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“In Her Father’s Shadow is a lovely story built on a gripping plot that revolves around friendship, second chances, and falling in love when you least expect it.”

-The Book Commentary

PRAISE FOR WOMAN OVER THE EDGE

“A story that is both tragic and beautiful, sorrowful and triumphant, *Woman Over the Edge* by Quinn Avery explores the unwavering power of the human spirit and our will to rise up despite the sum of our losses imploring us to fall. This story

felt real and authentic and most definitely did not follow a predictable formula, which I found refreshing. Quinn Avery expertly weaves a murder-mystery-thriller with a little dose of steamy romance into one exciting and thought-provoking tale. I thoroughly enjoyed getting lost in this story and I can't wait to get my hands on one of her many other novels!"

-Readers' Favorite

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"I recently read Woman Over the Edge by Quinn Avery which was my first by this author and now every back list title is going on my tbr because WOW!"

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A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a dark, sequined, sleeveless dress, is shown from the waist up. She is looking upwards and to the right. The background is a bright, out-of-focus scene of trees and foliage, suggesting a tropical or outdoor setting. The overall lighting is warm and golden. The text "DEADLY PARADISE" is overlaid in the center in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

DEADLY
PARADISE

*For my beautiful cousin whose star shone so brightly that it
burned out many decades too soon.*

Damn it, I miss you.

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Deadly Paradise

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ISBN-13: 979-8846702837

Cover by Najla Qamber Designs

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PART I

“Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a
memory no one can steal.”

From a headstone in Ireland

CHAPTER ONE

The charmed life Ophelia Keery had become accustomed to was obliterated the day of her parents' double homicide. She'd been the center of Alexander and Skylar Keery's world for six and a half years, even after the recent arrival of the baby sister Ophelia had always wanted. They lived in a sprawling mansion in Southern California with turrets and balconies that Ophelia considered to be an actual castle like those in her favorite fairy tales. Her parents had given Ophelia the best of everything and made her feel more special than other little girls her age. Sometimes she wondered if she was an actual princess.

Until a prince failed to come to her rescue when a stranger in a ski mask held a gun to her head.

Mere hours before her parents' untimely demise, Ophelia set up a tea party in the backyard for her favorite doll and a handful of stuffed animals. Thea peacefully napped in a covered stroller beneath the shadow of the grand palm tree overhead. Ophelia often treated the five-month-old like a living doll, styling her in frilly dresses and intricate bows before positioning her among her stuffed animals. Thea was a happy baby—especially when being cared for by her big sister.

Although Ophelia's best friend had recently declared they were getting too old for tea parties, Ophelia adored *Alice in*

Wonderland. Accordingly, when she'd turned five, her father had gifted her the lovely white iron table with intricate chairs along with a set of white china featuring tiny pink roses. It would seem rude to claim she'd become too old for his generous gift. Besides, no one other than her parents knew she was still engaging in the parties, so she didn't care.

Her mother glided toward her across the wide, manicured lawn, silver tea pot and a plateful of pastel macaroons on a tray in her hands. Skylar Keery was a striking woman with smooth blond hair with the brilliance of sunshine trimmed around her shoulders, wide blue eyes the same shade as her favorite anemone flowers, a naturally slender build, and a genuine smile that people would often say they could feel in their chest. Ophelia was grateful she had inherited the same arresting eyes and sun-kissed hair from her mother's Swedish heritage. Her little sister's eyes were a dark hue of decadent chocolate, like their father's, and her hair was coming in as a muddled shade of brown.

Skylar was known for being sophisticated while possessing both a tinkling laugh and a graceful spirit. She was kind to everyone, and lax in ways of discipline in contrast to her husband's strictness. She was on several charity boards, and president of an organization that assisted families with terminally ill children. Ophelia often accompanied her mother to visit the young recipients benefitted from her efforts, and once declared she wanted to be a young children's doctor.

Ophelia was convinced her mother had been an actual princess like in the stories her mother read to her at bedtime, and her father had been a prince. According to Ophelia's father, her mother had stolen his heart on first sight. He'd told Ophelia the story so many times that she had it memorized by the age of four. Skylar was the daughter of one of the partners at the firm where Alexander had been hired fresh out of law school. They first met at the firm's New Year's Eve party in one of L.A.'s tallest skyscrapers. The twenty-one-year-old had drawn the twenty-five-year-old Greek immigrant out of his shell that night, dragging him onto the dance floor despite his protests, and making him sway along with her to a Johnny Cash song. They'd snuck up to the rooftop of the building later

on, sharing their first kiss just minutes after fireworks shot through the sky. Even as a young girl, Ophelia couldn't imagine anything more romantic.

That fateful afternoon, Skylar wore a white dress featuring delicate bouquets of Forget Me Nots, and her thick blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail. With a graceful smile, she dipped before her eldest daughter with a little curtsy and set the tray on the table. "Good afternoon, Miss Ophelia and esteemed guests." Her voice was light and lovely, filled with warmth that Ophelia could feel in her tummy. "I made your favorite tea...caramel vanilla."

"Thank you, Mommy," Ophelia sang, mirroring her mother's smile and demeanor. Ophelia had never met anyone as warmhearted as her mother, and strived to be exactly the same. Skylar was gracious to everyone, even strangers they'd meet at the supermarket or at the park.

Skylar attended to the chubby baby snoozing beneath the tree, bending to adjust the stroller's shade. With tulip-shaped pink lips lagged open and hair in ringlets from the heat, Thea could have passed as a bonafide china doll. "I can't believe your baby sister is still sleeping. You seem to have the magic touch with her." Her mother lowered into a chair across from Ophelia, smoothing the skirt of her dress over her legs while wetting her lips. "How are you feeling, sweetheart? Are you still tired from our flight?"

Ophelia closed her eyes, summoning the memories from their recent trip to the beautiful island of Mykonos in Greece. In the beginning, the short getaway had been filled with adventures and laughter. Ophelia's mother and father had splashed alongside her in the deep blue sea, and taken her picture by the vibrant pink bougainvilleas found throughout the island. She'd loved the luxurious roll of her father's voice whenever he spoke in his native tongue to the locals, and the day-long excursion they took on a catamaran. The slimy octopus her mother ordered for dinner had made Ophelia squeal with delight. The resort workers had treated their family like royalty, some even calling Ophelia "Princess Ophelia."

The second day of their stay, however, an older woman came pounding on their villa door, sobbing and yelling in Greek. Ophelia had just finished dressing for the beach in the bedroom, and froze in fear with the strain in the woman's tone. Her desperation was palpable when she repeatedly yelled at Ophelia's father, "*Den éprepe na értheis! Xéroun óti eísai edó!*"

When Ophelia came out of the bedroom to peer out behind her mother's leg, the woman reached for Ophelia and all at once became inconsolable. Ophelia's father quickly sent the woman away. They promptly checked out of the resort a week earlier than planned, catching the first flight back to California.

Ophelia had pretended to be asleep on the airplane when her parents argued.

"I told you it was too dangerous to return!" her father had said in a voice that sounded more like a growl.

"Your poor mother missed you, and she had yet to meet Thea!" her mother had countered.

"She preferred we stayed away, where it was safe!"

"I still don't understand how they found us. We were discreet. No one should've known we were there!"

It was the only time Ophelia could clearly remember them disagreeing about anything. Those who knew Alexander and Skylar well were keenly aware the couple was madly in love. No one understood who could possibly want the charismatic couple dead, including the detectives who later investigated the double homicide, and came away without any suspects.

The old woman from the resort would make an appearance in Ophelia's nightmares for many years to come.

Ophelia opened her eyes to gaze at her mother. "Who was that scary lady, Mommy?"

Her mother's smile faltered. "That woman was simply afraid of something, sweet girl. She wasn't someone you needed to fear. In fact—"

Before her mother could say anything more, Ophelia's father swaggered in beside them in a navy blue suit, rich brown eyes sparkling with joy beneath his thick brows. Alexander Keery was a head taller than his wife with broad, muscular shoulders that made him "as wide as a bull" as her mother would sometimes tease. He possessed a stern military look in the way he wore his dark hair trimmed neatly on the sides and worn less than an inch long on top. On his days off he continued to embrace order, wearing crease-free jeans that appeared meticulously ironed and starched button-downs.

His tanned, high cheekbones lifted and the wrinkles forming around his eyes and across his forehead creased when he threw his daughter and wife a lip-splitting grin. Ophelia's heart soared as he neared, allowing her to breathe in his rich, woody scent. Although he was known for being ruthless in the courtroom, he'd been wrapped around Ophelia's pinkie since her birth.

"Daddy!" Ophelia gleefully shouted, lifting her cup. "You're just in time for tea!"

"Kalispéra kardia mou." Good evening, my heart.

Ophelia beamed with her father's affectionate nickname for his wife and daughters as he gave his wife a long and tender kiss. "I'm so happy to see you."

Her mother reached a slender arm behind him, cradling his head close. "How was your first day back?"

"We settled the Rivers case," he gleefully announced, wrapping his wife in his arms and burying his face in her hair. "He agreed to plead to a misdemeanor."

"I'm glad it's over," Ophelia's mother whispered. "It was giving you too much exposure. Someone could've recognized you after the reporters caught you leaving the courthouse."

"No need to worry, my beautiful wife," he said as he released her. "It's behind us now." He winked at Ophelia. "I'm ready to celebrate with a night out on the town."

Ophelia sat a little taller, eyes bright with hope. Her parents often went for dinner and dancing with her Uncle

“Dizzy” and Aunt Isabella, leaving her and Thea with a babysitter. “Do I get to come with?”

“That depends,” her father teased with a twinkle in his dark eyes. “Think you can keep up with your old *patéras*’ dance moves?” He wiggled around while singing the opening to their favorite Johnny Cash song—the one they’d danced to on the night of their first kiss. “*I’ll sweep out your chimney, yes and I will bring you flowers.*”

Both Ophelia and her mother giggled madly. Alex extended his hand to his wife, pulling her up to her feet and swaying with her cradled in his arms as he continued to sing the song. Ophelia watched them with a giant smile pressed to her lips that hurt her cheeks.

“What about the baby?” her mother asked.

“You mean the new one we’re going to make tonight?” she heard her father whisper.

“We’re getting another baby?” Ophelia squealed, springing from her chair to hug her parents. “Thank you, Mommy! Thank you, Daddy!”

Skylar backed away from her husband with a loud peel of laughter and patted Ophelia’s head. “Your father was only *teasing*, sweetheart.” She playfully slapped her husband’s shoulder. “Go change, *Mister Cash*—both your outfit *and* your mindset. We have more than enough babies for now, and I have an important tea party to attend.”

Her father cradled her mother’s face in his hands. “How can you expect me to stop making babies with you when they’re as perfect as their *mamá*?”

They embraced and kissed long enough that Ophelia began to giggle. She was accustomed to seeing them kiss often, but she thought she’d seen a *tongue* flicker between their mouths.

“Eww!” she called out, shaking her head. “Did you just lick mommy?”

Her parents separated, laughing, and her father threw Ophelia a wink. “I love your mother *very* much, *kardoula mou*. She’s the love of my life.” He then pressed a kiss into the

mess of blond curls on his eldest daughter's head. "I love you *and* your baby sister just as much. Only you're my *fengári kai astéria*." *Moon and stars*.

Once he headed into the house, Ophelia returned to the table with her mother, pouring tea into their cups and stacking macaroons onto their pretty plates. They carried on with silly conversations, addressing Ophelia's doll and baby sister as if they were capable of answering. Her mother was refilling their cups when a thunderous bang interrupted their party, echoing from inside the house. A murder of crows took flight, cawing into the warm air. The pitcher slipped from her mother's fingers, bouncing against the stone patio with a loud clang.

A shiver rippled over Ophelia's skin. "What was that, Mommy?"

Her mother reached across the table, taking Ophelia's arms in a firm grasp. Although there was a wild look in her blue eyes and her face was ghostly white, her expression remained calm. Even. "I need you to go inside the safe place, sweetheart, and lock the door like we practiced. Don't come back out, no matter what. Can you do that for me?"

"Why, Mommy? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sure it's nothing." Her mother closed her eyes and firmly pressed her lips against Ophelia's forehead. Then, with a somber look, she stood and ran a hand over Ophelia's curls. "I love you, my darling daughter."

Ophelia's stomach twisted in knots as she watched her mother retrieve a small handgun strapped to her thigh before she started for the house. Ophelia was no stranger to guns—her parents and her Uncle Dizzy regularly shot at targets in their backyard. Her mother had impeccable aim, and had taught Ophelia how to respect the deadly weapons. But they were normally locked in a safe in her father's office. She didn't know her mother carried one beneath her dresses.

Ophelia scooped her sleeping sister out from the stroller and headed for the little house nestled among a violet Jacaranda tree on the far end of the pool. It looked like a playhouse to Ophelia, only it had a heavy metal door that

made everything outside of the little house silent. She perched inside the doorway, debating whether or not to close the door behind them when her sister made a deep grunting noise and stretched in her arms, eyes still closed. Ophelia hated sitting inside the little house on her own. Besides, if Thea were to wake, she would need to go inside to make a bottle.

Ophelia's breaths came out in tight huffs as she waited and waited for someone to come for them. What was taking so long? Why hadn't anyone come looking for them?

With the sound of a second deafening bang, then a third, she peered out from around the door. Tears burned behind her eyes, and her tummy hurt. *Something was horribly wrong.*

Once her sister began to let out little cries, Ophelia rocked her and sang one of her mother's favorite lullabies. Although her mother had told her to stay hidden, her bladder was full of tea. She couldn't wait any longer to use the bathroom. Plus she suspected Thea was fussing because she was hungry.

Gripping Thea a little tighter, she shuffled her sandaled feet through the thick Bermuda grass toward the main house. She approached the table on the stone patio in back where they ate most of their dinners, and peered inside the french doors leading into the living room. When she took a tentative step inside, her entire body became rigid with fear.

A raw, primal scream violently rose from the pit of her stomach, searing her vocal cords as it ripped up her little throat.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood dripped down bright pink toenails suspended in the air, splashing onto the stark white marble floor below. Despite the high-pitched ringing in Ophelia's ears, the parlor in their family home remained eerily silent. Ophelia stared at the red puddle forming below the pink toenails, telling herself it was only spilled paint. It had to be. She couldn't accept the fact that it was her mother's blood, or that someone had brutally murdered the kind, beautiful woman hanging from the transom separating the rooms.

Another scream stuck in Ophelia's throat when a tall, gangly man suddenly stepped in her way, shielding her from the grizzly sight. Although it was a warm August day, he wore a long-sleeved black shirt, black pants, black gloves, and black boots. A black mask covered his head, only showing a set of dark, piercing eyes. The shadow he cast over Ophelia omitted danger.

Blinding fear unlike anything she had experienced prickled down her neck. She became rooted in place, too frightened to pull in another breath.

"Are you Apollo's daughter?" His voice was mid-toned and shaky, unlike her father's deep tenor. She decided maybe he wasn't a man after all. Maybe he was simply a monster. Her heart thudded with a deafening beat that shook her entire body.

She didn't know anyone named Apollo. She wanted to shake her head in reply, but she still couldn't make herself move.

“*Skatá!*” the man cursed, running a gloved hand over the top of the cotton mask. Ophelia had heard her father mutter the Greek word a time or two, and knew it meant something bad that she wasn't allowed to repeat. “Orion did not tell me you were a kid! And a *vréfos* too? *Christós!*” The man reached behind his back, then cursed again as he brought his arm back around. He produced a handgun—one significantly bigger than the one her mother had hidden beneath her dress—and held it against her head.

Her jaw began to chatter. “Who are you?” she whispered.

The man muttered something to himself in Greek, shaking his head repeatedly before lowering the gun. “Listen, *paidi.*” He bent over, resting his free hand on one knee. “If anyone asks, you did not see me, and I did not see you. *Katanoó?*” *Understand?*

Her eyes trailed down to the handgun still clutched in his fingers, and her bladder gave a painful tug.

“Did you hear what I said? If you tell anyone I was here, I will have to come back.”

Something shifted in his eyes when he held the gun to her head. “Then I will be forced to do something not good to you and your little sister. *Understand?*”

A woman's piercing scream breached the air. In the blink of an eye, the man retreated deeper inside the house, disappearing from sight. Lucinda, the middle-aged housekeeper that had worked for Ophelia's family for many years, came rushing out the patio doors. Eyes impossibly wide, she scooped Ophelia into her arms, holding her head against her generous bosom. “Don't look, *bebíta!* *Oh Dios mío,* don't look!”

A feral, gut-wrenching sensation begged Ophelia not to look, but her curiosity was too strong. As her eyes grazed upward, beyond the pretty blue flowers on her mother's dress, she sensed the grisly sight of what she was about to see would

haunt her for the rest of her life long before she met her mother's lifeless blue eyes.

THE CONCEPT of death was hard for Ophelia's little brain to grasp. When her Uncle Dizzy arrived to explain how her parents had gone to heaven to be with Ophelia's beloved dog, Sandy, and wouldn't be coming back, Ophelia became more confused.

"But *why* did they go?" she asked with a persistent shake of her head. Fat tears fell from her eyes as she hugged her stuffed bunny with all her might, wishing she could hug her baby sister instead. Her Aunt Isabella had taken Thea downstairs to prepare a bottle of formula. "Why would they leave me? Did I do something naughty?"

"No, baby girl. Of course not." Her uncle was a massive man with a head of thick strawberry-blond hair and a jolly laugh who'd been fondly nicknamed "Dizzy" by her mother. He'd spent enough time at their house that Ophelia had always regarded him as an uncle rather than merely a family friend. Her uncle looked silly crouched across from her on one of the little pink chairs in her bedroom's play area, yet she couldn't muster a giggle beneath the intensity of his intoxicating green eyes filled with thick tears. "They didn't have a choice."

"Because the man took them?"

The color drained from her uncle's already ashen face. "What man, Ophelia?"

"The man wearing black. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone I saw him. He said if I told, he'd come back and do something bad to me and Thea."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He said a bad word in Greek like daddy sometimes does, then he said Orion didn't tell him I was a kid."

Her uncle's eyes darted to the open doorway. The lump in his throat dipped several times before he swung his eyes back onto Ophelia. "Listen to me, baby girl." With a wobbly smile, he reached out to tuck a finger under her chin. "That man you

saw? You need to keep him a secret. Just between you and me. Do you think you can do that?"

Ophelia nodded obediently. She adored her uncle and would've done anything he asked.

A middle-aged man wearing a dark blue suit and dull brown shoes stepped into the room. His stomach was round, his narrow eyes dark, and a wisp of dark brown hair encompassed his thick skull. When his thin lips spread with a terse smile beneath his dark mustache, he reminded Ophelia of the cartoon man on the package of her favorite chips.

He first addressed her uncle. "You must be Richard Dawson." His voice was deep and gravely, as if his throat was filled with marbles. The two men shook hands. "I'm Detective Lee. Is it alright if I speak with Ophelia for a moment?"

Ophelia's uncle brushed a thick knuckle over one of her cheeks. "It's okay, sweetheart. I'll handle this." He rose and crossed the room, squaring his stance in front of the man. Her uncle was intimidating when mad. Ophelia had seen him that way a few times when strange men said things about her aunt that her uncle didn't like. "Can't it wait, detective?" he whispered. "She can't comprehend what happened to her parents."

"It's best if I speak to her while her memory's fresh," the man insisted in an equal quiet, yet audible tone. When his shadowed eyes met Ophelia's, his smooth lips bent with a tight, empathetic smile. "It won't take long."

Her uncle returned to collect Ophelia in his arms and hold her possessively against one hip. "So long as you're sensitive with your questions. She's only six."

"Of course." The detective bobbed his head before his focus shifted to Ophelia. "I'm sorry about your parents. I imagine this has been a difficult day. I'll try to keep this as painless as possible."

An emotion bubbled out from her uncle's lips, sounding to Ophelia like a choked laugh. "*Difficult day?* Give me a break.

Walking in on her parents' execution...there are no words to express what kind of day she's had."

The detective threw her uncle an annoyed look. "I'm hoping you can help us figure out who hurt them, Ophelia. I understand your housekeeper found you and your baby sister inside the house. I'm sorry you had to see your mom like that. It must've been very hard."

"Is there a question somewhere?" her uncle grumbled.

"Can you tell me if anything happened before you went inside the house? Did you hear something? Maybe see someone other than your mom and dad?"

Ophelia's stomach clenched as she thought of the Greek man dressed in black. Her uncle wanted her to keep the man a secret. He must've believed the man would come back to hurt her too. She wiped a hand over her wet eyes.

