Something beyond skin had passed between them, and he didn’t know if she’d felt it too. He’d have to pay attention to know if it was a one-time occurrence or if there was more at play than a fleeting chemistry. He’d learned from his marriage that chemistry played a role between husband and wife, but it couldn’t be the sole basis of a committed relationship.

“How do you like Le Macao?”

She licked the tines of her fork. “While I’m not exactly sure what yuzu cream is, it certainly plays well with the bitter chocolate crèmeux and crunchy pecan streusel.” She rinsed her palate with water. “Now for the Le Fraîcheur citron.” She slid a bite of the light lemon cake with lemon marmalade, crèmeux, and mousse into her mouth. Her pupils dilated a fraction. “Oh, that’s good. I’m not sure I can pick a favorite.”

“You enjoy lemon?” Since she’d tasted both, Leo went ahead and grabbed his own forkful of the Le Fraîcheur citron, ignoring Le Macao.

“And orange. Really anything with citrus. You’re not a fan of chocolate?” She

pointed at him with her fork.

“Not as much as citrus. I think we’ll fight over citrus desserts, though I plan to let you win. Your happiness will facilitate a better working relationship.”

She shook her head. “When we met, I didn’t know if you possessed a sense of humor. I’m happy to be wrong on that count. You’re more approachable when you smile.”

“Do I really look that intimidating?”

“Yes, at least to me.”

“I’ll have to work on softening my image.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Shall we?” He stood and went behind her chair to pull it out.

“Thank you.” She rose, and he couldn’t help but notice how well her dress fit, showing her curves without being ostentatious or vulgar—the sort of dress his wife would’ve worn.

He put his hand on her back and guided her to the private elevator ,which opened with a soft chime.

“What about the bill?” she asked.

“They’ll charge it to the room. I’ll take care of the fees before we check out tomorrow. Not to worry.”

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Back at the suite, they stepped into the main room. The lights of Athens glowed outside the window, with the Acropolis centered in the dark framing.

“It’s beautiful.” She stepped to the window.

“You’ll see more beautiful sights before your job is over.”

She nodded. “Thank you for dinner, Stavros.”

“Of course.” Leo tried to think of an excuse to get her to linger but drew a blank.

“I’m going to say goodnight. I have a film to watch.”

“We could view it together,” he offered.

Even in the dim lighting, he could see color enter her cheeks.

“It’s research. I don’t think you’d enjoy it.”

He cocked his head. “Why?”

She tilted her chin to her feet. “It’s a bit of a horror/fantasy film.”

“Interesting.”

“You didn’t peg me for the type, huh?”

“No.” Leo didn’t think Rose would like that sort of film at all. She seemed more of a romantic comedy type. But then, he didn’t know much about women lately. It could be his whole radar was off.

“I’ll see you in the morning. I’m looking forward to meeting the children,” she said and headed for her room.

“Goodnight, Rose.”

As Leo entered his suite, he had no doubts the children would love Rose. She was beautiful, fun, and unexpected, exactly what his children needed.

CHAPTER THREE

Meteora

Rose rubbed the heel of her foot while Plutus drove them away from the hotel.

“Blisters?” Stavros asked from next to her.

“Only one.” She smiled at him. “Not bad for hiking all over Athens for two days.” She leaned back against the soft leather seat. “I had no idea Kyrene would be such a ruthless taskmaster. She made it her mission to be certain I saw everything in Athens.”

“I’ve had the pleasure of taking tours with Kyrene.” He chuckled. “I came away with two blisters.”

The car ride to Meteora would take four hours. Plenty of time for Rose to get to know the mysterious head of security across from her. What was in his past between a stint in the military and the time he came to work for Mr. P? Was he married or was one of

his job requirements that he remain single? There wasn't a ring on his finger, but some men didn't wear them. Robert had.

She fingered the wedding band she wore on her pinky. She simply couldn't bring herself to give it up, though she didn't wear the matching engagement ring anymore. The stone provoked questions and explanations she'd rather not give.

Stavros broke the quiet with a question. "I know you're single, but I'm guessing that's your wedding band." He indicated the ring she twisted.

Rose stilled her hands and folded them in her lap. "Yes." She focused on the tinted window.

"How long has it been?"

She cut him a sharp look. "I'm sure you already know the answer to that question if you've done your research properly."

The corners of his lips turned down. "Forgive me for being polite. Yes, your background was thoroughly investigated, but that doesn't mean I know everything about you. Your choice of words, your expression, and your body language speak more than words on a report." He turned his head toward the window.

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Rose felt wrong-footed. She sighed. “Yes, it’s my wedding band. I can’t seem to take it off and place it in a drawer to be forgotten along with my husband, even though it’s been several years. I don’t know if you can understand that.”

He nodded. “Does the ring bring you joy or sorrow when you touch it?”

She fingered the gold circle. “A bit of both. Joy for the time we had and sorrow that our life together was cut short. There were so many dreams left unfulfilled.” Rose looked out the window. “Stavros, where are we going?”

The car pulled onto a large bank of cement surrounded by airline hangars and parked.

She looked at him. “I thought we were driving to Meteora. We’re flying?” A small squeak punctuated her final word.

“Yes. A car ride would take four hours. The trip is only one hour by air.”

Plutus opened her car door, and she stepped out. The heat of the cement penetrated her flats. She looked beyond the open hangar doors to see small planes and helicopters inside. She gulped.

“Do you prefer planes or helicopters?” Stavros asked.

“Are you asking me to choose? Because I’ve never been in a small plane, and I’ve never been in a helicopter at all. Do all of these belong to Mr. P?”

“No, they don’t, and no I’m not asking you to choose. We’re taking the helicopter.”

He pointed to their waiting flight vehicle.

Rose gaped, equally terrified and elated.

“Are you afraid of flying?” Stavros asked as they crossed the tarmac.

“Not exactly. Afraid of dying while plummeting to the earth would be more accurate. Are you sure this thing is safe?” Though the copter was off, she instinctively ducked as they passed the point where a spinning blade could potentially cut off her head.

“Neither Mr. P nor I would ever put your life in danger.”

“Well, certainly not intentionally.” She stared at the glass windows that harbored seats for six. “Where will the luggage go?”

Stavros opened one of the doors and indicated a compartment behind the rear seats. “There are only three cases. Yours, mine, and Plutus’s.”

“Who’s going to fly this contraption?” She half wondered if Stavros would be with Plutus in the copilot seat while she prayed in the backseat.

“I am,” said a male voice from behind her.

Rose whipped around, her skirt flaring away from her legs.

“Ah, Dino, good to see you.” Stavros shook the beefy man’s hand. “Ms. Berret, may I introduce Dino. He’ll be our pilot, and Plutus will be our co-pilot. I’m taking the day off to sit with you in the back.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Rose.” She limply shook Dino’s hand before turning to Stavros. “You can fly a helicopter?”

“He’s one of the best,” Dino supplied.

“I flew helicopters and planes in the military,” Stavros explained. He checked the time. “We need to go, or we’ll be late.”

With trepidation and more than one doubt, Rose allowed Stavros to hand her into the windowed contraption of death. “Well, at least I’ll be able to see the ground coming at me,” she muttered.

“You’ll be quite safe,” Stavros assured her.

With bags stowed and everyone seated and buckled, the copter roared to life. The blades spun until Rose couldn’t distinguish them individually. She gripped the edge of the seat.

They lifted into the air, and Rose gave a yelp. She closed her eyes and started praying the rosary.

“Are you Catholic?” Stavros’s voice came through her headset. He sat across from her so he was going backward.

She’d forgotten that anything she said could be heard by the rest of the crew. Right now, she didn’t have any energy to care about how foolish she looked. “Not for a long time. The words come from my childhood. I guess it seemed like a good idea to pray. Wasn’t my religious affiliation or lack thereof in your report?” She peeked at him through slitted lids.

The corners of Stavros’s lips twitched.

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“Are you laughing at me in my moment of peril?” she asked.

“Not at all. How can I help?”

“Distraction.”

“Then open your eyes,” he said. “The scene is breathtaking.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that will help.”

A hand gripped hers, and she gasped. Her eyes flew open in surprise.

“Trust me. You want to see this. Look.”

Still uncertain, she let her eyes leave his to take in the view of Athens below. Rose sucked in a hard breath. “You’re right about the view. It’s even better than the hotel window.”

Stavros gave her hand a squeeze and started to pull away.

She held tight to him, like a life line. “Not yet. I need a few minutes to calm down. Please?”

He nodded. “Your comfort and care is my chief objective at the moment.”

“Thank you.” Rose let the strength and warmth of his hand flood peace and calm into her body and soul. She noted the calluses on his palms and a few small scars on his

fingers, likely from his military days, though one looked much older, probably from his childhood. She tried to picture Stavros as a little boy, running through a field or a city neighborhood, playing cops and robbers with his friends. The image wouldn't stick. All she saw was the attractive man across from her with his dark eyes and hair, strong chin, straight nose, and well-formed lips.

She averted her eyes, hoping Stavros hadn't noticed the last place her gaze had lingered. His looks alone could garner him any supermodel or celebrity in the world. How had he become a security guard?

Once she became acclimated to the rush of the ground beneath her and the whirl of the blades and engine, she relaxed her grip on Stavros's hand and reluctantly indicated he could have it back. She missed his touch instantly. Strange. Perhaps she simply missed the comfort of human contact and not of Stavros himself.

At last, they landed at a small strip in Meteora. Once the engines and blades of the copter stopped, they exited. With luggage in hand, Stavros led them to a small bunker where Rose took the opportunity to use the bathroom.

When she rejoined Stavros, she said, "I didn't think Meteora had an airport. I didn't see one on any map. The nearest one looked to be an hour away, and that's how long it took to fly here."

"This airstrip isn't on any maps. Its use is very restricted and private. Mr. P was able to gain clearance a few years ago."

"I see." Probably made a huge donation to the upkeep of the sky-high monasteries. Rose sniffed. She disliked that the wealthy could throw their money around to get what they wanted, but even more that people would happily accept the bribe.

"Have I said something wrong?" Stavros asked.

“No,” she responded a little too quickly.

Stavros raised a brow.

She redirected the conversation. “When will Mr. P and the children arrive?”

“Any minute.”

Rose’s stomach turned. The time approached when all her fears would be confirmed or put to rest.

“Are you hungry?” Stavros asked.

“No.” She couldn’t eat even if she wanted to. Her nerves were in overdrive. She fingered her ring. The hum of a small plane reached her ears, and Rose searched the sky. A small yellow plane circled once and successfully landed on the airstrip, then turned, and parked in a grassy spot.

Two children and a gentleman spilled out. Hand in hand, the trio approached.

Rose noted the subtle military nuances of the man’s bearing. His dark, close-cropped hair gleamed in the sunlight. His strong jaw bespoke a no-nonsense attitude. She couldn’t decipher anything about his eyes behind his sunglasses. With a hint of satisfaction, she noted that his nose had been broken and reset at some point. The surgeon had skillfully reset his nose, but she could detect the slight misalignment with her artist’s eye.

She took a deep breath. Moment of truth.

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The trio stopped two steps shy of Rose and Stavros.

Mr. P said, “Ms. Berret, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He shook her hand, and she felt the calluses on his palms.

“Pleased to meet you.” She wished for a drink of water to satisfy her suddenly dry throat.

“This is Nefeli,” he said.

The girl dropped a curtsy.

“And this is Adonis.”

The little boy made a slight bow.

Then the children launched themselves at Stavros, with a cry of Papa. He took them in his arms and hugged them before gesturing to Rose.

Astonishment temporarily rooted her in place. Why were the children hugging the head of security and calling him papa? Another sign of the lack of love coming from their father. Anger on the children’s behalf flared within her, erasing all nerves.

She lowered her body to match the children’s height and shook their hands. “I’ve discovered a secret,” she told the children. “The staff only use one name instead of titles. So you may call me Rose.” She looked up at Mr. P. “If that’s alright?”

He flicked the barest of glances at Stavros and nodded to Rose.

Adonis placed his hands on Rose's cheeks and turned her head side to side. "You're pretty," he said. "I'm four. How old are you?"

"Adonis," Mr. P's voice held a note of warning. "It's not polite to ask a lady her age." He frowned.

"Your father is right," Rose said to Adonis. "But I don't mind telling you. I'm thirty. I had my birthday a few weeks ago."

"Did you have balloons and a cake? Did all of your friends give you presents?"

Rose laughed. "I'm afraid not. No balloons, cake, or presents."

His brown eyes widened. "No presents? How can you have a birthday without presents?" Adonis lowered his voice. "Are you on the naughty list?"

Rose held in her laughter at this serious question. "I'm not on the naughty list," she assured him. "Sometimes when you grow up, birthdays aren't as important to celebrate as when you were a child."

He turned horrified eyes on the two men. "You mean when I grow up, I won't get presents? No one will care about my birthday?"

Oh, dear. Rose had definitely said the wrong thing. She was off to a bad beginning.

"Could we give her presents?" Nefeli asked. "And a party?" She turned brown puppy-dog eyes on the men.

"Of course," Mr. P said. "We'll have to plan a party for Ms. Berret, er, Rose."

Nefeli took Rose's hand. "What kind of cake do you like?"

"My favorite is opera cake. I'm not sure you have that in Greece."

"What's in it?" Nefeli twirled a lock of hair.

"Almond sponge cake, coffee syrup, chocolate ganache, coffee buttercream, and chocolate glaze."

"I bet Dianthe could make that," Nefeli said to her brother.

"Dianthe can make anything," he agreed.

"Who's Dianthe?" Rose asked.

"Our cook," Nefeli said. "She makes the best spanakopitain all of Greece!"

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Rose smiled. "Is spanakopita your favorite? I haven't tried it yet."

Nefeli's jaw dropped. "You've never had spanakopita?"

"This is my third day in Greece, so I've had limited time to try new foods. I shall certainly add spanakopita to my list to try."

Adonis tugged on her skirt. "What about dips? Do you like them? They're my favorite." He wiped his hand under his nose.

"I haven't had dips either."

Adonis shook his head.

Nefeli looked to the men. "Can we have spanakopita and dips at Rose's party?"

"Of course," Mr. P said.

"We'd better get in the helicopter if we're going to be on time for our tour," Stavros said.

Rose tried to hide her dismay. She wasn't quite prepared to fly again. "The helicopter?"

"We're doing a flyover of the six monasteries before we see them on the ground," Stavros explained.

Mr. P handed the children into the copter before joining the pilot up front.

“I take it you served together on the helicopters and airplanes,” she said to Stavros as he assisted her into the copter.

“Yes. He’s a hair better pilot than I am, but don’t tell him I told you. I’ll never hear the end of it.” He winked at Rose.

The children took the front facing seats and donned their headsets. They seemed quite at home in the copter. Rose mused that they’d obviously flown in it many times, whereas today was her first and now second flight in her life. Oh, the things the rich took for granted.

With everyone secured, the engines and rotors whirled to life, and they were airborne.

Stavros pointed out each monastery as they flew over: Varlaam, Roussanou, St. Stephen, Holy Trinity, St. Nikolaos, and Great Meteoron.

Rose alternated between watching the children’s delighted faces and staring dumbfounded at the structures perched on top of towering rock formations that stretched skyward.

“The monks seemed to think they could be closer to heaven and God if they built their houses of worship as near to the sky as possible,” Rose said.

“Can you imagine the difficulty of building these monasteries at the top of mostly sheer cliffs?” Stavros asked.

“They were strong,” Nefeli said.

“Like me!” Adonis flexed his arm muscle.

“Just like you,” Stavros agreed with a smile at the young boy.

The interaction between Stavros and the children warmed Rose’s heart. His affection for them was genuine and made a better impression on her than Mr. P’s formality. Too bad the men’s roles weren’t reversed. But then, Rose wouldn’t enjoy Stavros’s company as much, and she wouldn’t be as friendly with Mr. P. She needed to give Mr. P a fighting chance. First impressions weren’t always what they seemed. Stavros was quite different from what she’d assumed at the start.

The copter landed, and they climbed into a waiting vehicle.

“Welcome to your exclusive tour of the monasteries of Meteora. I’m Dia, your guide for the day,” said the young, perky woman in the driver’s seat.

“Nice to meet you,” Mr. P said. “Thank you for accommodating our small party.”

“No problem. I love to do VIP tours and share my knowledge of the monasteries.”

“Are you an anthropologist?” Stavros asked.

“I started a degree in history and archeology but didn’t finish.” Dia headed down the road. “The academic scene wasn’t for me, but you’d be hard-pressed to find anyone who knows more than me about this region. I grew up here. My father is one of the caretakers of the sites. And a few of my ancestors served the monks.”

“What’s a monk?” Adonis asked.

“A man who spends his life worshiping God,” Dia said.

“Why does he live in a special house?” Nefeli asked. “Why can’t he love God from home?”

Dia peeked over her shoulder at the children and flashed them a smile. “Great questions. You keep asking them. I’ll keep answering. I can see today will be fun.” She focused on the road. “Monks thought they could focus better on God if they were away from the rest of the world. They built their homes and churches, and grew and cooked their own food.”

“I like God,” Nefeli said. “But I like my family more. I wouldn’t want to go away from them.”

“Me either.” Adonis nodded. “I want to stay with Nefeli and my papa.” He slipped his hand into his sister’s.

“No one has to go anywhere,” Stavros assured them. “You’re too young anyway.”

“Originally, there were twenty-four monasteries in the area. Six remain. We’ll see all of them and will tour the inside of three of them.”

“Which three will we see today?” Nefeli asked.

“The monasteries rotate their days off, so we rotate them on our tours. Today we’ll

see the Great Meteoron, Varlaam, and Roussanou.”

“Cool,” Adonis said.

As they stepped out at the Great Meteoron monastery, Rose was surprised when Adonis took her hand. She thought he’d want to be with his father after being separated. He must have been starved for a woman’s affection. The children seemed to be surrounded by men most of the time.

Rose bent down to the child’s level. “Adonis, I need you to do a very important job for me.”

His eager brown eyes looked into hers. “What?”

“You must keep me safe from getting too close to the edge, or I’ll tumble over. Can you do that?”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Stavros watching them.

“Yes.” He nodded with a solemn expression.

“Thank you.”

As they approached the monastery, Dia asked, “Do you have a shawl?”

“Oh, yes.” Rose let go of Adonis’s hand long enough to dig the white shawl out of her handbag.

Dia helped her arrange it properly. “The monks require proper attire to tour their monasteries. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Thank you.”

They entered the monastery.

“I’ll keep the history simple so the children won’t get bored, and you can appreciate the strength and beauty of the structure,” Dia said. “The first monk to summit Platis Lithos or Wide Rock was Athanasios. He and fourteen original monks scaled the 613 meters and toiled for nearly fifty years to build the monastery. Many of them never lived to see the completion of their work.”

Rose was struck by the vibrant colors of Christ and his disciples covering an entire stone wall.

Adonis tugged on her hand, and she bent down. “Are they alive?” He pointed to the wall.

“No. It’s a painting. But they look like they could walk right out of the wall don’t they?”

He nodded. “Are they ghosts?”

“No. Only pictures like the ones you see in the books you read.”

“Can I touch it?” He held up a hand.

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“No. The paint is very old, and if we touch it, we could damage it.”

Dia continued. “In 1340 they completed Theomitoros or God’s Mother church.”

“How did they get up here?” Nefeli asked.

“The 146 stairs we used to walk up weren’t installed until 1923. Until then the monastery was accessed by a system of wooden ladders, ropes, and nets.”

“That sounds fun,” Nefeli said. “I’d rather climb ladders to get here.”

“I’m sure you would.” Dia gave the girl a smile. “But the stairs are safer.”

They continued their tour, and the children peppered Dia with questions. Rose was delighted to discover the library housed priceless treasures of books and manuscripts. “I suppose after building, there wasn’t much else to do,” she commented to Stavros.

“It’s one of the wealthiest of its kind,” he said.

As they traveled from one monastery to another, Rose watched the children for signs of fatigue or hunger or boredom, all of which could quickly turn their delightful outing into a miserable meltdown. The children absorbed Dia’s history like little sponges. They were obviously intelligent and well-mannered. After visiting Varlaam, Dia supplied them with snacks and water on their way to the third monastery.

“What did you like best about that one?” Rose asked Nefeli.

Nefeli chewed and swallowed before answering. “The net.”

“Good choice. I can’t believe that’s all the monks used until they felt inspired to modernize. I don’t think I would’ve liked traveling by net.”

“I would. It’s like a big swing.” Adonis showed the motion with his arms, and a little water spilled out of his bottle.

“Oops.” Rose wiped up the water with a napkin.

“Sorry.” Adonis looked down at the floorboard.

Rose presumed he expected to be scolded by her. “Accidents happen,” she said. “We just need to be a little more careful. What did you like best, Adonis?”

“The big barrel.”

“I liked the water barrel too,” Rose said. “I think you could build a nice playhouse or fort inside one that big.”

“That would be fun. Could we take the barrel home with us?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid not. It’s too old, and I don’t think it will fit in the helicopter.”

Adonis frowned.

“But maybe we could build a blanket fort with chairs when we get to your house. Have you ever done that?”

Adonis shook his head.

“Really?” Rose looked to Nefeli for confirmation.

“Never,” Nefeli said. “Can we have your birthday party inside of it?”

“Um, maybe?” Rose looked at Mr. P.

“Your fort will have to be quite large,” he said.

Nefeli’s brows knit together.

Rose guessed the girl was trying to decide if that was a “no” or a “we’ll see.” She wasn’t certain herself which answer had been given.

They arrived at Roussanou, the last monastery they could tour.

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“Roussanou is at a lower elevation than the other monasteries, making it more accessible,” Dia said as she led them through the building. “The monastery was founded by a hermit, and the main cathedral was built at the end of the 16th century. The decorations were completed thirty years later. Unfortunately the building sustained heavy damage during WWII and in the 1980’s was turned into a convent.” She gestured to a wall. “These beautiful wall paintings were done in 1560.”

“Pretty,” Nefeli said.

Rose observed that as wonderful as the children were about soaking up history, they were tiring of the activity. She was grateful this was their last stop on the tour. Rose was also ready for some down time. She hadn’t slept well the night before. Her nerves at meeting the children and Mr. P kept waking her.

With the tour concluded, they returned to the airstrip.

“Thank you for a wonderful morning,” Rose said to Dia.

“You’re welcome.”

Mr. P engaged Dia in conversation while Stavros guided the rest of them to the copter. “We’ll eat lunch in the helicopter on our way to Corfu. The luggage was sent ahead and will be at the hotel when we arrive,” he said.

Rose nodded. “Is the Papadakis lifestyle always this nomadic?” She helped Stavros strap the children in and handed them pita wraps and bottles of water. The children were hungry and kept quiet as they consumed their food.

Once settled in their own seats, Stavros said, “During the school year, the children remain at home, and Mr. P is there most of the time, though his business does require some travel. In summer, they travel quite a bit, though this summer’s schedule is the busiest. The children are a little older, and Mr. P felt they were ready to learn more about their homeland.”

“The children do seem to love history and seeing new places,” Rose said.

With Mr. P on board and the copter secured, they lifted into the air.

“How long is the flight?” Rose bit into her wrap and relished the crunch of tomatoes and lettuce.

“About an hour. By land and ferry, it would take us almost four hours.”

“I think Adonis would like the ferry.” She looked over at the little boy and saw he’d fallen asleep. His half-eaten wrap sat in his lap.

Rose reached over and took the wrap. She put a napkin around it and put the food in the cool pack under her seat. “He’s worn out. Does he usually nap?” In her experience, many children had given up naps by the age of four.

“Not regularly,” Stavros said. “But sometimes, if it’s been a busy morning and we’re traveling, he’ll pass out.”

“Will he sleep well tonight, or will the nap disrupt his schedule?”

Rose had been given little information on the children’s daily routine. With the heavy traveling schedule laid out during her stay, she could see why that had been omitted.

“He’ll sleep fine,” Stavros said.

With her food finished, Nefeli handed Stavros the trash and asked him, “May I draw, please?”

He nodded and handed her the tablet.

With a few quick taps, Nefeli opened an art app and commenced drawing with a stylus.

A peaceful quiet descended on the party, and Rose spent her time looking out the window as Greece flew under her feet. The children were dears, and while she knew there would be disagreeable moments, she determined to shower them with love.

CHAPTER FOUR

Corfu

Rose liked the hotel instantly. She thought they’d be staying in some posh super resort, but this one was farther from the activity of the port and felt more family friendly and intimate.

“The hotel grouped our rooms together,” Stavros explained as they walked up the stairs to the top floor. The children and Mr. P trailed a few steps behind.

As the modern-looking hotel was only three stories tall, Rose didn’t mind the climb, especially after all the stairs they’d hiked in Meteora.

“Your room adjoins the children’s. Mr. P and I have rooms flanking yours.”

“I’m sure we’ll be quite comfortable,” Rose said.

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“Mr. P has meetings in the groves the rest of the day, and I’ll be with him.”

“And what am I to do with the children?”

“Swim.” He smiled at her. “You can enjoy the pool or there’s an umbrella and chairs reserved on the beach for your use. Whenever you or the children get hungry, eat anywhere at the hotel and charge it to the room. On behalf of Mr. P, I do request you not leave the property.”

“No bodyguard,” she guessed.

“Correct.”

“That’s fine. We can save exploring for tomorrow. I think the kids could use a lazy afternoon.”

Rose checked the rooms and saw that not only had the luggage been brought up but everything had been unpacked as well. She wasn’t keen on having a stranger handle her personal items, but there was little she could do about it.

With swimsuits and sunscreen on, she and the children tromped down to the kids’ pool. They spent the afternoon splashing in the water and alternating between the beach and the pool.

Rose helped Adonis with his strokes and putting his face in the water while Nefeli built a sandcastle.

Nearly every hour, a staff member asked if they required any food, beverage, or extra towels.

When Rose heard Adonis's stomach rumble, she decided it was time for dinner.

"But I want to stay," Adonis protested.

"I know," Rose said. "But your tummy needs food." She ruffled his hair. "How about we eat, and then we can play with the large chess set before we get cleaned up for bed?"

"Yes!" He pumped a fist in the air.

"Adonis doesn't know how to play chess," Nefeli pointed out, piling the sand toys into a mesh bag.

"Well, then we'll teach him."

"But I don't know how to play either," Nefeli said.

"Then I'll teach you both."

They ate dinner on the deck under large umbrellas, and Rose enjoyed trying moussaka at the children's insistence. They seemed scandalized that she was so unfamiliar with their native food.

After the chess game, they begged her for treats, so she got them croissants. They ate them on the beach as the sun set.

Adonis gave a big yawn.

“Time for bed,” Rose said. Back in their rooms, the children bathed and dressed in their pajamas. “I see you have a few books. Would you like a bedtime story?”

Adonis handed her a book with a dog on the cover. “I like this one.”

“Can I read by myself?” Nefeli held up a small chapter book.

“Of course.”

Rose read the book to Adonis, noting that Nefeli seemed to pay more attention to his book than her own.

Rose hugged and kissed each child and then turned out the lights. “I’ll leave the door open, so you can call if you need me.”

“Goodnight, Rose,” Nefeli said.

Adonis fell asleep instantly.

Stavros was right. The nap hadn’t derailed Adonis’s ability to fall asleep. Though whether the helicopter power nap would disrupt his sleep during the night remained to be discovered. She’d nannied once for a boy who would be up the same amount of time in the middle of the night that he napped during the day. She quickly learned not to let him nap more than fifteen minutes.

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As she stretched out on her bed, she glanced at her tablet. Tomorrow's itinerary would be waiting for her. She debated whether to check it or not, but she needed to know what time to have the children up and ready. She skimmed the schedule and noticed a little red dot by her message box. That was new. She clicked on the dot and read the message from Mr. P.

"I'm sorry to have missed saying goodnight to the children. Tucking them into bed is one of the highlights of my day. I trust you had an enjoyable afternoon. The children seem quite taken with you. I'm grateful they feel comfortable in your presence. You have a wonderful way with them. If there is anything you require, please let Stavros know immediately, and he'll take care of you."