"My mommy and I were having a tea party when we heard a loud noise," she began, playing with the collar of her uncle's white dress shirt. "My daddy had just gone inside to change. He was going to take us out to eat and go dancing." More tears spilled down her cheeks. She'd never get the chance to dance with her father again. "Mommy...she told me to hide with my sister...said Daddy would come out and we'd all play hide-and-go-seek...but they—they didn't come out...and then I heard another bang—"

As she broke into breathless sobs, her uncle's arms tightened around her. "I think that's enough for now, detective."

"I understand she's upset, Mr. Dawson, but as you said, this *execution* was staged as some sort of message for someone. What was done to Mrs. Keery is normally the kind of thing we see with a hitman, only this was sloppy—as if done by an amateur. The knots were loose, and one shot was fired into the ceiling. It's imperative we find whoever did this, and get them off the streets before they strike again."

Her aunt Isabella entered the room with a gurgling Thea balanced on her curvy hip. The former Latina beauty queen

wore the usual leggings and cropped athletic top she donned when teaching dance and yoga classes at the gym, and her long, raven hair was swept into a high ponytail. Ophelia was convinced her favorite Barbie doll had been created to mimic her aunt's eyes as dark as the coffee her mother drank, dramatic cheekbones, and voluptuous lips.

"Excuse me," her aunt snarled, "but what are you doing in here, Detective?" Her expression hardened as soon as she noticed her niece was crying. "Oh, sweet girl." She handed the baby to her husband in exchange for Ophelia. She embraced her eldest niece while glaring at the detective. "You need to leave. This poor *child* has been through enough for one day."

Nodding, the detective reached inside his jacket and handed a small card to her uncle. "Please call me if she remembers any more details," he said. "No matter how insignificant it may seem."

Her aunt firmly closed the bedroom door behind the detective. She set Ophelia on the bed, then spun on her heels and yelled at her uncle in a flurry of Spanish.

With terse laughter, her uncle set Thea in Ophelia's lap. "Aunt Izzy needs a timeout. Can you watch your sister for me?"

"You're going to leave me too?" Ophelia asked, her voice tight with fear.

"No, sweetheart." He sunk down to his knees so his eyes were level with hers, and spoke in a slow, warm tone while stroking the side of her head. "What happened to your mommy and daddy doesn't happen very often. Aunt Izzy and I are going to be here for you and your sister...for a very long time. Right now we're only going to be a few steps away in the hallway, having a quick little chat. Okay?"

Wiping at more tears, Ophelia nodded. After they left, she let her sister suck her stuffed bunny's ear inside her toothless mouth and shuffled to her door to listen in on her aunt and uncle's whispered conversation. Her uncle's voice was rushed and grave when he said, "They found them, babe—just like Alex always feared."

“Oh my god,” her aunt gasped. “*No.*”

“The hitman threatened Ophelia. They’ll come after the girls next if we don’t protect them.”

“How do we do that?”

“We start over...somewhere far away where they can’t find the girls.”

Her aunt’s rich voice became thick with tears. “Poor Ophelia...she’s already going to be sad and confused without her parents. Do you really think it’s best to start somewhere new?”

“It’s what Alex wanted. We both know he and Sky had prepared for this kind of situation. We agreed to be her guardians if anything happened—it’s our responsibility to keep her and Thea safe. We’ll leave tonight, once it’s dark.”

“What about our house? Our things?”

“I’ll make arrangements. Call Sharon—have her run over to the house to pack enough for a week away. Tell her your father is sick or something. Make up something believable. Then pack everything you can for the girls. Mostly the necessities, but a few things that will comfort Ophelia too... something that will remind her of her parents. Maybe a few pictures of them together and something significant that belonged to Sky. I’ll have someone collect the rest of their things after we’ve settled somewhere safe.”

“How will we know where’s safe?”

“We have an arrangement with an old sergeant Sky and I once served under. Archie is equally invested in keeping the girls safe, and has all the documentation we’ll need to pose as the girls’ parents.”

“Ophelia is going to have so many questions. What will we tell her?”

“Nothing. It’s better if she doesn’t know the truth. We’ll have to be diligent when addressing each other from now on. They’ll become Nova and London, like Skylar requested. Archie already has our new IDs.”

Ophelia's tummy felt sick. Their conversation went too far over her head. All she knew is that she was certain she didn't want to leave her house or her parents—wherever they may be. Then, with a jarring chill, she realized the Greek man wearing all black could return. She had to be a good girl and do whatever her uncle said.

THE REMAINDER of the day was a blur of endless motion. While Ophelia's uncle made endless phone calls from her father's office, her aunt stuffed Ophelia and Thea's belongings inside several suitcases. Once the sun had set, her aunt rushed Ophelia and Thea past the pack of police officers downstairs to a giant black SUV waiting in the driveway. Her uncle and a man in a black suit set their suitcases inside the trunk. Ophelia fell asleep on her aunt's shoulder in the backseat of the vehicle, and woke to the creamy off-white interior of a small airplane. Her aunt and uncle embraced at her side as her teary-eyed aunt kissed Thea's fat cheek over and over.

"It's going to be okay," her uncle murmured, pressing his lips into Isabella's sleek hair. "There's nothing to be afraid of, babe. I'll keep all of us safe. I promise."

Ophelia turned away to glance out the oval shaped window at her side. Hundreds of lights twinkled in the dark night below. The familiar tug of her tummy told her they were headed higher into the sky, headed somewhere far away. "Where are we going?"

Her uncle's thick lips spread with a smile. "We're going on an adventure."

CHAPTER THREE

The adventure Ophelia's uncle promised began when they immediately settled in upstate New York. To everyone they would meet from that point forward, Ophelia and Thea were known as Nova and London, while her aunt and uncle became Jason and Val. They all took on the surname Hulburt. Although it was all incredibly confusing to Ophelia, she did her best to adjust to everyone's new names.

The newly acquired family of four moved into a charming little two bedroom cottage on the edge of a lush green vineyard. According to their uncle, the cottage needed countless repairs, but Nova was immediately smitten with the old house, thinking the rock siding and arched windows looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. It was nestled among the foothills where the maple and oak trees would turn brilliant shades of orange and yellow in the fall, and snow would blanket the ground in the winter. A stone path led around the house to a little flower garden with an abundance of pale pink and purple hydrangeas. Best of all, Nova loved how she could look out the bedroom she shared with London, and see the endless acres of grapevines that had become theirs. She wished her mommy had been there to see it.

A greenhouse and various sheds used for winemaking and storage flanked the other end of the vineyard, and a small restaurant with a bar had recently been added to the mix. Archie, the property's previous owner and an old friend of Nova's uncle, came by often to teach them how to care for the grapes and harvest them at different stages before beginning the winemaking process. Over time, Nova's uncle took great pride in the pressing and fermentation of the fruit before letting it age, and finally bottling it for sale. Nova—with London either in a nearby stroller or balanced on her hip—was usually at her aunt and uncle's side for every step, acquiring a knowledge of the different processes for white and red wines at an age when most children were spending time on a playground or in a classroom surrounded by their peers.

For the first month, Nova woke every night covered in sweat, her little heart pounding. In her nightmares, the man dressed in black returned to hurt her and her little sister. She couldn't breathe whenever she thought back to the day her parents were taken from her. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could recall every little insignificant moment of that day leading up to their murders, like the way her father's dress shirt crinkled beneath his suit jacket when he bent down to kiss the top of her head, the way a bumble bee possessively hovered over Nova's tea no matter how many times she tried to shoo it away, or the mystical floral scent that clung to her mother when she arrived with the macaroons. Why were they gone?

A kind woman named Doctor Shauna with frizzy hair several shades lighter than strawberries and bright green eyes began coming to the house twice every week. She told Nova she was an old friend of her uncle's and wanted to talk about ways to make her feel safe. Nova admired Doctor Shauna's bright dresses and sparkly jewelry, but she didn't like speaking about what had happened to her mother and father. And she couldn't tell the woman about the man she'd seen, because she'd promised her uncle he'd remain their secret.

From the moment they'd fled California, Nova had taken her baby sister under her protective wing, often refusing to let her aunt or uncle help. She wasn't going to let anyone take her

sister away from her too. She insisted on feeding London, changing her diapers, and putting her down to sleep in the crib next to her bed. The responsibilities Nova took on made her wise beyond her age. Her desire to play with dolls and throw tea parties quickly faded, replaced with an innate need to nurture and protect London from danger.

On weekdays, Nova's uncle gave her lessons in reading, writing, history, and math. There were times when Nova grew frustrated with her uncle, and was convinced he was making everything up. After all, she had no idea what he did for a living before they'd left California. When Nova asked her aunt why she couldn't go to a real school, Val simply told her, "Your uncle went to college to become a teacher. There isn't anyone better suited to teach you everything you need to know in life."

In the beginning, she didn't complain when her aunt and uncle hardly ever took her anywhere beyond the vineyard and didn't allow her to make new friends. She preferred to stay close to London anyway. The orphaned sisters were taught to stay out of sight of the guests unless they were under their uncle's supervision.

Shortly after they re-opened the restaurant, there was an incident in which a man came to dinner with a handgun concealed beneath his sports jacket. Nova's uncle spotted the weapon and pinned the man down on the floor, demanding to know who had sent him. The police were called, and the man who had merely been exercising his right to carry was released. Nova had been there to witness the scene, and soon after developed night terrors in which she'd wake everyone with her screams. London began sleeping with their aunt, and their uncle slept in London's bed at Nova's side until the terrors began to fade away.

They'd been in upstate New York for two years when their aunt and uncle added a two-story resort onto the restaurant with a grand lodge and twenty guest rooms. They even added a kidney-shaped pool where the sisters spent a majority of the summers that followed. London was just a few months past two when she first jumped into the pool—long before their

uncle had a chance to teach her how to swim—evoking a rule that wouldn't allow her outside without a life vest in the summertime for years to come.

Nova's little sister had already become the literal definition of a "wild child" long before the pool incident. In addition to always being on the move, London refused to stay dressed, even when the temperatures were frigid outside. She'd pass out challenging looks to anyone who dared to tell her "no," and she constantly put herself in situations that should've evoked fear into a little girl her age. She was outgoing and friendly, attempting to start a conversation with every guest to visit the property. For her third birthday, their aunt and uncle gifted her a set of baby goats. Once the goats began climbing everything, London could often be found with them on the roof of their nine-foot shed.

Once their Moon & Stars wine began receiving numerous awards, including one nationally that gained them a massive following on social media, the winery became a popular destination for travelers all over the country looking for a peaceful weekend getaway. The menu was expanded to include fresh bread Val baked in a primitive stone oven every single morning behind the cottage, Kalamata olives grown in pots inside the greenhouse, and savory cheese made from the milk of London's energetic goats.

As the winery expanded into a trendy hotspot, soliciting bookings for weddings several years in advance, dozens of employees were hired. Nova once overheard her uncle explaining the strict screening process they used during interviews. He used words like "veterans" and "conceal and carry," but she didn't quite understand what any of it had to do with selling wine and serving customers. London and Nova both befriended most of the new staff members, forging bonds with some that continued long after the employees moved on to somewhere else.

Whenever Nova and London weren't in class with their uncle or doing homework, they'd help their aunt tend to the grapes, olives, and goats. In the free time that remained, their uncle trained the sisters in boxing and Tae Kwon Do. London

was six when she earned her first belt. Nova was ten when he began to teach her everything she needed to know about handling guns.

It seemed any kind of busywork was the best way to entertain London's free spirit, so no one was exactly surprised when, at the ripe age of seven, the brown-eyed beauty with wild chestnut hair and sun-kissed blond streaks had developed an arguably healthy obsession with yoga. Their aunt became her personal trainer, teaching London advanced poses and the importance of a balanced diet. The award-winning chef that had commandeered the winery's kitchen in recent years became accustomed to having London at his side, begging him to teach her how to prepare everything. She'd been a charmer her whole life, and easily won the hearts of whatever staff and guests came through the vineyard.

Nova remained cautious and threw herself into schoolwork. She easily absorbed everything her uncle taught her, advancing through the standards required for each grade at an increasingly impressive rate. When she was thirteen, she began watching documentaries and reading biographies on murderers. Before long, she developed an obsession with the circumstances surrounding her parents' deaths. She tried to find anything she could on Orion, mostly coming up with constellations or companies named after the Greek god. There were thousands of men with the name, none of which gave her any clue to how that name fit in her parents' murder in California.

She badgered her uncle for answers that he wouldn't give. "Why was my mom better at target practice than you and my dad?" she'd ask him. "Who was she? Why did she have a handgun strapped to her leg the day she died? Why did you tell me to keep the man I saw that day a secret? Did he kill them? Why were you protecting him? What aren't you telling me about their murder?"

Her uncle was either vague with answers, or flat out refused to discuss the subject no matter how much Nova argued. He also refused to help her obtain a copy of the file from the detective that handled her parents' murder. She loved

her uncle, but on this point he was infuriating. She couldn't understand why he wouldn't help her. The constant hole in her stomach from not knowing filled her with an anger that she didn't know what to do with. If she kept it bottled up, she was certain she would explode.

She acted out by smuggling wine from behind the bar and drinking it after her family had gone to bed and wearing short skirts with low-cut tops around the employees—behaviors she knew would infuriate her uncle. If he planned to forever keep her in the dark about her parents, she planned to make him regret it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nova was sixteen when Katerina Makris and her son, Nikos, came to work at the winery. The moment Nova first laid eyes on the mysterious boy with fierce eyebrows and a sharp jaw, her first crush manifested. From her secret perch behind the kitchen door, her knees literally shook as if the world was moving beneath her.

She watched intently as Katerina and Nova's uncle carried on a conversation in Greek. Nova remembered very little of the language since her father's death, but her uncle was able to converse with Katerina at a comfortable level. Nova hadn't known he was fluent in her father's native language. She was even more surprised the way her uncle treated Katerina like an old friend.

Both mother and son were striking, with eyes so dark they swallowed their pupils, olive-toned skin, stick-straight noses, and luxurious raven hair. Katerina's loose waves bounced around her shoulders when she walked. Nikos wore his hair neatly trimmed around the sides, and longer on top. He was attractive in a way that made her belly swell. She held her breath, waiting for Nikos to speak. She was *very* interested in anything and everything the tall, handsome young man had to say.

Later that afternoon, while Katerina was trained in the kitchen and Nikos cleaned tables, Nova perched on the walnut bar top where soon customers would occupy stools across from the small oak and steel barrels containing the award-winning varieties of wine. She studied Nikos from afar as he worked, appreciating his Led Zeppelin t-shirt and dark classic jeans paired with old-school skater sneakers. Although lanky, he moved with the confident swagger of a grown man, and the muscles in his arms flexed impressively as he scrubbed each table. She'd only seen him smile once, but the flash of his bright white teeth as straight as piano keys revealed behind his generously rosy lips was enough to make her heart swell and her stomach tingle with excitement.

She was grateful she'd finally have someone around who was close to her age. Even better, she had a chance to talk to him without anyone else listening in. Her aunt was tending to the grapes that were nearing harvest, and her uncle was helping London perfect the pattern required for her next belt in Tae Kwon Do. The chef and other wait staff weren't scheduled to come in for another hour, and the only other employee on the clock was in the kitchen with Katerina.

When she thought about approaching Nikos, nerves bubbled through her like a sparkling wine. Most of what she knew about flirting came from years of watching her aunt and uncle's disgustingly affectionate relationship, and the sappy romance movies she sometimes watched with her aunt. She wanted to believe in love, but she was also cynical that anything could end with a happily ever after. Her parents had been madly in love, and their ending was nothing short of a Shakespearian tragedy.

"So, new guy," she finally called out, hoping he couldn't detect the tightness of her breath, "where you from?"

Turning away from the table, his eyes nervously swept past the kitchen before meeting hers. Their alluring darkness caused her heart to flutter against her ribs with the force of a bird's wings. She suddenly understood the longing she sometimes heard in musician's voices when they sang about love.

“Mykonos—ehhh...an *island*...in Greece.” His voice was as deep as her uncle’s, and his accent was rich. Every word he uttered sounded romantic. As they echoed through her head, she became motionless—all except for the widening of her eyes.

“Wait, did you say *Mykonos*?” A flicker of excitement passed through her. “That’s where my dad was from.”

Nikos’s dark, thick eyebrows rose. “Yes. Your father...he knew my mother. They were...ehhh...friendly. Since they were very young.”

Nova’s pulse sped. *What else did he know about her father?*

“Really?” Crossing her arms, she mirrored his high-browed expression. It seemed her uncle’s list of secrets was never-ending. “How did you and your mother end up here?”

“Your uncle...very kind. When we leave Mykonos, he tells my mother...ehhh...he can help.”

Interesting, Nova thought to herself. How did her uncle know her father’s childhood friend well enough to offer his help? For the first time since she had been torn from her family’s home in California, she believed she may actually have found an avenue leading to the truth about her parents. But she had to tread carefully, especially when her aunt or uncle could walk in on their conversation at any moment.

“What was it like, living in Mykonos?”

“Greek islands...very *arketá*...ehhh...pretty.” His lips twisted with a shy grin that she felt in her toes. “*Parádeisos*.”

The mere sound of his voice warmed her from head to toe. “What does that mean?”

“Umm...I think paradise. The sea...beautiful blue. Blue like your eyes.”

When her cheeks warmed, she momentarily looked away. “You must hate it here. It’s so...*boring*.”

“The island is...ehhh...*busy* in the summer. Many tourists. I like the quiet here. Much like our...what is English word for

cheimónas....cold time of year.”

“Winter?” Nova offered.

“Ah, yes. *Efcharistó*.” *Thank you.*

“What do you really want to do now that you’re in America?” Arms spread, she let out a quiet giggle. “I mean, no offense, but you don’t want to be a waiter here for the rest of your life.”

He bashfully dipped his chin. “I want to test...get American school...ehhh...paper.”

“Diploma,” Nova corrected in a kind tone.

His tanned cheeks flushed a little. “My English...not so good.”

“I can help you with that.” She slid off the bar top and slinked over to him, ensuring her mini skirt rode up her legs a little more with every step. After she’d learned Nikos would be working that afternoon, she’d borrowed a push-up bra from her aunt’s dresser to wear beneath a tank top that she’d outgrown years ago. From the spark of interest in his eyes as they brushed over her cleavage, he appreciated the effort. “Maybe you can teach me some Greek in return.”

Before he could reply, the swinging door to the kitchen opened. Patricia, the winery’s tattooed manager, stepped out with a deep frown. Nova normally liked Patricia since she didn’t rat Nova out for swiping bottles of wine out from behind the bar. But in that moment, Nova was irritated by her timing.

“Hey, Nikos.” Patricia adjusted her black-rimmed glasses while throwing Nova a quick smile. “When you’re finished with the tables, come back here and I’ll show you where you can find everything.”

As Nova glanced back to Nikos, she all at once came up with a plan.

AS NOVA and London settled in their beds that night, their uncle stood in the doorway of their room, shifting his weight

from one side to the next. His furrowed gaze shot between the sisters as if he was irritated by something they had done. “I want you both to stay far away from Nikos,” he told them.

“Why?” London asked. “Is he naughty?”

He held Nova’s confused stare. “You aren’t to spend any time alone with him. Do you understand me?”

Nova understood. It didn’t mean she had any intention of obeying. Not when Nikos might know something useful about her father.

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, after Nova completed her homework—which had become increasingly difficult as she was a year ahead of other kids her age, and her uncle was both a math and science enthusiast—she helped Nikos memorize the food menu and hone in on the English he may need when dealing with customers. She also taught him everything she knew about wine and how to explain the different varieties.

Spending time with him eased some of the anger that came with having so many unanswered questions. Meeting someone from her father’s homeland also filled her with an urgency to learn more about her parents’ past. How could she ever have a normal life unless she got to the bottom of her parents’ murder?

Nikos eventually shed his shy, reserved mannerisms and engaged in conversations that went beyond their studies. The third time they got together, Nova realized he was flirting with her. She began to feel a little guilty about using him, even though there was something else at play. Being around him created a sense of yearning that overshadowed everything else.

Nova’s aunt and uncle had allowed Nikos and his mother to stay in one of the resort’s units until Katerina saved up enough to afford something in the small town nearby. The close proximity worked to Nova’s advantage, allowing her ample time with the hot Greek. She told Nikos about her uncle’s protective nature and asked him not to tell his mother about the time they spent alone. In the weeks that followed,

the pair became quite stealthy. They'd share whispered lessons in each other's languages while soaking in the pool after midnight, and then sneak into the cellar to share a bottle or two.