Rose turned off the tablet and the light. She sat in bed, staring out at the water beyond the pool. In his message, Mr. P was all warmth and gratitude, so different from his aloofness in person. He was an enigma she intended to solve.

???

Rose and the children stood in front of the wooden sign.

Nefeli opened her mouth to read.

"Nefeli, let Adonis try to say the words, please," Rose said.

She'd noticed that Adonis didn't read much on his own. Nefeli read everything to him, and he depended on her for it—a habit Rose planned to undo. Adonis needed to learn to read on his own and enjoy it. A child who could read could do anything he

wanted in life.

“C—C.” Adonis frowned.

“I’ll help you with the first word,” Rose said. “Corfu is the name of the island we’re on.”

“Corfu,” Adonis said. His little face scrunched. “D—D.”

“You’re doing fine. Keep going,” Rose encouraged.

Nefeli tried to be patient, but Rose saw one sandaled toe dragging through the dirt.

A braying sound filled the morning air.

Adonis looked around. “Is that a horse?” His eyes lit up.

“No.” Rose spent a few minutes helping Adonis sound out the words on the sign.

“Corfu Donkey Rescue,” he said.

“Yes.” Rose clapped. “Good job, Adonis.”

“We’re going to see donkeys?” He turned bright eyes on her.

“Very special ones.” She took their hands and led them into the rescue center. “These donkeys were abandoned or unwanted by their owners. Some were mistreated. A wonderful English woman saw how many donkeys needed homes, and in 2004 she started this place where the donkeys can live in peace.”

“How many donkeys are there?” Nefeli asked.

“Five hundred so far.”

“That’s a lot of donkeys.” Adonis reached out to touch a gray donkey with white spots. “Can I get a pet donkey? Can we take him home?”

“You can touch him, but these donkeys need to stay here.”

“We already have donkeys and horses at home,” Nefeli said.

“But these are special. Rose said so.” Adonis stuck out his lower lip.

“Do you help take care of the donkeys at home?” Rose asked him as she rubbed her hand over the coarse hair of a brown donkey.

“Sometimes I get to help feed them. Papa only lets me ride the smallest and oldest one. He says I’m not ready for horses yet.”

“I can ride horses,” Nefeli said proudly. “Papa let me start on my seventh birthday.”

“Do you wear a helmet?” Rose asked. The idea of one of these precious children being hurt by a fall from a donkey or horse worried her.

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“Always,” Nefeli said. “The stable man won’t let us ride without one.”

“Good.” Rose silently blessed the stable man.

They wandered through the rescue center for nearly an hour, and since the day hadn’t grown too hot yet, the children were allowed to walk one donkey each.

Rose took several pictures so Mr. P could see them, but she loved the look on their faces, especially Adonis’s. He beamed with pride, showing the dimple in his left cheek.

“I’m hot,” Nefeli said.

“Then I think we should go for a swim,” Rose said.

They piled into the car, and Plutus drove them to their next scheduled destination.

“That isn’t the hotel.” Adonis pointed at the sign by the entrance. “I thought we were going to swim.”

Rose ruffled his hair. “We are, but not at the hotel.”

They clambered from the car, not waiting for Plutus to get the door. He removed a bag from the trunk and handed it to Rose.

“Thank you, Plutus.”

“Where are we?” Adonis looked up at her.

“Aqualand,” Rose said.

“Aqualand!” Adonis jumped up and down and repeated the name over and over.

Rose quickly calmed him, and they entered the water park.

A staff member led them to their daybed under a large umbrella providing plenty of shade. After a quick trip to the bathroom and changing area, Rose slathered them all in sunscreen.

“Where do you want to start?” she asked the children.

“The slide,” they chorused.

Rose followed the children around the play area. They went down the slide, more times than she could count, and got dunked by the water barrel. She learned every inch of the pirates’ cove.

Under protest, she pulled the children from the play area to feed them and reapply sunscreen before they plunged back into the water activities. Rose would’ve liked a float along the lazy river, but the children were too young.

They stayed until closing. Plutus picked them up and returned them to the hotel.

“Shall we have food brought to the room and watch a movie?” Rose asked. This way she could get the children bathed and in their pajamas instead of dressing them in clothes to eat at one of the areas in the hotel.

“Can we have a picnic?” Nefeli asked.

Personally, Rose was all done with the sun, but the children's happiness came first. She thought of a compromise. "Why don't we eat at the outdoor café?" They could all go in their suits and then get clean and ready for bed. "You can pick out my dinner again." She hoped, by sweetening the deal, to avoid taking picnic supplies to the beach.

"Okay."

For dinner, the children ordered herpastissada. Rose enjoyed the hearty red-wine stew served with pasta, but thought it would've been better to eat in winter instead of on a hot summer day. She would've liked to try the fishbianco. She'd get another chance.

After dinner, they all got cleaned up. As Rose was reading Adonis his bedtime story and having him sound out a few words, a knock came at the door.

She opened the door, and Stavros and Mr. P entered.

Rose didn't realize how much she'd missed seeing Stavros until he stood before her. She was struck again by his handsome features.

"We came to say goodnight," Mr. P said. "Sorry we missed having dinner with you. Work ran long."

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In a whisper, Stavros asked her, “Would you like to take a walk along the beach for a few minutes?”

Rose hesitated.

“I cleared it with Mr. P,” he added.

She was exhausted but couldn’t turn down the chance to spend some time with Stavros. “Yes.”

Assured of permission, and that the children would be in the capable hands of their father, Rose put on her sandals.

“Children, I’ll be back shortly.” She gave them each a hug and kiss. “Remember, I’m here if you need me in the night.”

She left the room, with Stavros, and they went to the beach.

Stavros led her away from the lights of more hotels and toward the empty beach, the peaceful serenity broken only by the waves lapping against the sandy shore.

She half-wished he’d take her hand and then chided herself for being a ninny. She had known him only a handful of days. Where was her head? She knew better than to be swept away in a staff romance. Too many times she’d seen the aftermath of workplace romances run amok between actors, actresses, and the crew on the movie sets. Look at what had happened between Maddie and Paul on the vampire versus werewolf film.

Stavros broke into her thoughts. “How was your day?”

“Adonis loved the donkey rescue. I’m working with him on his reading. I noticed Nefeli reads for him, and I’d like him to make more progress.”

He nodded. “You’re observant too.”

“At some things.” She traced the outline of his profile with her eyes and her heart sped up. He was a fine looking man. “I noticed the children call you Papa. A strange nickname to be sure. Why is that?”

Stavros stopped, leaned down, and rolled up his pants, and walked through the water up to his ankles. He cleared his throat. “Papa is short for Papadakis.”

Rose couldn’t hide her surprise. “You’re related?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Cousins or something, I suppose.” She tapped her chin with her index finger.

“Mmm.”

“Ah.” Rose turned over this new piece of information. Brothers in arms. Relations. No wonder the children were so familiar with Stavros. The situation made more sense. With their father gone so much and Stavros as head of security and Mr. P’s assistant, the children probably saw more of him than of their own papa.

“I apologize for not explaining further when you arrived,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be staying.”

“Of course. And I’m only here a short time until my sister can either take my place or

find you a permanent nanny.”

“How is your sister? I was sorry to hear about her foot when she called to explain about the change. She seems like an exceptional woman.”

Rose thought she heard him say under his breath, “Much like you.” But she wasn’t certain and didn’t want to ask in case that wasn’t what he’d said. “My sister is recovering from her ankle sprain. I wonder what she was thinking when she chose to cliff dive in Italy. She’s not usually much of a risk taker.”

“We all lose our heads from time to time.”

She laughed. “I doubt very much if you ever lose your head, Stavros.”

“I’m not perfect, Rose.” He paused to look at her. “I’m human, and I make mistakes.”

There was something strange about the look in his eyes in the half-light. His humility made him more attractive to her, making her insides turn gooey.

“The best I can hope for is that when I make mistakes, they have minimal impact on those I care most about.” He resumed walking.

Rose watched him for a moment, taking in the strong bearing of his shoulders and the definition of his calf muscles before catching up. She laid a hand on his arm. “I think that’s the most any of us can hope for, along with forgiveness.” Tingles graced her fingers at the point of contact.

“Do you forgive easily?”

“Most of the time.”

“Except when it comes to the wealthy,” he said.

She removed her hand as old wounds reared their ugly heads. “You don’t understand.”

“I’d like to.”

She ran a hand across her eyes. “I’m too tired to explain.” True, but it sounded like a weak excuse.

“Another time, perhaps. We’ll head back.” He reversed direction.

Rose kept her eyes on her toes as she walked through the sand and water. She didn’t look forward to explaining her past encounters and why they’d left a bad taste in her mouth when it came to the wealthy. Stavros might think less of her afterward. She’d tried in her heart to forgive her husband’s family. Apparently she still needed to make progress.

CHAPTER FIVE

Delphi

Leo missed the children . . . and Rose. He checked the time on his phone again and leaned his head against the leather car seat. Only two minutes since he last checked, and only five minutes before he’d be reunited with Nefeli, Adonis, and Rose.

“Anything I can do for you?” the real Stavros asked.

“Stavros, you can do many impossible things, but speeding up time isn’t one of them.” He flipped his phone in his hands and shifted under Stavros’s study.

“You’re always happy to see the children, but you’re anticipating seeing Rose.” He gave a small smirk.

Leo sometimes wished his head of security and closest friend wasn’t so observant and astute. “Yes,” he confessed. As much as he loved the olive groves—touching the waxy leaves and smelling the olives being pressed—olives couldn’t compete with his family. And he was already grouping Rose in with the children—something he hadn’t done with the previous nanny who’d been with him since Adonis was born. He’d been surprised when she announced her elopement and resignation, but had wished her well.

Rose had been with them a week, and her effect on him was earthshaking.

“How long before you tell her who you really are?” Stavros asked.

Leo flipped the phone over and over. “I don’t know. I want to understand her better before she learns who I really am. I don’t want her to shut me out when she learns I’m a billionaire.”

“You should tell her sooner rather than later. The longer you wait, the harder it’ll be, the worse she’ll take it.”

Leo frowned. “You didn’t see her face that first day when she spoke about the wealthy. There was revulsion and deep disgust. I want to know what happened to form her opinion. Once I know her past, I can work to change her opinion of me in the present.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” Stavros warned. “I still think you should’ve been honest with her from the start and explained why we perform this charade of you as security and me as Mr. Papadakis. Tula didn’t have a problem with it.”

“Tula was there from the beginning. I think a stranger would find my reasons ludicrous.”

Stavros shrugged. “You could come out of the mysterious reclusive shadows to take your place in the world.”

“I won’t risk the children. I can barely hang on to my own sanity when the gold diggers come calling. You saw what happened after . . .” My wife died. He left the last three words unspoken.

“I remember,” Stavros said. “I’m surprised Rose didn’t figure out your true identity after the children called you Papa. Whatdidyou tell her?”

“That it’s short for Papadakis.”

Stavros shook his head. “The gray area between truth and lies.”

The car pulled to a stop.

“We’re here.” Leo exited and held the door open for Stavros.

Stavros stood and straightened his jacket, and they entered the hotel in Delphi.

Upon entering the suite, Leo was unprepared for the lurch his heart gave at seeing Rose. She looked even lovelier than two days ago, if that was possible. Her hair was damp from a recent shower, and the waves were starting to curl.

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Upon seeing Leo, she pulled her hair back into a loose knot at the base of her neck, drawing his eyes to the delicate spot where her neck and shoulders met. Her loose peasant blouse dipped down on one side, exposing a sun-kissed shoulder as she bent to scoop up a few of Adonis's toy soldiers.

Leo fought the urge to run his fingertips over her tempting skin and trace the light freckles.

She straightened and shifted her top to cover her shoulder, and Leo wished she hadn't bothered. He liked seeing this more casual side of her, dressed in shorts and barefoot. White nail polish adorned her toes, making them stand out against the plush beige carpet. Her comfort level around Nefeli and Adonis reminded him of Nia.

A memory of Nia and Nefeli crawling around the floor sprang upon him. Nia's curls fell into her eyes as she pretended to trumpet like an elephant, her swollen belly pulled nearly to the carpet by gravity. Nefeli trumpeted in reply and she swung her arm in front of her face like a trunk. They were playing zoo only a few days before Adonis was born. Nia was gone a week later.

The happy memory mixed with the sorrow of losing his wife, and he felt moisture prick at his eyes. He blinked rapidly to shoo the tears away, hoping they went unnoticed.

Rose stowed the soldiers in a small drawstring bag and set the bag on the coffee table.

The children dashed into Leo's arms with a cry of "Papa."

He hugged his kids before they turned their greetings to Stavros.

Leo needed to score some one-on-one time with his children and with Rose but wasn't sure how to do it without arousing her suspicion.

Perceptive as always, Stavros said, "I have some work to attend to. But before I go, tell me about your adventures. Did you have a good day?"

"Yes, we went to Del-pie," said Adonis.

"Delphi," Rose said. "Remember the f sound in the middle. Try again, Adonis."

Leo was impressed by Rose's gentle correction of his son's mispronunciation.

"Delphi." Adonis looked at Rose for confirmation.

She smiled at him. "Very good."

Adonis beamed back at her.

"And what was your favorite thing about Delphi?" Leo asked.

Stavros sat on the couch, and so did Leo. Rose took a chair, and Adonis sat on her lap. Nefeli landed on the floor cross-legged and pulled out some paper doll dresses to color. The tip of her tongue poked out of her mouth as she concentrated—a trait she'd picked up from her mother.

"I liked the rocks," Adonis said.

"He climbed quite a few of them at Delphi and at the temple of Apollo." Rose ruffled his hair.

“I liked Apollo better,” said Adonis. “The rocks were flat, and I could walk on top of them.”

“What about you, Nefeli?” Leo asked.

Without looking up, she answered, “I liked the theater.”

“We climbed every stair!” Adonis jumped off Rose’s lap.

Leo couldn’t help but smile.

“Yes, we did,” Rose said. “Lots of stones are required to seat five thousand people, and I think we walked on every one of them. Do you remember what we found at the top?”

“The Olympics!” Adonis ran around the room with a triumphant arm up.

Leo imagined him carrying a torch.

“Almost.” Rose laughed.

Leo liked the sound of her laughter, pure and lighthearted.

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“The stadium, where they hosted games similar to the Olympics.” In a lower voice, she said to the men. “I think we’ll have to straighten out a little of his history later.”

“I want to be an Olympian,” Adonis proclaimed, hands on hips and legs spread wide.

“In which event?” Leo asked, amused by his son’s antics.

Adonis’s expression turned thoughtful, and he looked to Rose, as if for guidance.

She beckoned to Adonis, who walked over to her. “That’s a tough question. There are summer and winter Olympics to choose from. Shall we do some research, find out what events there are, and then choose a few you’re excited about?”

He nodded. “Can I fire my cannons now?”

“Sure.”

Adonis clambered to the floor and dumped out the bag of soldiers and a smaller bag Leo hadn’t noticed.

Leo raised a brow at Rose.

Adonis emptied toy canons which clattered against the marble table. He lined them up in rows facing each other and then mounted the canons behind the soldiers, with a soldier attending each cannon.

Rose explained, “On our way back, we passed through a charming part of town full

of shops, including a toy shop. He spotted the cannons, and I bought them. I hope that's alright." She fidgeted with her wedding band.

The barest of glances at Stavros indicated Leo's answer.

"That's fine," Stavros answered.

"He may need a cavalry or a navy in the future," Leo added, and Rose's fidgeting stopped.

Stavros stood. "I'll check in with you later. Thank you, Rose for taking care of the children."

She nodded and began to stand.

He waved her down. "I'll see myself out. The children look happy. That's what I care about."

"I took lots of pictures." Rose pointed to her tablet, which had become a tactical feature in Adonis's table war.

"Thank you. I'll see you all before bed." He exited the hotel room with a wave.

A slight frown deepened Rose's features.

Leo decided her frown was the one expression he wanted to banish from her countenance.

"I still don't understand him," she said.

"Care to show me the pictures?" Leo asked.

She nodded and moved from the chair to the couch. She reached for her tablet.

“We can view them on mine.” Leo indicated Adonis. “We wouldn’t want to ruin his game. He and Nefeli seem quite engrossed.”

She agreed.

With a few swipes and taps, Leo pulled up the shared photo album on his tablet.

As Rose shared the pictures with him, the children gathered around, exclaiming about what they’d liked and disliked at each point of interest.

“Here’s the treasury,” Rose said.

Adonis scowled. “There wasn’t a single pirate, and I didn’t find any treasure. Just a bunch of old rocks and columns.”

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Leo laughed and pulled his son close. “This treasury is like a bank, not a place for pirate treasure.”

“The Grecians used it to keep dedications and votive offerings. Those items were treasure to them,” Rose explained.

“I like pirate treasure better.” Adonis slid back to the floor and commenced firing the cannons.

“I’m sure you’ll have other chances to explore places pirates might’ve been,” Leo said. “There are several islands to explore on the itinerary.”

“I wanted to see if the cave had pirate treasure.” Adonis looked up briefly. “But Rose said we couldn’t go.”

“The cave is a three and a half hour hike through the forest, not to mention I wasn’t sure of the safety of the climb or the cave. A visit would be an all-day affair,” Rose said. “We had many sights to see, and by the end, the kids wanted a break from the heat with a cool dip in the pool.”

“I’m sure a swim was refreshing,” Leo said. He got down on the floor with his son and moved the soldiers around. “Rose was right about not visiting the cave today. We’ll go in a few years when you and Nefeli are a bit older and your bodies are strong enough for the hike. Then you can make the trip there and back.”

Adonis frowned. “I’m strong.” He pumped an arm muscle.

“Yes, you are wonderfully strong for a four-year-old.”

“I don’t want to see the cave,” Nefeli said. “What’s so exciting about a dark hole in the ground?”

Leo bit back his laugh.

“There could be bears in there,” Adonis said.

Rose looked at Leo. “Are there bears in Greece?”

He nodded. “Brown bears live in the far north part of the country.” He said to Adonis, “I’m afraid bears wouldn’t live in the cave.”

“Pirates?”

“Not those either.”

“Oh.” Adonis yawned. “I don’t want to see the cave then.”

Rose hid a smile behind her hand.

“Have you eaten dinner?” Leo asked.

“We were going to order in since we’re all clean,” Rose said.

Leo pulled up the menu and, after a few minutes of consultation with Rose and the children, placed the order.

“Can we make a fort?” Adonis asked.

Rose looked around the room. “I think we can manage it if we rearrange the furniture. We’ll need some help though.” She turned to Leo. “Are you up for eating in a fort or do you have duties to perform?”

“I have time,” Leo said. Truthfully, he had quite a bit of mail waiting in his inbox, but he’d forgo a few hours of sleep to spend time with his kids and Rose. He could nap tomorrow while they traveled to Nafplion or go to bed on time and work in the car. He was sorry he wouldn’t be in the same car as Rose and the kids, but he had a conference call and needed the quiet. Plus he didn’t want to burden the children with being silent while he was on the call.

Building a fort was the best use of his time in this moment. His children were always his priority. He hoped Rose would recognize those moments when the time came to tell her who he really was. Stavros was right. He needed to reveal the truth sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER SIX

Nafplion Part I

Rose used the morning car ride to brush up on her Greek, with the children’s help, while also teaching them French. They used English as their common language to communicate, though Rose tried to incorporate as many Greek words as she could.

When the children tired of learning, and after a scuffle over a paper doll that resulted in a ripped-off-head and tears from both Nefeli and Adonis, Rose put on movies. Nefeli chose a Barbie movie, while Adonis watched the latest Pixar film.

With peace restored, Rose was free to watch the scenery pass by the window and let her mind wander. Her thoughts naturally turned to Stavros, and a light warmth traveled through her as she reflected on her fort experience.

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With a little muscle, they'd maneuvered the couch and chairs to form a box, then she and the children hauled all their bed covers to the main space to erect the roof. Stavros arranged for extra blankets to be brought up with the food. Once the roof was secured, he brought in a lamp so they could see. Little traces of the setting sun's rays crept in across the floor and penetrated tiny chinks where blankets didn't quite overlap.

Adonis bemoaned the lack of a flashlight before digging into his chicken.

The delicious fare couldn't distract Rose from the touch of Stavros's leg against hers and the occasional bump of his shoulder while he ate. Rose was hyperaware of Stavros's proximity. Every accidental brush set little sparklers off in her body. The reflection of the lamplight in his dark eyes drew her in. She wished she knew what secrets he kept hidden, what the rest of his untold story was. She blamed the heat inside the fort, sealing in their carbon dioxide, but she knew her elevated temperature had everything to do with the handsome, caring man beside her.

A sound drew her attention, ending her reminiscence of the previous night.

Adonis was chewing on his headphone cords.

Rose fished gum out of her bag and handed one piece to Adonis and another to Nefeli. She spent the rest of the car ride reminding Adonis to keep his gum in his mouth—he liked to stretch it out in one long piece with his fingers—and failing at not thinking of the attractive-in-more-than-one-way Stavros.

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Rose stepped from the private villa onto the sand and wiggled her toes. An afternoon on the beach sounded wonderful after the long car ride. She hefted the picnic basket in one arm and shouldered the beach bag on the other.

Nefeli dragged a bucket of toys through the sand, leaving a smooth trail in her wake.

Adonis raced past them both and jumped into the edge of a wave lapping onto shore. He gave a whoop.

“Let me give you a hand,” Stavros said, appearing beside her.

She startled. “Oh.”

He took the picnic basket. “I knocked at the door, but when no one answered, I figured you must already be here.”

“Thank you.” She rubbed at the marks on her arm from the basket handles, relieved to have the burden removed.

They put the items at the lounge chairs set up under a canopy. Rose set the blanket on the sand before spreading the picnic.

“Nefeli, Adonis, food,” she called to them.

From the water’s edge, they raced toward the blanket.

“Slow down, or you’ll get sand in your lunch.” She laughed.

Stavros took her arm and massaged away the basket handle marks.

Rose worked earnestly not to show how much the touch of his hands on her skin

affected her. A tingling sensation felt as if icy-hot cream had been applied to her arm.

The children's arrival broke the moment.

"Thank you," she murmured to Stavros. Rose turned her head, hoping to hide the blush she felt in her cheeks. She took deep, calming breaths and worked to lower her heart rate.

"You're welcome," he replied in a low voice.

Her body seemed to have a mind of its own, and butterflies emerged from their chrysalises in her stomach, fluttering happily around.

Adonis grabbed some olives, and Rose handed him a plate.

He dumped them onto the plate, and one fell off in the sand. He reached to pop it in his mouth, but Rose stopped him.

"That one isn't safe to eat now. Sand, wonderful as it is, can carry bacteria," Rose said and then buried the olive. "Rub your hands off on the towel."

Adonis did as he was told.

Rose poured all of them a generous portion of hand sanitizer. Once clean, they loaded up their plates, without letting any more olives go rogue, and enjoyed their meal.

"How was the car ride?" Stavros asked, wiping fava from the corner of his mouth.

“A small squabble, and then they watched movies.”

“Tell me about it.”

Rose recounted the incident. She ate an olive. “These are good. I wonder if they’re grown locally.”

“They are,” Stavros said.

“Where?” She looked around. Beaches, rocks, and town were all she saw.

“There’s a grove near Nafplion located in Epidauria.”

“Is the grove one of ours?” Nefeli asked.

“Can we see it?” Adonis asked.

“Yes, the grove belongs to your family,” Stavros answered the children. “I believe Papa is touring it tomorrow. Would you like to go?”

“Yes,” the siblings chorused and clapped their hands.

Stavros turned to Rose. “Would you like to see the olives?”

“I would. I think it’s a wonderful idea for the children to learn about the business they benefit from and may be a part of someday. Children should know what occupies the majority of their father’s time.”

“I’ll check with Mr. P. I think your company will be welcome. He enjoys taking Nefeli and Adonis to see the groves and see how the oil is made.”

“The press goes—,” Adonis made a squishing gesture with his hands.

“Is that your favorite part?” Rose asked, scooping up some rice.

Adonis nodded.

“I like the tasting,” Nefeli supplied. “I like the different flavors.”

“She’s got a talent for noticing the subtle difference in the oil,” Stavros said. “Her mother did too.”

Nefeli beamed.

“A wonderful asset in the olive oil business to be sure,” Rose said. “What about Adonis? Any emerging olive talents yet?”

“Not yet. He’s more drawn to the dirt and trees. He may be more like his father that way. He likes to watch the growth and find out how to keep the trees healthy and strong. Time will tell.”

“May we get in the water, please?” Adonis clasped his hands together in front of his chest and shook them.

“Let’s reapply our sunscreen and tidy up. Then we may get in,” Rose said. She applied sunscreen to each of the children and stowed the picnic in the basket.

“You need sunscreen too,” Nefeli pointed out.

Rose removed her cover-up, conscious of this being the first time Stavros saw her in a swimsuit. She wore modest one-piece suits these days. She'd hung up her bikinis a few years back. She simply didn't feel the need to display that much flesh on the beach. Marriage had changed her in more than one way.

She tried to ignore Stavros's gaze as she took the sunscreen from Nefeli and coated her skin.

"Let me help." Stavros took the bottle from her, sprayed her back, and rubbed in the sunscreen.

Rose couldn't ignore the sensations his fingertips caused to shoot through her as the lotion penetrated her skin. "Thank you," she managed to say without too much betrayal of her feelings in her tone.

"I want to help, Papa," Adonis said.

Stavros smiled at the boy. "One moment." Stavros applied the sunscreen to his lower half and then peeled off his shirt and knelt down.

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Adonis sprayed his chest and back and then wiped the lotion into Stavros's skin.

Rose couldn't help but stare at Stavros's physique. He certainly kept to a military workout regimen if his muscles were any indication. She wondered when he found the time, since Mr. P's schedule was so rigorous.

Stavros smiled at her, and she turned away. He'd caught her staring.

She shook her shoulders. She wouldn't be the only woman staring at him on the beach. He was a fine specimen of man.

Taking the children by the hand, Rose led them all to the water.

As they neared the edge, Adonis broke away and took a big jump at the edge and splashed water on all of them.

"Oh!" Rose wiped a stray drop from her cheek.

"I love the water!" Adonis jumped up and down.

"I can see that," Rose said.

"Me too!" Nefeli plunged into the blue waves, which hit her knees.

"I'm grateful the waves are so small here," Rose said to Stavros.

"The beach is in a small bay on the Argolic Gulf which makes it fairly protected from

large or strong waves, an ideal place to come with children.”

“I agree.”

They played in the water, until Adonis tired and wanted food. Rose got him some fruit and water.

“I want to build in the sand,” Nefeli announced.

“I want to go back in the water,” Adonis declared.

Rose looked to Stavros. “Shall we divide and conquer? If you can stay, that is.”

“I can stay. Mr. P is tied up for the rest of the day.”

She raised a brow.

“I’ll take Adonis to the water, and you can build with Nefeli. Your artistic skills exceed mine.” He winked at her and scooped Adonis over his shoulder. The boy playfully protested at the fireman’s carry by pounding his little fist across Stavros’s back.

Rose laughed.

“Where should we build our castle?” Nefeli lifted the bucket of sand toys.

Rose looked longingly at the canopy. She’d prefer to take a break in the shade, but if they built under the canopy, there wouldn’t be any room left for the people. “How about there?” She pointed halfway between the canopy and the water. “Then we don’t have to haul the water so far.”

Nefeli nodded and headed to the indicated spot.

Rose followed. Upon arrival, she said, “Would you like to build something different today?”

“Like what?” Nefeli held a shovel in one hand and a pail in the other.

“I was thinking we could make a sea turtle.”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “How?”

Rose took the shovel from Nefeli and, with the end of the handle, traced an oval in the sand. “This is the shell or carapace.” Then she outlined the feet, head, and tail.

“I see it!” Nefeli clapped her hands.

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“We’ll need quite a bit of sand. Let’s get digging.” Rose stepped several feet away to dig, while Nefeli hauled pails of water to mix with the dry sand.

The body was halfway built when the boys came to join them.

Adonis liked mixing the sand the best, with digging coming in a close second. He and Stavros took over those duties, while Rose and Nefeli worked on shaping the sand into a turtle’s recognizable features.

Rose relished the feel of the dry sand mixing with the wet, the grain sifting through her fingers, sticky and exfoliating at the same time. The artist in her awakened with a sigh of satisfaction. She missed the completion her soul craved when she painted a landscape or worked on a particularly tricky bit of makeup for a film. She decided to include art into the children’s daily life. Nefeli would certainly appreciate learning new skills. Rose could see the budding artist when she watched her draw. Nefeli had potential to grow her gift, possibly even to the professional level, but Rose would withhold judgment on that idea. The girl was only seven.

With the carapace complete, Rose taught Nefeli how to draw the design using the side of a broken shell.

“Like this?” Nefeli marked out a section.

“Exactly.” Rose stepped back to let Nefeli complete the work.

The tip of Nefeli’s tongue peeked out from between her lips as she concentrated.

“Adonis, will you help me with the head?” Rose asked.

The boy raced around the turtle, nearly squashing one of the turtle’s feet, and spraying them all with sand.

“Hey!” Nefeli chided.

“Sorry.” Adonis sank to his knees. “What do I do?”

“We need to shape the sand like this.” Rose guided Adonis’s hands to form the head. “You have the most important job,” she said to him. “You get to give him eyes.”

The little boy grinned at her. “Really?”

“Really.” She plucked another nearby shell and made a little dash in the sand. “That’s all you need to do. One on each side toward the top of the head.”

Adonis put an eye on one side and then on the other. He frowned. “They don’t match.” His lower lip trembled.

One eye was higher than the other.

“Do you want them to match?” Rose asked. She wanted to know his intentions.

“Yes. Otherwise he won’t be able to swim straight.” Tears glistened in his eyes.

“Then, let’s fix it.” She pulled him next to her to look at the head. “Which eye is where you want it?”

He pointed to their right. “That one.”

“Okay.” She erased the other eye and patted the sand back into place. “Try again.”

Adonis was deliberate with his stroke. His eyebrows knit together, and he threw down the shell. “It’s still wrong. I can’t do it. I keep messing up.” He wiped at his eyes with a sandy arm.

“Adonis, we all mess up, and it’s okay to make mistakes.” Rose brushed the sand from his cheeks with her thumbs. “We learn more from them than from our successes most of the time.” She erased the eye once more. “Try again. We can do his eye over and over again until you say it’s right.” She handed him the shell once more. Rose felt eyes on her and looked over.

Nefeli worked on the carapace design, ignoring them in her deep concentration.

Stavros was watching her interact with Adonis when he should have been forming the tail of the turtle.

Rose dropped her head from the intensity of his gaze and wondered what his thoughts were. She was doing her best to be a good nanny to these semineglected children in her limited time with them. Were his thoughts of admiration or judgment? She hoped they were of the former.

“How are the eyes this time?” Rose asked Adonis.

He moved his head back and forth, opening and closing one eye at a time to determine if the eyes were to his satisfaction. “I think they’re good.” A slow smile graced his face.

“Will he be able to swim straight and keep up with his turtle friends?” she asked.

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“Yes.” Adonis looked across the turtle. “What do you think, Papa?”

Stavros approached them, careful to leave the sand sculpture undisturbed.

Rose swore the temperature increased ten degrees by the time he reached her side.

He knelt by Adonis and studied the turtle’s head. “Very good work.” He patted the boy on the back. “He’ll be a fine swimmer, just like you.”

With a smile, Adonis leaned into Stavros’s side.

Rose thought they looked perfect together and wondered yet again why Stavros wasn’t Adonis’s papa. The man and boy were so familiar, so comfortable around each other. They even possessed similar features. Rose mused the likeness was due to genetics.

“I’m finished!” Nefeli spread her arms wide and looked expectantly at them.

Rose walked around the turtle to admire Nefeli’s handiwork. “Splendid, Nefeli. The design is beautiful, and your lines are so clean.”

Nefeli’s smile widened under Rose’s praise.

“He’ll be the envy of the ocean.” Stavros gave her a one-armed hug, and her smile grew, filling her face all the way up to her eyes.

Rose noticed that Stavros and Nefeli had the same nose, and chalked it up to family

ties again. “What should we name him?” Rose asked the children.

“Chelóna,” said Adonis.

“Chelóna?” Rose let the word roll around in her mouth.

“It means turtle,” Stavros supplied with a smile.

“How do we know he isn’t a she?” Nefeli asked. “I want to name herómorfo korítsi.”

Rose looked blankly at Stavros.

He smirked at her. “That translates to beautiful girl.”

“He’s a boy turtle,” Adonis said.

Nefeli put her hands on her hips. “She’s a girl.”

Rose sensed a storm brewing between the children, each wanting their name for the turtle to be chosen.

Stavros seemed to read the signs as well and suggested, “How aboutómorfo chelóna?”

The children looked doubtfully at him.

“The only way to know for sure is to flip the turtle upside-down and check its belly.” Rose bent down as if to grab the underside of the shell and turn the sculpture over.

“No!” Adonis ran to her and tugged on one arm.

“All our hard work!” Nefeli grabbed Rose’s other arm.

The three of them tumbled back into the sand.

“Omorfo chelónait is then.” Stavros extended his hand to help Rose up.

She took his hand, all her senses flaring to life. Her foot slipped as she rose, and she landed, palms first, onto his chest. His shirtless chest. Oh my. The bare touch of his skin under her fingertips had her neurons firing on overdrive. Many years had passed since she’d been held, even in mishap, by a man. And this wasn’t any man. Stavros was an inch shy of Greek-god status. He wasn’t in body-builder shape, but his muscles had definition, carved from years of disciplined exercise.

He gripped her by the elbows and helped her secure her footing. “Are you alright?” he asked in a low, husky voice.

“Yes, you broke my fall nicely.” She tried for a bit of light humor to distract Stavros from reading the emotions she felt sure were displayed on her face. Rose dared to raise her eyes to meet his. Mistake. She was prepared to see many things in those deep brown orbs: amusement, irritation, indifference, even rejection. But compassion laced with desire left her gulping and breathless.

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He let go with a trace of reluctance.

Rose blinked. What had happened? What was happening between them? Was she developing amorous feelings for a co-worker? And the head of security for a billionaire at that. Certainly a relationship between her and Stavros wouldn't sit well with Mr. P. Not only that, but she wasn't intended to be here long, only until her sister healed and could take her place or a permanent nanny could be found in the meantime.

Flustered by her body's response and the thoughts swirling in her brain, Rose turned her focus on the children. A safe area. Her goal there was to love them and help them learn. Clear parameters. No temptation to get lost in deep brown eyes there.

"Are you okay, Rose?" Adonis asked.

"Yes, thank you." She brushed sand off her legs. "With the turtle finished, how about we go for a swim?"

Adonis raced toward the water before she finished the words swim, with Nefeli right behind him.

Rose chased after them and didn't look back to see if Stavros followed. She wasn't sure she could ever look in those eyes again and not be lost to Stavros's charms.

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Leo was in trouble. And he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to get out of it.

He paced the length of his grand villa, up and down, up and down. An early morning run would give him the air and space he needed. He jogged down the steps to the sand and continued at a steady pace along the surf and shoreline. He knew Stavros would follow him. That man instinctively knew when Leo needed breathing room and when he needed a sounding board.

Leo hadn't slept much. After spending the afternoon on the beach with the children and Rose, he'd still put in several hours of work after the kids went to bed. When he lay down to sleep, dreams of Rose filled his brain. Particularly one in which he helped Rose from the sand, and she fell against his chest. Then he dipped his head and captured her tantalizing lips in his. The intense ardor he felt between them had him reeling. He hadn't felt this way since he met his wife. No woman since had captured him the way Rose did.

Birds circled overhead, squawking in the morning sun, which glittered on the bay, momentarily pulling him from his thoughts. He took the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the sunrise, the sounds of the morning, and the feel of the waves against his ankles as he splashed through them.

Inevitably, his mind returned to Rose. He admired the way she cared for his children—her patience and desire to teach them and to learn from them. Nefeli and Adonis were learning French from her, and in turn they taught her Greek. Her Greek was coming along. He probably should've started tutoring the children in another language a couple of years ago. The earlier they started, the more proficient they'd be.

A sharp piece of shell struck the bottom of his foot. "Ow!" He hopped on one foot and moved from the water. Flopping down on the sand, he examined the pad below his big toe. No blood, though the area might be tender for a day or two. From the corner of his eye, he saw Stavros watching with an inquisitive eyebrow raised. Leo waved him off.

He stood, tested the injury, and commenced jogging with little inconvenience.

He couldn't develop amorous feelings for Rose. He was her employer, even if she didn't know that. Actually he didn't want her to know. Leo feared it would change the relationship between them. He needed to change her point of view about the wealthy first. Maybe then she'd be more accepting of his status and his feelings for her.

Leo shook his head and redirected his course back toward the villa. What was he thinking? Moments ago he'd reminded himself why he couldn't be in a relationship with Rose, and here he was hoping to contemplate a future with her.

He should probably put some physical distance between them, but that was impossible with the children coming to visit the olive grove. Of course, he could give Rose the day off . . . but he wanted her to see the grove and learn about his business and why he was so passionate about olive oil production.

Before approaching the villa, he paused to stretch his muscles.

Stavros appeared at his side with a water bottle. "A good jog."

"How many miles?" Leo took the bottle and downed half the contents.

"Three."

"Three? We're getting soft."

"Speak for yourself." A brief smile graced Stavros's face. He looked over the bay. "You like her."

Leo scowled. "How do you know?"

“I’ve been watching you together. I saw what happened yesterday.”

“And?”

“It’s my job to observe you and keep you safe from all harm, internal or external.”

“You sound like the military handbook.” Leo switched to push-ups, still too much pent up energy sizzling under his skin.

“It’s what you pay me to do.”

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“You think Rose is a threat?” Leo asked.

“Not to you or the children physically. I don’t think she’d hurt a soul.”

Stavros was talking in riddles. “Make your point,” he barked.

“She might be a threat to your heart.” He paused and then added, “And you might be a threat to hers.”

Leo flipped onto his back to do crunches and to see Stavros better. “You think she likes me?”

“I do.”

Leo’s heart gave a little leap. “What’s so wrong with that?”

“I watched you lose one woman you loved. I’m not sure how well you would survive another. Plus you’re her boss, and there are the children to consider.”

“Don’t you think I know all of that?” Leo snapped. He increased his pace, irritated with himself for losing his temper.

Stavros’s placid expression didn’t change. “All of that being said, I don’t think you’ll find a better woman.”

“What?” Leo propped himself up on his elbows and straightened his legs.

“You heard me. If I found a woman like Rose, I’d marry her and leave you in a heartbeat.”

“Nice loyalty.” Leo resumed his crunches.

“You’ve put yourself in a difficult position with the secret identity.”

“I know.” Leo exhaled through two crunches.

“We’ve been in tight spots before. You’ll find your way out.”

“I hope she still likes me after she learns the truth.”

“I think she will, though I’d bet she’ll be spitting mad. You might be in the doghouse for a bit.” Stavros smirked.

“So you’re telling me to go for it?”

“I hardly think you need my blessing. I’m your friend, not your father.”

“But?” Leo asked.

“I’m saying, follow your instincts.” Stavros stretched his arms over his head.

“They’ve always served you well in the past. Saved our lives a time or two.” He held out his hand to help Leo up.

Leo took it. At eye level with Stavros he said, “Your instincts saved us too. Thanks for having my back.”

“Always.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nafplion Part II

Rose was excited and curious to see the foundations of the Papadakis empire on their olive-grove tour. Skirts were preferable in Greece for summer, but she decided leg cover was more important when hiking through who-knew-what-length-of-grass to see the trees. So she'd opted for linen pants—wonderfully breathable—and sturdy, fashionable shoes.

Dressed, fed, and coated in sunscreen, Rose and the children presented themselves at the curb of the hotel to meet Mr. P and Stavros.

Rose thought Stavros looked even more handsome with his skin darkened another shade from sun exposure. She blushed, thinking of her hands on his bare chest, and turned her head, hoping Stavros didn't see the blush.

The car ride didn't take long, though Rose wished the seating arrangements were different. Stavros sat up front and Mr. P sat in back with her and the children. They made stilted small talk, with the children carrying the majority of the load of conversation.

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Rose's employer was cordial but aloof. She didn't know that she'd ever truly like him. He seemed too unapproachable, though clearly he cared for the children. What an enigma her employer was.

"The trees!" Adonis pointed at the tinted window.

Sure enough, olive trees could be seen on one side of the road. They passed a sign marked Epidauria, and soon the car pulled into a charming village.

"The view is worth stopping for," Mr. P said.

They piled out of the car.

"You're right about the view." She shaded her eyes with one hand and took in the scenery. Endless olive groves surrounded the quaint village, reminding her of a picture she'd seen in a fairy tale book.

"Do you like it?" Stavros asked quietly from just behind her.

She almost jumped. Rose hadn't noticed him sneak up behind her as she stood in awe of the scene. His nearness caused a spike in her pulse, and she was fully aware of how close he stood. She even thought she detected mint on his breath.

"I do. It's beautiful."

"Can we see the trees now?" Adonis tugged on Stavros's hand.

“Of course.” Stavros gestured for them all to load up the car.

After a short ride through the sea of trees, they arrived at an olive mill.

An older, weathered man in work boots met them. “Good morning.” He shook all of their hands, kissing Rose’s hand on the back. “We’re delighted to have you with us.” He bent down to the children’s level. “I’m Titos. Welcome to my grove.”

“Can we climb the trees?” Adonis looked around eagerly.

“Maybe.” Titos gave him a wink.

“Would you like to take a walk first or inspect the mill?” He directed the question to the men, who stood side by side.

Rose couldn’t discern which man he spoke to directly. Odd. Mr. P owned the business, so all shop talk should be directed at him. But then Stavros probably knew almost as much about olives as Mr. P since he accompanied him on his business trips and inspections.

She took the children’s hands and followed the men into the grove. “We could get lost in here if we wander off. All the trees look the same. Make sure to stay where you can hear and see me.”

The children nodded solemnly.

“Papa would never let us stay lost,” Nefeli said. “He’d come find us.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” said Rose. “But let’s not test that theory or we’ll miss the other scheduled activities.” She released their hands. “Remember what I said.”

The children stuck close. Adonis immediately found a stick and swung it as he walked, sometimes poking it in the ground.

Rose noted that Adonis didn't use it to hit the trunks or branches of the trees, as most boys his age would do. He'd been taught to respect the trees. They were his legacy.

The men were a few steps ahead of her, and bits and pieces of their conversation floated back to her.

"How does the harvest look this year?" Stavros asked.

"Good, for the most part," Titos said. "There's a blight on a small section of the grove but we're treating it. The blight should have minimal impact on the crop."

"But if it spreads . . ." Stavros tapped an index finger on his chin. "Keep me posted. Please send me weekly reports. If the blight doesn't respond to treatment then we can bring in a specialist to consult." He put a hand on Titos shoulder. "But I doubt we'll need to take such measures. You have as much knowledge as any grower I know."

"This grove has been in my family for nine generations," Titos said proudly. "Thank you for your confidence in my abilities. We'll come through."

The men clapped hands.

Adonis captured Rose's attention.

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“Look at me!” Adonis swung upside down from a tree branch five feet off the ground.

“You’re quite a little monkey.” Rose moved close in case he should fall. “How are you going to get down?”

A puzzled expression marked the boy’s features.

Rose knew she could easily help him get down quickly. But she reasoned that it was better in the long run to teach Adonis how to problem solve. “Can you reach up to grab the branch?”

Adonis swung to reach but fell short. His knees wobbled on the branch. “No.” A little bit of panic crept into his eyes.

“I’ll hold your feet, and you try again.”

He nodded and swung. His little fingers scraped against the bark but didn’t grab hold. “I can’t do it,” he said.

“Yes, you can. Try one more time. I won’t let you fall.”

Adonis screwed up his face and swung once more. This time his hands gripped the branch. “I got it!”

Rose let go of his knees.

With his feet oriented to the ground, Adonis dropped from the branch and landed on the grass.

“Are you hurt at all?” Rose asked.

Adonis stood and wiped his hands on his shorts. “Nope.”

She took his hand and turned around.

Everyone stared at them.

Rose gave a little wave and felt embarrassment inflame her cheeks.

“I think we’re ready to see the mill,” Mr. P said to Titos. “There’ll be less temptation to climb the trees there.”

The group headed back the way they’d come.

Stavros fell in step beside Rose. “You made an interesting choice back there.”

“Is Mr. P upset?” Rose chewed her lower lip. Had he mistaken her teaching moment for careless negligence?

“No. Merely curious as to why you didn’t rush to Adonis and pluck him off the tree. That’s what most people would’ve done.”

Rose’s defenses went up. “First of all, if I’d panicked and yelled, that might’ve scared Adonis into losing his grip on the branch. Second of all, he needs to learn how to get himself out of a sticky situation on his own. At some point, all children grow up. Before he leaves the nest, Adonis needs to learn independence and how to trust his judgment so he can be confident in his abilities. Coddling or helicopter parenting is a

disservice to the child. Not that there's much danger of that in this situation. Sometimes I wonder if the children even know if Mr. P loves them." The words were out before she'd thought them through. She'd let her prejudice against the wealthy get ahead of clear thinking. Again.

Stavros's mouth formed a grim line. "You think the children don't know their father loves them."

She ran a hand through her waves. "I apologize for what I said. I think the children do know they're loved. I have difficulty seeing the way he shows affection to them."

"Ah."

Rose didn't think Stavros understood, and his lack of clarity was her fault. "Please forget the last part of what I said." As he skipped along, she called to Adonis. "Not so fast. Careful of the tree roots." She paused at a tree and rubbed a leaf between her fingertips. "The leaves are a pretty silver green," Rose remarked in an attempt to divert the conversation away from her blunder.

"They are." Stavros sighed. "I wish to understand this animosity you have toward Mr. P."

"I don't know him well enough to harbor ill feelings toward him."

"And yet you lash out at him and all in his financial class. Why? Won't you tell me, Rose?"

Rose sighed and set out after the children, who were ahead with their father and Titos. They were her responsibility. She needed to look after them and focus on her job, instead of on the man who sent her heart aflutter. "I'll tell you soon." A truthful but vague answer.

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Stavros shook his head. “Very diplomatic. I guess that’s all I can expect when I pry into your personal life.”

“You haven’t divulged much about your personal life. Why should you know about mine? Besides, you already have my background check.”

“True. But that doesn’t tell me how or why you became the woman you are walking beside me. The facts are there. The life experiences that molded and shaped you are not. I want to know the answers to the mystery embodied in Rose.”

“Are you willing to do the same?” She quirked an eyebrow at him.

His gaze stretched ahead to the men and children. “I think I am.” Stavros turned toward her. “I’d like to ask you on a proper date. Will you come?”

“Yes,” she said. The expression on his chiseled face had her heart fluttering overtime. So much for not mixing business with pleasure. If Stavros didn’t see a problem with taking their friendship up a level, then why should she?

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Rose watched Adonis pick at the scab on his knee. He’d’ fallen halfway up the nine hundred and ninety-nine steps at the Palamidi castle, after they left the olive grove. Stavros carried him the remaining four hundred and three steps to the top.

The view was stunning. The city, the bay, the boats, and the trees all formed a glorious vista worthy of the gods. Adonis was delighted to learn Achilles had been

there. Any Greek hero was Adonis's hero.

"Leave your scab alone." Rose gently removed his hand from his knee. "Let's put some more medicine on it so it can heal and not leave a scar."

"What's a scar?" Adonis asked.

Rose opened the tube of antibiotic ointment and applied the gel to his skin. "A scar is a place on your body that gets hurt, and when the skin heals back together, it doesn't quite look smooth after. You can always tell where the injury happened."

"Like Papa and Stavros. They have scars."

"Yes," she said. Both men bore marks from their military days, though Mr. P had more than Stavros. "We've already been on a boat to see Bourtzi. I thought we might paint." Mr. P had supplies delivered while they were on the boat.

"Paint?" Adonis scrunched up his nose. "I don't know how to paint."

"I'll teach you."

"And me too?" Nefeli popped up from where she'd been coloring on the bed.

"Of course. We'll start with water colors. They won't ruin your clothes."

Nefeli set her paper and colored pencils aside. "What will we paint?"

"Anything we see that looks interesting."

"An olive?" Adonis asked.

“The beach?” Nefeli inquired.

“Both sound great. Do you want to paint in here, out on the beach, somewhere in the hotel?”

“We can paint anywhere?”

“Sure. We only need cups of water. Your papa had all the supplies delivered while we were out.”

The children looked at each other. “Beach.”

After putting on sunscreen, they quickly gathered their supplies and headed out to the sand.

Rose helped the children set up their small easels and clipped paper to them. After a five-minute lesson on how to use the paint and how to use some simple tricks that might help them bring their intended subjects to life, she let them loose.

Adonis painted a beach ball, an olive, and a tree before Nefeli had completed her first picture.

Rose wasn’t surprised. She’d expected Nefeli to be more absorbed by the project.

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Nefeli frowned. "I can't get the color right."

Rose stepped behind her. "Don't be afraid to mix or layer the colors. Here." She brought Nefeli over to her easel and put a fresh sheet of paper on it. In two spots on the page, Rose showed her what she meant by each technique. "Try it out on mine first, then apply the ideas to your painting."

"Can we play catch?" Adonis handed Rose a ball.

"Sure."

They moved away from the art area to protect the space from any rogue balls.

Rose kept Adonis entertained by seeing how many steps apart they could toss the ball before one of them missed or how many times they could catch the ball in a row.

"Rose, come see," Nefeli called.

Rose and Adonis strolled over.

"It's pretty," said Adonis.

"I like it too," Rose agreed.

On the page was a simple beach scene of sand, ocean, and sky, with a red beach umbrella off to one side.

“Is this any place in particular?” Rose asked.

“Home,” Nefeli said. “I miss home. When are we going there?”

“I’m not sure. Your papa is checking on several of his olive groves as we travel.”

Adonis dropped the ball in the sand and tugged on Rose’s hand. “Can we play in the water?”

“Yes,” she said to Adonis and then asked Nefeli, “Are you ready for a break?”

She nodded, and set her brush in the water cup.

The rest of the afternoon, they alternated between painting and play.

All the while, Rose wrestled with when to tell Stavros about her issues with the wealthy, and how he might react to her revelations.

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Leo drummed his fingers on his leg under the table. He had high hopes for his evening with Rose. And she looked good. Her scarlet wrap dress clung to her curves and flared out from her slim waist to stop short above the knee. She wore strappy black sandals. Her lipstick was the same shade as the dress. How did women find matching lipstick?

Rose broke the ice by saying, “Dinner on our first date. Very original.” She winked at him and placed her napkin in her lap.

Leo nodded. “I figured if the date doesn’t go well, we could at least get a good meal out of it.”

Rose chuckled. "I'm guessing you don't date much."

"No."

"I would think being Mr. P's right hand man and head of security would prevent you from having much of a personal life. You seem to be on the job 24/7."

"My job is a demanding one," he agreed and adjusted his tie.

"That's the third time you've pulled at your tie. Take it off. I don't mind."

"Unfortunately the dress code for this restaurant requires a tie. I have to leave it on, or they'll ask us to leave."

Rose frowned. "You've got to be kidding."

“No.”

Rose opened the menu and perused it.

Leo did the same but watched Rose over the top of his menu, which contained no prices. A posh boutique restaurant like this didn't bother with them. If you needed to know the price, you couldn't afford to eat here.

Rose folded her menu and set it down. She ran her hands over the leather binding with gold-leaf lettering. With a mischievous gleam in her eye she said, “I didn't see anything I like. Let's go somewhere else.”

“This is the highest-rated restaurant in Nafplion,” he said. “People usually wait months to get a table here.”

“Let me guess, Mr. P made a call, and a table suddenly opened up.”

“Yes.” Leo tugged at his tie again.

“That was very kind of him, but I don't care to eat at an establishment that cancels one person's reservation because a higher bidder comes along.” She tossed her napkin on her plate and stood. “I'm going to eat somewhere else. Are you coming?” She held out a hand to him.

Leo threw a bill down, even though they hadn't ordered, and took her hand, leaving their table behind. Rose had hijacked their date, and all of Leo's plans went out the window. Well, maybe there would still be a kiss at the end.

On the street, he asked her, “Where to?”

“We’ll wander,” she said with confidence. “We’ll find a cozy spot to eat and then let the night choose our path.”

Her ideas sounded both dangerous and exhilarating. When was the last time this billionaire father of two had thrown the itinerary away and been spontaneous? He recalled doing such things with Nia. She could always coax him into putting the business aside for a bit to live his life. He always came back rejuvenated and more productive. In fact, work seemed easier since Rose came into his life, and he spent more time seeing Greece through her eyes and devoting more time to the children.

Hand in hand, they walked.

Leo let the moment wash over him. The feel of Rose’s hand in his was natural. Her palms were smooth and provided an elegant base for her long, tapered fingers. She kept her nails trimmed, and the tips formed white crescents.

Rose turned a corner onto a quieter street. She paused in front of a small restaurant to read the menu posted in the window. “Here,” she declared.

And in they went.

A waitress asked if they wanted to eat in or out, and Rose chose out.

They passed through a small indoor dining room, with a few patrons, to a respectably sized outdoor courtyard. Large bulbs on strings hung from the trees to illuminate the space while fairy lights wound inside glass jars added to the ambiance.

The waitress seated them at a corner table under one of the trees and handed them menus before leaving to fill their drink order.

To keep himself from dwelling on the fact that he had to relinquish Rose's hand to sit down, he asked, "Did you know this place was here?"

Rose looked at him. "Of course not. I believe Greece is much like France in the fact that good local cuisine can be found around any street corner. France hasn't once let me down in satisfying the foodie in me. Why should Greece be any different? Unless you don't think Greek food is on a par with French food." She raised a brow at him in challenge.

"I agree that Greek and French food are equal." He wouldn't dare insult her homeland. Doing so would certainly put a damper on their relationship.

They read in silence until Rose set down her menu.

The waitress reappeared with their drinks, took their order, and set off for the kitchen.

She leaned her chin on one hand. "Tell me something I don't know about you."

There were a million things Leo could choose from, including his secrets, but his mind went blank. He scrambled for something, anything, to say. "I don't like octopus," he blurted and inwardly cringed.

Rose blinked. "Oh. Not what I was expecting."

Heat warmed his cheeks. What an idiotic thing to say.

"Duly noted. I will never serve you or order you octopus," she said.

"Thank you."

“Though I may get you squid.” She winked.

He groaned. “No squid either. I’m guessing you were looking for something more along the lines of what I did in my childhood.”

She shifted her shoulders. “I’m okay with the octopus answer, but I’m certainly game to hear anything you want to share with me.” The fairy lights added to the twinkle in her eyes.

“I have two parents, went to school, got into trouble once or twice as little boys will do, and spent a good deal of time swinging from olive branches.”

“I guess that runs in the family,” she said.

Leo went still inside. Had she guessed he was really Mr. P and Stavros was actually Stavros?

She continued. “You’re cousins after all.”

“Right.” Relief washed over Leo. He really needed to tell her who he was. But not on the first date. That seemed like a no-no. But then there was no rule book for billionaire widowers impersonating staff. He was making this up as he went along. And most likely botching a future with Rose. His stomach tied itself into a knot.

“That would also explain why you know so much about olive trees for a security guard,” she said.

“Naturally.” Oh, he was in trouble.

The food arrived, saving Leo from wondering how to blend the truth and lies together. He decided he’d tell her about his true past as much as possible, and so far that was what he’d done.