One night, they rested together at the edge of the pool, huddled close enough that their knees touched. She had stolen one of her aunt's skimpy bikinis to use for their nightly swims, and she loved how often she caught Nikos sneaking a peek at her breasts. She finally felt comfortable enough with him to ask the one question that had been weighing extra heavy on her mind.

"Did your mom ever say anything about my parents' murder?" she blurted. "Like who would want to hurt them, or why?"

"I am sorry your parents...they are gone," he said, briefly dusting his thumb over the back of her hand. "But why do you think my mother knows this?"

She tried to ignore the way her belly tightened from his touch. "I don't know. Maybe you could ask her...just to make sure. I just get the feeling whatever they were afraid of has something to do with Mykonos. We went there right before they died, on vacation, and something or *someone* spooked my parents."

His eyes narrowed. "Spooked?"

"Scared."

"My English...it still needs work."

"You'll get there." She threw him a shy smile. "You're very smart, Nikos. It won't be long and you'll be ready to test out of high school. It'll be a piece of cake."

Squinting, he wiped a hand over his wet face. "I do not understand." In the moonlight, the water droplets on his thick eyelashes sparkled like diamonds. She watched one drip down to his sharp cheekbones and roll past the generous curve of his thick lips. "What does a piece of cake have to do with school?"

When she realized she had been staring at his mouth, she quickly turned her head away. “It’s a dumb saying, I guess. It just means it’ll be easy.”

He chuckled with a deliciously deep sound. “In Greece, we have strange proverbs.”

She glanced at him over her wet shoulder. She adored listening to him speak in his native tongue. His voice was so sensual, and the words sounded exotic, even as she was starting to understand the language. “Like what?”

His eyes lit with amusement as he said, “*Agápi horís pízmata den éhi nostimada.*”

Butterflies took flight in her stomach. “What does that mean?”

Now *his* eyes were focused on *her* lips. “Love without a bit of stubbornness isn’t tasteful.”

“You’re right, that is strange.” With heat rushing through her cheeks, she swam away.

By then, she had already sensed he wanted to kiss her. His eyes would sparkle when he laughed as she taught him American slang that he found amusing, and he watched with a spark of desire whenever she swam laps around him in the pool. He was a strong swimmer, but seemed to prefer treading water or floating in a way that elicited a peaceful look. In turn, she admired his deeply tanned, sinewy body whenever he wore swim trunks, and reveled in the muscles flexing across his back the rare times he raced her for laps.

Long before he finally did kiss her, Nova realized she may have already fallen a little bit in love with the handsome boy from Greece.

CHAPTER FIVE

One sticky summer night, after they'd drained a bottle of moscato while sitting across from each other on the cellar floor, Nova sang along to a Johnny Cash song playing on the radio. The only station they could get while in the cellar played old country western songs. At first they thought it was silly, but Nova loved Johnny Cash because it reminded her of her father. Teaching Nikos the lyrics turned out to be a fun, less challenging way to learn English.

When the song was finished, she caught Nikos's dark eyes fixed on her face. The sudden change in his expression, as serious as she'd ever seen, made her belly tingle.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, willing herself not to smirk.

The corner of his full lips lifted. "*Eísai poly ómorfi.*" *You are very beautiful.*

Heat rushed up her neck, settling in her cheeks. "You only think that because I'm the first American girl you've met."

"I do not think any girl could be as beautiful as you. Eyes...blue like Aegean sea...hair like sun...face like...ehhh...*ángelos.*" *Angel.* He leaned forward to take her hand. "Your heart...also very beautiful."

As he laced their fingers together, Nova held her breath. A flush spread through her entire body when he continued to hold her gaze with a severe look that sent her pulse racing.

“I cannot stop how I feel,” he continued, squeezing her hand. “Even though I think maybe this...may not be good idea.”

Despite the light feeling in her chest, Nova frowned back at him. “You mean *us*?”

“*Nai.*” *Yes.*

Irritated, Nova shook her head and clenched her teeth. “Did *my uncle* tell you to stay away from me?”

“*Nai.*” *Yes.* “But...I think maybe—”

“I don’t *care* what my uncle says,” she blurted in a forceful tone. “He doesn’t get to decide whether or not you and I can be together, do you understand?”

“*Katalavaino,*” he whispered, grinning.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I understand and I would very much like to kiss you, girl with the sea blue eyes.”

The knot in her throat had become too massive to swallow. “I would like that too,” she whispered.

As he bent in, she closed her eyes and held her breath. His warm lips dusted hers with a feather-light touch that set her soul on fire. The sweet moscato on his lips and the rich musk of the oak barrels surrounding them all at once made her dizzy. Before he could back away from her, she flipped her eyelids back open. “*Páli,*” she pleaded. *Again.*

Nikos set the palm of his hand against her cheek and gazed down on her with deep-seated longing before bending in a second time. She parted her lips for him, welcoming the gentle sweep of his wine-laced tongue and the more aggressive stroke of his velvety lips. Soon his hands were tangled in her hair and her arms were around his neck as the kiss deepened, awakening a ravenous side of her she never knew existed until that moment.

She climbed into his arms, resting her knees on either side of his legs as she claimed his mouth, soliciting a moan from deep within his throat. She didn't know if she was kissing the right way—if there even was such a thing—and she didn't care. One single thought repeated over and over through her mind: *more*. She wanted so much more of what he was offering.

They kissed and their hands wandered for what felt like a lifetime before he suddenly pulled away. “You, beautiful girl,” he whispered, his voice even deeper than usual, “you make me...ehhh...I cannot think of word.”

“Crazy,” she rasped, tugging him back to her.

Half-heartedly, he resumed the kiss for only a moment before breaking free of her grip around his neck. His eyes blazed with passion as he stroked a finger across her cheek. “It is very late.”

With her heart slipping back down her throat, Nova sank down to her backside. “Was I doing something wrong?”

Softly chuckling, he shook his head. “You do everything right.”

“Then why did you stop?”

“We go very, *very* fast. I want the...ehhh...*romance* with you. Not on hard floor.”

Frustrated tears burned against Nova's eyes. “It's not like we can make out in the room I share with London, with my aunt and uncle across the hallway.”

His exceptionally white teeth shone in the nearly dark room when he smiled. “We find a way. The wait...will be worth it. But we must be very careful. Your uncle...he must not know.” He cupped her face in his hands before giving her a slower, more gentle kiss.

Now that she'd experienced her first kiss, she didn't know how she could possibly wait to do it with him again.

NOVA COULD BARELY CONTAIN herself whenever Nikos was near. She became a bubbly, animated version of herself, giggling too much and skipping instead of walking. When they were apart, she fantasized about what they might do the next time they were alone.

They continued their late night rendezvous through the remainder of the summer, swimming in the pool and spending hours getting to know each other on a very intimate level in the confines of the cellar while laying atop a blanket—at Nikos's request. She showed off some of the self-defense moves she'd been taught as an excuse to get him into a vulnerable position. But he always pumped the breaks before she could convince him to make love to her. His excuses varied, from, "we do not have protection from baby," to "you are very young," and "you cannot take heart back if you change mind."

She didn't believe her uncle suspected anything, although sometimes she was sure she caught her aunt giving Nikos knowing looks whenever Nova acted strange around him. Nova had only been caught sneaking back into the house by her aunt one time, and her claim that she was on a walk because she couldn't sleep was accepted. Still, Nova was certain she couldn't hide her adoration for Nikos, especially as her feelings were growing more complex with every day that passed. Once she realized she truly loved him, she ditched the plan to use her involvement with him as a way to get back at her uncle.

Not only was he her first real friend since they'd left California, but she was beginning to think he might be the love of her life.

LATE SEPTEMBER through early October was Nova's favorite time of year. The latest harvest of grapes kept her aunt and uncle busy, giving Nova and London more free time than normal. The year Nikos came to stay with them, the lax in schedule gave them ample time alone during daylight hours. They spent the entire day celebrating when Nova turned seventeen. Nikos brought her a cupcake with a single candle in

the middle and gifted her a silver chain featuring a dainty wave pendant the color of the sea—and, of course, her eyes. They kissed, and laughed, and held hands while dreaming of becoming an old couple together.

The first time London announced she was coming along on one of their adventures, the threesome went for a hike on the outermost point of the vineyard where the foothills began. London stayed several feet ahead of them, jumping and climbing every rock that came across the path.

She stayed occupied enough that Nikos could hold Nova's hand, even bringing it up to his mouth on occasion to pepper the back with secret kisses. Nova was infatuated with the thickness of his lashes when he closed his eyes or laughed, the way he'd study her face when they were together like it was the first time he was seeing her, and the fact that he was always touching her when they were alone. She'd never dreamt a guy only two years older could actually be that romantic outside of the movies.

"Be careful, short stuff!" Nova warned as her little sister started scaling a twenty foot rock.

"You climb like little monkey!" Nikos hollered. "I think we find you a...ehhh...*banana*."

London turned to tilt her head at him. "Why do you talk like that?"

"Don't be rude," Nova scolded, quickly dropping Nikos's hand. "He's still learning English."

London waited for them to catch up so she could march alongside Nikos. "Why did you come here if you didn't know how to talk like us?"

"We had to leave," he told her. "It was very dangerous for us in Greece."

"Dangerous how?" London pushed.

Nikos eyed Nova, silently asking for permission to continue. She hadn't told her sister to stop asking so many questions because she had wondered the answer herself. She nodded her consent.

“A bad man hurt my mother,” Nikos said. “She was afraid he would come for me next.”

Shrugging, London asked, “Why didn’t you just call the police and have them arrest the bad man?”

“Because the bad man is very smart. Orion...friendly with police.”

A gasp shot from Nova’s lips. Her parents’ killer had mentioned that same name.

Orion did not tell me you were a kid.

Stomach churning, she reached out to grab Nikos’s arm. “Wait. Did you say *Orion*?”

Nikos shrugged. “This is very common name in Greece.”

What were the chances Nova’s father and Nikos’s mother were old friends, and also had someone named “Orion” in common? “Who is he?” she whispered, pulling him closer. *Had he been the same “bad man” who’d sent someone to slaughter Nova’s entire family?*

“We talk later, yes?” Nikos replied, tilting his head in London’s direction.

“I need to know, Nikos,” she pleaded. “It’s important.” She squeezed his arm a little tighter, and held his gaze so he’d see the desperation on her face. “The man who murdered my parents...I think someone named Orion may have sent him.”

Licking his lips, Nikos looked away. “Like I said, the name Orion is very common.”

She felt a stab of betrayal. “Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

He glanced ahead, ensuring London was preoccupied before brushing his lips over Nova’s. “I think to get answer, you speak with your uncle.”

His reply made her furious. It wasn’t that she was mad at Nikos for not telling her whatever he might know. She was merely tired of her uncle refusing to fill her in on everything *he* knew.

CHAPTER SIX

Several days after Nikos had told Nova about Orion, as Nova snuck out of the house to meet Nikos for the night, Katerina stepped out of the darkness and stood in her path. Nova let out a squeal before slapping her hands over her mouth. When she looked into the Greek woman's knowing eyes, her surprise faded to an intense level of dread. *Had she told Nova's uncle?*

"You..." Katerina began, seeming to struggle for words as her tongue tripped over them, "my boy...no good."

With a frown, Nova wound her arms around herself. Was she trying to say Nova and Nikos were both bad people, or was she trying to voice her disapproval of them being together? "*Den...ehh...káno,*" she began. *I don't.* Then she forgot the word for "understand." "*Den xéro,*" she finished. *Don't know.*

"You...do not know...my boy...he has been through...*kólasi.*"

Nova's gut churned. She knew that word. Her father often muttered it when she was little, and her mother would scold him when Nova was around.

Hell.

The evening breeze seemed a little cooler, making Nova's teeth chatter. Katerina had always seemed pleasant enough to Nova, although reserved. She mostly kept to herself, only speaking to Nikos and Nova's uncle. She was certainly harmless.

When a dark, menacing look spread across Katerina's pretty face, however, Nova's heart rose in her throat. She shuffled back.

"Meíne makriá apó to agóri mou," Katerina all but hissed, wagging a stern finger at Nova. Tears filled her eyes when she repeated, *"Meíne makriá!"*

Nova's mind scrambled to translate the words as Katerina sulked away, disappearing back into the darkness. She was fairly certain *agóri mou* meant "my boy" in English, but couldn't quite grasp the rest.

Even without knowing the exact words Nikos's mother had said to her, she was certain it was some kind of a warning.

A FULL SIX months after Nikos and his mother had arrived to America, the late night dips in the pool and hikes around the property came to an end. The frigid weather moving in from the mountains forced the young couple to stay confined to the cellar where they could guarantee they wouldn't be caught. One such evening, as Nikos held Nova in the crook of his arm while stroking her hair, he blurted, "We are moving to a house. In the New York City."

Nova became still, her throat thick with dread. She had yet to take any driver's education classes since it seemed pointless when her uncle was keeping her locked away. But it was a two-hour drive to the city, and it wasn't like they had access to public transportation.

Had Katerina decided to take him away so they could no longer be together? She had never mentioned that night to Nikos, but his mother had been cold to her ever since and Nova had gone out of her way to avoid another one-on-one.

She spun around to grip his face in her hands. “You can’t leave!” She wove her arms around his neck, wishing she could literally hold him in place. “The city is so far away! How will I see you?”

“I continue to work at winery until I leave for school,” he promised, dusting the warm tip of his straight nose against her cheek. He had recently passed the exam to earn his high school diploma and was saving up for community college. “My mother, she knows how I feel. She says once I get American license, I can take you out on *proper* date with her car.”

“You told her about us?” It would explain the late-night confrontation. Maybe Katerina simply thought Nova was too young to be dating her son. Maybe she hoped their relationship would cool down with a little distance. “Did she really say that?”

His lips spread with one of his cute little grins. “I did not tell her. She already knew. I wear my heart for all to see, and my heart, it only beats for you.”

Delicious chills ran down Nova’s spine. *Was he saying he was in love with her?* She turned into him and began combing her fingers through his thick hair. It had grown longer since she’d met him and had begun to curl in soft waves around his ears. He was achingly handsome and had a heart of gold. How did she get so lucky?

“My uncle is super protective. He’ll never let me leave this place.”

His brows shot upward. “Ever?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. He never lets me go anywhere unless I’m with him or my aunt.”

He ran a fingertip along her bottom lip. “I think maybe he has good reason to keep you here.”

“I think he’s afraid whoever murdered my parents may still be looking for me and my sister. But I think it’s been long enough...surely they’ve given up by now. And besides, he made us change our names.” She brushed her fingertips along

his strong jaw. “Why won’t you tell me more about this Orion guy?”

He tore his gaze away. “Your uncle...he made me swear —”

“I don’t care!” she cried. “I’m tired of all the secrets!”

“I understand this, my beautiful girl,” he said, gripping her chin with his fingers. His eyes softened as they returned to hers. Every now and then she detected a bit of pain in them, like in that moment. “Sometimes secrets are important. Sometimes they are kept only to...ehhh... *protect* those we love.”

“Sometimes I think my uncle cares more about keeping me as his prisoner for the rest of my life than protecting me.”

“But, Nova, you do not see clearly. He keeps you close because he loves you and cannot stand to see you hurt.” Nikos brushed his lips over hers before leaning back with a smile. “You will be done with school soon, yes?”

“Probably before spring, yeah.”

His smile grew. “And then you leave for university so you can become a nurse, yes?”

There was very little they hadn’t discussed in their time together. He knew she’d planned to become a RN as soon as she was finished with high school, and wanted to work with terminally ill children. He was unsure which profession he wanted to pursue, so he planned to take general courses until a subject caught his interest.

She wound a wayward curl at the nape of his neck around her finger. “Whenever I try talking to my aunt and uncle about leaving for college, they change the subject.”

“Maybe you go to university, and we live together.” He leaned into her touch and closed his eyes. “They cannot keep you here forever, *cardia mou*.”

Her heart stuttered and soared with the same nickname her father had used for her when she was a little girl. And he was asking her to move in with him one day. She was already

convinced she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, but she wasn't convinced her feelings were reciprocated.

“*Se agapó*, Nikos,” she told him with tears burning behind her eyes. *I love you*. “I think I've loved you since the moment we met.”

His eyes opened as his lips spread with a dazzling smile. “I know this, my beautiful girl with sea blue eyes.” His fingers toyed with the little wave pendant hanging from her neck. “I feel your passion when we kiss. I feel this way too.” He drew her arm away from his neck and laid the palm of her hand on his chest. “Do you feel that? My heart...it loves very, very deep for you. Only you.”

When tears spilled from her eyes, he quickly wiped them away with his thumb. “I don't want to be far away from you,” she said.

“We will find a way to be together, my love.”

“Make love to me, Nikos.” She aggressively tugged on the button of his jeans, wanting him naked as soon as humanly possible. “*Please*. I can't wait any longer.”

Laughing, he gathered her wandering hands inside his and brought her fingertips to his lips. “First I ask your uncle permission to date you, yes?”

“Are you *crazy*?” she nearly shouted. “After he warned us to stay away from each other?”

“He does not need to know about the time we have already been together. But if you are to live with me, he will need to know. I think maybe one day he will understand.”

A little pout pressed against her lips. Although it was an outdated concept, she also couldn't help seeing it as being a little romantic. “It's a little late for you to ask about us *dating*, don't you think?” She flipped him over to his back and straddled him, dipping down to plant a teasing kiss against his lips. “Isn't it enough that we love each other?”

With a soft chuckle, he stroked a finger along her cheek. “Soon, *cardia mou*. Soon. We do this the right way.”

As she held his loving gaze, she worried her bottom lip. He didn't know her uncle the way she did.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The following day, shortly after Nova and London gathered in the restaurant for their morning lessons, their uncle came storming in through the double front doors of the building with his teeth bared. His face was a disturbing shade of scarlet. “You have the morning off, London,” he grumbled. “Go help your aunt.”

“But—” London began to protest, sharing a confused look with her sister.

“*Now!*” he roared.

Eyes wide, London scurried from the building. Nova’s heart began to skip at a rapid rate once her uncle’s dark gaze honed in on her. “I thought I told you you’re not allowed to spend any time alone with that *boy*.”

Anger stirred in her belly. She refused to let him control every aspect of her life. Although she wished Nikos had warned her that he’d be talking with her uncle so soon, she also felt a small sense of relief. However their conversation had gone down, she had no intention of ending her relationship with Nikos. At least they’d no longer be forced to sneak around.

“He’s not a *boy*,” she snapped, feeling fiercely protective of her man. “And why not?”

“Because he’s not good enough for you!”

“Why? Because he’s a waiter? He’s going to school soon—he’s really smart! Probably smarter than you! And he loves me!”

“You aren’t safe with him!”

Her lips curled with a snarl. “Why would you say that?” she demanded, closing the distance between them. Heat boiled through her veins as her frustration rose. “Why do you insist on keeping me in the dark on everything? Who wanted my parents dead? Who is Orion? Is he the same man who hurt Katerina?”

He became still. “What did Nikos tell you?”

Eyes narrowed, she lifted her chin. “Just that some man named Orion had hurt his mother, and they left Greece because she was scared he’d come after Nikos too.”

With a dark laugh, her uncle shook his head. “This is *exactly* why you can’t be with him!”

She echoed his laugh. “Because he knows the truth you refuse to tell me, no matter how many times I ask?”

Clenching his fists, he looked away. “There’s more at play than you know,” he grumbled in a low, almost inaudible tone.

“Like what?”

“I can’t talk about this with you.”

“Why not?” She swiped the twinned stream of tears from her face and barred her teeth. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. I’m sick of asking you questions that you’ll never answer. And I don’t care what you think anymore. As soon as I get my diploma, I’m moving in with Nikos and going to college.”

“The hell you are!” he roared, shoving a stool into a nearby table.

“How long do you think you can keep me locked away like some kind of freaking princess in a fairy tale? I’m almost an adult, Uncle Dizzy!”

Just then, Patricia, the restaurant's manager, breezed through the front doors. Her face froze when she caught onto their frigid body language. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting something?"

"Nothing important," Nova snarled, storming past her.

"Nova, we're not finished talking!" her uncle yelled.

"I am!" she yelled back without turning around.

With tears blurring her path, she stomped outside and crossed the parking lot. She was determined to get back at her uncle in one way or another and only one idea came to mind.

She pounded on Nikos and Katerina's door, relieved when Nikos soon answered. In only a pair of sweatpants strung low on his hips, lean chest still holding on to a deep summer tan, he was so incredibly beautiful. His hair was ruffled and his eyes were hazy like he'd just rolled out of bed. She wanted to taste the words on his lips when he uttered, "Nova?"

She peered behind him and bounced on the balls of her sneakers. "Is your mom here?"

Worry snapped into his gaze when he shook his head. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"How long will she be gone?"