He dug into hissouvlaki, while she cut up her salad with gyro meat.

“Here, try this.” He held a forkful out to her.

“What is it?”

“Fried feta with honey.”

She took the bite, and Leo’s gaze got hung up on her ruby lips.

“Mmm. That’s good.” Rose wiped her mouth with her napkin.

Leo shouldn’t have picked dinner for a date. Every bite, every wipe with the napkin only drew attention to her lips. He should’ve picked something active, a hike, a walk on the beach—even if it was cliché—snorkeling, parasailing, anything that didn’t involve food.

“What about you?” Leo asked. “Anything remarkable in your childhood?”

“My parents were wonderful. We grew lemon trees outside our home. Nothing like the olive groves of Mr. P’s, but my mother had a fondness for the garden. She liked to try out new plants and see how they did on the French Riviera. My father was a banker. My sister is two years older than I am and, as you know, runs a high-end nannyng service. We both married young. Neither of our marriages or families turned out like we planned though.” Rose fell into a thoughtful silence.

Leo's eyebrows knit together. "Is your sister divorced or in an unhappy marriage?" He decided asking about the sister was a less personal option than directly asking Rose what happened in her own marriage.

"No, nothing like that. She has a gem of a husband. They can't have children. They've run through all the fertility options without success. They've discussed surrogate pregnancy, fostering children, or adopting, but so far nothing feels quite right. So she continues loving other people's kids on the path to becoming a mother in her own right one day. Our whole family has been heartbroken with each twist and turn of their journey, though none as much as Marie and her husband." Rose's eyes misted over.

Leo reached across the table and held Rose's hand. "Marie sounds like an incredibly strong woman. I can only imagine she has a husband who is her equal."

She waved a hand across her face. "Sorry, I get choked up when I think of how unfair life can be. My sister is desperate to have a child, while others get pregnant in a snap—and don't want or can't care for the life growing inside them—and cast the child aside."

"Life can be a mystery."

"I've offered to be a surrogate if they choose that route."

"That's noble of you." Leo ran his thumb along the back of her hand, while a part of him worried about her sharing the same fate as his late wife. "And what of your plans for children? Do you want to have a family of your own, or are you happy with your life the way it is?"

Rose withdrew her hand. "I think we should finish our meal." There was a tightness in her voice, almost a warning. The playful twinkle in her eye vanished and was

replaced with wary coldness.

The remainder of their meal was spent in a strained silence.

Leo had blown it. He shouldn't have asked her about children and family. The timing was wrong. But he needed to know if her future could ever include a husband again and children. He, Nefeli, and Adonis were a package deal. He'd never abandon his children for his love of a woman, no matter how exquisite she was.

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With the meal concluded, they set off along the Arvanitia Promenade, supposedly the most romantic walk in all of Greece, especially during sunset. Leo had timed everything perfectly. The sun was at the horizon in all its glory, trailing beams of gold, orange, and pink across the sky. The setting was idyllic, and yet an emotional gulf remained between him and Rose, who walked by his side.

He didn't attempt to take her hand, and he noted with dismay that she didn't try to hold his hand.

"The city is beautiful," he said in an attempt to make small talk.

"I agree," said Rose, though she didn't meet his eyes.

"The heat from the stone walls is tempered by the sea breeze," he said. Really? That was the best he could come up with? Ugh.

They scooted closer to the wall as a group of tourists passed, the leader carrying a Greek flag on a tall pole.

"Stavros, there's something you should know. Something I need to tell you. I'm finding it difficult to say the words." She fidgeted with her ring.

She was going to end their potential romance. He read the telltale signs in her posture, in the phrasing of her words, in the downturn of her mouth. As first dates went, this was his record worst. He was getting the whole breakup speech of it's-not-you-it's-me before the date had even finished. He should've known better.

They reached the lighthouse, and Leo led her down onto the sand, out of the foot traffic, and to a slightly secluded area. They both faced the sea.

“You’re being gallant and patient, which makes this all the harder for me,” she said.

Here it comes. Leo braced himself.

“You know from my background check that I’m a widow.” She twisted the ring over and over.

“Yes.”

“I married Robert at age nineteen. He was twenty-one and had just completed his military service. Both of our parents thought we were far too young. We were happy. Our wedded bliss lasted long after it usually atrophies for most couples. We had our little disagreements and arguments, but we always worked them out. We finished school, and Robert went to work for a business in shipping while getting his graduate degree. I worked as a makeup artist in film.”

“Yes, I read about your career in the background check. I’m looking forward to learning more about how you turned to that job.” Where was she going with all of this? She’d repeated to him only facts he knew. Obviously there was more, and the more was what he’d been dying to know to gain a better picture of Rose. He hoped there wasn’t an affair in her past.

She nodded. “Our schedules didn’t always line up, and I missed Robert when we were apart. After a few years, we decided to try to have a child. Naturally I was apprehensive since my sister was well into her journey through infertility. I worried we wouldn’t be able to have a child of our own. We took steps ahead, in case either one of us turned out to be incapable of having a child the old-fashioned way. I had some eggs harvested, and he put some sperm on ice. And then we gave it a go. I was

pregnant in three months without any outside assistance. We decided I'd put my career on hold for a while."

"Was that hard for you?"

She turned her head to see him. "You mean giving up my career or the pregnancy itself?"

"The second one. No, well, yes, well, no." He arranged his thoughts. "I mean to be able to create a child in the natural way while watching your sister struggle."

"Telling her I was pregnant was bittersweet. She was thrilled for me, of course, but I could also tell the news broke her heart. Why did she have to struggle so much when pregnancy came easily to me?" Rose turned her sights back on the sparkling water. "In the meantime, Robert and I prepared our home for the baby and went back and forth about names."

"You were happy," Leo stated.

"Yes." She reached a hand up and fingered the ends of her waves. "The time for the baby to arrive drew near. We'd made all the preparations."

"Though no one can be totally prepared for parenthood," Leo said.

"I wouldn't know." Her voice had a raw edge to it.

Leo grew concerned. His heart drummed in his chest, and a chill washed over him. He was about to learn something that wasn't on her background check.

"A month before I was due, Robert was killed in a motor accident. He was driving his scooter home from work. The storm came up suddenly, and the rain made visibility

difficult. Traffic was heavy. All the wrong conditions. At the hospital, the doctor told me Robert was killed on impact, caught between two large trucks that erupted in a fireball. His spinal cord snapped, so he never felt the burns.”

Leo threw caution to the wind and took her hand. “Oh, Rose, I’m so sorry.” Inadequate words were all he had to give her. The knife of pain over losing his own wife slashed through him.

She gripped his hand. “But there’s more. I was seven and a half months pregnant at the time. After Robert died, only the thought of raising our child kept me going.” Tears trailed down her cheeks. “A week after we buried Robert’s ashes, I lost the baby. Stillborn. The trauma was too much.” She wiped at her eyes, and Stavros did the same. She was touched by his display of emotion. “I buried the two people I loved most in the world in less than ten days.”

Leo tugged on her hand.

Rose turned tear-filled eyes on him and then collapsed against his chest, clinging to him like a lifeline.

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Leo held her, rubbing her back to soothe her, and grieved with her.

“I didn’t get to say I love you to him one last time.” Her voice was muffled by his shirt.

“I’m sure he knew you loved him.”

“I didn’t get to say goodbye or even raise our child.” Anger tinged her grief.

His shirt was soaked with her tears, and he didn’t care. “You’ve been carrying this grief, this burden, a long time.”

She nodded. “I haven’t cried about my husband or the baby since after the last funeral. I’m afraid it’s all coming out now. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry, Rose. I’m honored you’ve entrusted me with such a tender moment in your life. I can tell very few people know the tale.” He kissed the top of her head. The lost child was what had been missing from her facts. He’d known she was a widow, but not about this. “Is it hard for you to nanny for other people’s children?” My children, he wondered.

“For the most part, no. There are moments when I see something in a little boy or girl and I wonder if my son would’ve worn that same expression or asked the same questions, like ‘Why is the sky blue?’ But nannying mostly fills my soul with joy to spend time with their precious spirits.” She pulled away from his chest and untangled her arms.

Their faces were so close he could smell the tang of the after-dinner mint on her lips. Leo could easily kiss her, wanted to kiss her, but a part of him held back, sensing that, in this moment of vulnerability and sharing, he might come off as having taken advantage of her. He didn't ever want her to think ill of him. He listened to the wiser part of his brain telling him to wait and ignored the clamor of his hormones.

With his hands still around her waist, he said, "You'll make an amazing mother."

She brushed at her eyes, slightly smearing the mascara under her lower lashes. "You think so?"

"I know it."

He applied slight pressure to her back, and she rested her head against his chest. "Thank you," she murmured.

"Of course."

Leo held her in his arms until after the sun completely set.

With a sigh, Rose stirred. "I'm sorry for ruining our first date. I think there's a rule somewhere that says not to spill the most difficult things about your past."

"There's no need for apologies. I'm honored you felt comfortable to share so much. Please let me know if there's any way I can help ease your burdens."

She took his hand and twined their fingers. "You already have—just by listening with an open mind and heart."

He kissed the back of her hand.

Leo led her to the hotel, grateful to have shared a heart-to-heart moment that would elevate their relationship in a more intimate way than a first kiss. Though he still anticipated that their first kiss would change their relationship in unexpected ways.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Crete

Rose fidgeted with her ring. Ever since her oversharing on their first date, she didn't know how to act around Stavros. She spilled a pile of personal information on him—definitely outside the bounds of first-date etiquette.

Yet she felt a closeness to Stavros she hadn't experienced since her marriage. The sensation was both surprising and pleasant. She also wondered what it meant for her future. Their future?

Rose tucked her shoes into the bottom of the suitcase and then folded her clothes and put them in. She needed only a few minutes to finish. The children were with Mr. P and Stavros, taking a quick walk on the beach to give Rose time to finish up unimpeded.

The children. Her heart gave a tug. She loved all the children she nannied for in between film shoots. Though she usually kept a little distance in her heart at the same time, knowing the situation was temporary. Yet somehow, Nefeli and Adonis had crossed her protective barrier, and she instinctively knew that leaving them would have a lasting effect on her. If she were totally honest with herself, she had imagined herself and Stavros forming a family unit with the children. A ridiculous thought at best. Mr. P was their father, not Stavros.

Rose shook her head to clear away such foolish notions and refocused on the task at hand.

Yet she couldn't shake away the mental picture of herself with a husband and two children.

She'd been lonely for too long, and her heart craved love, companionship, and laughter.

She twisted her wedding band. What would Robert want?

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When she lost Robert and the baby, she knew her heart needed time to heal. She hadn't given up on the idea of marriage and family. She'd simply tucked them into the back of a mental drawer that she pulled out once in a while and then replaced with a sigh.

She believed when the time was right, Robert would give her a sign that it was okay for her to move forward, be a wife and mother again. Since becoming a part of the Papadakis family, Rose's feelings had stirred. Was that the sign?

Rose shut the suitcase and stepped to the window.

"Tell me what to do, Robert."

Down on the beach, the children played catch with Mr. P and Stavros. All of them were smiling, with Stavros's grin the widest.

Her heart gave a double thump at the sight of his face. Perhaps he craved companionship and a family as much as she did. He was single and childless. If he married, that could change his eligibility to remain as Mr. P's right-hand man. She pressed her fingertips to the glass. It was smooth and cool to her touch. She wondered how Stavros' stubble would feel under her fingers. After dinner, she'd had the impression that Stavros had fully intended to kiss her goodnight at the end of her date. Yet he held back. As she waited for sleep to take her, she mused on his reasons. After what she shared, would she have felt he'd taken advantage of her if he kissed her or that he was trying to heal her wounds? Mothers and fathers kissed their children's booboos to take the pain away. A quality in his eyes had left no doubt in her mind that he was deeply acquainted with the grief of losing a close loved one.

He'd held back to keep their first kiss from being marked by her sob story.

A little swell of gratitude hit her heart. Stavros considered her feelings, wants, and desires before his own. That fact stood out in glowing neon lights. And she fell a little bit more under his spell, and her heart made a little more room for him.

"Rose," Stavros's voice called from behind her.

She blinked and saw the beach was empty. She was so lost in her musings that she missed their entrance into the villa.

"In here," she called.

Though once he appeared before her, she rethought the propriety of the situation. They were alone in a bedroom together. Granted the door was open and she could hear the voices of the children and Mr. P in the next room, but still. She hadn't been alone in a bedroom with a man since her husband was alive.

He cocked his head. "You okay?"

She nodded and gave him a soft smile. Shutting the suitcase, she announced, "All set."

With the car packed, they headed to the airport.

"Can I drive the plane?" Adonis asked as they walked across the tarmac.

"You can help," Mr. P said. "You still have to wait a few years to get your license."

Adonis scowled.

“What about me?” Nefeli asked. “Can girls be pilots too?”

“Of course they can,” Rose answered. “Haven’t you heard of Amelia Earhart?”

Nefeli shook her head.

“We’ll learn about her on the flight,” Rose said. She turned to Stavros. “I assume there’s Wi-Fi on the plane?”

“Of course.” He wore his sunglasses.

Rose decided she didn’t like them. Not that he didn’t look handsome with them, but they hid his eyes and thus his thoughts from her. She didn’t ask how long the flight was. Her itinerary told her it was a little over an hour. No time to watch an in-flight movie, so she’d work with the children on their education.

Soon they were in the air.

Rose still struggled with riding in a private plane, but the children were used to it. As far as Rose could tell, they thought this was how everyone traveled. If they only knew. Traveling for films, she’d spent plenty of flights in cramped seats, with the person in front of her fully reclining their seat with no warning or consideration for her knees.

She kept the children busy with learning activities but couldn’t stop her eyes from straying to Stavros and Mr. P, who were deep in conversation.

Every once in a while, Stavros would meet her eyes and smile, catching her in the act. She blushed and refocused her attention on the children.

Back on the ground, the heat of the day hadn’t quite set in yet. They jumped in the

car.

Adonis gave a yawn.

She and the children traded Greek and French words on the drive to Knossos.

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When they arrived, Adonis said, "It's hot."

"Knossos is described as a maze," Rose told the children as they entered the historical sight of massive columns and colorful frescoes.

Adonis's young eyes lit up at the word maze.

"I'm sure you've heard of the legend of the Minotaur," Rose said.

"It's in one of my books," said Nefeli. "My book tells all about the Greek legends and stories."

"The Minotaur had the body of a man but the head and tail of a bull," Rose said, taking the children's hands.

Adonis wrinkled his nose. "I wouldn't like to be part bull."

Rose laughed. "I don't think he much liked it either. He was a very grumpy beast. So much so, that King Minos ordered Daedalus and his son Icarus to build an elaborate maze called the labyrinth to keep the Minotaur from terrorizing the kingdom. Every year the king would send in young men and young women as an offering. They would get lost in the maze and would be eaten by the Minotaur before they could find their way out."

"That's not very nice," Nefeli said with a definitive shake of her head.

"No, it's not. What do you think the king should've fed the Minotaur instead?"

Nefeli stuck the tip of her tongue out of her mouth as she thought. “What do bulls eat?”

“They eat grains and grass.”

“Eww. I don’t want to eat grass,” Adonis said.

“Yuck,” Nefeli agreed.

“What’s grains?” Adonis asked.

“Grains are corn, barley, and oats,” Rose explained. “Besides regular grass, they eat hay and silage.”

“I wouldn’t like to eat those either.” Nefeli twirled the end of her braid. “Maybe if they fed the Minotoursouvlaki, he wouldn’t eat the people. I likesouvlaki.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I likemoussaka,” Adonis said. “Yum.” He rubbed his tummy.

“There’s another story about the Minotaur,” Stavros interjected. “About the hero who defeated the labyrinth and the beast.”

“What’s that, Papa?” Nefeli asked.

“Theseus’s friend Ariadne gave him a ball of string. He tied it to the door of the maze when he entered. After killing the Minotaur, he followed the string through the maze back to the door.”

“If we get lost, we can use string to find our way back out?” Nefeli looked up.

“Yes.”

“But we don’t have any string,” Adonis wailed.

Rose squeezed his hand. “We don’t need string. We have each other. The maze is broken.” She gestured to the ruins around them. “And the Minotaur is long gone. Nothing to worry about.” She pushed dark hair off of his forehead. “Okay?”

He nodded. “Okay.”

They wandered through the piles of stones, taking lots of pictures. By the end of two hours, they were hot and sweaty. And Rose actually did feel lost once or twice, though she didn’t show it. She didn’t want to worry the children.

“I’m hungry.” Adonis kicked at a loose pebble.

“I think lunch is a good idea, and then we can check out the aquarium,” Rose said. Being indoors with air conditioning sounded heavenly, as did a cool shower or dip in the sea.

They made their way to the car and took their seats.

Rose leaned forward to keep from touching the leather. Her shirt was stuck to her back by sweat, and she didn't want to compound the stickiness by pressing the fabric into her skin. She risked a glance at Stavros. His face had a sheen of perspiration across it. Even sweaty, he remained attractive.

Stavros flashed her a smile, and she turned her head to focus on the children.

Rose felt her cheeks warm from having been caught staring at him yet again. If only he wasn't handsome and kind and charming and . . . She twisted her ring. Her heart was decidedly letting him in, through cracks in her well-built armor, and she didn't mind a bit.

After a quick lunch at a local café that more than satisfied Rose's appetite, they continued onto the aquarium.

"Wow!" Adonis let go of Rose's hand and raced toward a tortoise enclosure. "That's so cool!" He looked back at her. "Can I pet him?"

"Uh."

"Of course." A young woman in a staff T-shirt approached. "We encourage our human friends to interact with our animal friends."

Rose, Stavros, and Nefeli joined Adonis.

The young woman added, “You’re welcome to take pictures too.”

“Can I ride him?” Adonis tapped on the tortoise’s carapace.

The young woman giggled. “I’m afraid not. He’s too small, and you’re too big.”

“I want a tortoise I can ride,” Adonis said.

“He’d have to be a really old tortoise and a different breed,” the young woman said.

“This guy is blind.”

Adonis stroked the shell.

“That’s sad,” Nefeli said as she joined Adonis by the tortoise. “His shell is so smooth.” She ran her hand over the ridges connecting the plates.

“Most of our animal friends are rescues, and a few are abandoned pets,” the young woman explained. “We nurse them back to health and give them a home.” She turned her focus on the adults. “You’ll find a staff member near the creatures. Many of them may be handled. All you have to do is ask.”

“Thank you,” Rose said.

“I want to meet some more animals.” Adonis tugged on Rose’s hand.

As they visited the various exhibits, Rose felt Stavros’s eyes on her. She sensed when he was in proximity to her without even looking. Over time, she’d grown to have that same sense with her late husband. Her relationship with Stavros seemed to have an accelerated path. She tried to keep up with the new path this relationship was forging minute by minute. The process was both thrilling and exciting, besides being a little nerve-racking.

“He’s so big.” Nefeli pointed to an iguana munching on lettuce and carrots.

“That’s one of our longest residents,” said an older gentleman in a staff T-shirt. “He’s quite used to people being around, but we ask you not to touch him. Iguanas tend to bond with a specific person and can be aggressive toward anyone else. Their tails make a powerful whip.”

Rose put a hand on Nefeli’s shoulder to prevent her from getting closer to the iguana. “Shouldn’t he be kept away from people, then?” She felt Stavros’s body heat along her left side before he entered her peripheral vision.

“He’s been here since he was a baby. In all those years we’ve never had an incident.” The man smiled.

“How long do iguanas live?” Stavros asked.

“In captivity about a decade, because of malnutrition and poor husbandry. In the wild they can live up to twenty years. This boy is going on fifteen years. We give him excellent care.”

Rose snapped pictures of Stavros and the children with the iguana.

Snakes were next on their self-guided tour.

Stavros raised a brow. “Are you prosnake or antisnake? In my experience people are one or the other. There isn’t any middle ground.”

“I don’t have any problem with snakes,” Rose said. “They are common enough in French gardens to be no big deal.”

“Have you touched one before?” he asked.

“Yes. If we found a snake in the garden, I was the one who had to relocate it if my father wasn’t home. Mom and my sister are antisnake, as you say. Plus there were field trips and visits to zoos where I had the chance to touch them.”

“Would you like to hold our albino python?” a young man asked. His staff T-shirt sported a faded red stain near the hem.

Rose looked at the indicated snake. “It’s enormous!” The creature was nearly as big around as Stavros’s thigh. Not that she’d been looking at his legs during his beach swims. “I don’t think I could hold it.”

“Perhaps if we all work together,” Stavros suggested. “What do you say, children?”

“Yes!” the kids chorused.

Rose found herself side by side with Stavros, the children flanking them, and the albino python being draped around her shoulders. Stavros helped her bear the weight with the snake across his shoulders. The children held the snake closer to the head and tail. She could feel the pulse of the snake’s breathing through her shirt.

Rose handed the staff member her phone. He captured several pictures, returned the phone, and then untangled the four of them from the snake.

“Will he try to eat me?” Adonis asked the man.

“No. He’s fed regularly. Humans aren’t part of his diet. But in the wild it could be a different story.”

“Thank you.” Rose smiled. She was pretty sure a snake that size could eat her if it chose to. Hadn’t she recently read about a reticulated python that ate a farmer in Asia?

Back in the car, Rose asked the children, “Which animal was your favorite?”

“The snake,” Adonis said without hesitation.

“I liked the chameleon the best,” Nefeli said. “He’s so cute. He reminds me of the one in the Rapunzel movie. I’d like to have one as a pet.”

Rose nodded.

“That might be difficult,” Stavros said. “Chameleons are hard work. They require very specific living conditions. You have to keep the humidity at the right level.”

“What’s humidity?” asked Adonis.

“It’s the amount of moisture in the air,” Rose replied. “And I would bet today, that level is very high.” She fanned herself with a hand.

“Can we go swimming?” Adonis asked, picking at a loose thread on the hem of his shorts.

“I think a nice swim in the sea sounds perfect,” Rose said.

“Hooray!” Adonis bounced in his seat. “When will we get there?”

Stavros gently placed a hand on Adonis's shoulder. "In a few minutes. Try to keep it together until we get there."

"May I play on my tablet?" Adonis asked Rose.

"Yes." She passed the tablets to the children. Adonis was immediately engrossed in a game, while Nefeli worked on her drawing skills. A relative quiet settled over their group, and Rose's eyes naturally drifted to Stavros. He held his tablet as well, and his mouth was drawn into a frown, his forehead creased.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

He turned off the tablet and shut the case. "Unfortunately a matter requires my attention when we arrive at the hotel. I'd hoped to join you at the beach."

Disappointment settled over Rose like a light blanket. "I'm sorry too. The children enjoy your company."

"Only the children?" He quirked an eyebrow.

Rose's cheeks warmed. "Two sets of eyes are better than one when children and water are involved."

"Agreed." He held her gaze.

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Rose felt the heat spread from her face to her toes. She felt some unspoken communication pass between them, but she was unsure of the message. Before she could unriddle the code, the car came to a stop.

Adonis reached for the door handle, eager to get out of the car.

Stavros took his hand. "You know the rules." His voice was firm but kind.

Adonis sighed and flopped back on the leather seat with a groan.

Stavros exited the car first.

From her seat, Rose could see his eyes darting around checking for anything suspicious or threatening. He exchanged a head nod with Mr. P.

"We're clear," Stavros said.

Rose and the children exited the car, and they all entered the hotel.

The rooms were sumptuous, and the bags had been unpacked.

Lickety-split, Adonis was in his swim suit. "Can we go now?" He tugged on Rose's hand.

She laughed. "I need to change too, Adonis. And we need sunscreen."

He flopped on the bed and kicked his feet. "I don't want to put on sunscreen. I want

to go to the beach now!”

Rose drew in a breath for patience. Depending on how she handled the situation would either eliminate or escalate Adonis’s behavior. He was tired, possibly hungry, and had already enjoyed a full day of activity.

She sat next to him. “Adonis, we would all like to go to the beach. Can you be a big boy and put on your sunscreen so when I’m changed we can go? Or I can help you, but then you’ll have to wait longer while I get ready. I’ll also order a snack to be delivered to our chairs.” She couldn’t do much about the tired yet, but she could alleviate the hunger factor.

He frowned.

“I’m a big girl. I can put on my sunscreen,” Nefeli said, getting the bottle out of the beach bag.

A look of determination crossed Adonis’s Greek god features. “I’m big enough too!” He grabbed for the bottle.

Rose needed to head off the fight over the sunscreen. “Good.” She pulled a second bottle out of the bag. “Here’s one for each of you.” She put the second bottle in Adonis’s hand. “Use the sprays on the deck, and when you’re done, I’ll be ready.”

The kids raced for the door. Once they were on the deck, without a fight over who got to open the door, Rose slipped into the bathroom and changed, grateful for the two minutes of peace.

Blessedly they managed to get onto the beach without any further threat of an Adonis tantrum, and Rose applied sunscreen while placing their order for food.

“Can we get in the water now?” Adonis kicked at the sand.

“Let’s find a few shells or pebbles for our sand castle first.” Rose knew the sunscreen needed a few more minutes to soak in before the kids hit the water or all their application would be for naught.

Storm clouds of defiance gathered on Adonis’s face. “I want to go in the water now!”

Rose steeled herself for a battle of wills. She took the tactic of sympathy and reason. She knelt down on the sand in front of him. “I know. The water is blue and cool and inviting. I want to swim in the sea too. But if we go in right now, then all of your sunscreen will come off, and we’ll have to wait twenty minutes longer to reapply and let the protection soak in. Do you want to wait another twenty minutes?”

She studied his face, watching to see if he’d be reasonable or if his fatigue and emotion would overcome him and they’d have to sit through a time-out.

Adonis looked longingly at the water and then at Rose.

Nefeli ran up with a smooth gray pebble. “I think this would look pretty on the castle.” She held it out to Adonis.

He took it and ran a finger across the surface. “I want to find my own rock.” He handed it to Rose, who breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked Nefeli for her brilliant timing.

She set the pebble on the table under the beach umbrella nestled between the chairs. “Let’s go.”

Hand in hand, they combed the beach for a few minutes, collecting rocks and shells among the pink sand. With their treasures returned to the chairs, Rose gave the go-

ahead to play in the water.

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Sweat mingled with salt water as she and the children finally cooled in the waves of the sea. When they tired of splashing, Rose took the children a little beyond the gentle breakers and taught them to float and tread water.

“Remember the sea is a beautiful thing, but you must always respect that she’s in charge. Tides and waves can change unexpectedly. You must always keep your eyes on the sea.”

The children shook their water-coated heads solemnly. A few drops sprayed.

“Who would like a snack? I think our food has arrived.” She jutted her chin toward their beach chairs.

The kids let out whoops of joy, and she helped them back over the breakers. Once they had their footing, the children raced across the sand to the table.

From the water, Rose smiled as she watched the siblings nosh on cheese, grapes, bread, and olives. Always olives. It was a good thing their father owned olive groves all over Greece and kept their hungry stomachs well supplied. But then, that’s probably why they liked olives so much.

She let her imagination add in the image of her lost boy. He popped a grape in his mouth and then laughed at something Adonis said. Water from his dark hair dripped onto his shoulders and back. He turned to smile at her, reminiscent of Robert’s smile with a dimple on one cheek. His nose matched hers as did his eye shape, but the color was the same as Robert’s.

She let out a sigh of longing and sorrow, then left the image behind as she emerged from the waves.

Rose wrung the water from her hair and piled her waves on top of her head in a messy bun before settling into a chair to eat her snack.

“Can we build the sand-castle?” Adonis tugged on her foot.

“Drink some water first,” Rose instructed. She didn’t need to add dehydration to Adonis’s precarious position. “You too,” she reminded Nefeli.

The kids obediently quenched their thirst before settling into the sand with toys and a plan to construct a castle complete with a Minotaur maze. History had made an impression.

She gave herself permission to lounge for a few minutes before joining them. She wasn’t on holiday after all. She was the nanny. She should’ve requested days off, but that wasn’t part of her contract since it was only for a month before Marie took over or found a suitable replacement.

She stared across the waves, keeping an ear on the chatter of the children. The problem for Rose was that the more time she spent with the children and Stavros, the less inclined she was to leave and return to her solitary life. Yes, working on films was exciting, and she enjoyed the creativity and interaction, but it was also exhausting and meant her friends were spread across the world.

Marie’s time was taken up by the business she ran from Paris, and even though the sisters were in the same country, Rose saw Marie and their parents about three to four times a year due to Rose’s heavy travel schedule.

Something had to give. Something had to change.

Which inevitably brought Rose's thoughts back to Stavros.

She got down on the sand with the children, attempting to distract her thoughts. But building walls and turrets wasn't enough.

What if she decided to stay on as nanny instead of going back to makeup? Would she and Stavros be allowed to pursue a relationship if they worked together? Would it cost one or both of them their jobs? She frowned as she mixed dry and wet sand for a tower.

So many unknowns. She plunked the bucket upside down and tapped the top to release the tower. When she pulled the bucket away, the sand fell apart. She was building dreams out of sand without a solid foundation, much like the castle in front of her.

She started the tower over. She still didn't have concrete proof that Stavros wanted to pursue a romantic relationship. There were the looks and the hand holding and one date. Not nearly enough to build a future on. No declarations, no kiss. Just her assumption that he wanted to kiss her.

The tower held together. Was it a sign?

She banished all thoughts of Stavros and what-ifs, and spent the remainder of her time focused on the children and the task.

When the castle was complete, she took a picture of it and the children.

"I'm starving." Adonis rubbed his tummy.

Rose checked the time. Whoa, way past dinner, and she needed to put the children in bed. She looked around and realized the sun was on the horizon. "I'll order dinner in

while you two get cleaned up.”

“Can we watch a movie?” Nefeli asked while putting the sand toys in the mesh bag.

Adonis turned hopeful eyes on her.

Rose bit her lower lip. A movie would keep them up much too late, and they had another full schedule tomorrow. A late night would certainly result in a meltdown by Adonis.

“We’ll see,” she hedged. “Maybe instead of a movie, we could watch a show while you eat.”

“Okay.”

And perhaps, if she was very lucky, the men would stop by to say goodnight to the children, and she could see Stavros.

???

Rose wiggled her toes in the pink sand. Pink. Not hot pink, but a delicate luminescent pearl shade that sparkled in the sun. She adjusted her sun hat and then called the children over to reapply their sunscreen.

“Can we go in the water again?” Nefeli asked.

“Yes, we’ll have time for one more dip before we go back to the hotel.”

The children gave each other a thumbs-up and helped one another get coated in sun protection. As they bounced away to wiggle their toes at the water’s edge, she reapplied sunscreen to herself.

The children had needed a day off to do nothing. So had she. She was grateful to Mr. P and Stavros for being willing to make the schedule change.

Her phone rang, and she smiled. “Hello, Marie.”

Her sister’s face filled the screen. “How’s the nanny vacation going?”

“Pretty well.” She flipped the screen view to show her sister the blue sea, the pink

sand, and the children before returning to her face.

“I can see it’s a real struggle.” Marie laughed.

A pang of homesickness struck Rose. “I miss you. How’s your foot healing up?”

“The doctor says I’m doing well, and the physical therapist says I’m doing even better.”

“That’s great.” A false brightness crept into Rose’s voice. That meant her time with the children and Stavros was drawing to an end.

Her sister turned a critical eye on her. “You almost convinced me. What’s going on? Is it the children?”

“Heavens no. They’re about as idyllic as children get.”

Marie frowned. “Is the boss being mean to you?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“The head of security, then.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, you’ve been touring all around Greece and haven’t even seen their home yet, so you haven’t met the rest of the permanent staff. He’s the only one left.” She rolled her eyes. “Do I need to have a chat with him? Tell him how to treat my sister?”

“No, no, no.”

“Three nos. Interesting.” Marie’s violet eyes lit up. “You like him.”

Rose groaned and hid her head in her hands so her sister wouldn’t read what she was trying to hide.

“Oooh,” Marie squealed. “You really like him. Does he like you?”

“Marie,” Rose said in half exasperation, half amusement. “We work together. I’m pretty sure that we’re not supposed to have a romantic entanglement.”

“Entanglement.” Marie wiggled her eyebrows.

Rose groaned again and checked on the children over the rim of her phone. “I’m pretty sure romantic attachments are against your code of conduct and Mr. P’s.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean they don’t happen. I’ve lost a few nannies over the years to staff and bosses. And do you really think I’d put the rules above my sister’s happiness?” Marie’s shoulder shifted, and Rose knew that her hand was on her hip even though it didn’t show in the frame.

“That’s part of what makes all of this complicated.”

Marie’s features softened. “Rose, you’ve been alone for a while now. You’re still young. There’s time to remarry, have children, make your dreams come true. I want to see you happy again, and if this man does that, brings that light back into your eyes, then I’m all for it. I can work through the fallout with Mr. P and get another nanny. I’ve already been working on that scenario.”

Rose’s brows knit together. “I thought you were replacing me at the end of the month.”

“There are some other complications besides my foot to take care of. Plus, I could never be the permanent replacement when I’m the one running the company.”

“True.” Rose had an inkling that her sister wasn’t telling her everything but decided to let it go. “How are things at home?”

A wrinkle creased Marie’s brow. “The usual. He’s being compassionate and understanding and far too good for me, and it’s driving me up the wall. Just once I’d like to see him get angry about our infertility to see that he’s human instead of superhuman.”

Rose couldn’t help but smile. “Maybe he doesn’t show anger because you have enough for both of you.”

“Well, maybe I’d be less angry and frustrated if he’d share half of it with me instead of being the calm and reasonable one.”

“Traits I recall you admiring during the dating stage. You said he helped ground you and balance you out.” Marie had always been one to wear her heart on her sleeve.

“Yes, well.” Marie went silent. “I want a child so badly.” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “To be honest, Rose, I’m thinking of giving up the business.”

Rose was stunned into momentary silence. “Why?”

“I started the company before I married and struggled to have children. Taking care of other kids brought me joy and fulfillment, but lately, caring for other people’s children reminds me of what I don’t have, all that I’m missing.”

“I hear what you’re saying. Taking care of Nefeli and Adonis is wonderful but also reminds me of the life I lost. I actually pictured him playing with the children yesterday on the beach. Isn’t that delusional?” She gave a wry laugh.

“No, Rose. That’s natural. You expected to raise your baby.”

The women fell silent.

“What can I do to help?” Rose asked.

“Talking to you helps. Knowing I can count on you to fulfill this assignment is a great help.” Her expression turned stern. “Promise me you won’t let potential fallout keep you from discovering if there’s a relationship with Stavros worth pursuing.”

“Only if you promise to take my offer of surrogacy seriously.” Rose had offered surrogacy as an option for her sister and husband. They declined. Rose felt confident she could carry the baby to term. Her pregnancy with her own son had been uncomplicated until . . .

“Deal.” Marie’s eyes darted away. “I’ve got a meeting in a moment. I need to go. Take good care of those kids and keep me posted on Stavros.”

“I will.”

Her sister waved, and the call ended.

Rose tapped her phone against her chin as she watched the children. What would her sister do if she decided to end the business? Would she sell it off?

And there was the lingering feeling that Marie was hiding something from her. What could it be?

She stuffed the phone in the bag and pushed off from the chair to join the splashing children. She’d lounged long enough. And sitting here wouldn’t bring her any answers. At least Marie had given her the green light regarding Stavros. A smile curved Rose’s lips. That only left Mr. P’s blessing to obtain. But then, when had she cared what rich people thought when it came to her personal life?

CHAPTER NINE

Santorini

Leo tucked in his shirt. Dinner with Rose. Another official date. And this time there would be a kiss—so long as neither of them had a meltdown. He checked his reflection in the mirror. He untucked his shirt and rolled up the sleeves to stop right below his elbow. Better. He’d thought about wining and dining Rose tonight. He loved seeing her dressed up. She killed him. But Stavros had advised him on a casual approach, and he canceled the dinner reservations while Rose got the kids ready for bed.

“Don’t build up so much expectation for the kiss,” Stavros told Leo. “Otherwise you’ll both be disappointed. Let the moment flow.”

Leo snorted. “Like you’re one to give advice,” he said.

Stavros slugged him in the arm. “Just because I don’t have a love life now, doesn’t mean I’ve never had one or won’t have one in the future.”

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“Not easy to have a love life when you’re working for me all the time.”

“See, it’s your fault.” Stavros gave one of his rare laid back smiles. “Besides, unlike you, who have been lucky enough to fall in love once and are on the verge of falling in love twice, I haven’t had that privilege yet. She’s out there though. I know it. And I’ll know her when I find her.”

“I’m sure you will,” Leo said. On the inside, Stavros was actually a romantic. Not that anyone would think that by looking at him. “The women need to get past your intimidating exterior first.”

“If she can’t look beyond that to the man inside, then I don’t want her.”

Leo set a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You know I want you to be happy. I don’t know what I’ll do when you find her and leave or leave to find her, but I still hope for that day.”

“Thanks.” Stavros shook off Leo’s hand. “Stop being sappy. Go on your date. Kiss the girl, and let me know where you want to go from there. I’ll watch the kids.”

“They love you, you know. You’re part of the family.”

“I know. And while a dad and honorary uncle/head of security is great, they need a mother, not another nanny.” Stavros gave Leo a pointed look.

“I agree.” Leo wiped his hands on his khakis.

Stavros narrowed his eyes. “You think Rose could be the one?”

Leo swallowed and nodded. “I realize it’s completely cliché to fall for the nanny, and a huge boss-employee no-no, but I’m quite on my way to being in love with her if I’m not already.”

“That’s big.” Stavros settled in a chair.

“It’s scary.”

“And thrilling at the same time?” Stavros quirked a brow.

Leo nodded.

“Sounds like our time in the military.”

“Similar kind of rush,” Leo agreed.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Leo checked his pockets. “I don’t want anyone tailing us.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. You think I can let a billionaire and his lady love wander the beaches of Santorini unattended?”

“Yes.”

“Just because I’m not tailing you doesn’t mean I can’t have someone else do it,” Stavros said. Stavros had standby staff everywhere they stayed in case plans changed.

“No. I can’t have a romantic moment with Rose when I’m being watched. You’ll

have to trust that I can bring us back in one piece.”

Stavros huffed.

“I got us out of that mess in the bunker. I think I can handle this.”

Stavros nodded with a scowl. “You had to bring the bunker into this.”

“Absolutely, if it buys me private time with Rose.” Leo checked his rolled sleeves.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.”

“Keep your shirt on.” Stavros rose from the chair and followed Leo to the adjacent villa, where Rose and the children stayed.

When Leo saw Rose in a simple sun dress that highlighted her eyes and newly acquired Greek tan, he had to check his impulse to sweep her into his arms then and there in front of Stavros and the kids.

He hugged and kissed the children.

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“Please read us a bedtime story?” Nefeli held out a book to Leo.

“Cleo and Cornelius, again?” He grinned at Nefeli. The book was the children’s current favorite.

He glanced at Rose for permission. He didn’t want to hold up their date, but he didn’t want to deny the children either. He often felt he spent too little time with them as it was. They were already missing a mother. He didn’t want to fall into the category of absentee father.

She smiled and nodded.

He settled on the edge of the bed, and the children flanked him. He read the charming picture book of Cleo and Cornelius and their adventures in Egypt and Italy.

“When can we see the pyramids?” Adonis jumped on the bed.

“When we don’t have to worry about you getting lost inside one.” Leo tackled Adonis to the bed and tickled him.

“I won’t get lost.” Nefeli climbed onto Leo’s back.

“If you did, I would find you all.” Stavros picked up Nefeli and tickled her side before rescuing Leo from Adonis. “Which book do I get to read?” he asked the kids.

They both scrambled to the far side of the bed to find a book.

“That’s your cue,” Stavros said to Leo and Rose. “I’ll take it from here.”

Leo couldn’t resist dropping a kiss on his children’s heads before taking Rose’s hand and walking out of the room.

He chuckled when he heard Nefeli ask, “Why is Papa holding Rose’s hand?”

Rose laughed too as they escaped onto the warm sand. In the evening air, ambient light from the villas and moon lit their path.

“Poor Mr. P. You stuck him with the explanation,” she said.

“Yes, I did.” Leo grinned. “He’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure he will. He’s their father. Though I still think they have a better relationship with you.”

Leo cleared his throat. “Well, I do spend a good deal of time with them.”

“I wish Mr. P had the same kind of relationship with them.”

Leo tugged at his sleeves. “He’s a busy man and does his best.”

“Yet they still seem to prefer you.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Are you sure you’re not their papa?”

Icy dread filled Leo’s body. How had she found out? Who had told his secret? Then he noticed the teasing gleam in her eye and took a shaky breath before letting out a nervous laugh.

“Are you alright?” Rose cocked her head.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine.”

“You seem on edge.”

This wasn't the beginning he'd imagined. Time to get the date back on track. He squeezed her hand. “How could I be anything else when I'm with you?” He raised her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles, drawing a beautiful blush into her cheeks.

“Where are we going for dinner?” she asked.

“Wherever you'd like to.” He swung their joined hands lightly.

“You didn't make a reservation?” Her eyes narrowed a fraction.

“I canceled it. I thought we'd let the night take us where it wants to.”

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“Wow. Look at you stepping out of the organization box.”

“Every once in a while it’s good to be spontaneous.” He spun her around and dipped her. She laughed. Their heads only inches apart. “Would you agree?”

She nodded.

His eyes traveled the features of her face, which he’d come to cherish so quickly and easily, and landed on her lips. Awareness of her warm body in his arms flooded him, spiking his heart rate. The air felt charged with anticipation. Her pupils dilated as his lips descended toward hers. He kept his eyes locked on hers, seeking permission, until the last possible moment. When her eyes fluttered closed he took that as a yes and pressed his lips to hers. Her mouth was as soft as he’d imagined, and all the more tasty for the wait. He held his passion in check, savoring the moment of their first kiss, knowing it could never be repeated, and he wanted it to be memorable. He kept the kiss light, exploring the contours of her lips.

A tremble ran through her, and she arched her back, pressing her mouth firmly to his.

Leo worked overtime to keep his passion from spilling out all at once, letting it trickle bit by bit as the kiss built in length and intensity. He righted her mid-kiss without breaking contact and let his hands trail into the waves of her hair.

Her fingertips played at his hairline, and he pressed her closer, the passion growing waterfall-sized. She fit perfectly against him, as if she was always meant to be there.

Leo lost all track of time and space. The universe consisted of only him and Rose and

the gentle lap of the water and the caress of the sea breeze.

The passion ebbed, calmed, and he pulled back enough to get breath, leaning his forehead on hers.

The sound of their ragged breaths joined the night air.

“I thought kisses came at the end of dates.” She ran a hand through his hair and rested it on his shoulder.

“Why is that a rule? Why can’t dates start with a kiss? We’ve already thrown the rule book out anyway.”

Her body shook with silent laughter, and Leo loved feeling her lungs move in and out against his hands on her back.

“I suppose we have. Will Mr. P be upset at his staff having a romantic interlude?”

“Mr. P is a generous man who doesn’t begrudge happiness to anyone,” Leo said.

“Thank goodness for that.”

“What about your sister? Will she be upset that your assignment took a personal turn?” He leaned back enough to look in her eyes.

She looked out at the sea and smiled. “She gave her blessing yesterday.”

“You told her about me?” Leo was half-pleased he’d been a topic of conversation and half-concerned about what Rose might’ve said.

“Sort of. She more or less guessed. It wasn’t like I’d take up with a cabana boy.” She

giggled.

“I’d be highly offended if you did,” he teased.

“I’m afraid I’m more attracted to heads of security named Stavros who wear sunglasses indoors and out.” She kissed his cheek.

The name Stavros washed over Leo like a cold wet blanket. He cursed his lack of honesty. He should’ve told her his name before he kissed her. He didn’t want to hear his best friend’s name spoken in passion or a declaration of love from this woman in the heat of the moment. He wanted her to love him, Leo. He should’ve come clean before, and now it was too late.

“Stavros?” The shine in Rose’s eyes was tempered with worry. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, not at all.” He smoothed her wavy hair. “I only wish our circumstances were a bit different.”

“You mean that I’m leaving soon?”

“That too.”

What an impossible situation. He was living a swapped life with his best friend and falling in love with the temporary nanny. How had he let things get so out of hand?

She ran a hand through his hair again and let it rest on his bicep. “I know our situation is complicated and there’s still much we don’t know about one another. How about we take us one day at a time?”

“I think that’s wise,” he said. He took her hand. “How about dinner?”

“Dinner sounds lovely.”

They walked up the beach to a cozy eating spot that was void of loud music and young adults living the party life.

After they ordered, Leo took her hand.

“Since we started our date with a kiss, does that mean there won’t be a goodnight kiss?” Rose asked.

“Do you want there to be?”

She gave him a coy look. “I wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Are you opposed to start-of-date kisses after tonight?”

She ducked her head and gave a soft laugh. “No. In fact, I rather think we’re going to struggle to keep our lips to ourselves until we’re alone.”

“I guess I’ll have to speak to my boss about more time off during our trip.” He kissed the back of her hand.

Their food arrived, requiring the relinquishing of hands.

“Was it strange for you to kiss me?” he asked.

“Strange?”

Leo fidgeted with his napkin. "I guess I made the assumption that I'm the first man you've kissed since your late husband. If I was wrong I apologize."

Roses bloomed in her cheeks. "Your assumption was correct. I haven't dated or kissed anyone since I lost him."

Leo smoothed his napkin in relief. The little, pop-up jealous monster on his shoulder flitted away.

"What about you?" she asked. "I take it that wasn't your first kiss ever."

"No."

"Let's assume we both had a youth and shared a few kisses. Was there ever anyone special?"

He nodded. "Yes, very."

"What happened?" Rose set her fork down, indicating her full attention was on him now that her plate was mostly clear.

Leo wavered with indecision. Should he tell her all of the truth? Did he want to ruin a wonderful evening full of promise of more to come? He faltered.

"I lost her."

"She died?"

He nodded. Not a lie, more of an omission. Nia was dead. His wife was dead.

"Oh, Stavros." She squeezed his hand. "I understand. How did it happen?"

The waiter arrived with the check. Leo paid, and they walked back on the beach before he answered.

“She got ill.” Also true. He’d left out the part of Adonis’s birth and the complications thereafter. “The doctors did all they could, but it wasn’t enough. All the money in the world wasn’t enough to save her.” He was surprised to find his eyes watering with unshed tears.

“Money can’t save the ones we love.”

He noticed bitterness trace her features. “You told me about your loss, but I think there’s still a part you haven’t shared with me yet. Will you?” Clearly her husband and money were tied together, though he still didn’t understand the connection.

She sighed. “Soon, but not tonight. I don’t want to talk about ugly things and ruin this beautiful date with you.”

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He nodded with understanding. There would be plenty of ugly later when she learned his real identity. He hoped by that point they would've reached an unconditional-love status.

He paused and pulled her into an embrace. They stared out over the water, the moonlight dancing and sparkling on the tips of the waves.

“Rose, whatever the future may bring us, I’ll be forever grateful you came to nanny for the children and brought joy and love to our lives.”

“And French.” She kissed the hollow at the base of his throat.

“Especially French.” And then he made good on their end-of-date kiss.

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Rose walked on clouds. The white buildings of the island shone brighter, and their blue domes looked deeper. The sand under her toes felt finer. Her mind ran a constant replay of her kisses with Stavros.

Of all the places they’d been so far, Santorini was the most relaxed.

With the kids happily swimming in the pool, Rose called her sister.

“Afternoon.” Marie yawned over the video chat.

“Did I wake you?” Rose asked. Marie wasn’t one for naps. She said the world passed

her by when she was asleep during the day.

“A quick catnap,” Marie admitted.

Rose’s brows furrowed. “Are you ill?”

“No. I’m fine. Work is busy.” She swept her honey blonde hair over one shoulder. “I’m sure my health wasn’t why you called.”

“Maybe it should be.” Rose studied her sister’s face. Cover-up didn’t quite hide the circles under Marie’s eyes. Her cheeks were less full than usual. “Have you lost weight?”

“A little. Surprising when I’ve been told to keep off of my foot and let it heal. I expected to put on weight.” Marie gave a weak laugh, a sure sign that something was up. With their father’s on-again-off-again thyroid issues, their family was adept at spotting the tiniest signs of a change in health. “What’s going on? Are you trying another fertility drug? Is it the side effects?”

Marie’s expression closed off. “I’m not ready to talk about it yet. Look, when I have something to tell you, I will.”

The finality in Marie’s tone was unmistakable. Rose wouldn’t get any more information until her sister was good and ready to share.

“You can’t blame me for being concerned. You’re really worrying me.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you.” Marie sighed. “I’m working on a secret project that’s requiring more energy than I planned. If the project succeeds, then I’ll tell you all about it. But if it fails, I don’t want everyone to know.”

“Fair enough.”

Marie cocked her head. “I take it the date went well.”

Rose couldn’t stop her smile from taking over her face. “Very well.”

“First kiss.” Marie squealed, suddenly full of life.

“At the beginning of our date,” Rose supplied.

“Oooh, very unconventional. I like him even more.”

Rose laughed. “You haven’t even met him.”

“Can you send me a picture?”

Rose shook her head. “You know I can’t.”

“Right, the contract. No photos may be shared outside of the immediate family unless prior authorization is given,” Marie recited. “If I was only your sister and not your boss, I’d be wheedling you to get one on the sly and send it to me.”

“I’m pretty sure my phone is monitored.”

“Yeah.” Marie put on lip gloss. “Is there another date planned?”

“Tonight.”

“Nice.”

“I love this island. Our time here has been laid-back. We went to Mr. P’s olive grove located near some caves outside Fira. In the mornings, I’ve taken the children to see ancient Thera and hike Nea Kameni. In the afternoons, we play in the sea or the pool. After dinner we wind down with a movie. It’s been lovely. I could stay here a long time, but we’re off to Rhodes tomorrow.”

“And have you been seeing Stavros during all of this?”

“Not as much as I’d like.” Rose stretched her legs. “Mostly we’ve shared looks over the children’s heads and behind Mr. P’s back.”

“How has Mr. P taken the news of your budding romance?” Marie asked.

“Surprisingly well. He’s been giving us the time together anyway. He’s been very chill about the whole thing.”

“Maybe he sees in both your eyes what I see in yours.” She gave a smug smile.

“And what’s that?”

“Love.”

“You think I’m in love with Stavros?”

“Aren’t you?” Marie arched a brow.

“No comment.”

Marie laughed. “Well, if not, you are well on your way to being in love with him. Love looks good on you. It always has.” Her expression turned more serious. “I know taking this assignment was hard for you, nannying for a wealthy family, and that you only did it because you love me enough to set aside your feelings of the past. Are you sorry you came?”

“No.”

“Are you still hung up about the wealth thing?”

“No. I suppose I accepted the circumstance fairly quickly. There wasn’t anything I could do about Mr. P being wealthy. I think the children not being spoiled went a long way to setting my apprehensions aside. Not all wealthy people are created equal.”

“Well said.” Marie clapped. “Just as not all middle-class makeup artists or businesswomen are created equal.”

“True.”

“Thanks for calling and giving me an update. Any chance you might want to extend your time with the Papadakis family to give yourself a little longer with Stavros?” Marie asked. “Or do you still want to stick to the original time line? I can’t remember

if you have another film coming up.”

“I don’t. I could be persuaded to extend my time here.”

“Good. That’ll give me a little more wiggle room in finding the permanent nanny. I haven’t come across the right person yet.” Her forehead scrunched.

Rose knew how much vetting Marie put into her nannies, especially the ones who went to wealthy clients. Landing a job with her firm was a much-sought-after accomplishment in the nanny industry.

Suddenly her sister’s face went pale. “Gotta go. Love you.”

“Marie?” Rose asked, but the call had ended. She sank back into the lounge chair in frustration. Something was definitely going on with her sister’s health, and she was tempted to text her brother-in-law for answers.

Rose tapped the phone against her chin. If Marie still looked unwell during their next chat, then she’d worm the information from her brother-in-law. Depending on his answers, she might need to call in reinforcements. Their parents.

With her decision made, she dropped the phone in the bag and headed to the pool to join the children.

A thrill of anticipation went through her as she looked forward to enjoying a few kisses on her third date with Stavros.

CHAPTER TEN

Rhodes

Leo was more than disappointed to cancel his third date with Rose. He looked forward to walking the black sand beach with her and sharing a kiss or two. Unfortunately, a shipping emergency came up that required his attention. He felt terrible when he delivered her the news. She looked equally upset at their missed date.

He vowed to make it up to her. Each day he spent in Rose's presence solidified his growing desire for her always to be with him. He wanted to be able to kiss her in front of the children. But he needed to tread carefully, as Stavros kept reminding him. Once the children saw signs of affection, questions would follow. More particularly, would Rose be their new mom?

He certainly wanted her to be.

He hoped she felt the same way.

All he needed to do was tell her who he really was and hope she'd overlook his poor judgment.

The car pulled to a stop.

"Where are we, Papa?" asked Nefeli as the group exited the car.

“Butterfly Valley,” Leo replied.

“Butterflies!” The girl squealed and pumped her hand up and down.

“Will one land on me?” Adonis asked, slipping his hand into Rose’s.

“Quite possibly,” Leo said.

“Cool.” Adonis grinned.

“Sounds lovely,” Rose said. “Why is it called the Butterfly Valley?”

“They’re attracted to the Zitia plant that grows here.” Leo got close enough to whisper. “Mr. P thought it’d be a good idea to stretch our legs after the flight. Let the kids work off some energy before we arrive at the hotel.”

“Smart thinking,” Rose agreed.

The five of them set off to see the butterflies. They rounded the gift shop and took the path.

“It’s beautiful,” Rose said. “The trees.” She rested her hand on the bark of the nearest one.

“The shade is welcome at this time of day,” Leo said.

“Very,” said Rose. “Not too far ahead,” Rose called to the children skipping along the path.

Adonis stopped to climb a boulder.

“I see a butterfly!” Nefeli pointed.

A brown and black butterfly with yellow spots sat on a bush.

Adonis scrambled down to look more closely with Nefeli.

“Why isn’t it moving?” Nefeli looked up at Leo. “Is it hurt?”

“No,” Leo answered. “These butterflies are nocturnal.”

Nefeli and Adonis exchanged a quizzical look.

“Nocturnal means they move around at night,” Rose explained.

“That’s weird,” Adonis said, tugging up the waistband of his shorts.

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“We’ll have to be quiet so as not to disturb their sleep,” Rose said.

The children nodded and walked ahead to join Mr. P, leaving Rose and Leo a small bubble of privacy.

“So long as nothing happens between now and eight o’clock, would you like to join me for our date?” Leo asked, brushing her hand with his as they walked down the cobblestone path.

“Yes. I’d like that very much.”

“Rose,” Nefeli said. “Come see.”

The couple hurried down the slope to where Nefeli stood.

“The bridge looks like fairies made it,” Nefeli said with awe in her voice.

“It does,” Rose agreed.

Before them was a bridge constructed of wood. Spanning the small creek was a long log covered in wooden planks. The railing was hewed from natural branches.

“Do you think the fairies use the waterfall as a slide?” Nefeli asked.

“I certainly would if I were a fairy.” Rose gave the girl’s braid a loving tug.

“Can we go down the waterfall?” Adonis made to climb over the rail and into the

creek below.

Leo grabbed him. “I think we should stay on the path and be respectful of the fairies’ and butterflies’ homes. We wouldn’t want to accidentally step on one.”

“Yeah, the fairies would curse us,” Nefeli said.

“I didn’t know fairies could do curses,” Rose said.

“Depends on the fairy. Some are nice and some are naughty.” Nefeli leaned against the rail and stared at the waterfall. “I wish I could see a fairy. But they don’t like to be seen by humans.” She sighed.