"She just left for store. I think an hour. Maybe two."

"Good."

She barged inside, launching herself into his arms and kissing him with everything she had. She purposely left the door open a crack behind her. Although she no longer wanted her uncle to walk in on her having sex with Nikos to simply get under his skin, she was hoping her uncle would catch them in the act, and realize she was done letting him control her. Nothing would stop her from leaving with Nikos.

She felt Nikos's reluctance in the timid slip of his tongue against hers before she drew away. "Where do you sleep?"

When he pointed to the unmade pull-out couch beneath the window, she took his hand and dragged him over to it, forcibly

shoving him down.

His dark brows stitched together. “Nova, *cardia mou*—”

“No more talking.” She yanked his sweatpants down his toned legs. Her mouth became bone-dry when he was all at once naked, not having worn any underwear. They had messed around countless times in the cellar, but she’d never seen him in the full daylight.

He was more handsome than she could handle. Every delightful inch of him.

She quickly recovered from her shock and peeled her shirt off over her head, watching Nikos’s gaze darken as she kicked off her jeans and unhooked her bra. As always, he regarded her breasts as if they were a precious piece of art, admiring them before molding a hand around them. Their mouths joined once again for a passionately deep kiss, fueled by mutual love and adoration.

She had always imagined their first time together would be slow and gentle, with ample time to thoroughly explore each other’s bodies, but she was on a mission. After sliding her underwear down her legs, she climbed onto Nikos’s lap. Despite his unsure expression, he was hard.

With a slight shake of his head, he cupped her face in his hands. “*Ómorfi agápi mou me ta thalassiná mátia,*” he said to her. *My beautiful love with the sea blue eyes.* “*Me káneis τόσο charoúmeno.*” *You make me so happy.*

Heat drained from her face a second before she froze in place.

What was she thinking? She had wanted to sleep with him for a very long time, but not that way. Not because she was angry at her uncle. Nikos had entrusted her with his heart. He deserved so much better.

With tears spilling down her cheeks, she wound her fingers around his wrists. “*S ‘agapó τόσο πολύ, Nikos.*” *I love you so much.* “But—”

“What the *fuck?*” her uncle roared from outside the widow.

Nova's heart sank. It was too late to fix her mistake.

Cursing in Greek, Nikos moved away from her to snag the blanket that had fallen onto the floor. He draped it over himself with a corner, using the rest of it to cover Nova up to her shoulders a second before her uncle barged into the room, slamming the door against the wall.

Nova swallowed her tears. It was time to own up to her mistake. "This isn't what it looks like, Uncle Dizzy!" she declared, clutching the blanket against her chest. She moved to her knees, crouching between the two men in a defensive move. "I *love* him! He loves me!"

Danger ebbed through her uncle's deep tone when he told her, "Stay out of this, Nova." His eyes darted to Nikos. "If you don't leave this room by the count of five, I'm ripping your heart out through your goddamn throat."

Nova had never seen her uncle lose his temper to that extreme, and was a little worried he'd make good on his threat. She moved a little closer to Nikos. "You're not going to touch him, and he's not going anywhere!"

Her uncle's lips twisted with a scowl. "You bet your ass he is. He's leaving, Nova, and he is never coming back."

"Then I'm going with him!" she declared. Once the words left her mouth, she was unable to catch her next breath. *Was she actually willing to run away?*

Every bit of her uncle's thick body trembled with rage. "Do you really want to know who hurt his mother?" He gestured to Nikos. "Go ahead, tell her. Tell her how you're *related* to Orion—the man who ordered the hit on her parents."

Nova's breath caught with a painful stitch that spread through her sides. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. How could the man she loved be related to the monster who had taken her parents from her? Nikos was loving and kind. It couldn't be true.

Eventually, she glared back at her uncle. "You're lying."

Nikos's fingers wrapped around her elbow, nudging her around to look at him. The haunted look on his face startled her. "It is true, my love." His eyes glistened with unshed tears as he spoke. "Orion is my father." He mournfully shook his head. "I did not know he had put hit on your parents."

The sound of the furnace kicking in vibrated through Nova's chest.

Her ears began to ring.

Pain squeezed her heart as more tears began to fall.

It had to be a lie.

She was accustomed to her uncle lying and keeping secrets. But she never would've expected the same from the man she loved—the man she trusted with her heart. As she held his gaze, it felt as if her insides had been scooped out and disposed of at her feet.

With one hand gripping the necklace he had given her, she shoved him square in the chest with the other. "I *trusted* you, Nikos! How could you do this to me? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your uncle told us we could come only if we do not mention my father," Nikos answered, throwing her uncle a dirty look. "I did not lie about Orion. He is not a good man."

Her fist clenched the blanket as she attempted to understand the sea of emotions raging through her. She glared at her uncle, ready to shove him even harder. "You knew who he was and you still let him come here?"

"I briefly dated his mother, a long time ago," her uncle explained. "I'm the only one she knew here, so she reached out to me when she finally decided to leave Greece. Nikos deserves a chance, even if he comes from bad blood, but his connection to your parents runs too deep. This can't happen, Nova."

Behind her, Nikos finished getting dressed with his sweatpants and a hoodie. "Please, no more yelling," he said as he started for the door. "I did not mean to hurt anyone." His

eyes held Nova's for a moment before he turned the handle. "I am very sorry, *cardia mou*. I should not have loved you."

When the door closed behind him, Nova's heart shattered into a million pieces. She collapsed in a heap of tears, sensing she'd never see him again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nova never had a chance to discuss with Nikos the details of his relationship with his father.

Once she was finally able to wrap her head around everything, she'd returned to the unit Nikos shared with his mother and found it completely empty.

He was gone.

In the months that followed, Nova became a mere shell of the person she'd once been. Losing the love of her life was almost unbearable—even more painful than losing her parents. She once again feared what were to happen if she lost London, and never let her sister stray too far out of sight.

Her uncle continuously threatened to either send her away to a strict girls' school, or confine her to her bedroom for the rest of her life. A part of her knew he had only been trying to protect her and give her a good life, but his betrayal cut deep. His decision to tell her about Nikos's relationship to her parents' killer had come too late, and hadn't been enough. The yearning for answers had only intensified since Nikos had left, and she no longer trusted her uncle to give her the answers she sought. She tolerated the time she was forced to listen to his lessons as it became clear earning her diploma would be the only way to escape the prison he had made.

As her uncle had demanded, Nikos hadn't left any way for her to contact him. Every night after scouring the internet for any sign of him, Nova would cry herself to sleep. She also combed through endless searches for Orion Makris. Nikos had been right about Orion being a common name in Greece, but there weren't any results for one with Nikos's last name.

She didn't know how to feel about the man she loved being related to the man who'd ordered a hit on her parents. Sharing blood with a monster didn't necessarily make him one too. If Nikos had been dangerous, her uncle would never have agreed to let him anywhere near Nova and London. Still, he had warned the girls to stay away from him.

The revelation only made Nova more hungry than before for the truth about her parents. What had their relationship been with Nikos's father? Why all the secrecy?

As soon as Nova tested out of high school, she announced to her aunt and uncle that she was moving out to attend a university in Manhattan—to which she'd already been accepted. "I'm taking London with me," she added at the end. "She wants to go to public school where she can make friends."

"We're her legal guardians," her uncle reminded her with a constant shake of his head. Although the rest of him remained unnaturally still, a dark shade of red blossomed up his neck. "You don't get to decide where she goes."

She all at once resented him for keeping her and her sister locked away. She resented him for going out of his way to prevent them from having any friends. She met her uncle's angry scowl with a dead-eyed stare. "Don't fight me on this, Uncle Dizzy."

"You're only seventeen. How do you think you're going to provide for you and your sister on your own?" he challenged. "Who will protect you?"

Glancing between her aunt's teary gaze and her uncle's scowl, she was filled with a stab of guilt. They had raised them as their own, and she was threatening to pull their family apart. "You taught us how to fight for our lives," she reminded him,

her tone all at once gentle. “And my parents’ trust left us with more than enough to get by until I’m able to secure a nursing position.”

Nova’s aunt swept Nova’s hair over one shoulder and grazed a finger across her niece’s cheek. “I know we’ve kept you sheltered most of your life, *mi amor*, but it was only because we love you and wanted to keep you safe. I also know you’re still hurting because of what happened with Nikos. I would hate to see you make a decision this monumental out of anger.”

Nova clenched her teeth and shook her head. “I’m not moving away because I’m angry.”

“Are you sure about that?” Nova’s uncle sneered.

Nova’s aunt set a hand on her husband’s arm. “I’ve sat by quietly all these years while you made every decision on behalf of these girls. I love them as if they’re my own and hate to see them go, but I think Nova is right. You can’t keep them here forever, and the school is only an hour away.” Relaxing her pose, she took a step closer to Nova’s uncle and wrapped her arms around his thick middle. “You’ve raised them to be smart, strong, and independent. They know how to defend themselves.” She rested her head on his broad chest. “Let them go, *cariño*. Let them spread their wings, and find their own way in life.”

Nova tried not to smile when she realized she had won.

She was finally breaking free of her uncle’s protective bubble.

IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED, London and Nova molded their altered lives into a comfortable routine, becoming each other’s closest of friends and confidants. While Nova was still taking on the role of London’s guardian, she was also the one who comforted her sister whenever dumped by a guy or betrayed by a friend. They sat together in silence as they studied for their respective classes and experimented by making complicated meals when they needed a break.

Whenever Nova wasn't working one of two jobs she'd taken on, they explored the city, took in concerts and fashion shows, ate at the trendiest new restaurants, and caught the hottest Broadway shows. They had lived under their aunt and uncle's strict protection for so long that they were akin to newborns seeing everything for the first time.

Once Nova received a bachelor's degree in nursing, she landed a position at a reputable children's hospital located in a respectable school district in Brooklyn Heights. Although she volunteered for the night shift as it paid double she would've made working days, money was still tight. She'd been saving every extra cent available for London's college savings, and used some of their parents' inheritance for a down payment on a small two-bedroom brownstone. It was a major upgrade from the tiny studio apartment they'd shared in Manhattan, and London was at an age in which privacy was imperative.

In Brooklyn Heights, London was able to attend a public high school without metal detectors, and was given the opportunity to befriend over half of her classmates. She even fell in love with a teacher's son who was big into sports. Nova was a little jealous once her sister began spending most of her free time with Erik, attending his games or working out with him at the gym. She was also keenly aware she'd been the same age when she'd fallen in love with Nikos, so she was highly empathetic when Erik broke up with London less than a year later after he'd fallen in love with someone else. London was devastated.

"Wanna head into Manhattan tonight?" Nova asked her sister three days after the big breakup. "We could catch a show or go to that creepy restaurant you like."

From her slumped position on the couch, London grunted. "Not really."

"Come on, short stuff. Moping around isn't going to help anything."

"Says the one who's still moping around six years after her only breakup," London shot back, mindlessly flipping through the stations.

Nova only rolled her eyes, irritated her sister had gone *there*, but knowing it couldn't be denied. "One of the doctors was telling me about a new gym in the Lower East Side. We could go check it out...see if it's worth getting a membership there. It takes less than twenty minutes via ferry." She lifted her eyebrows, hoping her sister would perk up when she added, "They have a massive sauna and a juice bar."

London lifted one shoulder with great difficulty, as if it weighed a hundred pounds. "I guess we could check it out."

Nova was ecstatic with London's willingness to go—even more so once they met James, a hulking trainer at the popular gym. Nova found his fair blond hair, wealth of tattoos, and thick muscles to be fascinating, while his enthusiasm and friendliness made him endearing.

"What are your long-term goals?" he asked London, rubbing the palms of his hands together. His voice was rough and masculine, bearing the slightest hint of a European accent. Nova decided his clean complexion and smooth, flat pectorals were good indications he wasn't a steroid user.

London glanced around the busy gym, shrugging. The building stretched an entire city block, occupying two floors separated by a glass ceiling. Dozens of members of all ages occupied state-of-the-art equipment. "I have a lot of pent-up anger that I'd like to work out," she muttered, pulling her sleeves over her hands.

James responded with a chuckle. "I can definitely help you there. You appear to be in excellent shape already."

Nova appreciated the way the man treated London like a peer rather than sounding like a creep when complimenting her appearance.

London's grumpy demeanor of the past few days lifted as she threw James a genuine smile. "I do a lot of yoga, some Tae Kwon Do, and I recently started dabbling in weight lifting. This douche I was seeing taught me a few things about weights, but I'm sure he didn't know what he was talking about."

“Then we’ll start with the basics,” he replied, flashing a dimpled smile. “Are you hoping to stay toned, or pack on more muscle?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.”

“We’ll dabble in a few different things until you have a better idea.” He turned to Nova then, bright blue eyes wide. “What about you?”

“Oh, I probably won’t become a member,” she said, waving her hands through the air. “I don’t really have the time. I just wanted to find her a safe place to work out this anger of hers.”

His dimpled smile returned. “You must do *something* to stay fit.” Unlike the respectful tone he’d used with London, his attempt at flirtation was obvious when he added, “You look great.”

“She watches what she eats and puts in a ton of steps at the hospital,” London informed him as she threw Nova a knowing grin. “She’s a nurse at the children’s hospital in Brooklyn Heights.”

“You don’t say?” James’s eyes twinkled when they swung back to Nova. “I love working with children. I’d love to hear more about your job some time. Maybe we can meet up for drinks some time—or even dinner.”

“Maybe,” Nova agreed, feeling a slight tug of attraction in her gut.

Nova tagged along the first several times after London became a member of the gym. She claimed it was because she wanted London to feel comfortable, but the sisters both secretly knew it was because she wanted to see James. James was always there, encouraging London to push herself to her limit while flirting with Nova on the side.

After several weeks, Nova finally took the time off to accept his offer for dinner. They met in Midtown at a cozy Italian restaurant with emerald green walls and seaside inspired art. James was undeniably handsome in a crisp blue button down dress shirt and khakis. He was so perfect that he

was almost pretty. Every other woman in the restaurant seemed to agree the way they gawked as Nova and James were paraded through the small building to a round table in the back. Nova worried they'd judge her as unworthy of him as she'd worn a simple white sundress with gold sandals. After her shift at the hospital, she had merely run a brush through her long blond hair.

"You look beautiful," James told her after they'd ordered their drinks.

"I have a confession to make," she told him, shifting in the leather chair. "I haven't really been on a date before. I'm not really sure what I'm doing."

Frowning, he leaned in a little closer to her. The candle in the center of the table highlighted his broad jaw and wide nose. "How is that possible?"

She felt a little self-conscious when she laughed. "I stay busy with work and London."

He leaned back, nodding with a wide smile. "You must be doing a killer job, because your sister's great. She has a contagious aura and a ton of potential to become a successful influencer, if that's something she'd be interested in doing."

"An influencer?"

"Someone who makes money from posting sponsored products on social media."

Nova's heart flipped. "She's not on social media." It was one of their uncle's rules Nova had stuck to, and London had never complained. It seemed like a logical rule to follow after what had happened to their parents.

"It's a shame. With someone experienced helping her gain a following, she could possibly pay for college."

"I don't know..." Nova crossed her arms over her chest. Although she liked the idea of London funding her own education, she wasn't sure she wanted her sister exposing herself to strangers in such a vulnerable way. "Could she do it without anyone knowing her real name?"

He dipped his smooth-shaven chin. “I use the moniker Marshal James myself. If I went by my real name, I’d be constantly mobbed at the gym.” He threw her one of his charming smiles, complete with a deep dimple on one side. “It’s bad enough some people already recognize me there.”

“You’re saying you’re famous?”

Leaning back over the table, he lowered his voice. “You haven’t noticed the looks we’ve been getting since we walked in?”

“I figured it was just because you’re so handsome,” she whispered back. “Has it been lucrative for you?”

“Between collabs selling protein shakes and workout gear, I was able to pay cash for my new ‘Vette.” Something dark stirred in his gaze. “I’ll take you for a ride sometime.”

She was suddenly more interested in the idea of her sister earning money for college than getting to know the social celebrity sitting across from her. It would allow her the freedom to take less shifts at the hospital if she didn’t have to stress so much about paying London’s student loans. She was already up to her eyeballs in debt from nursing school.

She folded her arms and lifted an eyebrow. “If becoming an influencer is something London wants to do, could you help her get started?”

With a wide grin, he reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “I’d love to.”

CHAPTER NINE

The fall of London's senior year, Nova was diagnosed with breast cancer. By then, she'd been meeting with James on occasion for casual outings, and they'd only exchanged one confusing kiss that lacked in any kind of sparks. With the prognosis, she decided to sever any notion of pursuing a romantic relationship with him rather than disclose her upcoming surgery, mostly as she didn't want London to find out. Thanks to James's mentoring, London had developed a massive following on social media, and Nova didn't dare ask James to keep such a substantial secret from his mentee. She wanted her sister to have as normal of a senior year as possible—for both of their sakes.

Besides, she was confident she'd be okay as she had only been at stage two, and the oncologist her supervisor pulled a favor to get her into was known for being one of the best in the city. Lying to her sister by saying she had a five-day convention to attend in Maine burdened her with a crushing guilt, but she needed the time to heal without unnecessarily worrying London.

Once she was released the day after the surgery, she checked into a hotel across from Central Park where she binged on takeout and old TV shows. Sadly, it was the only

time she'd ever taken to do something to accommodate her own personal needs.

It was also the only time she'd ever truly been alone.

In the quiet that stretched on for hours every night, she thought of Nikos. Her heart felt heavier than usual as she longed to be reunited with her first love.

Ever since they'd moved to the city, her gaze would dart to every dark-haired man she came across, convinced she'd catch a glimpse of the man she'd loved. Although she'd been asked on countless dates, she was certain her heart wouldn't survive another breakup.

Besides, she still loved Nikos every bit as much as the day he'd left.

Once the snow melted and the cherry blossom trees went into full bloom, London was accepted to a university in Chicago where she planned to major in nutrition and wellness. James had recommended the program, and London seemed eager to assert her independence even more than before. She had scored multiple collaborations by then, earning enough to also pay for an apartment while she attended school rather than staying in the dormitories.

Nova didn't know what she'd do with herself once London left in the fall. She'd dedicated her life to her baby sister, putting dating and friendships outside of those she'd formed at work on hold. She'd decided she could join the gym where James had helped London become a local celebrity. Although she wasn't interested in pursuing another romantic interest, it would keep her busy once she found a work-out-buddy or two.

One early afternoon a week before London's high school graduation, Nova heard her sister squealing her name from the entrance of their brownstone. It was an odd time for London to be home as she was scheduled for her bi-weekly session with James. "Nov!" London yelled again. "Get your ass out here! I have some exciting news!"

Releasing the ponytail she'd worn for her shift, Nova wandered into the living room to find her sister almost literally

bursting at the seams with excitement. London's obsession with fitness had not only earned her a six-figure following, but had given her an enviable combination of muscles and curves. The way she filled out a plain black tank top and leggings featuring one of her sponsors' logos reminded Nova of pictures she'd seen of their aunt during her pageant days. Between London's passion for working out, outgoing personality, sweetheart face featuring perfectly symmetrical features, and long golden hair recently dyed the same sunshine shade as her sister and their mother's, she had propelled into the life of an influencer almost overnight. Her rise to fame both fascinated and terrified Nova in ways she couldn't explain.

"Why aren't you at the gym?" Nova asked.

London's beautifully rich, mocha eyes rounded wider than seemed possible. "You aren't going to believe this, but I was just offered a free trip to Mykonos, *Greece!*"

Nova's skin tingled. Mykonos—the same island on which their father and Nikos's family had once lived. *What were the chances?* Although she also recognized the opportunities it could provide, she still didn't believe in coincidences. Her cynicism overrode her sister's excitement. "Why Mykonos? And there's no such thing as *free*, short stuff."

"God, you sound just like Uncle Dizzy." London rolled her eyes up to the ceiling before breaking out in another wide grin. "I started following the account for this up-and-coming boutique resort there, and they DM'd me a little bit ago, offering an all-expenses-paid trip for two! All I have to do is post a ton of pictures and do some live-stream videos!"

"That sounds too good to be true. How do you know you aren't being scammed?"

London's expression turned serious. "It's a hundred percent legit. James googled the resort's webpage, and spoke to the manager. She confirmed the offer is valid." She batted her long, thick eyelashes, reminding Nova of the curious little girl who climbed buildings with her beloved goats. "What do

you say, sis? Can we go? It would be the perfect chance for us to bond a little more before I leave.”

Nova’s heart raced as she considered the idea of accepting the “free” vacation. If it was indeed legitimate, it couldn’t have arrived at a better time. It would give Nova one last chance to prepare London for life on her own, as well as provide her with an unofficial send-off. Since Nova had accumulated more vacation time than she knew what to do with, it would be a perfect opportunity to enjoy uninterrupted time alone with her sister without having to worry about getting called into work, or London’s friends stopping by unannounced.

Most importantly, Nova could investigate her father’s childhood neighborhood, and ask around to see if anyone remembered him. Maybe she’d finally learn something useful about Orion, too.

The only potential problem would involve disclosing their intended trip to their uncle. Based on Nova’s interactions with him over the years, she suspected he would blow his top if she so much as mentioned the idea, and would find a way to prevent them from leaving. She’d figure out a way to deal with him later.

On a deep sigh, her shoulders drooped forward. “Let me have a more detailed conversation with James and set up a call with this resort. If I can be convinced it’s legitimate, we’ll go.”

London’s squeals of delight were loud enough to wake their cranky neighbor who began pounding on the wall between them.

Later that night, she called her aunt, hoping to solicit more information about Greece than her uncle had ever been willing to share. After Nova brought her aunt up to date on her recent promotion at work and the final details of London’s graduation dinner the four of them had planned, Nova asked, “Do you remember where exactly my dad grew up in Mykonos?”

“Yeah, it was called Little Venice. I only remember because that’s where they took you when you were little. Your mom said it was the most beautiful place she’d ever been, and

if it was anything like the Venice in Italy, we had to plan a girls' trip there one day.”

“Do you know why my parents ended our trip early? I remember them fighting about it on the flight back.” The exact details of their argument had faded over the years, but she still remembered small snippets. “I think it had something to do with my grandmother.”

“Hmmm...I don't believe I ever saw your parents fight. *No one* did. Are you sure you remember that correctly?”

Nova sensed her aunt was lying. She was no different than her husband, wanting to keep Nova in the dark. “Why did they leave? Did it have something to do with Nikos's father?”

“I'm not really sure.”

“Did my dad ever talk about his family?”

“Not that I can remember, except that he never met his father, and his mother was poor—struggled to take care of him on her own. I remember him telling you that one Christmas when you asked why his family never joined you for the holidays. Based on some of the things your mom said, I sometimes got the feeling that...” Her voice trailed off.

“That what?”

“I don't know why I didn't tell you my theory before now, but it's probably not something I should tell you over the phone.” With a heavy pause, she cleared her throat. “Let's just say I'm not sure his parents were ever really in a relationship, per se. And I don't think he came from the most stellar family in general.”

“You mean ‘not in a relationship’ as in a one-night-stand kind of thing?” Nova decided the explanation would make sense. Their father had been an only child, and she'd once heard him tell someone his mom had moved them to Mykonos from Athens when he was a baby so she could work on a fishing boat with her cousin.

Her aunt let out a sound of great frustration. “You're putting me in a sticky position. It's not my place to say such

things when I don't have actual proof." A sad, heavy sigh released from the phone. "Where's this coming from, kiddo?"

"I guess I'm feeling a little...nostalgic. I can't stop wondering what happened to my parents, and why someone wanted them dead."

"You've been through a helluva lot in one lifetime, Nova. Try to forget about the bad memories, and focus on making new ones. Let your hair down, and have some fun with your sister. She'll be moving to Chicago before you know it. Maybe you can allow yourself to indulge in a little pleasure for a change, and take some time off from work. Do you remember your uncle's friend, Archie? He moved to the Hamptons after selling us the vineyard. I know he'd be more than happy to let you two stay with him for a couple of days this summer."

Nova couldn't imagine cashing in on one of her uncle's favors. "We'll come up with something fun to do this summer."

"I miss you, kiddo. Tell London I said she needs to take a break from her phone. Your uncle is worried out of his mind that one day she's going to have a crazed fan stalking her." Her aunt huffed out a heavy breath. "I don't even want to go there."

Nova knew the feeling. "I've tried to crack down on her about it countless times. I'll keep trying."

The betrayal of not disclosing their planned trip with her aunt cut deep. Still, she was eager for a chance to dig into their father's childhood, and attempt to uncover the mystery of what happened in Mykonos all those years ago.

PART II

“Even chance meetings are the result of karma. Things in life are fated by our previous lives. That even in the smallest events there’s no such thing as coincidence.”

- Haruki Murakami

NOW: CASH

Frustration slithered through Cash Fixen like a living being, twisting through his guts and heating his veins. It had been thirty-six hours since he'd arrived in Athens, and he wasn't any closer to finding his target than when he'd been in Houston. He may have given up everything when he'd blindly hopped on the first flight to Greece—his job, his rent-controlled apartment, and any chance of reconnecting with his sexy neighbor. Not that he was looking for anything long-term, especially as he vowed never to show his vulnerable side to a woman again, but he sure would've liked another chance to experience those long, silky legs wrapped around his waist. It wasn't every day he caught the attention of a corporate lawyer who was all business during office hours, and a freak in bed after dark.

Considering he hadn't caught a second of sleep since the plane's wheels touched down on foreign soil, he decided he'd be better off to continue his search with a clear head in the morning. He headed down the narrow cobble stone street lined with graffiti where his target was last spotted, answering the cat calls from the group of local women dressed in tight tube-tops and short skirts with a casual wave. He'd interviewed them hours earlier, and they were friendly once they'd learned of his intentions. Traditional Greek music rolled out from the open door of the small bar they gathered around, and the mossy odor of the cheap weed they smoked wafted through the warm air.

Once he was away from the white lights strung among white washed trees on the main drag, the darkness settled in

around him. It was so inky black that he was unable to see his hand in front of his face. He cut through a narrow alley leading to the cheap motel that would only set him back sixty-four euros a night. He still knew his way around every corner of the village. It seemed every building he crossed retained a memory from his childhood.

The faint strum of a lute was drowned out by a trio of low, guttural growls. Moonlight cut through the dark clouds to reveal a pack of mangey dogs with protruding ribs and matted fur. They were clustered around a set of aluminum garbage cans dumped on their sides, likely protecting whatever scraps they'd found. Cash almost passed them by without a second thought until his eyes caught on something that stopped him dead in his tracks.

A set of painted toenails.

“Get outta here!” he yelled at the mutts, swiping a hand through the air and charging at them. “*Fýge apó edó!*”

They scampered away before he squatted down beside the body to remove the debris scattered over the woman. He half expected to find one of the prostitutes he had spoken with earlier as she wore a short, sparkling dress, but her skin tone was lighter than that of the locals. Removing the old sheet draped across her head, he discovered blond hair matted around a swollen and bloodied face. Although it appeared she'd been beaten with fists, making it impossible to guess her ethnicity, his gut told him she wasn't from the area. On closer inspection, there was a gash in her forehead, just above her right eye. It also appeared she'd been stabbed right above her hip. Inside her limp, bloodied hands, a piece of the dress had been torn off, and was saturated with blood.

Cash pressed his fingertips against her carotid artery, surprised to find a faint beat. She was alive...barely. He searched around her for a bag or purse that may reveal her identity, but there wasn't anything helpful to be found among the piles of garbage.

On a deep exhale, he scratched his neatly trimmed beard as he did his best to assess the situation. He couldn't leave her

with the starving pack of dogs, and he sure as hell couldn't afford to get the attention of the local police, either. Even if he made an anonymous call from the motel's phone, it could take considerable time for an ambulance to arrive, and time wasn't on the woman's side. Although Cash didn't have time to play nurse to a half-dead stranger, he knew a thing or two about first aid. He could tend to her wounds until somehow able to properly provide her with the medical attention she needed.

He needed to prove to himself that he was nothing like his father. He wasn't a fucking monster.

With a resigned grunt, he scooped her lithe body into his arms and carried her to his motel room around the corner.

THE DESIRE for sleep disappeared once Cash tended to the wounded woman lying on his bed. A different kind of exhaustion rattled through his bones. He lacked the energy required to deal with the situation. He'd brought a half-dead stranger into his motel room on the other side of the world. Who knew how long she'd remain unconscious? What if no one believed that he had merely found her in that state? Yet his conscience, no matter how messed up it might've been at times, wouldn't allow him to just dump her outside of a foreign hospital.

A quiet knock on the motel door broke the eerie silence between Cash and the unconscious woman. He hurried across the small room and found an elderly, white-haired local with bushy eyebrows waiting outside. The man hesitated before entering, his dark, hooded eyes closely studying Cash's girth. Ever since he'd packed on an extra fifty pounds of muscle to his six foot plus frame by loading up on carbs and lifting weights during his free time while enlisted in the Corps, Cash tended to draw that kind of reaction. The elderly man was at least a foot shorter—largely due to the massive hump of his back—and maybe weighed a buck and a quarter when soaking wet.

Although Cash had been relieved when the motel's attendant said he knew of a retired doctor who lived down the

road, the feeling of relief fizzled when the old man advanced into the room with the gait of a hundred-year-old. His faith was somewhat restored when the man retrieved medical supplies from the small bag clutched in his arthritic hands, and lowered to the battered armchair Cash had placed at the woman's side.

“Pligósate aftí ti gynáika?” the doctor asked as he began his assessment of the woman. *Did you hurt this woman?*

“Milás انگlikά?” Cash responded with a shake of his head. *Do you speak English.* He hadn't used much Greek since they'd fled the country. Speaking his childhood language dredged up painful memories. Besides, he was hoping his presence there would go mostly unnoticed.

The man's thick white eyebrows stitched together. “You do this?”

“No, sir!” Cash barked. He'd injured his share of people as a necessity, but never a woman. He'd never so much as slapped one. His eyes dragged along her broken body strewn across the motel bed. “I found her like this in the alley around the corner.”

The doctor gave Cash another questioning look and grunted before carefully examining every part of the woman. Out of respect, Cash stepped out of the room when the doctor began to lift her dress. By the time he returned, the elderly man was wrapping gauze around stitches on her abdomen. He had bunched the short dress around her waist, leaving her partially covered. Once the bandage was in place, he retrieved a syringe and two small bottles from his bag. He injected one liquid into her thigh, the other into her arm. He pulled the skirt of her dress back down before meeting Cash's hopeful expression with a slow shake of his head.

“Not good,” he said with another mournful shake of his head. “Not good.”

“Is she going to live?”

“Bad concussion,” he explained. “Maybe ribs broken. But stab wound clean, heartbeat strong. I think she lives... for now.”

I give her antibiotics, fluids. You let her rest. Keep dressing clean.” He dug inside his bag, then deposited half a dozen red and white capsules into Cash’s hand. “She wakes, you give her these.”

Whatever drug he’d handed Cash was most likely not street legal in the States. Cash stuffed them into his pocket and scowled. “She needs a hospital.”

The man’s dark eyes hardened. “No hospital.”

A harsh laugh stuck in Cash’s throat. *He couldn’t be serious.* “She can’t stay *here.*”

“No hospital,” the man repeated in a firm tone, nudging the hem of her dress up again to reveal the edge of her pink lacy panties. “Look.” His crooked finger pointed to a small mark on her inner thigh. She’d been tattooed with a series of handwritten numbers. The lines were red with irritation. “Mark of mafia. Very, very bad. You take her to hospital, they finish killing her.”

Cash’s blood ran cold. He ran his hands over his tired face, eyes fixed on the grungy tiled ceiling. Of course the woman would be tangled up with the deadly organization. The Nikolaidis crime family was heavily invested in trafficking drugs, and it was also known to tattoo women with a number before they were forced into sex trade. It seemed plausible the woman had tried to run, and they’d beat and stabbed her as retribution, left her for dead. If Cash took her to the hospital, he’d undoubtedly be signing her death warrant.

Eyeing the frail doctor, Cash silently prayed he could be trusted as he reached for his wallet. He couldn’t imagine it would take much for a destitute local to be bribed into revealing the woman’s location if the mafia were to ask. “Can you come back again tomorrow to check on her?”

“*Nai,*” he confirmed with the Greek word for “yes,” eagerly accepting the wad of euros Cash pressed into the palm of his hand. “I come back after dark.”

“Make sure no one follows you here. *Efcharistó, giatrós.*”
Thank you, doctor.

Cash walked him to the door, locking it once he'd stepped over the threshold. If the mafia was truly searching for the woman, the flimsy lock wouldn't do any good. The Beretta tucked into the back of his khaki shorts was his only hope for surviving that type of invasion.

With another scan of the woman's battered face, there was no denying she'd be in unbearable pain when she woke. *If* she woke.

It was nearly impossible to guess her exact ethnicity or her age, but Cash was willing to bet she was caucasian with a deep tan, and anywhere from eighteen to thirty-five. Although she was petite and on the slender side, her hips and chest had the kind of curves only seen on grown women. Beneath the grime covering her fingers and toes, it appeared she'd recently received a pedicure and manicure. Her hair—the parts not soaked in blood—was a shiny shade of blond likely maintained in an upscale salon. When the doctor had examined the inside of her mouth, Cash had never seen such a perfect set of teeth. Despite whatever she'd been through, they were still a bleached shade of white achieved by regular treatments. He was willing to bet her clothes were a designer brand based on the flourishing cursive—in English—on their tags. She came from money. Someone had to be missing her.

He wasn't exactly the empathetic type, but he felt an overwhelming pang of pity for the stranger. No one deserved the kind of beatdown she'd received. He guessed she was strong, or she wouldn't have survived the attack.

He'd give her a sponge bath in the morning and make a few calls to see if anyone matching her description had been reported as missing. He was more convinced than before that she was American. Maybe even Canadian. With any luck, he could locate her family because he couldn't sit in the little motel room with her forever. He'd waited what felt like a lifetime to catch his prey, and make him pay for what he'd done. Having a critically injured woman in tow would only slow him down.

48 HOURS EARLIER: NOVA

Nova awoke with a start that violently cramped her stomach muscles. She gasped for air, digging her fingers into the headrest in front of her. The moment she'd discovered her mother hanging from a rafter inside their California home had replayed in several vivid dreams since they'd left New York. The horror of that day remained as fresh as the lingering taste of the bitter coffee she'd sucked down on the ferry ride from Athens.

The middle-aged driver's deep, gravelly voice announced they were pulling up to their final destination—or at least Nova was pretty sure that's what he was saying. It wasn't like she had an excuse to use Greek very often since Nikos left. A doctor at the hospital had once summoned her to explain a medical procedure to a parent and their child, but even then she had to use an app for the complicated phrases.

At her side, her sister let out a dry, vacant laugh that grated on Nova's nerves. When had London started acting so superficial, and why hadn't Nova put a stop to it sooner? She was pretty sure the artificial attitude had stemmed around the time London began live-streaming for her fans.

Turning, Nova discovered her sister's beautiful face contorted with an amused smirk. Whatever kind of person London had become—whether good or bad—was all on Nova. The winery had taken up too much of their aunt and uncle's time for either of them to make too much of a lasting impact on London when she'd been younger.

“You were totally whimpering like a wounded puppy,” London informed her sister with a dramatic eye roll. “You kinda look like one, too.” Using her phone’s forward camera lens, she puckered her lips and ran her fingers over her meticulously braided hair as if preparing for a photoshoot. “You might want to pull yourself together before we check-in.”

Narrowly resisting the urge to tug her sister’s braid, Nova snagged the cell phone from London’s grip, slightly grimacing at the sight of her sister’s pink acrylic fingernails.

Blood dripped down bright pink toenails...

Straightening her spine, Nova held the phone away from her sister. “I agreed to come on this trip because you promised it would be an opportunity for us to bond,” she scolded. “That means you aren’t going to spend the entire time glued to your phone, telling a bunch of randos about your new lipgloss.”

London roughly nudged Nova aside to retrieve her phone. “Those *randos* are the reason I get all this free stuff, including both this trip *and* that fab outfit you’re wearing.”

Nova audibly winced. Brad, her attorney friend in Brooklyn, had come up with legal documents for London to sign that included the fact that the least expensive villas in the resort started at ten thousand per week. Not only that, but a mere day after London announced to her followers that she was going to Greece with her sister, a wardrobe rack containing dozens of beach-appropriate outfits was delivered to their brownstone. Nova felt uneasy once she learned the stylist from the department store had sent the exact sizes for them both. They wore similar outfits for the flight from New York to Athens, each choosing colorful skirts and sparkling tank tops cropped at the waist.

The conversion van rolled to a gentle stop in front of an impressive series of whitewashed buildings, framed by lush, bright pink Oleanders, and lined by white cobble stone streets. It was a picture-perfect setting for London’s followers—the stuff dreams were made of. “*Kyries kai kýrioi ftásame ston*

telikó proorismó sas. Sas efcharistoúme pou odigeíte me ta taxíδια Sunshine kai na échete mia ypérochi méra.”

With a panicked expression, London watched the other occupants gathering their belongings and rising from their seats. “What’s everyone doing? What’d he say?”

Nova hadn’t been listening closely, and only caught that they had reached their destination. “We have one minute to get off. Anyone who remains will be sold for slave labor,” she deadpanned.

London’s pink cheeks drained of color. “*What?*”

Slinging her handbag over her shoulder, Nova sighed and rolled her eyes. “You should’ve made an effort when Nikos tried teaching you Greek, short stuff.”

London responded with a low whistle. “You haven’t mentioned prince charming in forever.”

That’s because it still hurts too damn much, Nova thought to herself. They gathered their empty water bottles and handbags, then lined up behind the other occupants. The heat of the potent sun blasted through the van’s open door, overpowering the chill of the air conditioning.

“Check this place out!” London squealed, tugging on Nova’s arm. “It’s even more lit in person! Nova, this place is the definition of paradise!”

As they descended the van’s short stairway together, Nova couldn’t help but agree. She waited to claim their luggage, happily passing off the large bags to an eager bellboy, while London turned her back to the resort lodge and took a series of animated selfies. As they ambled toward the double glass doors of the building beneath a wide arch, years of stress melted off Nova’s shoulders. She inhaled the briny scent of the sea and glanced at the vivid flowers surrounding the building, feeling a dull stab of guilt for not bringing London to their father’s homeland sooner.

She also felt a surge of anger that their uncle hadn’t made any effort to keep them connected to Mykonos either. The winery was doing exceptionally well, having grossed seven

figures in recent years. It wasn't like they couldn't afford the trip.

With a content sigh, Nova slipped her aviator sunglasses down the bridge of her nose to peer at what appeared to be a bar on the far end of the building. "Go ahead and check us in, short stuff. I'm gonna round up a couple glasses of Aidani."

"That better be some kind of alcohol." London gave a sharp click of her tongue. "Wait. How is *that* fair? You're the big sister! You're supposed to be in charge!"

"The resort offered this trip to the big shot influencer, not me!" Nova called over her shoulder as she headed for the bar. She couldn't help but laugh at the irony. She'd spent the last five years trying to prevent London from excessive drinking, and now that they were in a country where it was legal for London to drink, Nova was ready to start the party.

As Nova rounded the corner, her breath was knocked right out of her chest with the bird's-eye view the resort's perch on the cliff provided. Surrounded by glass walls that provided a panoramic view, a sleek white granite bar alongside several white couches overlooked pristine white sand and turquoise water, as well as more whitewashed buildings. She spotted two pools on either side of the property, surrounded by navy blue lounging chairs and canopies lined up beneath the guest rooms. The sun was in full force, making the scene even more picturesque.

Quite suddenly, a deep unease tugged through her. She felt as if she'd been standing in that exact same spot once before. She took a sputtering breath as she scanned the property again. The layout wasn't all that different from the one she'd visited with their parents. The whitewashed guest rooms with balconies created a dizzying sense of déjà vu.

With chilling clarity, her most vivid memory from their vacation returned.

An older woman pounded on the door, sobbing and yelling in Greek...

What had the woman wanted, and what were the chances Nova had returned to the exact same resort? What if Nova's parents really *had* known the woman? Could she have been a relative? What if she'd been her estranged grandmother? What could the woman have done that would make Nova's father want to leave Greece in such a hurry after her visit?

"Everything all right, miss?" a man asked, his lips hovering just inches from Nova's ear. His voice was silky and deep, filled with crackles, like the rattle of whiskey being poured over ice, and topped off with a sultry Greek accent. The sound of it physically pained her.

It reminded her of Nikos.

Rubbing her bare arms, she swiveled her head to face the man. A wall of tanned muscle mass covered in an off-white button-down and khaki shorts towered over her, his beady amber gaze holding her stare in a way that sent icicles shooting down her spine. Danger seeped from his intense stance. She couldn't tell if he was attempting a pick-up line, or if he was genuinely concerned. He didn't look like he'd be a part of the resort's staff, but she wasn't positive. When she shivered again, it was out of intimidation. Simply put, he was frightening.

With a hand held over her rapidly closing throat, she was struck with a sudden need to flee.