As they continued their adventure, Adonis asked, “What’s that weird noise?”

“Cicadas,” Leo said. “That’s the sound they make. They’re quite odd-looking bugs.” He pulled out his phone and showed the children a picture.

“Eww. He’s ugly,” Nefeli declared.

“They certainly aren’t my favorite,” Rose said. “We have about fifteen species that live in the south of France, and I loathe the years they hatch.”

“Why?” Adonis took her hand and tugged her along.

Leo followed, wishing he could take Rose’s hand as easily as his son did. He took the moment to imagine that Rose would always be in his life, loving the children as Nia had, and perhaps adding one or two of their own to the family. He believed Rose would be open to more children. She seemed to long to be a mother.

When he caught up to them, Rose said, “This place is idyllic. The trees, the

cobblestone paths, the small waterfalls, and the ponds work together to create an atmosphere of serenity and peace.”

“It certainly does,” Leo agreed, admiring the curve of her cheeks as she smiled. “Look up.”

Rose, Stavros, and the children looked at the trees.

“What are all those brown leaves?” Nefeli asked.

“They’re not leaves. Those are butterflies,” Leo answered.

“Wow,” the children chorused as they craned their necks, their mouths open in awe.

“A wonder to behold,” Rose said. “Thank you for bringing us here. As much as I love the sand and sea, this is a refreshing change.”

He risked placing his hand on the small of her back. “Does that mean I should change our hotel reservations? I booked us a bungalow on the beach.”

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“No. Keep the hotel. The kids are little fish and love the pool and sea.” She shifted the slightest bit to lean back into his hand.

Stavros coughed. “We should head to the hotel to make the meeting.” He gave a slight head nod at Leo’s hand on Rose’s back. “I’d hate to be late and have the meeting run long and delay this evening’s plans.” He gave Leo a significant look.

During their morning jog, Stavros advised Leo to tell Rose the truth of his identity before the relationship went any further. Leo agreed that it was past time. His palms sweated at the thought of Rose’s reaction.

“Right.” Leo clapped his hands. “Let’s head to the hotel so you urchins can swim.”

The children cheered and raced up the path with Stavros.

With the others ahead, Leo took the opportunity to take Rose’s hand and brush a kiss across her temple. “Until tonight.”

She smiled. “Tonight.”

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On their date, Rose slipped her hand into Stavros’s, relishing the feel of being palm to palm with him again. His hands for the most part were smooth, except for a few callouses and scars from his time spent tending the olive trees when he was at home.

“Thank you for the schedule changes,” she said.

He squeezed her hand as they strolled through the old city of Rhodes in search of dinner. “I noticed the days are easier for you and the kids if there’s an activity in the morning, followed by beach time in the afternoon. I’m afraid I wanted you to see and love all of Greece so much that I overpacked your schedule at the beginning.”

“I might be able to keep up that pace, but Adonis was on the verge of daily meltdowns. Thanks for the adjustments.”

“Of course. I want you and the children to be happy.”

“And so does Mr. P?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m surprised he takes such an interest in the happiness of his staff.”

Leo paused and turned Rose to face him. “Do you still have doubts about his sincerity and good nature after all these weeks?”

“Not really. I think my brain is still having trouble moving past my prejudices despite all the evidence to the contrary.”

A concerned look washed over Stavros’s face, and his shoulders tensed. “What else can he do to convince you?”

Rose looked at the buildings, hoping they’d provide the answer that eluded her. “I really don’t know. I’m beginning to think I might not be capable of moving beyond what happened to me.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

Rose nodded, her nerves jumping into action. Would Stavros be able to understand her heartache and pain?

They turned a corner and came upon a green space. Stavros seated them at a secluded bench under a tree overlooking the harbor and ships.

Rose rubbed her thumb against his hand. “First, you should know that I loved my husband very much. We were rather young when we married, and we looked forward to a long, bright future together. He came from money but wanted to make his own way in the world rather than relying on his family’s wealth. His parents weren’t pleased with his choice of life and had a few misgivings about his marrying down.”

“You come from a middle-class family,” Stavros protested. “Hardly living below the poverty level, and you’re educated.”

“Yes, but a makeup artist wasn’t what they had in mind. His parents were looking for an heiress or at least a woman of equal pocketbook status. Still, they worked to accept me and within a year’s time were happy with Robert’s choice.”

“You were fortunate.”

“I thought so.” She took a breath and continued. “They would take us on trips and give us lavish gifts, but mostly they tried to be respectful of us carving out our own life.” Rose took a deep breath, her heart beating in her chest. “And then Robert died in that traffic accident.” Her voice shook. She looked out over the water as the memories flowed through her.

Stavros wrapped an arm around her.

She drew strength from his warmth.

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Stavros pulled her tighter. “I can only imagine how you felt.”

With her free hand, Rose wiped at her eyes. “There are few words that convey the depth of my sorrow and loss.” She took a fortifying breath. “I couldn’t cope, couldn’t function. I turned everything over to my in-laws to settle and went home to my parents. I was a walking zombie for months, trying to process and work through my depression. I thought I’d never be happy again.”

Stavros pulled her tighter, and she rested her head on his shoulder, her tears leaking onto his shirt.

He kissed the top of her head. “Oh, Rose.”

“Six months after burying my husband and son side by side and just as I was starting to pull out of my fog, my in-laws paid a visit. They’d been wonderfully supportive and kept in regular contact with me while I was a mess. They made a proposal.”

Stavros’s eyebrows scrunched together. “What kind?”

“The unimaginable.”

“Marry his brother?” Stavros turned to face her.

“No.”

“Marry his sister?”

Rose nearly laughed, a needed breath of humor. “No. They wanted me to have Robert’s child.”

Stavros shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“We’d put some of Robert’s sperm on ice, remember?”

Stavros looked out over the water, comprehension and disgust washed over his face. “They wanted to artificially inseminate you with their dead son’s sperm to bear the grandchild they lost.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Stavros shook his head, his jaw clenched. “Of all the cruel, selfish . . .”

“I thought so too at the time. They offered to pay for everything if I would live with them, and we would raise the child together. They returned the next day for my answer.”

“Oh, Rose. What did you do?”

“As you can see, I’m here.” She folded her hands in her lap. The memories of that meeting left her trembling.

Stavros stiffened beside her, and she sat up.

“Did you have the child? Is he with your in-laws?” he asked.

“No.” She was hurt that he would think her capable of abandoning her child, and she put a little physical distance between them. “I knew that wasn’t what Robert would want. Of his siblings, he was the exception. The rest of them are arrogant and self-

serving. Turned out, underneath their kindness, his parents were too. When I refused, they offered more money. And when I told them I couldn't be bought, they threatened my career and family. They were in a position to make good on all they said, but I held my ground. They left, and we never spoke again."

"And that's why you despise the wealthy," Stavros concluded.

"Yes."

"Did they make good on their threats?" he asked. His expression turned reflective, laced with pain, which she didn't understand. Was he feeling pain on her behalf?

"No."

"Wait. You said earlier that you thought your in-laws were selfish and cruel. But you don't think so now?" he asked.

"Over time, I've concluded that they were parents in pain, desperate to hold on to a piece of their son in any way they could. They knew I was capable of carrying and bearing a child, his child. They thought their idea would bring happiness to all of us, give us back what we'd lost. Some days, I wonder if they were right."

"And on the other days?"

"I wonder what their reaction would've been if I'd fallen in love and wanted to take my son and start a new family with my husband."

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“Based on what you’ve told me so far, nothing good.”

Rose laced her fingers together. “I think they would’ve legally taken him from me, under a myriad of lies, or possibly by paying off the judge. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing my child a second time. Those kinds of thoughts helped me stand firm when they tried to convince me of their plan.”

He wrapped her in a hug. “I’m sorry for all that you’ve been through. You’re an incredibly strong and compassionate woman. I already knew that, but what you’ve shared with me has cemented your admirable qualities forever.” He kissed her temple, then her ear, then her cheek.

Rose was grateful to have him kiss away her difficult and sad memories. A man like him was exactly the reason she’d refused her in-laws’ primrose path.

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After his date, Leo paced back and forth on the sand in the dark. Outdoor lights from the bungalow illuminated his path. Stavros watched him from his towel on the sand, where he did push-ups.

“That bad?” asked Stavros.

“I should’ve told her who I was earlier. I can’t tell her now that I know why she loathes the wealthy so much. She has good reason. I’d loathe me too.”

“What happened?”

Leo filled Stavros in.

“You’re right,” Stavros said, switching to one-armed push-ups. “You’re sunk.”

Leo stopped. “You’re supposed to be the voice of encouragement and hope here. The Gandalf or Dumbledore sage or something.”

“Do I look like an old English guy with a beard and hat?” Stavros raised a brow.

Leo resumed pacing, anger and frustration with himself and Rose’s ex-in-laws driving his steps. “How do I salvage the situation?” He kicked at the sand and then coughed when some got in his mouth.

“I think you might need to blow it up.” Stavros switched arms.

“What?”

“Remember that time in the Middle East when we got into a tight spot and the only thing we could do was blow up the building we were in so we could escape?”

“Yes. Not our brightest idea. There was a good chance we, or the soldiers we were rescuing, wouldn’t get out alive.” Leo looked at his friend, curious as to where Stavros was going with it.

“You need to blow up the situation with Rose by telling her who you are. You’ll never know if the two of you can survive the fallout unless you tell her.”

“But it might cost me her.”

Stavros sat up. “If she walks away, was she really the right woman to begin with?”

Leo frowned. “You make a good point.”

Stavros switched to crunches. “Look, if Rose is everything you believe her to be: kind, compassionate, and understanding, then you two will pull through. That doesn’t mean she won’t be mad and need some space before you come back together, but at least then there won’t be any secrets between you.”

Leo plopped down on the sand. All his anger deflated. “The thought of losing her is physically painful. And what will I tell the children?”

“That they’re getting a new nanny.”

“They adore Rose.”

“They adored the last one too and still made the adjustment. The kids can do it again.” Stavros held crunch position. “We all knew Rose’s time here was temporary until the permanent nanny could be found.”

“I know.” Leo traced lines in the sand. “I just didn’t expect to fall in love with her.”

“None of us did, and yet it happened.”

“It’s so cliché.” Leo groaned.

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Stavros laughed. “It absolutely is.” His expression turned sober. “I think if you and Rose do pull through, then you need to come out of the woodwork and be the face of the company again, instead of all this cloak-and-dagger stuff.” He stretched his abs. “Even if the relationship with you and Rose doesn’t work out, I still think you need to come out of the shadows and rejoin the world. You’ve been hiding long enough.”

“But the gold diggers,” Leo protested.

“There will always be sharks in the water. That doesn’t mean you should stop swimming. I’ll have your back.”

“Thanks, man.”

“You got it. Not to mention, it’s exhausting pretending to be you all the time. After Mykonos, I’m looking forward to going home, where the staff knows who is who.” Stavros stood and brushed the sand off. “If you’re done wallowing in self-pity, then I’m going to bed. Some of us have to actually work for a living.”

“Hey.” At the teasing dig, Leo threw some sand at Stavros’s already moving legs.

Stavros laughed and then disappeared inside the bungalow.

Leo watched the waves for a few minutes, trying to work up his courage to tell Rose the truth. She deserved to know. He needed to find the right time. In his mind, he rehearsed various scenarios and speeches to keep Rose from hating him completely. Every scene ended the same, with Rose walking out of his life.

With that dismal image in his mind, Leo went to bed, with the inkling that sleep would be elusive until he found the right way to tell her. He gave a wry chuckle as he slipped under the sheets. All his skills for running a multi-billion-dollar olive oil industry were worthless when he faced affairs of the heart.

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As Rose finished dressing, she heard voices from the living room. She easily picked out the children's voices, along with Mr. P's and Stavros's. A little thrill went through her at hearing his tones. She could listen to him for hours with his charming Greek accent when he spoke English.

Though her Greek was coming along and Stavros was doing his best to learn French—she suspected to make her happy—she found conversation flowed best when they spoke their common language of English.

A female voice pricked her ears. Who else is here? Rose threw on a couple of bracelets and took one fleeting glance in the mirror before exiting her room to find out who the mystery woman was. She hadn't noticed a new arrival on the schedule.

“Kyrene!” Rose rushed over to the woman and gave her a hug, followed by a kiss on each cheek. “I didn't know you were joining us.” She gave Stavros a pointed look.

He had the decency to look abashedly smug.

“Surprise!” Kyrene sang out. “Mr. Papadakis brought me in to help out with your sightseeing of Rhodes.”

“Wonderful.” Rose was delighted to have Kyrene with her again. “You've met the children?”

“We’re old chums,” Kyrene said, ruffling Adonis’s hair. “Are you ready?”

Rose checked the supplies in her bag. “I think so.” She looked at the children. “Did you brush your teeth?”

“Yes,” they chorused.

Rose arched a brow at Adonis. “Are you sure? Did you use toothpaste?” He consistently resisted brushing his teeth when asked.

He studied the floor with a frown.

“Adonis?” Rose waited for him to raise his head. “As soon as you’re brushed, we can go.”

He scowled. “Fine.” He stomped off to the bathroom.

“I’ll make sure he does it right this time.” Mr. P followed after him.

Once Adonis had clean teeth, they set off.

Rose was grateful to have Kyrene with them but missed having Stavros there. He and Mr. P had stayed behind to attend to business matters.

In front of the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, Rose bent down in front of Adonis, adjusting her skirt for modesty. “How would you like to be a knight for the day?”

Adonis’s brown eyes widened. “Really, can I?”

“Yes,” Rose said. “May I borrow your sword?” she asked him.

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Adonis handed her the stick he'd picked up on their walk along the street of Knights.

"I name thee Sir Adonis Papadakis, Knight of Rhodes for the day." Rose tapped the stick on each of Adonis's shoulders and then returned it to him.

"Cool." He beamed. "What does a knight do?"

"He helps others and defends them from harm."

"Oh." He scrunched his face. "That sounds kind of boring. I thought I'd get to ride a dragon or something."

"Knights slay dragons in all my picture books," said Nefeli.

"I don't want to slay a dragon," Adonis protested.

"If we find a dragon, I'll see if you can ride it," Rose promised.

Above them loomed two towers flanked by endless stone walls that appeared either gray or cream, depending on the lighting.

They entered through a large stone archway that deposited them in an enormous courtyard that housed Greek and Roman statues.

"Where are their clothes?" Adonis asked, pointing at the white figures on pedestals.

"Statues don't wear clothes like we do. The artist either carves the clothes into the

stone or showcases the human form,” Rose explained.

“That’s weird,” Adonis said. “I like clothes.” He pointed at his Iron Man T-shirt.

“I do too,” Rose agreed.

Past the courtyard, they entered the palace itself and climbed a huge stone stairway, sparsely decorated.

“Only a handful of the one hundred and fifty rooms are open to the public,” Kyrene said as they walked through the ancient palace. She led the children on a history scavenger hunt she’d created. With the children enthralled looking for mosaics, carved seats, wall hangings, textiles, and oriental vases, Rose had time to mull over her relationship with Stavros while she trailed them from one historic artifact to another.

He was kind, generous, caring, compassionate, astute, intelligent—the list went on and on—and a great kisser. Tingling warmth ran through her body at the memory of their kisses. She touched her lips with two fingers.

She knew from her marriage that physical attraction was only one part of the equation. There had to be emotional connection, trust, communication, and total honesty.

Rose searched her mind for anything she had neglected to share with Stavros that might be relevant to building a future together. She came up empty. Her conscience was clear.

Could she say the same for Stavros?

She wasn’t sure. She had no reason to believe he’d lied to her about anything. But

what about omissions of truth? There were moments when she looked in his eyes and knew there was something in his past he hadn't shared yet. Did he not trust her, or were the memories too painful?

She rubbed her arms. She knew about painful memories, and she'd shared some of the worst with him. She needed to be patient.

"Why are there so few windows?" Nefeli asked. "In my palace I want lots of windows."

Kyrene answered. "This was less of a palace, like you might see in princess books, and more of a fortress to fight and protect. These windows would've been used for checking the positions of possible enemies or firing arrows to vanquish their foes."

Nefeli frowned. "Then why do they call it a palace? It doesn't even have pretty gardens. Just dirt, rocks, and some palm trees."

Kyrene laughed and tugged on Nefeli's braid. "They put the money into the building instead of making it beautiful."

"If I had a palace, the gardens would have to look like ours at home."

"And your gardens would be the envy of all Greece." Kyrene said.

Rose hadn't seen the Papadakis home yet. The description of the gardens intrigued her.

As the group moved forward over the stone floors, Rose asked Kyrene, "Have you been to the Papadakis's house?"

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Kyrene smiled. “Once or twice. Andhouse is a small word for that estate. The grounds are the star. Endless rows of olive trees of course, but Mr. Papadakis’s wife loved plants. She did a lot of work to cultivate the gardens there in her short life, and Mr. P has kept them up after her death.”

“Did you meet her?”

She nodded. “Nia was a lovely woman. Ready smile and laugh, doted on Nefeli. Thrilled to be carrying Adonis.” A shadow passed over Kyrene’s features. “A real blow when she passed away.”

Rose didn’t know the details of Mrs. P’s death. Kyrene might know what happened.

“How did she die?”

“I believe there was severe bleeding and an infection. I’m not sure of the details. Adonis was three days old when she died. You’d have to ask Mr. P or Stavros. They could tell you more.”

Rose nodded. She certainly wouldn’t ask Mr. P. Too painful and too personal. She knew Stavros would answer her questions, but what more did she really need to know? How devastated Mr. P and his wife must’ve been to deliver a healthy child and then say goodbye to one another.

She blinked back tears.

Kyrene laid a hand on her arm as they stood in front of a model sailing ship that had

captured Adonis's attention. "Are you okay?"

Rose nodded. "I was thinking of how difficult that experience was for Mr. and Mrs. P. One of my great regrets is not being able to say goodbye to my husband. But then, how much more difficult is it to watch your spouse die?"

"I can't speak to either, as I've never been married." Kyrene scooted around to study the ship from another angle. "Mr. P became a recluse after that. Hired a company to create an online avatar and remove all pictures of himself and his family from the Internet."

They moved forward to the next room, which contained a throne draped in red velvet.

Kyrene said, "I think that may've been a mistake as it resulted in him becoming a man of mystery, and the public loves to unravel a mystery."

A puzzle piece clicked into place. "That's why there wasn't a photo of him for this assignment," Rose said. "I only received photos of the children."

"Bingo."

"Why would he vanish like that?"

"Gold diggers." Kyrene frowned. "They barely waited six months after Nia died before they started trying to land him."

Rose's stomach rolled in disgust. "Vipers." She knew the kind. She'd met a few of them at social functions Robert's family attended. She much preferred salt-of-the-earth people like Kyrene and Maddie.

As they made their way toward the exit, Kyrene shared a few more historical facts

about the palace.

“Hospitaller founded the palace,” said Kyrene.

“How can a hospital build a palace?” Nefeli asked.

Kyrene smiled. “Hospitaller is a religious military group, not a building. They started in Jerusalem and still exist today. They are knights.”

Adonis’s eyes widened. “Knights,” he echoed.

Kyrene nodded.

“I bet they get a few raised eyebrows when they fill out official government documents,” Rose said.

“I imagine so,” Kyrene agreed.

“Have you ever met one?” Adonis asked Kyrene as they strolled out to face the blue water of the harbor.

“Not yet,” she said. “The knights aren’t here anymore. It took two hundred years and an army of one hundred thousand men led by Süleyman to defeat the seven thousand knights who lived here.”

“Silly man?” Nefeli scrunched her eyebrows.

Rose giggled.

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“Süleyman,” Kyrene corrected. “It took him six months to defeat the knights. Being a knight is no joke.”

With the gothic structure behind her, Rose let the fresh sea breeze wash over her skin.

“Who’s hungry?” she asked.

“Me!” the children chorused.

“Good, I think it’s time for lunch.”

“I know just the place,” Kyrene said. “Follow me.” To Rose she said, “It’s time to expand your cuisine again.”

Rose groaned. “What do I have to try this time?”

The women took the children by the hand.

“PlastaandChtapodokeftedes.” Kyrene winked.

“Plasta?” Rose asked.

“Handmade pasta cooked in meat stock, with lots of cheese and sizzling fresh butter. It may be served with boiled lentils, chickpeas, or dry beans.”

“That doesn’t sound bad. What’s the unpronounceable one?”

“The exact translation of this is ‘octopus ball.’ Think meatballs, but made of minced octopus meat and fried.” Kyrene grinned.

“Ew.” Nefeli wrinkled her nose.

“Gross.” Adonis said. “May I try one?”

The women laughed.

“Of course,” Rose said. “You can have mine.”

Kyrene wagged a finger at her. “No. You have to eat your serving if you want dessert.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” Rose sighed dramatically.

“What’s for dessert?” Adonis looked at Rose eagerly.

“I guess we’ll decide at lunch.”

“Are we there yet?” Adonis asked.

“We’re here,” Kyrene confirmed.

They were seated at an outdoor table under a blue and white striped awning, which provided much-needed shade. Large fans blew from the corners of the café walls to help ease the heat of the day.

Rose decided not to share the details of what she’d eaten for lunch with Stavros. He might not want to kiss her after she ate an octopus ball.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mykonos

Rose adjusted her headset as the plane flew above the sea toward Delos.

“There they are!” Adonis pointed at the seven white windmills lined up at the edge of the cape of Mykonos.

“Do they still work?” Nefeli asked over the plane’s headset.

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“No.” Stavros said. “They were built close to the water so that when shipments of grain came in from the boats, the people didn’t have to haul the grain very far for grinding.”

“Smart,” Rose said. “The spines of the windmills are so spindly, they don’t look as if they’d be powerful enough to grind anything.”

“True. But they worked.”

The plane touched down moments later. Then they made a quick trip over the tarmac to their waiting car.

“Where are we headed?” Nefeli asked.

“A boat ride.” Stavros’s eyes twinkled at the girl.

“Hooray!” Adonis cheered. “Do we get to help you sail?”

“Not today. We’ll have to wait until we get home for sailing. This will be a bigger boat we share with other tourists.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “No private boat? Isn’t that one of the perks of being a billionaire?”

“Mr. P thought you might appreciate him not flaunting his wealth all the time. After all, we took a private plane.”

Rose nodded and decided to keep quiet. She'd been on edge the past day or two and couldn't put her finger on why. Words kept spilling out of her that would be best left unsaid and didn't necessarily represent her thoughts. She wondered if she was subconsciously trying to pick a fight. Her time was drawing to a close with the Papadakis family. Mykonos was the last stop on the summer tour itinerary before returning to the Papadakis estate. She and Stavros seemed to keep putting off having a frank discussion about their future. Was she trying to split them up in case he didn't want to pursue a future? She folded her arms over her chest and stared out the tinted window as the white buildings with blue doors and windows went by.

They arrived at the docks and exited the car.

Stavros leaned in close. "Did you take your medicine?"

She nodded. "The itinerary gave me the heads up." At first Rose had been annoyed by the daily itineraries dictating her days with the children, but over the weeks, she'd grown to appreciate knowing what was going on and who would be where and when. She had fewer decisions to make about how to entertain the children. Mr. P gave them a nice balance of history, sightseeing, and free time. In the case of today, she'd known to take her sea-sickness medication ahead of time.

Rose was grateful the boat trip was a mere thirty minutes. She used the time to slather sunscreen on herself and the children. The sea breeze and sight of the horizon, combined with the motion-sickness medicine, made the trip fairly enjoyable.

There was a queue for tickets, but Stavros had purchased theirs ahead of time.

Rose eyed the queue for tours. "Are we going on a tour?" Rose asked the men.

Mr. P shook his head. "The guided tours are four hours. I thought that might be a little too long for the children."

“I agree.” Rose’s shoulders released with relief. She didn’t relish the idea of keeping Adonis in line for four hours.

“We’ll simply do the best we can,” Mr. P said.

“It’s a shame we didn’t bring Kyrene to give us the history,” Rose said in low tones to Stavros.

“Another time,” Stavros said. “I think the kids might appreciate the in-depth tour when they’re a little older.”

“Yes.”

“Shall we?” Mr. P asked, with a child in each hand.

“Lead the way,” Stavros said.

They followed the trails through the stony brush and wildflowers. The sun beat down on them.

“I guess they don’t use the ticket sales for the upkeep.” Rose swatted at a bug.

“I think they use it to fund the archaeologists’ exploration,” Stavros said.

“That’s probably a better use of the money.”

They arrived at the Temple of Isis. They wandered through the understructure of stone and columns before ascending the stairs.

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A welcome breeze washed over Rose, cooling her. She handed the children water bottles before quenching her own thirst.

“You can see the harbor and the boats,” Nefeli pointed.

“And Mykonos,” said Mr. P.

“I can see why the people wanted to build a temple here. This is probably the best view on all of the island.”

“I guess that means it’s all downhill from here,” Stavros joked.

Rose laughed. They’d climbed the slope to the top, making his statement literally true.

“This is also the most peaceful place on the island,” Mr. P said. “Tours don’t come up here. They parade by.”

“Shame,” Rose said. “I’m glad we came.”

They climbed down and went to their next stop.

“The House of Dionysus,” Mr. P said.

On a stone base, carved columns reached to the sky. The group heaved onto the base to see more. The mosaic in the middle of the floor was protected from foot traffic by the ropes around the columns.

Rose cocked her head. "I can't tell what the picture is."

"That's Dionysus riding a tiger," said Mr. P.

"And what are these?" Adonis pointed behind them at the rectangular stones set in regular intervals in the sand.

"The men's room." Stavros smiled.

"That's their toilet?" Nefeli wrinkled her nose.

"Actually, no," Stavros explained, "It was a men's only area where they could talk, play dice, and hang out."

"Sounds boring," said Adonis. "I'd rather fight tigers." He did a karate move.

Rose giggled.

Next they trekked over to the Archaeological Museum. Rose thought she could've stayed in the museum longer than they did. She admired the funerary statues, grave stelae, pottery, clay figurines, jewelry, and mosaics.

"There's so much to see. I don't think we've done it justice," she said to Stavros as they exited from the air-conditioning to the summer heat.

"Probably not," he agreed.

They headed to the archaeological site.

"This was the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis," Mr. P said. "The Ionians made it their religious center. Later the Athenians made it their treasury." He adjusted his

sunglasses. “Amazing how two cultures can view the same thing differently.”

“What kind of treasures?” Adonis asked.

“Probably the usual, gold and gems,” Mr. P said.

“That sounds boring.” Nefeli said.

“What would you put in your treasury?” Stavros asked.

Nefeli thought for a moment. “Books and art.”

“Naturally,” Stavros smiled at the girl. “Would anyone like to see lions?”

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“Me!” Adonis jumped up but slipped and landed on a knee as he came down. He started to cry.

The three grown-ups gathered around him.

Stavros scooped him up. “Where does it hurt?”

“Knee.” Adonis’s cry was muffled with his head buried in Stavros’s shoulder.

“You scraped it.” Rose rummaged through her bag for the emergency kit. She extricated a Band-Aid and an antibiotic wipe. “I’m going to clean your cut,” she explained to Adonis. “Then I’ll put a Band-Aid on it. It might hurt a little but only because I’m going to touch it, not because of the medicine. Okay?”

He nodded.

When she wiped the cut clean, Adonis’s crying intensified, and he wiggled in Stavros’s arms.

She placed the Band-Aid and declared. “All done.” Rose leaned in and kissed Adonis on the cheek. “You were very brave.”

Adonis peeked out at her and then nodded.

“Do you still want to see the lions?” Stavros asked. “Or would you rather get on the boat and go back to the hotel?”

“Lions,” Adonis mumbled.

“Okay.” With Adonis in Stavros’s arms, they hiked to the lions.

When they arrived, Adonis declared, “They aren’t real lions.” There was anger and disappointment in his voice. “I thought we were going to pet real lions.”