Her eyes snapped away from him and swept across the waves a hundred yards in the distance. "How could everything *not* be all right with a view like this?"

"Is this your first time visiting Mykonos?"

She turned back to him, grateful her mirrored sunglasses allowed her to avoid his intimidating stare. "Yes," she lied, unwilling to delve into her history with a stranger. "We just arrived."

His thick eyebrows lifted to his hairline. "Here with your boyfriend?"

"My sister."

A small, yet terse smile pressed to his lips. “If she’s even half as beautiful as *her* sister, I would love to meet her. Maybe I could buy you both a drink.”

Nova released a curt laugh. “Sorry, but we’re here on a girls’ getaway. Neither of us are interested in being hit on by strange men.”

“My apologies.” The man extended a thick hand. “Kostas Vertis.”

Somewhat reluctant, Nova gave his large, warm hand a quick shake. “Nova.” When the palm of his hand slowly brushed over hers as she released her grip, she willed the blush heating the base of her neck not to blossom. She wasn’t the type to blush and act girly around men.

Beneath her inquisitive stare, he quirked one eyebrow. “Now I’m technically not a strange man, Nova.”

“Depends on your definition of the word.”

He grinned in a way that she found oddly attractive. “I enjoy a woman with attitude.”

With her head cocked, she thoroughly sized him up. The details of his outfit and shoes possessed the precision of a designer’s work, and he wore the kind of luxurious titanium watch her father had left for her uncle. In addition to being arrogant, she sensed he was wealthy.

She quietly exhaled a deep breath with the sight of London dancing their way, key card waving in the air between her manicured fingernails. Although Nova didn’t want the man meeting her sister, she was relieved for an excuse to end the awkward conversation. She threw him a dismissive smile before starting to walk away. “Nice meeting you, but I have to go. I promised my sister I’d buy her a drink.”

“After you have settled in, I’d love to buy you ladies a round,” he offered, briefly brushing his thick fingers along Nova’s naked forearm. “I was planning on hanging around the bar for another hour or two.”

With his touch, her skin sizzled. The New Yorker in her wanted to tell the older man to take a hike, but something

softened in his big amber eyes along with his voice, and all at once she was able to appreciate that he was actually quite attractive.

“Don’t hold your breath,” she warned, feeling her lips curve with a smile despite a resolve to stay unaffected. Although her sex life was practically non-existent—she’d only slept with one classmate while in college, and a resident at the hospital over a year ago—her instincts told her she didn’t want anything to do with the stranger.

She darted away from him, wedging herself in front of London.

“Were you *flirting* with that hottie?” London demanded, glancing over her sister’s shoulder.

Nova quickly steered her towards the bar. “Your timing couldn’t be better. He came on to me like a bull in a china shop...asked if he could buy us drinks later.”

London gasped with the discreetness of a cartoon character as they each set their handbags on a stool tucked into the bar. “Please tell me you said yes. I’ve told you a million times, you should *never* turn down free drinks.”

“And *that’s* how you’re going to get roofied one day,” Nova grumbled. “Just because a man is somewhat attractive doesn’t mean he’s someone you should hang out with. For all we know, that guy was just released from prison.”

“Wow. Judgy much?”

“No. Just cautious.” Nova scanned over the selection of wine behind the bar before she gave the cute male bartender with glasses a bright smile and waved him over. He was tall and lean with short dark hair, and wore a white button-down shirt with black suspenders. His name tag said ELIAS.

“Good afternoon, ladies. What can I get for you?”

“*Yassas, Elias. Dýo potíria Aidáni Áspro parakaló.*” *Two glasses of Aidáni Áspro please.*

The man’s smile grew. “*Érchomai amésos!*” *Coming right up.*

Once the bartender stepped away, London giggled. “I haven’t heard you speak Greek in ages. I’m surprised you still remember it so well.”

Nova shrugged, unsure she’d properly conveyed her request for their drinks. “I’m sure my choppy sentences will confuse the locals.” She casually glanced back to where she’d met Kostas. He was heading towards the other end of the bar, moving in a slow swagger, wide shoulders held high with confidence. He leaned one arm on the bar top and a young female bartender quickly set an icy drink in front of him, her expression tense and eager to please.

“That man could be the love child of Chris Hemsworth and the Rock,” London said, dropping her voice an octave. “If you have no interest in hooking up with him, then step aside, sister.”

“Neither of us are *hooking up* on this trip, short stuff. Besides, he’s old enough to be your father.” Nova grabbed one of the wine glasses offered by the friendly bartender and swirled it by the stem, sniffing it before taking a sip. The strong burn of citrus notes slid down her throat and warmed her stomach. She held the glass away from her lips and hummed. “Aunt Val would love this stuff. It tastes dangerously good.”

“It tastes like a dangerously *good time*,” London amended, holding up her own glass between them. “Here’s to an unforgettable trip.”

Nova clinked her glass against London’s. “Cheers to that!”

As they conversed with the friendly bartender, telling him where they were from and how London had earned the trip, Nova caught Kostas’s fierce gaze on her. She held back a shiver. She was most definitely *not* hooking up with the handsome stranger.

NOW: CASH

Cash spent the night on the tile floor at the injured woman's side. He slept like the dead, and half expected *her* to literally be dead when he woke. However, once the sun was up, he found her in the exact same position he'd arranged her into before he'd closed his eyes. Unlike the night before, her breaths came out in a feminine rattle. He decided it could've been a result of the swelling of her nose, and maybe even a dislodged rib.

In the warm stream of sunlight seeping through the thin curtains, she appeared to be in twice as bad of shape as when he'd rescued her from the wild pack of dogs. The bruises on her face, arms, and waist had gone from pink and red to a blue and dark purple. The gash on her head and her stab wound were both bleeding through the doctor's bandages. Things were going to get a helluva lot worse for her before they got any better, he decided.

It was difficult for him to look at her without trying to imagine who had hurt her, and why. The tattoo was indefinite proof she'd been mixed up with the mafia. Even though they were infamous for delivering unusually cruel punishments to those who crossed them—including public beheadings—Cash couldn't say he'd have the strength to stop himself from raining hell down on the bastard responsible.

The idea of the mafia being involved circled his thoughts back to his mission. When he'd first come across intel suggesting his father's death was linked to the mafia, it seemed a natural progression. When Cash was a teenager, he'd

heard his father had begun transporting cocaine for the Greek mafia. He didn't know at the time that his own father was in charge.

He took care of business in the motel's small bathroom, then grabbed a quick, scalding-hot shower. Once dressed, he swiped a decorative clay pitcher from a shelf and filled it with warm water. Gathering a towel, washcloth, shampoo, and bar of soap, he returned to the woman. The concept of executing a sponge bath was foreign to him, but he couldn't imagine it would be too difficult of a task in comparison to other uncomfortable situations he'd been forced into when in the service.

The woman's feet and legs were filthy, so he started there and worked his way up to her pink lacy panties. In any other scenario he'd most likely be turned on, but it only made him more sad for her. If she did survive, who's to say she'd resume a normal life, and have a reason to purchase another sexy pair of underwear? Cash continued to clean the grime from her skin, refilling the pitcher and rinsing the washcloth four times. She wore a plain, frumpy-looking bra along with her sexy panties. He didn't dare disturb the undergarments in any way, afraid of being labeled as a perv at a later point in time. He did his best to avoid touching her extremely wounded face, carefully prying the blood-caked strands of hair away with his fingers and dabbing the blood remaining on her cheeks with the washcloth.

She wore two sets of earrings in each earlobe, and one in her cartilage. One set appeared to be real diamonds. Several delicate gold rings circled her fingers. The presence of her valuable jewelry only confirmed she was jumped for reasons other than a mugging.

Cash did his best to comb through her hair with his fingers once it was clean, mentally adding a brush to the list of supplies to grab when he made a run to the store. The level of care he used in tending to a stranger shocked the hell out of him. He hadn't been a gentle lover since he'd been a teenager, and he didn't put himself in the kind of situations that would call for any level of tenderness.

The truth was, the woman was someone's daughter. She was possibly even the love of someone's life, and Cash imagined it would gut them to see her in this condition. God knew what she'd gone through before she was assaulted. How long had she been missing? Had she been visiting Athens alone? He knew it would be worth his time to keep a close watch on the world news, because girls like her didn't go missing without someone noticing.

After hanging the towels on the shower rod, he plucked the room's portable phone off its base on the nightstand and took it with him into the bathroom. It was noon back in Houston, and Dominic answered on the first ring.

"You find the bastard yet?" his deep voice rumbled.

"No," Cash grunted. "I've come across a hiccup in my plans and need you to do me a favor."

"Anything, brother."

By declaring "anything," he wasn't being facetious. The Corps made them blood brothers. They'd spent countless hours in the shithole desert at each other's side, fighting off terrorists who hadn't reached puberty, and witnessing the pointless deaths of their friends who'd become family. Since they got out, Dominic had done everything from throwing Cash's drunk ass in a taxi and bringing him soup when sick, to collecting money that was owed to Cash by force and providing Cash with an air-tight alibi after his abusive neighbor was jumped a mere day after said neighbor had sent his girlfriend to the hospital with a severed spine. He had even helped Cash land his current job with Homeland Security—a position which Cash couldn't afford to lose.

"I need you to check around to see if a young blonde woman visiting Greece has recently been reported as missing...I'd say five foot five or six, around a hundred and thirty pounds. Possibly American or Canadian."

Dominic's deep, skeptical hum vibrated against Cash's eardrum. "Am I gonna have to fly over there to save your ass yet again?"

“I found an unconscious woman near my motel. Someone messed her up real bad. There’s evidence she’s connected to some unsavory characters, so I can’t risk taking her to a hospital or contacting the police without putting her in danger. I found a local doctor to treat her, but I’d really like to locate someone she knows to take over. I’ve already wasted too much time.”

“You’re right about that. Carlson is already on my ass, wanting to know what emergency made you up and leave with nothing more than a text.”

Cash used a bogus passport to book his flight. With any luck, their boss wouldn’t be able to track Cash to Greece. “What’d you tell him?”

“I’ve stuck to the plan—said you had to visit an old family friend in New York who’s on their death bed.”

“Glad you have my six.”

“Always.” Dominic then cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “If it were me, Cash-man, I’d cut ties with this woman as soon as possible. Dump her on the doctor, or leave her wherever you have her stashed away. You have enough on your plate without worrying about some ‘unsavory characters’ coming after you.”

“Too late.” Cash grunted out a short, unamused chuckle. “Believe it or not, it may be the same cast of ‘characters’ I’m after.”

“In that case, I hope you’re keeping your piece close.”

“Wouldn’t dream of going anywhere without it,” Cash assured him. His breath caught when he thought he saw the woman’s hand move through the cracked bathroom door. Cash continued to hold his breath, watching the woman’s digits closely to see if it would happen again. “I gotta run. Let me know as soon as possible what you find in your search.”

“Ten four, brother.”

Cash stared at the woman for a good half hour before his neglected stomach rumbled. Reluctantly, he left in search of grub.

THE DOCTOR RETURNED mere minutes after the sun set with an equally elderly and arthritic woman at his side. She wore a white cotton dress with flowers embroidered in gold, and her thin white hair was pulled back into a frazzled bun. They each carried a large bag. A long metal pole stuck out from the doctor's bag.

The old woman's eyes widened on Cash, her face strained with a fearful expression. Then her gaze skated over to the injured woman. On a sharp gasp, she brought a hand up to cover her petite mouth before mumbling in Greek and crossing herself.

"Den peirázei agápi mou," the doctor whispered to her. *It is okay, my love. "Den to ékane aftó."* He did not do this.

Cash cleared his throat and looked pointedly at the doctor. "Her breathing became more shallow this morning." Cash mimicked the sound she was making and the doctor nodded. "Otherwise nothing else has changed except for the color of her bruises."

"My wife is here to help wash her, change her into something clean." The doctor's eyebrows lifted. "You already clean her, no?"

"I didn't remove her undergarments," Cash admitted with a touch of embarrassment. He grabbed his duffle bag filled with his belongings, including several thousand euros, and headed for the door. "I'll duck out and let you two get to work."

Once he'd stepped out of the motel room and into the warm air, Cash briefly considered taking Dominic's advice. He could easily leave the woman with the nice couple and feel confident she was in good hands. They had no way of knowing his identify as his driver's license was inside his wallet inside his jeans pocket, and he'd checked into the motel using the same forged passport he'd used to get into the country.

But he didn't believe he could, in good conscience, leave them all behind, knowing the mafia could be on the hunt for the woman. If the couple were to die at their hands, it would be his fault. So he headed toward the nearest store to buy the items on his list along with a six pack of local beer and a gyro from a street vendor.

When Cash returned, the unconscious woman was dressed in a long yellow skirt and a white, lacy top that covered her stab wound. Her long blond hair was styled in a side braid over one shoulder. A thin tube connected to a clear bag of fluids hanging from a metal tripod was taped to the back of her hand, and a catheter bag suspended from clips nestled between the mattress and box spring. Cash hadn't considered the fact that she'd be dehydrated, or would have to relieve herself while unconscious. Quite frankly, he was still in disbelief of the situation he'd stumbled into.

The doctor's wife motioned for Cash to bend down to her level. Her wrinkled hands framed his face, and she placed a dry kiss on each of his cheeks. "*Eísai énas ángelos,*" she said to him before backing away. *You're an angel.*

Rather than taking the time to correct her, Cash studied the unconscious woman. "How is she?" he asked the doctor.

"Same as before. I return after dark tomorrow with more fluids."

Cash thanked them both before handing over more euros. Once alone with the woman, he settled into his spot on the bed at her side. For the next hour and a half, he watched the news and chugged bitter beer until exhaustion took over.

46 HOURS EARLIER: NOVA

London and Nova's room on the second floor of the resort could've been taken from a page in a high-end architectural magazine. Polished marble floors, arched cathedral ceilings, luxurious white leather furniture, professional-grade appliances...the accommodations were over the top and shined with newness. While London captured every square inch with her phone, Nova unpacked her belongings inside the walk-in closet of the smaller of the two bedrooms. Although it had been nearly two decades since her last visit to Mykonos, she assessed the room to decide if anything looked familiar. *Did the beds have the same sleek headboards?* She doubted it as they were quite modern. *Had the closet been in the same spot?* It seemed bigger, but that could've only been because Nova had been much smaller.

Her phone chirped with an incoming call. She dug it out of her handbag to find her uncle's handsome mug fixed in a genuine smile. Nova had taken the picture nearly a decade ago when she'd poured him a bottle of chardonnay while reminiscing about her mother, hoping he'd slip up and tell her something unintentionally.

Although her interactions with her uncle had remained civil, they only gathered on the holidays or for one of their birthdays. And he almost never called her directly. If he needed something, he usually called London.

Then she paled, realizing London had posted pictures to her social media accounts while on the bus ride from the port to the resort. She braced herself as she answered the call,

knowing she probably deserved the shit-storm that was about to let loose.

“What in the ever-loving hell is your sister doing in Mykonos?” The question was barely audible as it was accompanied by a deep, feral growl.

“Relax, Jason. I’m with her.”

“You’re *what?*” he snarled. “*Christ, Nova!* You both need to come home! It isn’t safe for you there!”

Among the guilt for keeping him in the dark, she felt a jolt of satisfaction. After all those years since her parents’ deaths, she finally had him cornered. “Tell me why.”

“You really want to do this now? Over the phone?”

“How badly do you want us to leave?” she challenged.

“I should’ve known you’d do this.” He let out a hard breath that trembled with anger. “Your mom and I met in basic training after we’d both gone to college. She called me D.C. because that’s where I was from. You started calling me ‘Dizzy’ when you could first speak, and your mom thought it was cute, so she didn’t ever correct you.”

Nova couldn’t properly grasp his words. *Her mom had been a soldier.* Skylar had been confident and brave, and it would explain why she could out-shoot everyone. But still. Her mom had been into pretty dresses. Nova couldn’t imagine her wearing camouflage and combat boots.

After a brief pause, her uncle continued. “We were both stationed in Turkey when your dad was still living in Mykonos. He came to Turkey for business and met your mom at a diner just weeks after we arrived. It was pretty much love-at-first-sight with those two. She spent her weekends off with him in Mykonos. I’d sometimes tag along. When our two-year tour was up, she convinced him to leave Greece and go to America with her. He fled the country just like Nikos and his mom.”

Anger niggled deep within her gut. She had no idea the lies had run so deep and stretched so far back. “So the story of them first kissing on a rooftop was bullshit?”

“To a degree. He asked her to marry him on a rooftop the New Year’s after he’d graduated from law school, and landed his first job at a law firm in L.A. Your grandfather really had been a big-shot attorney in Manhattan, but he’d passed away in a car accident with your grandmother long before your parents met. Your mother inherited millions from their estate.”

“Why did my dad have to flee Greece?”

“He was involved in some bad business,” he huffed. “He was looking for a way out when he met your mom. They hid out in California with new identities...started a different life.”

“What do you mean new identities?” Her blood ran icy cold. “Are you saying my name was something *else* before I was Ophelia Keery? Who *am* I?”

“Technically and legally? It was Ophelia Keery. They had changed their names long before you and London came along. But your dad’s actual name was Apollo Dimitriou. Your mom’s real name was Elizabeth Anderson.”

Wine sloshed through her stomach. She hadn’t truly known her own parents. What kind of “bad business” would’ve forced them to go into hiding? She had many other questions but wanted to continue interrogating her uncle while he was freely handing out information. “What about the woman who came to our resort all those years ago?”

“That was your father’s mother. Your mom had convinced your dad to return to Mykonos so you could get to know your grandmother, but your presence in Mykonos was discovered by the people they’d run from. Your memory was of your grandmother warning your father.”

“Is she still alive?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’m sorry, Nova. She passed shortly after your parents...my sources in Greece told me they think she died from heartbreak over their deaths.”

“What about the man I saw the day my parents were murdered? Why did you protect him?”

“I didn’t protect him, Nova. I was protecting you and London. I knew the people your dad was hiding from had

found him. Bringing attention to them by getting the police involved would've only put you in more danger."

"What about justice for their deaths?"

"It would never happen. The kind of people that were after your dad don't get caught, and never have to face consequences."

Her hand cradling the phone trembled with anger. "All this time you had the answers I've been looking for, and you refused to fill me in. *Why?*"

"Your mom didn't want you to know the truth about your dad. She made me swear I'd protect their secret if anything ever happened."

"What secret?"

"Nova...I can't. Please don't ask me to betray her."

Why did he have to be so damn stubborn? She knew she had to push him just a little bit more. "That resort I stayed in with my parents when we came to Mykonos...I think we might be back there...at the exact same place."

"*What?*" he roared. "God damn it, Nova! You have to get out of there! Now! You could already be in serious danger!"

"Tell me this secret my mom didn't want me to know."

"I can't. I've never liked keeping you in the dark, but I had to honor your mom's wish. She was my best friend, Nova. She was more like a sister."

"She's *gone*," Nova snapped. "I don't think she'll mind."

He grunted with frustration. "Let's just say your dad was a good man, but he was stuck in a really shitty situation."

"That's not good enough."

Nova ended the call before he could skirt around the subject any longer. She remembered many details from the nightmares that occasionally plagued her for years after her last trip to the island. She focused on the memories, recalling the deep wrinkles that lined the woman's forehead, cheeks, and chin. Her nose was large compared to the rest of her facial

features, and her dark eyes all but disappeared behind her drooping eyelids. She wore a beautiful, bright blue cotton dress with geometrical designs embroidered along the bodice, and her long hair was a peppery mix of gray and white, styled in a braid that went down the middle of her back.

“*Giagiá mou,*” she whispered. *My grandmother.*

London slinked into the room wearing a shiny silver swimsuit with a small swatch of material covering her chest. An even smaller swatch was positioned between her legs. “What’s taking you so long?” She held up her empty wine glass. “Let’s get another glass from that cute bartender, and catch some rays by the pool before the sun goes down!”

Nova furrowed her brow. Strippers wore more material than her sister was sporting. “What in the hell are you wearing—or rather *not* wearing?”

“An up and coming designer out of L.A. sent it.” London made a show of spreading a hand over her cocked hip in an exaggerated pose, and flashed a cheesy grin. “You like?”

Nova snorted, thinking to herself she’d never hated anything more. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“I’ll never tell unless you change and join me.”

“I’ll join you just as soon as you put on a cover up.”

London’s eyes flipped to the ceiling. “Seriously, Nov. You’re starting to sound like Uncle Dizzy.”

“It’s funny you should mention him. He just called. He knows we’re here.”

London lifted her hands with a shrug. “And?”

“He isn’t happy.” She decided the details of their conversation could be disclosed at a later date. She had always been careful not to discuss their parents’ death around her sister, and she didn’t know if she was ready to destroy her sister’s image of the perfect people they’d been.

KOSTAS'S NARROWED eyes darkened a little more with the sight of Nova approaching. His thick lips massaged together before his tongue appeared to wet them. Nova was secretly pleased his gaze was fixated on her and not her half-dressed little sister. Still, she wasn't completely confident in the high-neck bikini and mesh coverup she'd changed into. He kept his distance at first, watching intently as Nova ordered more wine from Elias. It wasn't until the bartender began to flirt with Nova that Kostas made his move.

"Min ta vázete sto domátio tous," he snarled at the bartender. Elias nodded, his smile aimed at Nova evaporating in the warm wind before he hurried away. Nova wasn't confident of what Kostas had said to him, but she understood "do not" and "their room." She guessed he was picking up their tab while simultaneously letting Elias know Nova was off limits.

Kostas stepped in next to her with a half-finished drink in hand and a sultry grin on his lips. "Hello again."

"I'm going to cool down in the pool," London announced, her tone playful. Glancing between her sister and Kostas, her smile practically split her lips down the center. "Have all the fun without me."

Kostas barely glanced London's way. His dark eyes were all but glued on Nova. "She seems like a handful."

"You're not wrong," Nova decided with a short laugh, looking past him to the beautiful water in the boldest shade of azure she'd ever seen. She pushed away the memories of Nikos comparing her eyes to the sea. "I doubt I'll ever sleep again after she moves away from home in the fall."

"College?"

Eyes sliding to his, she nodded. "She's going into nutrition and wellness."

"And what do you do for a living, Nova?"

"I'm a pediatric nurse."

"A noble career."

Shrugging, she gazed back to the sea. She took a long sip of the savory wine, forcing her shoulders to relax. It wasn't like the man would attack her in broad daylight with half a dozen guests lounging nearby. "Where are you from?"

"Here and there. I have a place down the road, but I do business both here and in America."

"Business as in..."

"I manage a security firm."

Nova tried not to smile at the irony. "I pictured someone of your...uh, *stature* being more of a pencil pusher. You know, like an accountant, or an insurance agent."

Chuckling, he set an elbow on the bar top, leaning closer. Her heart thrummed, and adrenaline spiked her chest with the close proximity of his lips. "And I pictured you as an exotic dancer."

Wine burned down her throat as she backed away. His aggressive nature was a slight turn on. "I was born with two left feet."

"Somehow I doubt that's true." He inclined his head to the bartender. "Where'd you learn to speak fluent Greek?"

"My dad grew up in Mykonos. I figured I should learn his native language."

His eyebrows pulled together. "Does he still live here?"

"He passed away when I was little."

Lips pursing together, he shot her an apathetic look. "My sympathies."

"His name was Alexander Keery. Did you happen to know him?"

Kostas shook his head. "I don't think the name 'Keery' comes from Greece. You said he was a local?"

Her stomach twisted as she recalled her conversation with her uncle. As dangerous as she knew the question may be, it was still outweighed by her desire for the truth. "What about someone named Apollo Dimitriou?"

Kostas's amber eyes blinked wide. "I believe so. He was a fisherman when I was a boy. He grew up in Little Venice...just down the street from my *theía*." *His aunt*. "How did you know him?"

Nova tried to hold back her excitement. "He was a family friend. Do you remember her address?"

"No, but I could take you there. Maybe I could take you out for dinner, too."

She glanced over her shoulder to where London reclined in a lounge beside the pool. As badly as she wanted to explore her dad's old neighborhood, she wasn't interested in going with Kostas if there were expectations attached to his offer. "Thank you, but we have a busy week planned."

"Are you brushing me off, Nova?"

Give the man a point for being perceptive, she thought as she turned to face him once again. A small flash of disappointment shimmied down her spine when their eyes locked. If she *was* interested, she didn't doubt someone with his level of severity could show her a good time. "Listen. I already told you I'm here to bond with my sister. You're a local, and I live in New York. Anything that could happen between us could only be considered a fling, and I'm not really into those—especially with my little sister around."

His gaze darkened as his fingers subtly brushed over hers. "We could be discreet."

Pleasure buzzed through her with the idea. She cursed herself for being so malleable.

He leaned in, intentionally brushing his thick, warm lips over her earlobe as he spoke. The heat of his breath on her skin sent her libido into overdrive. "If you change your mind, the bartenders here all know where to find me."

LONG AFTER THE sun had set, London and Nova continued to sip wine beneath one of the covered cabanas. They had both slept on the overnight flight from New York, and had yet to

feel any effects of jet lag. They were alone, with the exception of a few stragglers, mostly couples presumably returning from dinner. Light bulbs strung above them provided a golden glow against the steep cliff, and the moonlight did a decent job of providing a stunning view of the deep blue sea.

Nova could still hear Nikos calling her his beautiful girl with the sea blue eyes as if he was standing beside her. She reached for her wave pendant before she remembered she hadn't worn it in years. It sat on her dresser at home in a little clay bowl London had long ago made her in art class.

The strong wine did a stellar job of loosening both Nova's lips and inhibitions. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Kostas's propositions to share his bed and to see her dad's childhood home.

"I wish Mom and Dad were here with us," she confessed, crossing her ankles and snuggling into the blanket they'd borrowed from their room. The temperature had dropped a good ten degrees after the sun had sunk behind the horizon, but it was still fifteen degrees warmer than back in New York. "I wish you'd been given more time with them."

"Me too." London hiccuped and brought her sunglasses back down to rest on her nose. "It pisses me off knowing whoever killed them is still out there, probably living their best life. It's not fair."

Nova felt the need to reach over and squeeze her sister's hand even though London hated that kind of affection. "You're right, it isn't fair. But Mom and Dad wouldn't want us focusing our energy on that. They'd be happy to see us here, living *our* best life."

"I still can't believe I was given this trip for free." London hiccuped again. "Maybe it's karma paying us back for everything we lost."

"It's just this resort's elaborate way of gaining more exposure through your followers. How many times have you posted since we arrived?"

"Not sure. Maybe a dozen?"

“You really should consider cutting back, London. Or maybe even wait until we’re back home to post anything more. Just think how many people know your exact location at this moment.”

With a cluck of her tongue, London pushed her glasses back up her nose, then reclined against the canopy. “You’re so damn paranoid.”

“And you’re so damn careless! How do you expect me not to worry knowing you’re going to be living by yourself in Chicago, making it easy for anyone to stalk you by constantly posting your location?” The thought had kept Nova up more nights than she could count. Even in New York, London had made it easy for any weirdo to find her. How could she continue to be so reckless when their parents had been murder victims?

London swung her legs off her chair and sat facing Nova. “Wanna know what I think, Nova?” Swaying, she lifted her empty glass and shook it between them. “I think we need another bottle of wine.”

“No way,” Nova told her with a firm shake of her head. “You’re done for tonight. I’m not going to baby you tomorrow on the excursion the resort gave us because you have a hangover.”

From London’s droopy-eyed expression, Nova had already suspected her sister was ready for bed and wouldn’t give much of a fight. She led London back to their room, ensuring she was sound asleep before Nova turned off the light and closed the master suite’s door. Nova wouldn’t have put it past her sister to sneak back out for another glass of wine.

Nova paused in the hallway, glancing between her bedroom door and the room’s front entrance. The wine had made her limbs all loose and tingly, and her gut buzzed with a familiar warmth. Would it be the worst thing if she decided to take Kostas up on his offer?

NOW: CASH

The sound of a feminine, throaty moan ripped Cash from a light sleep. His heartbeat shook his entire body when he opened his eyes to pitch darkness.

She was awake.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, attempting to mask the gruff tenor of his voice with something a little more friendly. “You’re safe.” He climbed off the bed and hurried to flick on the bathroom light, closing the door most of the way. With slow, cautious steps, he returned to her side. One of her eyes was completely swollen shut, but the other landed on him. They were a stunning shade of blue, much like the sea.

Their color took him back to when he’d been a lovesick teenager, head over heels for a girl with eyes the same shade.

The woman whimpered.

“It’s okay, ma’am. I won’t hurt you. I found you in an alley nearby...you were in pretty rough shape. You still are. A local doctor and his wife fixed you up the best they could, but you were stabbed, and the doctor thinks you might have some broken bones, so you have to take it easy.”

The single eye continued watching him. Her hands violently trembled at her sides. If her face hadn’t been so messed up, Cash imagined she’d look terrified.

“Don’t be afraid.” He held a hand out between them. “I don’t know who did this to you, but I won’t let them hurt you

again. Do you understand what I'm saying? You're perfectly safe here...with me."

Her lips slowly parted. Her tongue flickered out, snagging against her dry lips, and her throat bobbed with a hard swallow.

Then she released a deafening scream.

It only lasted a few stressful seconds before she passed out cold.

Cash decided she either couldn't handle the shock of the situation, or she'd used all her energy. Whatever the reason, Cash was grateful. He'd been ready to ask the desk manager to summon the doctor so he could give her something to settle her down.

She stayed asleep long after the first sunlight filled the motel room. The idea of her coming around a second time and going through the same scenario again made his skin itch with unease. How the hell could he make it easier on her? The lingering trauma from her assault may have been too much for her to handle and it wasn't like he had easy access to a psychiatrist.

His phone buzzed with a text from his contact in Plaka.

WE MUST MEET. 13:00.

THE MESSAGE WAS ACCOMPANIED by a pinned location. Cash knew it meant the contact had new information about his target, and he couldn't afford to discuss it over the phone. He all at once remembered the women standing outside the bar down the block. An idea quickly began to form that ended with a hooker with large, brandy-colored eyes and jet black hair standing beside the passed out woman. She was fairly young, maybe nineteen or twenty. Of all the locals Cash had spoken to, she'd been the only one who spoke fluent English. She was notably short—hardly reaching the center of Cash's chest, even in three inch heels—and small boned like a bird. But she didn't seem at all intimidated by Cash or the proposal he offered. He didn't want to think about whatever sinister shit she may have done for money.

“*O Theé mou,*” she mumbled, spinning on her cheap heels to face him. *Oh my god.* She picked at the hem of her short beaded skirt with one hand, and braced her other arm beneath her bikini-clad chest as her dark eyes briefly flickered to the locked door. “You do this?”

“No fucking way,” Cash swore, shaking his head repeatedly. “Like I told you, I found her in the alley this way.”

The young woman’s long, blood-red fingernails wagged through the air. “I don’t do freaky things with hurt lady.”

“That’s not why I brought you here. I need someone less... *scary* to tell her she’s safe. She woke in the middle of the night and panicked when she saw me. I’m guessing whoever did this to her was a man, so I need a woman to explain things next time she wakes. Tell her that an American man brought her here, and she’s being cared for by a local doctor. She’s been hurt badly and needs to stay put until she’s feeling better. Can you remember that?”

“When will she wake?”

“There’s no way of knowing, but I’ll pay you for your time.”

She lifted her small chin, attempting to make herself a little taller. “Fifty euros...every hour.”

“Twenty-five, and not a penny more.” Cash grabbed his duffle bag from the back of the chair and slung it over his head. “I shouldn’t be gone for more than a couple of hours.”

The young woman’s eyes grew even rounder. “You still look for that man you wanted to see?”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, mister.”

With a quick assessment of her body, Cash noticed a slight bulge underneath her bikini top. “You have any drugs on you?” Last thing he needed was for her to OD while he was gone.

“No drugs.” Her lips puckered with a teasing smile. “Want me to strip for you?”

“No.” He groaned, silently praying she was of legal age and not young enough that he could face jail time if the situation were to be misconstrued. “If this woman wakes while I’m gone, explain everything I told you, then hit redial on the phone and ask for me.” He dug into his pocket for the twenty euros he’d set aside, and handed it to the hooker before placing his ball cap on his head. “Consider this a downpayment for keeping quiet. In addition to your hourly rate, I’ll give you more when I return.” He started for the door, then paused to glance at her over his shoulder. “Don’t bother looking for something to steal—I didn’t leave anything behind.” He’d already removed the woman’s earrings and rings in case they really were of any value and stashed them in his bag for safekeeping.

He was paranoid as hell on the hour-long bus ride, fidgeting enough that the old woman sitting across the aisle got up and moved several seats down. By the time they arrived in Plaka, he was convinced he’d made a mistake by leaving the woman in a sex worker’s care. He wasn’t sure how he’d become so attached to a woman he didn’t know and had never spoken to, or how he’d become so protective. She was a distraction he couldn’t afford. There wasn’t time to dwell on her any more when his contact spotted him, holding a hand up in greeting.

Locating Tobias was yet another favor bestowed on Cash by Dominic. Although the Mykonos native maintained a look equivalent to that of a thirty-something American nerd—tortoise glasses, neatly pressed button-down, khaki shorts, loafers, dark hair neatly combed to one side, slim build—he was actually a fine art dealer by trade, and knew more than anyone about the locals’ dealings. Aside from overcharging his clients, his background was clean, and Dominic couldn’t dig up any reason to believe the man couldn’t be trusted.

“Hello, my friend!” he called to Cash with a toothy smile. When they’d first made contact several days earlier, Tobias was just as eager and friendly. Cash was amazed by all the dark secrets someone with his demeanor had been able to provide. Not only that, but Tobias somehow managed to sound American even with a Greek accent. “How are you?”

Cash shook his hand. “Sorry, *my friend*, but I don’t have time for pleasantries. What do you have for me that couldn’t be shared over the phone?”

Tobias jerked his head toward the water. “Come with me. I show you.”

Tobias led Cash through the pack of tourists across the street and down a few blocks, his excited pace nearly impossible to match. Cash tugged his ball cap lower and avoided eye contact with anyone. If the rumors about his father were true, he didn’t want to cause any panic among the locals. They shared too many similarities for them not to be noticed.

Tobias waltzed into a restaurant with the confident ease of a local. They sat at a small table outside that provided a scenic view of the Parthenon that Cash didn’t give a single glance. Tobias ordered drinks that Cash didn’t plan to touch. “Well?” he demanded, jiggling his right leg beneath the table. “What did you want to show me?”

“The tents behind you...they’re filled with women offering massages. They were setting up early this morning when I stopped by here for coffee.”

The jiggling of Cash’s leg intensified as he peered over his shoulder at the handful of white tents arranged in a short line on the beach. “And?”

“My friend works here and tells me they’re sex workers. He says they come every Wednesday. Thirty euros for a basic massage. An extra hundred for private time with the tent door shut.”

Violence wasn’t usually Cash’s first instinct, but he was ready to jump over the table and beat the information out of the guy. Every minute he was away from the woman he was putting her life at risk. “Why should I care?”

“The women...they were brought here this morning by big men who held them like prisoners. One of the men got a little...*rough* with one. She was blonde, pretty. American.”

Cash stopped bouncing his leg when his stomach muscles clenched. *Just like the woman in my motel room.* “The mafia is trafficking these women,” he surmised, grimacing.

“It appears so. You stay here, and I think you’ll see them return at sundown to collect the women.”

Cash shook his head and ground his teeth together. The sun wouldn’t set for another three hours, and it was another hour ride back to the village. He couldn’t leave the blonde alone that long with the hooker. “No can do.”

Tobias’s smooth dark skin bunched with a confused expression. “Did you not come all this way to confront the man in charge?”

“My priorities have changed.” Cash kneaded his forehead with one hand while studying the five tents maybe a hundred yards away. He could go inside one and attempt to extract information from one of the women, but he was too recognizable. And from what he’d seen and heard, anyone who dared to turn on the mafia in the past had met a swift and rather unpleasant demise.

Confronting the mafia in an area filled with tourists wasn’t an option. Cash would have to follow them to learn where they were holding the women. The mafia may have had the local government in their pockets, but it wouldn’t have taken much convincing to get the US embassy involved if he was able to confirm there was a US citizen in the mix. Even if he didn’t get to inflict revenge on his mother’s behalf, he wouldn’t leave until he’d found a way to shut down their trafficking operation.

32 HOURS EARLIER: NOVA

Their first morning waking in Mykonos, London and Nova dined on the resort's extensive buffet—Greek yogurt, fresh fruit, freshly baked bread with olive oil, thinly sliced meats—before getting ready for their first excursion. When they passed through the resort, Kostas was already lounging by the pool, holding what appeared to be a Bloody Mary in one hand while scrolling through a phone with the other. He appeared incredibly relaxed, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts, leather sandals, and a narrowly brimmed fedora. Regret for deciding not to take him up on his offer rippled through Nova with the sight of his bulging arms and smooth, hairless chest. He caught her gaping his way and removed his wayfarer sunglasses, grinning.

“Good morning, gorgeous ladies,” he called out.

Nova only rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses, but London hollered back, “Good morning, handsome man!” She nudged Nova's and whispered, “That giant stud totally wants to bone you, Nov. If you don't make it happen, I'm going to do something that will embarrass the hell out of you.”

“We're not having this conversation,” Nova said, throwing a forced smile in Kostas's direction.

He must've mistaken the smile for something genuine, because next thing Nova knew, he was trotting their way. “Where are you two headed so early?”

“We booked a catamaran ride,” London told him.

“Through the resort?” he assumed.

“That’s the one,” Nova confirmed with a grimace.

One of his eyebrows curved. “That one’s no fun. It’ll be filled with drunk tourists and screaming children. How about you skip it, and come with me instead? We can stay on the water for as long as you’d like. You wouldn’t have to suffer through a long bus ride to get there, either. My sailboat’s docked below the cliff at the resort’s marina.”

Nova set a hand against her hip. “Sounds like the plot for a horror movie. You seriously expect two young women to jump on a boat with a strange man for the day?”

“I thought we established we’re no longer strangers,” he teased with a wink. “Besides, it wouldn’t just be me. The captain and his wife would accompany us. Thea is a helluva good cook, and can prepare anything your heart desires. Do you like lobster? Oysters? Champagne? Give me an hour, and I’ll have it stocked and ready to sail. You can enjoy the sunshine by the pool with mimosas, on the house, until then.”

“Thank you, but no thank you.” Nova tugged on her sister’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Seriously?” London hissed, twisting out from Nova’s grip. “You’re going to turn down a day on a private sailboat to hang out with a bunch of sweaty strangers on a packed boat for five hours?”

“That does sound miserable,” Kostas agreed with a nod. “Nova, let me round up the captain and his wife to speak with you. They’re extremely friendly, and they’ll vouch that I’m harmless.” His fingers reached out to grasp her elbow. “We would return early enough that there would be time to take you and your sister by your friend’s house in Little Venice.”

Red-hot anger seized Nova’s spine, causing her to bite down on the tip of her tongue. She didn’t appreciate being railroaded by her sister and a stranger, no matter how charming and handsome he may have been. But she was desperate for more answers regarding her dad’s past and appreciated that Kostas was offering to bring London with, rather than expecting Nova to accompany him alone.

LONDON SAT on the bow of the sixty foot sailboat, taking a hundred selfies with the mast fluttering overhead. Nova's jaw had literally dropped when Kostas first showed them the monstrosity with a navy blue hull and a cabin that seemed to go on forever. London had pinched Nova's arm before they boarded, telling her sister she'd snagged a millionaire and better not let him slip back out of their lives.

Thea, the captain's wife and their chef, sat beside Nova on the padded seats behind London for the first hour, engaging in friendly conversation and pointing out noteworthy landmarks. She was middle aged with a friendly face, sun-streaked brown hair pulled high into a stylish ponytail. She wore the same navy blue polo shirt as her husband's with tan khakis and boating loafers. She seemed timid when speaking to Kostas, and when he requested she pop a bottle of champagne and prepare the first course of the day, she jumped to her feet.

"Amésos kýrie." *Right away, sir.* Her expression was somber when she turned to Nova and excused herself in English. It reminded Nova of how the resort bartender had suddenly become cold and withdrawn with Kostas's demands. She got the feeling he was not the type you want to cross.

Thea returned a few minutes later to serve them each crystal flutes of champagne and left them with a bottle on ice. With the warm breeze ruffling Nova's hair and the glittering blue sea surrounding them, she couldn't think of a more romantic setting—except for maybe the floor of her family's cellar. With the sudden reminder of Nikos, she chugged her glass of champagne faster than deemed socially appropriate.

"Running a security firm must pay well," she commented as Kostas refilled her glass.

"I'm not the only one who owns this boat," he admitted with a shrug. "But yes, business is good. I guess you could say I live a...ehhh...*comfortable* lifestyle."

Examining the breathtaking view around them, Nova twirled the stem of the expensive glass in her fingertips. "I

never asked you...if you live just down the road from the resort, why are you always hanging around the resort?"

His lips bent with a smirk. "Because I own it."