Stavros set Adonis down. “These statue lions are better for petting. They won’t bite your hand off.”

“Why don’t the lions have manes?” Nefeli approached a statue whose front paws were replaced with rebar.

“Maybe they’re all girl lions,” Rose suggested.

“Or the manes were lost over time,” Mr. P said.

Adonis cocked his head. “They look like seals.”

Rose stifled a giggle. “You’re right.”

They walked through the ruins of an amphitheater before Adonis said, “I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” Nefeli said.

“Then let’s head back to the hotel for lunch,” Mr. P said.

Rose passed packs of crackers to the children. “Have a snack until we can get there.”

They started toward the boat.

Adonis ripped open his package, and the crackers went flying. More tears.

While Mr. P and Stavros bent down to calm Adonis, Rose retrieved her pack of crackers. She opened the crackers and handed them to Adonis.

“All better?” she asked.

Adonis wiped the tears from his face. “Yes.”

“What do you say to Rose?” Stavros asked.

“Thank you,” the boy said.

Stavros gave Adonis's shoulder an approving pat.

The return to Mykonos was smooth since the water was calm. As they traveled to the hotel, Rose mused over Adonis's mishaps. Both times Stavros had been the first responder and the one Adonis clung to, cementing the idea in her mind that Mr. P didn't spend enough time with his children. Yet Nefeli and Adonis didn't seem to mind. They were happy enough to spend time with their father and yet they were more drawn to Stavros. So strange. She wondered if she would ever unriddle the dynamics of this wealthy family.

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"Care to watch the sunset with me?" Leo asked Rose.

"Always." She ran a hand through her wavy hair.

Leo itched to run his fingers through its softness. "Mr. P is looking forward to tucking the children in."

"Good." Rose agreed that Mr. P needed to spend more time with his kids.

They said their goodnight to the kids, and Rose headed for the door leading out to the beach.

"This way, Rose," Leo said.

She looked confused. "I thought we were going to watch the sunset."

“We are, but first we’re going to take a little ride.”

“Do I need to change?” She indicated her blue sundress.

“You’re fine as you are. Just grab some sandals, and we’ll be on our way.”

She slipped on her sandals and picked up her bag.

He removed the bag from her shoulder. “We’re not toting the kids. You won’t need that.” He set it on the table, letting one hand linger on her arm. “I’ll take care of you.”

Her eyes radiated warmth. “I’ll hold you to that.”

He chuckled. “As you should.” He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the car.

A short drive later, they arrived at their destination.

“I’ll text you when we’re ready to leave,” he told Plutus.

“Very good, sir.” Plutus drove away.

“Welcome to Alefkandra,” Leo said. “Also known as Little Venice.” He linked his hand with hers and walked them toward the water over the dark marble paving stones grouted with white cement.

“Why is it called that?” Rose asked. “Are there canals and gondolas?”

“No. Early ship captains built unique and magnificent homes overhanging the sea. I think that’s where it draws its name. As you can see, the streets are incredibly narrow and don’t allow for cars. That’s why Plutus had to drop us off. I hope you don’t mind

the walk.”

“I love the walk. I have more time to admire the architecture.”

“And I have more time to admire you.” Leo dropped a kiss on her cheek and was pleased to see his words brought a slight blush to her cheek. One of his favorite pastimes was seeing shades of rose bloom on Rose’s face. “I got us a table at Montparnasse.”

When they were seated at their table, Rose said, “I can see why it’s called Little Venice. They built the homes right up to the water. The waves are practically lapping at our feet. Do they ever worry about flooding here?”

“I don’t know. But there’s no mention in the weather of a storm or flood tonight so we should be safe.”

The waiter brought their drinks.

Leo adjusted his chair to be closer to Rose and took her hand.

She stared out over the water. “The view is truly beautiful.”

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The strains of Mozart could be heard over the sea, as they sipped their drinks and watched the sun sink behind the horizon, coloring the sky with deep blues, light purples, a dash of pink, and a last hue of gold.

She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. “This is peaceful and heavenly. I could go on like this forever.”

There was a melancholy tone to her voice.

“But?” He prompted.

She straightened. “But aren’t we living in a fantasy world? Private planes, lush hotels, gorgeous sunsets, stolen moments. I’m only here temporarily, and while Mr. P is being gracious about our relationship, what’s our future once I’m gone?”

Her words cut his heart. “I’m willing to pursue a future if you are.”

She turned to face him, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. “How? You live in Greece, and I live in France. My work takes me all over the world.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “I don’t see how we can work this out.”

“You could stay,” he invited. “You don’t have to leave. We could continue dating and see where this leads.” He covered her hand with his own. “You can be part of all of our lives.”

“But I want a life of my own,” she said. “I want to marry again and have children.” She slipped her hand from his and threaded her hands together in her lap. In a soft

voice she asked, “Would you take a bullet for him?”

Leo sucked in a sharp breath. He knew she meant would he, as Stavros, take a bullet for Mr. P. And he knew Stavros would. Leo would do the same for him, and so there was only one answer. “Yes.”

“That’s another part of the problem. I don’t think I could handle sending you off to work each day, knowing you might not come back or might be injured.”

“Rose, you and I both know that death gives no warning. Your husband was coming home in a rainstorm from an ordinary workday. People we love are always one moment away from being gone. That’s why we have to cherish the moments we have together.” He attempted to take her hand, but she pulled away.

“You’re right. But that doesn’t mean I have to choose a future with a man whose odds of dying are significantly increased by his position.”

“You’re right, of course.” He thought hard, tension filling his shoulders and nerves filling his gut. She was already talking herself out of a future together based on his job, a job he didn’t have. This was the moment when he needed to come clean with Rose about who he really was. He was already losing her. He might as well lose her to the truth as to a lie. “Rose, there’s something I need to tell you. Something you need to know so you can make an informed decision.”

She turned her watery eyes on him. Her breath hitched. “Yes, Stavros.”

The expression on her face told him she expected a declaration of love. There was such hope, such tenderness in those soulful eyes, how could he dash all of her hopes with the truth? He wavered, teetered between doing the right thing and chickening out. He’d never been a coward. Now wasn’t the time to start, though he sensed being honest would cost him Rose. His heart shrank at the thought.

“Rose, I’m—”

His phone rang, and he jumped. Drat! He must’ve forgotten to turn off the ringer. He looked at the phone and hid the screen so Rose wouldn’t see Stavros’s name beneath his face on the caller ID. “Yes?”

“Nefeli is running a fever and has a rash. She needs you.”

Leo stood. “We’re on our way.”

Sensing his urgency, Rose stood. “Is it the children?”

“Nefeli has a fever and rash.” He threw some money onto the table, and they left the restaurant.

He texted Plutus to pick them up and received a response that he was in the drop-off spot, already having been notified by Stavros. Leo took Rose’s hand as they rushed through the narrow streets. He was grateful she’d worn sandals and not heels so they could move that much faster.

Catching sight of the car, he nearly broke into a run.

Rose tripped on the edge of a paver, and Stavros had to slow to catch her from falling.

“I’m okay,” she said.

When they reached the car, Leo threw the door open and scooted onto the seat after Rose. His confession would have to wait. The balance of his future with Rose would have to wait. His little girl needed him.

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Rose shook the cobwebs from her head as she sat up in bed. Her brain felt heavy from lack of sleep. She rolled her neck and shoulders to straighten out the kinks. She rubbed at a knot in her neck.

Movement from the corner chair startled her. “Oh!”

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Adonis closed the book he held and climbed up on the bed. “Is Nefeli going to die?” he curled up against her side.

She smoothed his hair and snuggled him close. “No, sweetie. Nefeli is going to be fine. We gave her some medicine to help her fever go down and calm her rash.”

“Mama died,” he said.

Rose’s heart broke on his behalf. “I know. But Nefeli doesn’t have what your mama did. Nefeli got a virus or had an allergic reaction.” The three of them, she, Stavros, and Mr. P, hadn’t been able to determine which one was the case. “The medicine is working, and she’ll be her energetic self very soon.”

“By breakfast?”

Rose shook her head and smiled. “Not that soon. Maybe tomorrow.”

“I’m hungry.” Adonis turned pleading eyes on her.

“Well, then, we better feed you. Can you give me fifteen minutes to get ready?”

His shoulders slumped, but he nodded.

“I’ll make you crepes,” she enticed him.

He grinned. “Can I play on the tablet?”

“Yes.”

He grabbed the device from its charger on the nightstand and began a spelling game.

Rose scooped up some clothes and slipped into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, she emerged fresh faced, with damp hair. The shower had done wonders to help lift her brain fog.

She held out a hand to Adonis. “Come. You can help wash the strawberries.”

He threw down the tablet and took her hand, tugging her toward the mini kitchen.

With the crepe batter made and the strawberries washed, Rose commenced making crepes.

Adonis watched eagerly, bouncing on his toes. “I got to sleep in the big bed,” he said.

“Yes, you did.”

When she and Stavros arrived from their truncated date, Mr. P had already moved Adonis to his room so he wouldn’t be disturbed all night by their ministrations to Nefeli.

They dosed Nefeli with ibuprofen and Benadryl. As they waited for Nefeli’s fever to go down, both men had alternated between pacing and holding Nefeli’s hand and debating whether to call in a doctor or take her to emergency care.

She’d overheard Mr. P say to Stavros, “Cases like this are why we normally employ a nanny with a nursing background.”

Rose was stung by his words but saw the merit of having a nanny with medical

experience—another reason why she shouldn't stay longer than originally agreed. Her heart shriveled at the thought of leaving Stavros and the children.

To prove she wasn't useless, Rose had given Nefeli a lukewarm oatmeal bath, which helped ease the itching and the temperature.

"If she hits forty degrees, and we can't bring it down with the ibuprofen, then it will be time to take her to emergency care," she told the men.

They stopped chatting and stared at her.

"How do you know that?" Stavros asked.

"I may not have my own children to care for yet, but this isn't my first nanny job. We go through basic first-aid training and are required to take refresher courses annually." She crossed arms over her chest. "Or did you not notice that in the information on the website? Wouldn't that be one of the reasons you chose my sister's company?"

Stavros had a guilty look on his face while Mr. P said, "You're right. That was one of the reasons we chose Marie's company. I'm afraid in all the worry over Nefeli, we forgot that detail." He gave a pointed look at Stavros.

Rose thought that a strange exchange. Thankfully their care over Nefeli was a success, and halfway through the night, Rose was dismissed to get some sleep since she'd have Adonis to tend in the morning.

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She had no idea if and when the men went to bed.

“Rose?” Adonis pointed at the frying pan.

“Oh!” She flipped the burned crepe into the trash can. “Sorry. My mind wandered off.”

Adonis giggled. “Where did it go?”

She smiled at him and poured a new circle of batter.

Mr. P wandered in looking slightly disheveled. “Morning.” He sat next to Adonis and ruffled the boy’s hair.

Adonis gave him a hug and said around a mouthful of food, “Rose is making crepes.”

“They smell good.” He started to smile and then yawned. “Sorry.”

“I think we’re all light on sleep, except for Adonis.” Rose slipped a crepe onto a plate and slid it in front of Mr. P.

“Thanks.” He scooped strawberries into the middle and topped them with whipped cream.

“You’re supposed to put the whipped cream on top of the crepe, not inside,” Adonis said.

“There’s more than one way to make a crepe.” Mr. P put a forkful in his mouth. “That really hits the spot.” He cleared his crepe in record time before making coffee.

“Bless you for making breakfast,” Stavros said as he joined them.

Rose’s heart picked up speed at the sound of his voice and at the sight of him dressed in sport shorts and a T-shirt. His hair was mussed and sticking up. She thought he looked sexy. She could easily wake up to the sight of that man every morning and be happy. A wave of sadness struck her. But they weren’t meant to be. Their lives were in different places.

He caught her staring, and she avoided his gaze while sliding him a crepe. Her fingers brushed his as he took the plate, and she felt warmth race up her arm.

“How’s Nefeli?” Rose asked.

“Sleeping. Better. I took her temperature. She’s a degree above normal.” Stavros dressed his crepe, putting the whipped cream on the outside.

“See, Papa does it right,” Adonis said to Mr. P.

“Right is a matter of perspective,” Mr. P replied sipping his coffee, leaning up against the counter.

“I think we’ll have a quiet day,” Rose said to Adonis. She directed her next remark to the men. “Thank you for clearing our schedule for the day.”

“I think we’ve all earned a day of relaxation and a nap,” Mr. P said.

Rose nodded.

“I don’t take naps,” Adonis protested, stabbing a strawberry.

“You don’t have to,” Rose said. She added another crepe to the stack.

Stavros took the top crepe and spread it with Nutella, while Mr. P stuffed his crepe with bacon and then drizzled it with honey.

Rose shook her head. She didn’t understand that last combination.

With the crepes made, Rose turned off the burner and sat next to Adonis so he acted as a buffer between her and Stavros. The way he looked at her indicated he planned to convince her to stay. If he told her he loved her, she’d stay, despite her concerns. There was little doubt that the children or Mr. P would object. She’d need to inform her sister as soon as possible. Perhaps she and Stavros could take a night stroll on the beach to finish their conversation.

The villa door opened, and an older couple appeared yelling, “Surprise!”

Stavros went white as a sheet and jumped from his stool.

Mr. P bent his head and muttered a curse word.

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Rose didn't understand their reactions.

Adonis launched himself from the stool and barreled into the couple's legs in a fierce hug. "Papaous! Yaya!"

Rose took a better look at the woman dressed in a loose top and linen pants and at the man in a short-sleeved button-down and khaki Bermuda shorts.

Papaous scooped Adonis up and kissed his cheek before resting the boy on his hip.

Yaya beelined for Stavros and embraced him. "Leo, my dear."

Bewildered, Rose looked at Mr. P. Why was Yaya calling Stavros Leo? Was it his first name? And why had she hugged him before her own son. Were these Stavros's parents? What was happening?

"What are you doing here?" Stavros choked out.

"We were missing you and the grandchildren." She looked around. "Where's Nefeli?"

Stavros cleared his throat. "She's sleeping. She had a rash and fever last night."

"Poor dear."

"Rose took good care of her." He gestured to her.

Yaya stepped forward and took Rose by the hand. “Rose, a pleasure to meet you. Has my son been taking good care of you?”

At a loss for words, Rose nodded. Her head was spinning, trying to understand the situation.

“I’m Nessa Papadakis, and this rogue is Theodon. We’re Leo’s parents.”

Her husband approached, still holding Adonis. “Call me Theo.”

“I’m sure Leo appreciated all you did for Nefeli, though I doubt he left his daughter’s side.” She threw an arm around Stavros and pulled him tight.

“Leo? Daughter?” Rose looked between the couple, Stavros, Adonis, and Mr. P. As she studied their facial features, clarity hit her like a bolt of Zeus’s lightning. Mr. P didn’t look like the other four.

Nessa cocked her head. “Leo Papadakis”—she gave her son a shake—“is our son, billionaire heir, and CEO of Papadakis Olive Oil.”

The heat of deceit cracked over Rose’s head and raced down to her toes. “You’re Leo?” she asked Stavros, with her hands curled into fists.

He nodded, with shame burning in his eyes.

They were all in on his secret, except for her, the idiot in the room.

Rose put her fists on her hips. “Then who is Stavros?”

Mr. P raised his hand. “I’m head of security.”

Hot tears brimmed in her eyes as she turned her wrath on Stavros, no Leo. “You lied to me.”

Leo broke away from his mother’s arm and took one step toward Rose. “It’s not what you think.” The pleading in his tone was lost on her.

She stepped back. “You’re everything I thought the wealthy to be. Deceitful, selfish, arrogant. You used me.”

“Please, Rose, let me explain,” Leo begged.

“No. I never want to see you again.” Rose grabbed her bag and raced from the room toward the beach, her heart breaking with every step.

From behind her she heard Nessa say, “Leo, what’s going on?”

The real Stavros said, “You should’ve told her, man.”

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Tears blinded Rose as she ran, slipping in the sand in her haste.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She'd been fooled by the rich for the last time. She hit the street and hailed a cab. She was going home to France where she belonged.

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Leo moved to race after Rose, but Stavros grabbed his arm. "Let her go. She won't listen to you right now. She's hurting."

Leo slumped onto a stool and buried his head in his arms.

"Leo, what's going on?" Nessa placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I'm an idiot, and I lost her," he said, his voice muffled by his skin.

"Yes, I can see that part. But what's going on?"

He felt his parents settle into the stools on either side of him before his father's hand rested on his back. Leo raised his head to look at his best friend. "Stavros?"

"I anticipated this. I'll keep tabs on her. Let you know where she is."

"Thank you." A modicum of relief penetrated the anguish of his soul.

"In the meantime, I'm taking Adonis to the beach to toss the ball around while you explain things to your parents." Stavros waved to Adonis to follow him, and they left.

Leo heard Adonis ask, “Where’s Rose going? Why was she so sad?”

He felt the gaze of his parents on him but couldn’t meet their eyes. “Rose was our temporary nanny. Her sister, Marie, was supposed to come, but she hurt her foot and sent Rose instead while she located a suitable permanent nanny. You know how I’ve been in hiding since Nia’s death.” From the corner of his eye, he saw his parents exchange a glance. They’d encouraged him several times lately to return to public life and seek out a wife and mother.

“Yes, son, we know,” Theo said.

And then Leo let the whole story spill out about how Rose had come and awakened feelings he’d long thought dead and resurrected that part of his soul that yearned to love a companion with his whole heart.

“She was prejudiced against the wealthy. Since she was a temp, I didn’t explain who I really was on the first day. I didn’t know I’d fall in love with her. I kept putting off telling her, and once she explained why she disliked the wealthy, I wondered if she’d ever forgive me for not being honest from the start.”

“And then we walked in,” Nessa said. “We spilled the beans, as they say.” She rubbed circles on his back.

“Your last nanny knew about the ruse from the start. We assumed the new one did too,” Theo said. “We didn’t mean to cause any harm.”

“I know, Papa. This mess isn’t your fault. It’s mine,” Leo rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“The question is, what are you going to do now?” Theo asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? He must go after her.” Nessa turned Leo’s head to face her. “You go and tell her the truth. Show her how you feel. Beg if you must. Fight for her.” She gave an emphatic nod. “Like your father did for me.”

Leo looked at his father. “She’s right. I fought for your mother.” He rubbed his face. “Nearly got a broken jaw out of the deal too.” He winked at Nessa.

“Papa?” Nefeli stood in the doorway of her bedroom.

“Nefeli.” Leo ran to his daughter, picked her up, and held her tight. “How are you feeling?” He ran a hand over her forehead and pushed back her hair, noting she felt normal and not feverish.

She yawned. “Hungry. May I have some breakfast?”

“Of course. Guess who’s here to see you?” He carried her over to the stools and plopped her in the one he’d vacated.

“Yaya! Papaous!” She hugged both of them.

“Let’s get you some crepes,” Nessa said.

Leo looked at the stack of uneaten crepes made by Rose’s loving hands, and his heart broke again.

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Stavros and Adonis came in from the beach.

Leo looked anxiously at Stavros. “Any word?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

“She’s booked a flight to Paris,” Stavros said. “Probably headed to her sister’s.”

Leo worried his lower lip. “Get the jet ready. I’m going after her.”

Stavros laid a hand on his arm. “I have a better idea.”

Leo watched his parents feed Nefeli and care for Adonis while Stavros explained his plan in hushed tones.

“Are you in?” Stavros asked.

Leo frowned at the carpet. “It’s risky. She might not come back.”

“She loves those children as much as you do. She’ll come. She’ll be angry, but she’ll come.”

Leo shook his head. “I don’t want to manipulate her. That’s what made her hate the wealthy in the first place.”

“Do you want to live the rest of your life without her?” Stavros raised a brow.

“No.”

“Papa, where’s Rose?” Nefeli asked, looking around.

And that one question made Leo’s decision easy. “She needed to fly home unexpectedly, but she’ll be back soon.”

Stavros nodded. “I’ll put the plan in motion.”

Leo ran a hand through his hair. “You’d better be right.”

“The building has already exploded. Now you have to build on the rubble. I’ll make the calls.”

Leo nodded and turned to his family, grateful his parents were here to help him through a tough moment. He clapped his hands. “Eat up. When you’re done, we’re packing up. We’re going home.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Paris

Rose fell into Marie’s arms when she opened the door. Relief at having kept it together consumed her, and then the floodgates opened as all her heartache and pain spilled out.

“Rose?” Marie’s boot clomped on the hardwood floor as she sat them on the sofa, Rose sobbing on her shoulder.

In a garbled rush, Rose told the whole painful story of Leo’s duplicity.

Marie stroked her hair. “I can see why you’re upset.”

Rose wiped her eyes and blew her nose with a tissue.

“You really love him.” Marie handed her another tissue.

“That’s the worst part.” Rose blew her nose again and crumpled the used tissues in her hand. Her head felt heavy and her eyes felt puffy.

“Not really.” Marie placed her hands in her lap.

“What do you mean?” Rose sniffed.

“You have to go back.”

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“What?” Rose jumped up. “I can’t go back. Did you not hear anything I said?” She paced.

“The permanent nanny can’t be there for forty-eight hours.”

“You can go,” Rose said. “You can do it for two days in a boot.”

“It’s not the boot that’s keeping me here.”

It was Rose’s turn to look bewildered at her sister. Clearly there was something she was missing. “I can’t go. One look and I’ll fall in love with him all over again. But I can’t love him. He lied to me. Going back to Leo is like sending me into the lion’s den and hoping I’ll come out unharmed. Impossible. If I let him explain . . .” She collapsed next to her sister and rubbed a hand across her forehead.

“You should let him explain, if only to get closure.”

“But you—”

“Rose.” Marie took her hands. “I’m pregnant.” Marie offered a small smile.

Rose’s mouth fell open. “What? When? How?”

Marie laughed. “I think you know how.” Her eyes turned misty. “We were taking a break between treatments. I’m thirteen weeks along, and everything looks fine.” A tear spilled down her cheek. “I didn’t want to say anything until I passed the first trimester. I’ve never made it this far before.”

Rose embraced her sister, and they both cried tears of joy.

“I’m so happy for you,” Rose pulled back and wiped at her eyes. “Both of you. All three of you.”

“But that’s why I can’t travel. I’m not taking any chances.”

Rose nodded. Her shoulders slumped. “I understand.” Her heart turned to lead at the thought of facing Stavros, no, Leo.

“I’ll take you to the airport,” Marie said.

“I’ll find a flight on the way.” Rose sighed.

“No need. Mr. P sent his plane for you.”

Anger bubbled inside of Rose. “Oh, he did, did he? He thinks he can snap his fingers, send his private plane, and I’ll come running back to him?” Her fist struck the sofa cushion.

Marie closed her eyes and took a deep breath and then opened her eyes. “Rose, Leo isn’t Robert’s family. Not all the wealthy are created equal.”

“Agreed. Some of them are worse than others.” Rose’s face felt ablaze with righteous indignation.

“But not Leo,” Marie said. Her face went pale, and she put a hand over her mouth. “Excuse me.” She bolted for the bathroom, with Rose hot on her heels.

When Marie was done emptying her stomach, she rocked back on her heels and flushed the toilet. She rinsed her mouth with tap water and splashed some water on

her face.

“Morning sickness?” Rose watched her sister with concern as she stood in the bathroom doorway.

Marie chuckled and smoothed her ponytail. “Morning, afternoon, evening.” She patted her flat abdomen. “The baby doesn’t seem to care.” She looked over at Rose. “I never had sickness like this with the others.”

“Maybe it’s a sign that this baby will come through.”

“Irony that being constantly sick could be a good sign.”

“I’m surprised you’re still ill. Usually it lets up around the second trimester. At least it did for me.” The familiar ache squeezed her heart as she thought of her little boy.

Marie shrugged. “The doctor said sometimes it lasts the whole pregnancy.” She gave a wry smile. “Lucky me. But if I can hold a living breathing him or her, the sacrifice will be worth it.”

Rose thought of the sacrifices Marie was willing to make to protect her child. She remembered a conversation with Leo about Mr. P having gone into hiding to get away from the gold diggers. Perhaps that was his way of protecting Nefeli and Adonis too. Her heart missed the children. She knew if she were a mother again, she’d do anything to protect her children. Her shoulders slumped. She needed to return to Greece.

“What is it?” Marie laid a hand on her shoulder.

“I think I may’ve misjudged Leo.”

“In what way? Because I can think of a few.” She smirked.

Rose shrugged off her sister’s hand and headed for her purse. “I think his deception was a way to protect himself and his children.”

“A parent will do anything for their children,” Marie said.

“Yes.” Rose shouldered her bag. “Is there anything the doctors can give you to relieve the symptoms?”

Marie gathered up her keys and bag. “The medicine they prescribe has more side effects than I’m willing to risk. It’s an all-natural pregnancy for me, as much as possible. The doctor mentioned that I may need to go on steroids if the baby tries to come early, or they may have to sew me shut to avoid a miscarriage. There are a lot of unknowns at this point.” She picked up a package of nuts and stowed them in her bag.

“I’ll pray the pregnancy goes well.” Rose embraced her sister.

“Thanks.” Marie squeezed her.

They left the flat. Marie locked the door behind them.

“The only thing that helps me from being sick is to eat all the time. When I’m full, I’m fine.” Marie dangled the bag of nuts in Rose’s face and then opened it. “I didn’t

eat as much as I should've at breakfast." She popped a nut in her mouth. "I'll be as big as a house by the time this little one arrives. But that will be worth it too." She smiled.

Rose thought Marie had never looked lovelier.

They arrived at the car in the parking garage.

"You ready?" Marie asked.

"No," said Rose. "Leo deserves my abandonment, the children don't. I'm sorry I ran out on them and didn't do my duty by you."

"It's understandable," Marie said.

They got in the car, and Marie pulled out of the space.

As Marie wound through the streets of Paris, she said, "I'll have a replacement nanny on the doorstep in two days. Can you hang in there that long?"

"For you and the children, yes. Though I can't speak as to my treatment of Leo."

Marie chuckled. "My sister's in love with a billionaire."

"Oh, shut up." Rose crossed her arms and stared out the window. But Marie's words rang true. She was in love with a billionaire. With Leo. Being near him and trying to keep her distance physically and emotionally would tax her in a way she'd never faced. Above all, she couldn't give him a chance to explain. If she let Leo speak, he would shatter the hastily built wall she was constructing around her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Isle of Papadakis Part I

Leo paced the floor, drawing minimal comfort in being home. “How long until the plane lands?” he asked Stavros for the billionth time.

“Same as before, minus one minute.” Stavros grinned at him.

“I need something to do or I’ll go crazy.” Leo ran his hands through his hair. His parents had the children happily occupied.

“You could go out into the grove,” Stavros suggested as he worked on his tablet.

“How can you be so calm?” Leo found his best friend’s relaxed state infuriating.

Stavros chuckled. “It’s not my heart and future at stake. I have nothing to lose here.”

“I wish I had nothing to lose,” Leo growled.

“Win or lose, you have forty-eight hours to convince her to stay,” Stavros said, closing the tablet. “And that was generous of her sister to grant you that long.”

“What do you mean?” Leo stopped.

“Marie is aware of your relationship with Rose and wants to give you two a chance to work things out, hopefully with a happy outcome. But she’s also Rose’s sister and has to protect Rose’s heart from further harm at your hands. She probably could’ve gotten the permanent nanny here today, but she’s giving you the gift of time. Don’t blow it.”

“I owe her.”

“Yes, you do.” Stavros stood. “Don’t forget, if Rose knows how her sister helped you, it could damage their relationship. Marie is betting on you to make Rose happy.”

“That’s all I want.”

“I know.” Stavros laid a hand on his shoulder. “Make it happen. This will be way more intense than any flight rescue we did in action.”

Leo nodded. “And the stakes have never been higher.”

Stavros dropped his arm.

“I’m headed to the grove, but I want to be standing on the runway when she lands,”

“I’ll text you,” Stavros said. “Now get out of here. You’re driving me crazy.”

Leo strode outdoors, across the veranda, and into the solitude and peace of the trees.

As he entered the grove, the scent of olives, leaves, dirt, and sea air filled his nostrils. The smells worked as a balm, bringing peace and calm to his soul. His heart might be in disarray, but he found solace in the ancient trees. It had always been so. Even when he was a child, the olive trees seemed a sacred space.

The sun played peek-a-boo with the clouds while he fingered leaves as he ambled amid the ancient, gnarled trunks, which were generations old and sure to outlast him. He found comfort that some things lasted for a long time if nurtured properly. He wandered farther into the section that was a mix of ancient and young. Last year a disease had infected part of the grove, killing some of the oldest trees. New trees grew in the places of their predecessors. He derived comfort in the knowledge that his ancestors had tilled this soil, sweated under the Greek sun, and tended the trees for the benefit of the generations to come. He felt connection. He felt grounded.

Inevitably his feet took him to the tree, the one he and Nia had planted the day they were married. Next to their tree stood two smaller ones, representing Nefeli and Adonis.

He rubbed a hand along the bark of the trunk of the wedding tree. He felt closest to Nia here than at her gravesite. The familiar ache of Nia's loss touched his heart, but not in the way it had in past days.

He whispered, "I've found someone, Nia. I've fallen in love with her. I think you'd like Rose. I hope you approve." He closed his eyes and let the sea breeze wash over him, listening with his ears and, more importantly, with his heart. A peaceful warmth grew in his chest, and he imagined Nia was there, smiling at him, giving him permission to pursue a future of love. Tears pricked at his eyelids.

"I believe she will love the children, the way you did, with her whole heart," he said. The leaves rustled in the wind.

“You will always be their mother, and I’ll be sure they never forget you, as I will never forget you.”

The sun burst from the clouds bathing him in warmth. He took it as a sign of Nia’s approval.

“Thank you.” He kissed the tree.

His phone chimed, and he checked the screen. The text from Stavros said, “It’s time.”

Leo’s heart raced in his chest, and his feet flew across the ground to get him to the airstrip in time. Rose was coming. The time had come to win her back. For the sake of his heart and his children, he must not fail to convince her to stay and become his wife.

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The plane touched down, and Rose forced the myriad emotions down too. She must be strong. Leo had betrayed her trust. She must keep that in mind, or the hasty and fragile walls constructed around her heart would crumble. She had to make it through forty-eight hours unscathed and then she could return home and cry her eyes out.

The plane braked to a stop. The cabin door opened, and she descended the staircase to the tarmac. Her heart lurched at the sight of Stavros and Leo, waiting for her. The fibers of her being cried out to be in Leo’s arms. She slapped them into submission and kept her features impassive.

“Welcome to Papadakis Isle,” Stavros said, his trademark sunglasses in place. “I hope your flight was enjoyable.”

Rose nodded, not trusting her voice yet. A whole island. The family owned the whole

island. Well, that figured. She twisted her wedding ring over and over. The height of the flight didn't torture her as much as knowing who she was coming back to, even if only temporarily.

"Rose," Leo began.

"Where are the children?" She directed her question to Stavros, ignoring Leo, though every cell in her skin was aware of him and his proximity.

"In the house with Yaya and Papaous," Stavros answered.

“Thank you.” She took a step.

“I’ll show you the way,” Leo said.

“No.” The word was curt and clipped. “I’ll find my own way, or Stavros may show me.” She used all her will power not to look at Leo.

Through his sunglasses, she saw Stavros’s eyes flick to Leo. He seemed to get an answer to his unspoken question. “I’ll take you.”

“Before you do,” she said to Stavros and then addressed Leo, “let me be clear. I am here for the children and nothing else. I have no desire to see or speak to you. Please respect my wishes.” Without waiting for a reply or indication of any kind that he understood, she strode toward the sprawling white mansion with blue windows and doors.

From behind, she heard Stavros say, “She’s not going to make this easy for you.”

“No, she’s not,” Leo said.

Then Stavros was at her side.

“And I don’t want you to speak to me on his behalf either.” Her voice issued the warning with a light growl.

Stavros nodded. “This is one mess Leo will have to clean up on his own.”

“Thank you.” The tightness in her shoulders eased a fraction. At least she wouldn’t have to worry that Stavros would try to plead Leo’s case to her. And since she’d issued the edict for Leo not to speak to her, she should be able to get through the next two days.

“I can’t promise that Leo’s parents won’t try to speak to you on his behalf.” The corners of Stavros’s mouth twitched.

Rose groaned inside. She hadn’t accounted for Leo’s parents. She could hardly tell them to zip their lips regarding their son. How was she going to get around that problem?

“I’ll show you your room first and then take you to the children.” Stavros led her through various rooms, pointing out items of historical significance to the family as they walked.

She tried to keep track of where they were going. “This place is like a maze.”

Stavros chuckled. “You should’ve seen it before the remodeling. The home has grown over the generations and with the increased wealth. The floor plan made no sense at all and was a nightmare to keep eyes on. This is much easier for protecting the family.”

“Are there cameras in every room?” She looked around for telltale signs but saw nothing.

“Pretty much, though they’re well hidden. The bedrooms and bathrooms are the exception, though there are cameras trained on all the doorways and windows.”

As she’d expected. At least she’d have privacy in her room.

“This is you.” Stavros opened a door. “The children are next door.” He pointed down the hall. “Our rooms are down there. The guest rooms are on the opposite side of the house.”

“You have a room in this wing?” The information surprised her.

“As head of security, I find being in close proximity to those I protect to be a necessary duty.” He flipped up his sunglasses. “But Leo is also my best friend, and this is my family.” He gestured to the home.

Touched by his loyalty to the Papadakis’s she cleared her throat and looked inside her room. “This will do. The new nanny will be here in two days, but I’m sure you know that.”

“Yes. Marie has been in touch.”

Rose frowned. “I’ll bet,” she muttered.

“You’ll find all your belongings inside.” He inclined his head toward her room. “We brought them with us.”

“Wonderful.” She had expected nothing less.

“I’ll have them shipped to your home when you return so you won’t have the burden of taking them on the plane.”

“I see. Turn out the nanny and relegate her to common status the minute she’s done with the job.” Bitterness tinged her words.

Stavros raised a brow. “You’d prefer the private plane?”

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“No,” she snapped. Her words and emotions were all over the map. She drew in a deep breath, hoping she could draw in rational thought with it. “Sorry. Whatever arrangements you and Leo make for getting me home will be just fine with me.”

“Of course.”

“The children,” she prompted.

“This way.” He led her back through previous rooms and then turned into another section.

The children played a board game on the floor with their grandparents. Catching sight of her, they launched themselves at her.

“Rose!” they shouted, wrapping their arms around her body, nearly toppling her.

Stavros steadied her by grabbing her elbow.

She bent to kiss their heads and raised her eyes enough to see Nessa and Theo exchange a pointed look. They were definitely up to something, and that meant she was in trouble.

“Rose.” Nessa greeted her with a kiss on both cheeks above the children’s heads.

Theo smiled at her by way of welcome.

“Rose, where did you go?” Adonis tugged her toward the game.

Nefeli held her other hand.

“I went home to see my sister. I’m sorry I left in a rush. Next time, I’ll say goodbye.” She gulped down the lump in her throat at the prospect of parting with these darlings forever.

“Why do you have to say goodbye?” Nefeli pulled Rose down onto the floor with her, examining her cards.

Rose looked at the other three grown-ups in the room. Hadn’t anyone explained to the children that the new nanny would arrive in two days? From the looks on their faces, apparently not. They expected her to break the news to the children. Well, that was just great.

She gathered the children against her. “Your new nanny will be here soon, and then I’ll go home.”

“Don’t you want to stay?” Nefeli turned her brown eyes up at Rose.

“We love you. Don’t you love us?” Adonis asked. His eyebrows puckered together.

Rose’s heart fractured all over again. She pulled them tight, fighting the tears gathering in her eyes. “Of course I love you, and I will always look on our time together with fondness.”

“What’s fondness?” Adonis rubbed his head against her side.

“Happiness,” Rose said. She needed to end this sad moment before she fell apart. “But until then, we’ll have fun. For starters, let’s finish your game.” She scooted behind the children while Nessa and Theo resumed their positions on the floor.

Stavros left, punching away on his tablet.

Rose pinned on a smile as the game continued and tried to stay in the moment, aware of the looks Leo's parents shot her. Inevitably her mind wandered to Leo and what he was doing and where might he be in the house. She could run into him at any time. She twisted her ring, her nerves on edge. She didn't want to be caught by him unawares. She didn't want to be caught by him at all. Her heart called her a liar. Above all, she must not be alone with him.

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Leo hadn't made any headway with Rose and her forty-eight hours were almost up. He ran harder across the sand than ever before. Not even after Nia's death had he punished his body this way.

Stavros matched him step for step.

Leo came to the cove and stopped. He bent over, his breath coming in short bursts.

"I don't think running yourself to death will win her back," Stavros said. "That's a terrible plan."

Leo shot him a dark look. "Don't think I haven't been trying."

"Oh, you've been trying. You haven't been succeeding."

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Leo threw a halfhearted punch at Stavros, who stepped out of the way.

“You want to spar?” Stavros grinned. “I can’t remember the last time you beat me.”

“Well, maybe today is that day,” Leo said, putting up his guard.

Stavros did the same. “Bring it on.”

Leo jabbed, kicked, and blocked, and Stavros did the same as each tried to topple the other one on the sand.

As Leo gained traction he realized Stavros’s game. “Don’t you dare let me win,” he growled.

“Maybe if I do, you’d have some confidence to go after Rose.” Stavros laid a well-aimed punch on Leo’s chest. “She’s leaving in the morning.”

Leo escaped Stavros and circled. “She won’t let me get close to her. If I come into the room, she completely ignores me. I’m a ghost to her.”

“Better get haunting, then.”

“She’s frozen me out. I can’t get her alone at all. She uses the children, you, and my parents as shields.” Leo kicked again and caught Stavros in the knee, making him stumble.

He regained his balance. “You have reinforcements,” Stavros said. “Use them.”

“What do you mean?” Leo angled for a better shot.

“You can’t get close enough to talk to her. I can’t talk to her. I don’t advise using the kids. Use your parents. They’re capable and more than willing.”

Leo scoffed, blocking Stavros’s punch. “I can’t see my father having that kind of conversation with Rose.”

“But Nessa can.”

Leo straightened, and Stavros’s palm hit his chest knocking him onto the sand. He landed on his backside and ran his fingers through the grains, pondering the idea of his mother’s intervention. Rose would have a hard time saying no to Nessa. His mother might be able to convince Rose to hear him out. One chance was all he needed.

“I think you’re right,” Leo said.

Stavros gave him a hand and pulled Leo up. They clapped each other on the back.

“Good spar,” Stavros said.

“Thanks. I needed that,” Leo said.

“You always need a good butt kicking. We should do it more often.”

Leo chuckled. “Someday, it’ll be you on the sand.”

Stavros scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

They headed toward the house. Leo had a good feeling about the plan. He hadn’t had

any positive vibes since Rose learned the truth about his identity. Positivity was a welcome relief from all the despair. His determination grew. One way or another, Rose would hear his side. Time was running out, and he couldn't have her leave without knowing the truth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Isle of Papadakis Part II

"Nefeli, Adonis, please put your shoes away," Rose said. She stifled a yawn. She was bone weary from the stress of avoiding Leo.

The pajama-clad children rolled their eyes but followed her directions.

"Thank you." She directed her words to Nefeli. "I'll tuck in Adonis and then be in to see you. You may read until then."

With a grin, Nefeli scampered into her room. She was excited to read her new book.

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Adonis climbed into bed with a yawn and a scowl. “When can I read books on my own?”

“When you can.” Rose pulled the covers up. “You’re already on your way to being a good reader.”

“I want to be better, like Nefeli.”

“I know, and you will be.” Rose smoothed his hair. She read him a book about monkeys and elephants. “Time for sleep.”

“Do you have to go?” Adonis’s brown eyes pleaded with her to say no.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I’m sure you’ll like the new nanny just as much as me.”

Adonis reached up and wrapped his little hands around her neck. “I love you, Rose. Please stay.”

Rose’s eyes pooled with tears. Leaving these children would be the hardest thing she’d done since burying her husband and stillborn son. “I love you, too.” She wiped the tears on his cheeks with her thumbs. “Song. Then bed.”

He nodded and settled back onto the pillow, keeping his brown eyes trained on her, one hand grasping hers.

She sang a lullaby and then kissed his forehead. “Night, Adonis.”

“Will you say goodbye?” his tiny voice asked.

“Yes. I’ll say goodbye in the morning.” She turned off the bedside lamp, letting the glow of the night-light fill the dark corners.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She cracked the door and turned to head for Nefeli’s room. “Oh.” Nessa stood before her. Rose pressed a hand to her chest. “You startled me. I was going to put Nefeli to bed.”

Nessa smiled. “No need. Theo has her. I was hoping we could take a walk and have a chat.”

Rose twisted her ring. “It’s my last night with Nefeli. I wanted to tuck her in.”

“We won’t be long,” Nessa promised. “You can look in on her after.”

Wariness crept into Rose. She had a good idea of what Nessa wanted to chat about.

“Please,” Nessa said.

Rose could no longer avoid the conversation. “Sure.” She followed Nessa into the twilight and down a stone walk leading to the sand.

Rose braced herself, arranging her internal defenses for the lecture that must follow.

“I don’t know what happened between you and my son these past weeks.” Nessa held up her hand to stop words from coming out of Rose’s open mouth. “And I don’t need to know. I can see you’re both miserable at the present, and that’s enough information for me to figure out what has happened. I haven’t seen Leo this devastated since Nia

died.” She looked at Rose. “And that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Rose’s brow furrowed. This wasn’t the conversation she thought they were going to have. She’d expected something more along the lines of, “This is why you need to hear Leo out.” More of the mama-bear tactic.

Nessa continued. “Nia was Leo’s whole world. When Nefeli came along, he was overjoyed to expand his world to include her. And when they found out they were expecting Adonis, he was over the moon. Nia’s pregnancy was normal, and a healthy baby boy was born. They enjoyed a few precious hours of parental bliss before the complications set in. Nia started hemorrhaging internally. As this happens from time to time, the doctors were concerned but not unduly so. They set to work to solve the problem, but despite all their efforts and care, the specialists couldn’t pinpoint the source. Leo never left her side, unless he couldn’t be with her while a test was being run. Even then he waited by the door until she was done. Very quickly, it became clear that Nia would bleed out, despite transfusions and anything else the medical staff could do. Leo and Nia sobbed on each other’s shoulders when the doctor delivered the news.”

Unwanted tears filled Rose’s eyes as she pictured the scene. The hastily constructed, fragile walls around her heart splintered piece by piece.

“There Leo was with the joy of Adonis in one hand, and sorrow of Nia in the other. Torn in half.” Nessa’s voice caught, and she took a steadying breath.

“Once the hope that Nia would live was gone, Nia determined to make her last hours count. She spoke openly with Leo and all of us about her dreams for the future of their family, including Leo marrying again. She knew, as I do, and as I suspect you do, that Leo has a great capacity for love.”

Rose nodded at Nessa’s truthful words.

“He held Adonis in one hand and Nia’s hand in the other until she breathed her last and was gone.” Nessa’s voice was strained by the painful memories. “Leo was broken but didn’t blame Adonis for Nia’s death, as many a father has done before him, and as I feared he might.” She turned watery eyes on Rose. “It’s a terrible thing to lose a spouse, especially when your future together is stretched out before you full of possibilities.” She gripped Rose’s hand. “I believe you know something about that.”

Rose didn’t trust her voice, so she squeezed Nessa’s hand in acknowledgment. The pain of Leo’s loss coursed through her like her own, leaving a hollow void in its wake.

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“Leo barely had time to grieve for Nia when the sharks started circling him, hungry for his fortune.” Nessa’s words turned bitter. “He was in mourning, and all those women saw were dollar signs. In an act of self-preservation, Leo turned recluse and switched roles with Stavros. The previous nanny was with this family from almost the day Adonis was born, so she was aware of the arrangement from the beginning.” Nessa stopped walking and laid a hand on Rose’s arm. “We assumed you knew too. It never occurred to us that Leo wouldn’t say anything, that he would leave the temporary nanny in the dark. Theo and I feel terrible that we sprang the news on you the way we did. We hope you can forgive us.”

Rose squeezed Nessa’s hand. “I do. It’s not your fault. It’s Leo’s. He should have told me.”

“Yes, he should have. The question is, why didn’t he? And can you leave tomorrow with not knowing?” She embraced Rose. “I’ve taken enough of your time tonight. I hoped if you understood what Leo went through it might give you a better picture of the man he is.”

“Thank you.” From the corner of her eye, Rose saw Leo and Stavros walking to the house from the beach.

Nessa noticed too. “I’ll let you say goodnight to Nefeli. The children will be sad to see you leave in the morning. They’ve grown quite attached to you in such a short amount of time.”

“I’ve grown fond of them too,” Rose said.

“I think you’ve grown more than fond.” Nessa said. “Leo isn’t the only one with a great capacity to love.” She kissed Rose’s cheek and headed for the house.

Rose turned back to look at the waves, processing all that Nessa had told her and the questions she’d posed. Could she leave without knowing Leo’s reasons for leaving her in the dark? Would she ever get closure if she didn’t?

She stared at the waves, willing them to give her heart an answer. The call of a bird in flight caught her attention. The bird dived into the water and came up empty.

As signs went, that was unhelpful.

Rose sighed.

She heard someone approaching, and all her cells went on high alert, attuned to his presence. Without looking, Rose knew it was Leo. She’d lingered too long, and he’d finally caught her alone.

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Leo’s heart thumped so loudly that he thought for sure Rose could hear it as he approached.

A twitch of her shoulders as he neared told him she was aware of him.

She looked beautiful but sad bathed in the twilight as the sun sank to the horizon on the opposite side of the isle.

With every step, he expected her to flee as she had since arriving at his home. She stayed, seemingly rooted to the spot. He stood next to her and waited. This was his last chance. He didn’t want to blow it.

Without looking at him, she said, “I’ll give you five minutes.”

Leo took a deep breath. “I was wrong to not tell you who I was from the start. I hadn’t planned to tell you because you’d only be here a month, and there didn’t seem to be a point.”

She gave a slight inclination of her head which he hoped meant that she understood his rationale.

“What I didn’t expect was to fall in love with you.” There. He’d said it.

Rose sucked in a hard breath, and a shudder went through her.

Leo wasn’t sure what that reaction meant. He moved to stand in front of her but didn’t touch her, even though every fiber of his being cried out to gather her in his arms and never let her go.

She kept her eyes trained on the sand.

He said, “As my feelings for you grew each day, I found it a little harder to tell you the truth, fearing you wouldn’t forgive me.”

She twisted her ring, trembling and silent.

Leo continued. “And each night I determined to tell you the next day. But then all my fear would come rushing back, and I stayed silent. You were so determined to dislike Mr. Papadakis from the first day. And once you shared your past treatment and reasons for despising the wealthy . . .” He ran his hands through his hair. “I believed you’d see my omission as a betrayal, as a manipulation tactic, and never forgive me. How could I tell you I was a billionaire without you hating me? How could you see me as a man who loves you and happens to be a billionaire? I’ve wrestled with these

questions with no answers. Usually women only see me as money, not as Leo. You saw me as Leo. I was afraid of how you'd look at me once you knew the whole story. After my wife died . . .”

Rose raised a hand as if to touch his arm but then dropped it and curled her arm across her chest. “Nessa explained about Nia’s death.”

Her voice was so quiet, he had to lean in to hear her, catching the scent of her intoxicating perfume.

“She did?” He couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice. He’d only concocted the plan of asking for his mother’s help a few minutes ago but hadn’t spoken to her yet. As always, his mother was one step ahead.

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“Yes.” She fiddled with her ring. “Your five minutes are up.” She slid the ring from her finger.

Fear and desperation coursed through Leo. He was failing. He was losing her. “Rose, please.”

She held her hands in front of her and slid the ring onto her opposite hand. She met his eyes for the first time. “What would you like to do with the rest of our time together?”

“What?”

She took a step closer. “I’m still upset that you didn’t tell me the truth from the beginning. But after listening to your mother and your explanation, I think I understand why. You’re right. I came here with a lot of justified prejudice against the wealthy, and I let that cloud my reaction to your identity.” She rested her hand on his cheek. “But I fell in love with you too. Your switched roles allowed me to know you as Leo the man. I never would’ve given Leo the billionaire the time of day. I suppose I have forgiveness to ask for too.”

He wrapped her hand in his. “You forgive me?”

“That depends,” she said with a teasing gleam in her eye.

“On what?”

“On how well you kiss me.” She grinned.

Leo captured her smiling mouth with his own and kissed her breathless and senseless. His future, their future, depended on this kiss, and Leo left nothing to chance. He poured his love for Rose into each point of contact, hungry for her to love him and forgive him. He trailed kisses across her cheek, down her jaw, along her neck, and back up to her perfect lips.

With ragged breath, he asked, “Am I forgiven?”

“Well . . .” Rose pretended to waver in her decision. “I suppose I could keep you standing here all night kissing me to earn it . . . but then we’d be right back here where we are now.” She gave him a sly look. “Might be a waste of time. I do like my sleep.”

“A sacrifice I’m willing to make. I’ll kiss you as long as it takes.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tight. He dipped his head. “I’m a little less stubborn. I’ve already forgiven you for your prejudice against my wealth.” He brushed his lips against hers.

She laughed, and he twirled her around.

“Besides, we need to give the children the happy news,” he said.

“And what’s that?”

“No new nanny. That you’re staying.” A claw of fear gripped his heart. “You are staying, aren’t you?”

She gave him a swift kiss. “I’m staying.”

Joy filled him, and he kissed her longer this time, letting the world fall away. For him there was only Rose, his Rose. Energy ebbed and flowed between them as kisses

were exchanged and murmured declarations of love given. Fires were ignited and banked for a future time when they could fully rage.

“Rose.”

“Yes?” She turned to look at the water, her back pressed against his chest, with his arms wrapped around her.

“I know Robert will always have a place in your heart, just as Nia will in mine. But I also know there is room for you, and I believe you have room for me too.”

“I do.”

“Our love will be different from what we had with either of them, but I hope our relationship will be as great.”

He saw the curve of her smile.

“I know what you’re trying to say.”

“We both know life is to be cherished because it can end at any moment. I’d like to cherish you for the rest of my days.”

She turned in his arms to face him. “What are you saying?”

“I’d like to upgrade you from nanny to equal life partner, wife, and mother.”

“That’s quite a proposal.” She twined her hands around his neck, a mischievous look on her face. “Will there be a prenup?”

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He laughed. “No. I’m quite certain you don’t give a flying olive for my money.”

Her expression turned serious. “Will there be children?”

“Would you like there to be?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I would too.” He pressed her to himself. “An agreement I’ll be happy to make good on once we’re married.”

She laughed again, a sound Leo hoped to hear for years to come. He kissed her soundly before reluctantly relinquishing her from his arms.

“We have some arrangements to make and children to make happy,” he said as they walked hand in hand to the house.

“Not to mention, parents, Stavros, and Marie.” Rose swung their hands.

“Also we still have your birthday party to plan.” Leo loved her smile and vowed to do all he could to keep it there as often as possible. He knew life would have its challenges, but he and Rose would conquer them together.

Rose laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“You do realize that when word gets out about our wedding, every nanny will be scheming to work for a billionaire in order to land a husband. Poor Marie. How will she ever be able to determine the honest women from the sharks?”

“I shall have to send an apology letter to all the single billionaire men in the world,” Leo said, kissing her knuckles. “And a thank you note to Marie for spraining her foot. If not, she’d have come instead of you.” He wrinkled his nose.

“Yes, well, you certainly couldn’t have fallen for my sister since she’s a married woman.”

He put his hand on Nefeli’s doorknob.

Rose covered it. “What are you doing? She’s asleep.”

“I think waking the children to tell them they have a new mother is important enough to sacrifice sleep.”

Rose groaned. “It’ll take them forever to get back to bed. Can’t we tell them in the morning?”

He chuckled and brushed his lips against hers. “Let the sleepless nights begin.” He winked at her and turned the knob.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Epilogue

Rose flicked at the silver balloon that would soon reveal the gender of her baby. She rubbed her hand over her expanded stomach, which seemed bigger than it should be at this point.

Leo wrapped an arm around her from behind. “Is the baby kicking?”

“Not at the moment.” She turned to face him. “Tell me true, do you want a boy or girl?”

He kissed her. “I want healthy, ten fingers, ten toes, and my wife at my side to raise him or her.”

She felt the weight of Leo’s words and decided to lighten the moment. She narrowed her eyes. “You started with him.”

“We already have one of each.” He jutted his chin toward Nefeli chasing Adonis, trying to get back her pink balloon. She was decidedly in the girl camp, and Adonis in the boy camp. “Whichever our child is they’ll be a blessing.” He looked up at the balloon. “Sure you don’t want to pop it before the cake?”

“No. After.”

“Are you sure you want to know at all? We could make it a surprise.”

“Nope. I want to decorate the nursery. I want to nest.” She kissed her husband.

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“Enough of that,” Marie said, approaching with her baby in her arms. “Kissing leads to the things that got us here in the first place.” She winked.

“Let me hold him a minute.” Rose stretched out her arms for Armonde. She cooed over her nephew, hoping her child with Leo would be just as perfect.

Marie’s husband wrapped an arm around his wife’s waist. “Thanks for inviting us.”

“As if you wouldn’t come.” Rose laughed.

“Well, you did send the plane,” Marie said. “How could we say no?”

Adonis ran up. “Can we have cake now?” he asked for the billionth time.

Leo looked at Rose for permission, and she nodded.

“Yes,” he said to his son. “But first we must sing.”

Rose handed the baby back to Marie.

Dianthe lit the birthday candles, all thirty-one of them, as the group gathered around the cake.

Rose looked around at her family as they sang to her with smiling faces. Her parents. Her sister and brother-in-law. Both sets of Nefeli’s and Adonis’s grandparents. Rose had worried about how Nia’s parents would feel about Leo’s remarriage, but they were delighted to have another heart to love their grandchildren. Leo’s siblings and

spouses had also opened their arms to her. And Stavros. Dear Stavros. He needed someone to love.

Rose made a wish and blew out the candles. She needed two breaths with the baby taking up some of her lung capacity.

When everyone had cake, Rose and Leo stood by the silver balloon.

“We’re happy you could all come to celebrate Rose’s birthday,” Leo said.

Everyone cheered.

“As you all know, we elected to learn the gender of our baby in a special way. Inside the balloon is confetti in the color of the gender, pink for a girl, blue for a boy. Stavros did the honors for us. He’s very good at keeping secrets.”

Stavros waved at the group.

“Shall we pop the balloon?” Leo asked.

A chant of “Pop” went up.

Leo pulled the pin tied around the balloon ribbon and aimed it at the balloon above their heads.

Rose covered her ears.

POP!

A shower of pink and blue confetti rained around them.

Everyone clapped and cheered.

Rose saw her confusion mirrored in Leo's face.

"Stavros, is there a mistake?" she asked.

He pointed to the ground, where Leo picked up a gold piece of paper that fluttered down. He unrolled it and looked at her with astonishment, before he gulped and handed it to her.

She read it. "Twins?" She looked at Leo and then at Stavros, who nodded.

"Twins," Leo whispered. "A boy and a girl." He sank into a chair.

She sat on his lap, while Nefeli and Adonis danced around them, yelling out potential baby names.

"Well, that explains a lot," Rose said. "I wondered why I was so much bigger this time. I thought it was because my muscles and skin were stretched from before."

Leo seemed to pull out of his trance. "You know what this means, don't you?"

She shook her head.

"We're going to need a bigger nursery."

"It means we're outnumbered," she said. Rose laughed and kissed Leo, her heart full and bursting. Twins.

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