The muscles in Nova's shoulders tightened. She hoped her sunglasses did a decent job of hiding her utter shock, because she felt as if she'd been betrayed. "You're the one who offered my sister a free vacation?"

"It wasn't *me* exactly. More like *my manager*. Zoe is one hundred percent in charge of marketing. I don't know the first thing about how that kind of thing works." Among a smile, he threw her the kind of wink she'd normally consider cheesy. On him, it was actually endearing. "I only learned this morning that your sister was the influencer. I merely sign off on whatever expenses Zoe incurs without necessarily knowing the details."

Nova scanned his expression, still wondering if he was telling the truth. Her mind raced with a myriad of reasons he could have to lure a young, attractive woman on the rise to fame. Then again, he had barely given London the time of day since the moment they met.

Kostas set his sunglasses on the cushion beside him, arching one eyebrow as a precarious smirk spread across his lips. "I can see that beautiful mind of yours trying to process all of this."

"What do you want me to say? That I think it's strange *you're* the one who signed off on our free trip, and then you were pushy about taking us for a ride on your yacht? That I think you may have already known *exactly* who I was when you introduced yourself, because my sister has posted pictures of me on her account?"

"Perhaps I'm only a dashing bachelor who's attempting to sweep you off of your feet," he teased, eyes darkening.

Nova let out a loud, nasally laugh. "You're extremely full of yourself, Kostas." With another generous sip, she eyed him thoughtfully before asking, "How long have you owned the place?"

“Only a handful of years. I took it over for my boss...he had it for several decades.”

“I think I’ve stayed there before,” she blurted, immediately wishing she could take it back. But it felt good to get the idea off of her chest and let it ruminate with someone who knew a thing or two about the resort’s history. She eyed him thoughtfully. “It feels like a lifetime ago, though, so I’m not sure.”

He tilted his head. “I thought this was your first trip to Mykonos.”

“I lied,” she admitted, shrugging. “I don’t always share everything about myself with total strangers.”

“Tell you what,” he said with a slow smile. “Maybe I can arrange for you to meet my boss while you’re here—see if he remembers you and your parents.”

Halfway through a sip of champagne, Nova stopped short. “How—”

“Nova!” London yelled from the bow, jumping on her bare feet and waving an arm through the air. “Nov, come’ere—you have to see this! There are dolphins swimming alongside us!”

Kostas chuckled and nudged her arm down so he could top off her champagne. “You better join your sister before she bounces right off the deck.” When the flute was filled to the rim, he tossed her a sexy wink. “I’ll be eagerly waiting your return.”

With champagne gurgling in her stomach, she stumbled away, confused and uneasy. How did he know she thought she’d been to the resort *with her parents*?

She wanted off of the yacht.

Something didn’t feel right.

“Where are they?” Nova asked her sister, eyes scanning the churning water as she passed the glass of champagne over. London quickly chugged it down.

“They were just there,” she told Nova, pointing to a spot at her side. “Hold on...I’m sure they’ll be back.”

“You’re not gonna believe this.” Despite her gut being uneasy, Nova swallowed down the rest of her champagne, hoping the strong liquid would sooth her nerves. “Kostas owns the resort.”

“Get out!” London squealed, pushing on Nova’s chest. Her eyes flickered over to him and she broke out in a toothy grin. “Guess I better thank him for this trip.”

Nova snapped her fingers to get London’s attention. “Who exactly sent you the offer to stay there?”

“At first it was a general message from the resort on Instagram. Then I got an email from someone named...uh...”

“Was her name Zoe?” Nova demanded.

London casually lifted one shoulder. “Yeah, I guess that could be right.”

A heavy breath shot through Nova’s lips. The whole situation still felt a little off, even if Kostas’s story aligned with the facts. “I think we should ask Kostas to turn the boat around and take us back.”

“Why?” she pouted, motioning to the horizon. “Take a look around, Nov. I’ve never seen anything like this. And the resort tour left hours ago.”

“It’s just...” Nova massaged her forehead with her fingers as a heavy haze clouded her thoughts. “What was I saying?”

Her sister called her name with urgency right before the sunlight was extinguished.

NOW: CASH

Darkness had begun to blanket the village by the time Cash returned to the motel. The air was alive with the usual blend of lute music and anguished calls of stray animals. At the same moment he inserted the key into the door, from the corner of his eye he detected the curtain inside his room fluttering. Before he was able to reach for his Beretta, he was yanked inside and felt the cool metal of a knife blade against his throat. A hard, sweaty body pressed against his back.

“Dóse mou tin tsánta,” a deep voice rumbled in his ear. *Give me the bag.*

Cash blinked rapidly, assessing the scene with sharp clarity. The doctor sat on the chair beside the still woman, his wrists and legs bound with rope, bandana tied around his mouth. His dark eyes locked with Cash’s, bright with desperation. A young man with a lanky frame covered in crude tattoos done by an amateur stood with one arm draped over the hooker’s shoulder. Cash noted the man was also covered in needle marks. Most importantly, he held a large hunting knife. His lips curled with a cocky snarl, revealing a mouthful of missing teeth. His dark, skittish eyes threw Cash a murderous glare.

Cash knew he could easily take him down with one arm tied behind his back. It was the unknown man behind him, holding a knife to his jugular, that he was most concerned with.

“Give him the bag, mister,” the hooker told Cash, appearing bored by the situation.

Sliding the bag down from his shoulder, he glared at the hooker. “Did you bring them here?”

She smiled in confirmation. “I don’t know what you talk about.”

Behind the hooker and the drug addict, the unconscious woman stirred, moaning. Once everyone’s attention shifted to her, Cash struck the groin of his captor and whipped him down to his back, quickly retrieving the knife when it scattered across the tiled floor. The man rolled onto his side, groaning, but Cash was already swinging his duffel bag at the crudely tattooed man, catching the skinny man hard in the stomach and throwing him back. His head connecting with the night stand sounded in a deafening *crack*. Poised to strike again, Cash watched the man collapse to the floor near his buddy. A fair amount of blood pooled around his head as he wheezed and coughed through a clenched jaw. Cash wouldn’t regret it if the man died, although it would be another inconvenience to handle.

“Get them the hell outta here,” Cash growled at the hooker, brandishing the knife between them.

Eyes wide with fear, she helped the man who’d attacked Cash to his feet—another crudely tattooed punk—before they assisted the man with the head injury.

“I don’t ever want to see you around here again.” Cash tilted the knife. “*Katanoó?*” *Understand?*

The blonde watched with her elbows braced on the bed at her sides, one lone blue eye darting between Cash and the attackers as they fled the room.

Cash hurried over to the doctor. “You alright?” he asked, untying the bandana before carefully slicing the knife through the binds to release his hands and feet.

“They will return,” the doctor huffed, rubbing his wrists once they were freed. “They could be mafia.”

The woman wheezed, her chest sounding as if it was filled with rocks.

“I won’t let them get to you a second time,” Cash promised, throwing her a look of resolve. “We’re getting the hell outta here.”

“I get you water,” the doctor tells her, heading towards the bathroom.

Cash didn’t take his eyes off the woman. “Are you okay? Did they...” He swallowed the lump in his throat. He was responsible for whatever went down while he was gone.

“They didn’t...touch...me,” she told him, slow and deliberate. Her low, scratchy voice sounded like that of a heavy smoker even though her teeth were snow white. Cash suspected she’d lost it from screaming at her captor, even if the idea pained him. “I...pretended to be...out...after you...brought...her here,” she explained. “I fell asleep...after you left...then I woke—” She hissed through her teeth and collapsed back against the bed, arm held over the stab wound on her stomach. “Why’s everything...on fire?”

From her hard ‘g’s and the way she said “everything is *awn* fire,” Cash suspected she was from the East Coast. All at once, he felt a surge of familiarity. The voice. That sea blue eye.

But it couldn’t be...

“You have to take it easy,” he told her, daring a step closer. “You’re in tough shape.”

The doctor returned with a plastic cup of water and held it to the woman’s lips. “Drink,” he commanded, cradling the back of her head. “Very slow.”

Her split lips curled around the cup. She sputtered a little before slugging the rest of the glass down. The doctor carefully lowered her head before reaching for his bag.

The woman’s good eye scanned over the tube inserted into the back of her hand before it rolled back onto Cash. “Who...are you?” she wheezed. “How...did I...get here?”

Cash stuffed his hands into his pockets. He didn’t believe in consequences, but he had seen fate at work more than once. Still, he was in Athens for a specific reason, and couldn’t

afford to blow his cover merely because he longed for something to be true.

“My name is Cash. Someone left you for dead in the alley around the corner.” They both watched as the doctor checked her chest with a stethoscope and asked her to breathe deeply.

“It...hurts,” she told the doctor.

The doctor patted her arm. “You will heal.”

“Who are *you*?” Cash asked her. “What do you remember?”

“I...don’t...know.”

“What about your name?”

A tear leaked down her cheek as her gaze wandered up to the ceiling. “I can’t...remember.”

“Bad memory from head injury...very common,” the doctor explained. With a kind smile, he gently patted her arm once again. “It will return.”

“I’ll give you two some space,” Cash offered, opening the door.

The woman’s expression tightened with panic. “You’re leaving...again?”

“Just long enough for the doc to check you over. I’ll be right outside, making sure those assholes don’t return.”

With a hesitant nod, one corner of her battered mouth lifted with an attempted smile. Cash inwardly cringed when she let out a soft cry and again reached for her abdomen. He needed to get her out of there in case those men really did work for the mafia. How the hell was he going to sneak her out of the village when it was likely she wouldn’t be able to walk?

He eyed the doctor with unease. “Prepare her to move out of here, doc. When you’re done, I’d like a word with you outside.”

AS EXPECTED, the doctor refused to allow the woman refuge in his home, and also strongly advised against Cash moving her anywhere. But he quickly returned with a rusted-out pickup truck he “borrowed” from his nephew and promised it would run long enough to get them wherever they needed to go. With tears in his eyes, the doctor told Cash his wife had sent some essentials for them both along with her blessings for a safe journey. Before he headed out, the doctor squeezed the woman’s hand and bid her farewell with, “*kalí týchi.*” *Good fortune.*

“How...do you...know him?” the woman asked as Cash closed the door behind the doctor.

“I don’t,” he said while doing his best to slip his arms beneath her without causing her any more unnecessary pain. “I’m not sure how much he told you, but this is going to hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. In addition to everything else, you broke some ribs.” He held her stare. “Ready?”

Lips pressed together, she nodded and let out a muted cry when he lifted her from the bed.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” He was certain she was at least ten pounds lighter than the night he’d found her in the alley. “Wish I could somehow make this easier on you, but you have to try your hardest to be quiet. We don’t want to draw any unwanted attention.”

She buried her face against his chest, muffling her cries as Cash carried her out to the truck and gently deposited her onto the passenger’s side of the bench seat. She stretched out a little, clinging to the underside of the blanket-covered bench while releasing noiseless sobs. *They wouldn’t have been in this situation if he hadn’t gone to meet with Tobias,* Cash berated himself as he hurried around to the driver’s side. He killed the truck’s automatic lights as he pulled away from the motel and navigated through the narrow roads. The woman continued to cry softly at his side.

He set a hand over her soft, golden hair with the gentlest of touches. “Hey, it’s okay. Time heals all wounds...isn’t that a

saying? You just need to rest a bit. We'll figure out who you are eventually, and get you back to your people.”

Everything felt familiar about her, even if it was only because of his vivid imagination. Even if his beloved had somehow found her way to him, he wouldn't dare wish for it to be true. He couldn't fathom the kind of blinding rage he'd experience if someone had caused his Nova that kind of irreparable harm.

He didn't want to admit it to himself, but regardless of who the woman may be, he sensed he was beginning to invest too much into her wellbeing. He feared what would happen to her when it was all said and done. “As long as you're with me, no one is going to lay another finger on you.”

He'd never been so certain of anything in his life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NOVA

Every breath she dared sent a sharp pain webbing across her chest. The fact that she couldn't conjure her own name, or make sense of where she was made the situation even more terrifying. Yet the presence of the handsome, muscular man at her side somehow set her at ease. He spoke smooth English, with the slightest hint of a Greek dialect. Something about him was familiar...

"Are you...from...here?" she wheezed, glancing to the road ahead as the headlights of a large truck filled the cab.

"Once upon a time, yes."

"Where are we...going?"

"Somewhere safe until you've healed enough to get around on your own."

"Please..." she began to beg. She didn't want to sound pathetic, but she knew something out there, something beyond the truck and the man terrified her. She just couldn't place what that thing was. "Please...don't...leave me."

His head pivoted around. All at once, his look was unquestionably haunted. "*Kardiá mou?*"

Everything ahead of her narrowed as if she'd been catapulted out from a cannon. The beautiful dark eyes fixed on her face doubled as whispered memories rang through her head.

"I think I've loved you since the moment we met."

"I know this, my beautiful girl with sea blue eyes."

“My heart...it loves very deep for you. Only you.”

“Nikos?” she cried, reaching out to the blurred space between them. Sharp pain seared through her side. Her vision doubled. “Oh...god...”

The old pickup swerved before stopping. Next thing she knew, she was cocooned by a set of strong arms.

“Nova? Eíste pragmatiká eseís?” Is it really you?

Were the words real? She couldn't trust anything amidst the haze covering her mind. Closing her eyes, she drifted back into the darkness.

“CARDIA MOU,” a deep voice urged. *My heart.*

Nova roused. *Was that her dad?*

Gentle fingers caressed her cheek. “Nova, please. You must drink something.”

Her functioning eye opened, squinting against the harsh sunlight before she was able to focus on a fierce, handsome face framed by a thick black beard. Thick waves of raven hair covered his wide head in the same shade as his thick eyebrows and beard. His features were so chiseled they appeared to have been carved from stone. She noticed a puckered red scar at the base of his throat, two silverly long scars beneath his jaw, and another along an eyebrow. The scent of his rich, mossy cologne tickled her nose and warmed her belly.

Hesitant, she reached out to brush her fingers along the man's smooth facial hair. Her body tingled with familiarity as she ran her thumb along his sharp cheekbone. Memories of the young man she'd known blurred into the man hovering above her.

Joy burst through her with the force of a nuclear bomb.

Her Nikos had returned to her.

A sharp cry fueled by surprise and utter glee clenched her sore stomach.

Was she dreaming?

“How...is this...possible?” she gasped.

“It must be fate,” he whispered.

A garbled laugh left her throat, making her body throb with discomfort. Her Nikos had been a romantic too and had wholeheartedly believed in fate.

His hand supported the back of her head. “Sit up, my love. You’re going to get dehydrated.”

“What...is it?” she asked, keenly aware the man could be drugging her. Maybe that’s why it had been so easy to convince herself it was Nikos.

“It’s water with electrolytes,” he promised. “You’ve been out for an entire day. Your skin is too loose...you’re severely dehydrated.”

She drank from the cup he offered, closing her eye when warm, soothing liquid coated her throat. She stopped to cough before drinking more.

“Nice and easy,” he cooed, massaging the back of her skull.

She drank a little more before leaning into his touch.

“Nikos?” she whispered, still wondering if it had all been a dream.

Warm lips brushed over her forehead. “I’m here.”

She was all at once surrounded by the musk of oak barrels as she drifted off into a lovely dream.

“LONDON!” she cried into the vast darkness before her. Her chest seized so painfully hard that she was sure she was having a heart attack. “London...where are you?”

A strong embrace brought her aching bones against a warm, hard body. “Shhh...Nova. You’re safe now. Everything will be okay. You need to rest, *cardia mou*.”

She blinked several times before she was able to focus on the faint vision of a bearded man huddled in the darkness at

her side.

Nikos.

“Where’s my sister?” she demanded.

“What do you remember?”

Her head throbbed as she attempted an answer. “We were in...Mykonos...the man...”

“What man?”

“We were...on a...boat.” As more memories returned, she was overwhelmed with rage. “He...drugged us! That son-of-a...bitch!”

“You came to Greece with London?”

She shot upright, breaking free of his grip. “Where is... she? Where’s London?” An excruciating throb began in her chest, spreading down to her stomach. “*Where’s my sister?*”

“Nova...*cardia mou*. You have to calm down. I can’t help you unless you focus.” Strong hands eased her down to lie on her back. “Where did you meet this man?”

Knowing he was right, she attempted a deep, stuttered breath. “He was at...the resort. They gave us...a trip...she’s an influencer...”

“You hadn’t met him before?”

“He knew...he knew...I’d been there...with my parents.”

Nikos’s sensual voice erupted in Greek before his fingers returned to the back of her head. “What resort, Nova?”

“I—I can’t remember the name. But she blasted it all over social media. Do you have a phone? I need access...to...the ___”

The unrelenting darkness returned.

THE NEXT TIME she regained consciousness, soft sunlight revealed her surroundings. She was in a small, plain bedroom with fluttering white curtains surrounding a set of windows.

Panic filled her throat as she took in the white sheet covering her legs, and the small toilet in the corner. Nothing looked familiar. Was she home? Was she in a hospital? Where was the bearded man? Had it all been a dream?

Before a plea for help fell from her lips, the curtains parted, and the man emerged from the open doors.

The fog lifted from her mind as her eyes—one partly lidded—drank him in. He was tall and broad with a thick build and a fierce, dark gaze. Her agony was replaced with sheer warmth.

“*Kaliméra,*” he greeted before lowering to the mattress at her side. The intensity of his gaze soothed her frantic heart. “How are you feeling?”

“Nikos?”

Nodding, his full lips spread into a dazzling smile before he handed her another glass. “Drink...slowly.”

Her hand wrapped over his firm grip on the smooth glass as she sucked down the warm liquid. Sweat pricked her skin as she recalled in detail how she’d met Kostas, and how he’d convinced them to go for a ride on his sailboat. “We have to go back to the resort,” she rasped. “He owns the place. We have to find London.”

CASH

Cash sensed Nova's unease as they boarded the ferry behind a long line of passengers. The others emitted the overwhelming excitement of tourists, laced with a handful of locals who looked unaffected by the sea's growing swells. He'd felt uneasy about boarding when the forecast predicted a storm with high winds, but he wasn't convinced he could talk Nova into waiting for the next ferry to Mykonos. She'd even fought him when he told her to grab a quick shower, saying there wasn't time. But she'd given in, and he'd heard her moan of relief once she'd stepped under the warm spray. The sound had been total hell on his fleeting control.

On the way to the port, he'd asked the driver to stop at a store where he purchased more waters fueled with electrolytes as well as a few things for Nova—several dresses, a wide-brimmed hat, and leather sandals. He threw in two sets of sea bands—just in case. The time he spent on Navy carriers while in the Corps taught him that no matter how large the vessel, rough seas could be intolerable.

Although Nova was still considerably frail and emotionally drained, he sensed her determination would be enough to get her through the rough ride ahead. Every bit of his being yearned to hold her close and protect her from whatever dangers they might encounter while searching for London, but she'd kept enough of a distance since they'd left his old friend's house that he decided it was best to give her the space she needed. Her haunted blue eyes and delicate condition carved a hole so deep into his soul that he was worried *he'd* be the one who wouldn't survive.

He'd spent the better part of a decade trying to forget her...trying to move on after he'd lost the one true love of his life. Although his mother had unexpectedly passed from a heart attack at the young age of forty-five, the heartache of losing Nova had essentially crippled the brave man he'd become, turning his life into a personal hell from which he feared he'd never escape. Around the time his existence became so quiet and so bleak that he'd considered putting an end to it all, he met Dominic and found a new purpose in life—stopping the man who'd both hurt his mother and flipped Nova's world upside down.

Now that Nova had returned to him—proving that fate wasn't done with them yet—he was forced to reevaluate everything that had happened. Maybe it hadn't all been about avenging his mother. Maybe everything that happened was merely a way to find his way back to Nova. And now that he was certain his father and his henchmen had nearly ended Nova's life, he was focused on painting the island of Mykonos red with the blood of everyone who had done her harm.

Once they were settled into the seats they'd been assigned in the center of the ferry, they rode in comfortable silence for a good amount of time. There were so many things Cash wanted to discuss with her, but he decided to let her take the lead as she seemed exhausted. She'd been out for days after they'd arrived at his friend's place in Plaka. He was worried she may never completely heal with any given amount of time.

Long after the captain navigated past the bay, the massive sea jet began to sway side to side. The view through the massive windows on either side alternated between either nothing but rough seas, and the sky. Rain slammed into one side of the boat. The waves quickly began to increase in severity.

A prerecorded announcement continuously played in both English, then Greek. "Due to extreme weather, no one is permitted to enter the upper deck area. Please keep children close."

Nova's good eye repeatedly swept over the growing swells outside, then across the mostly calm passengers surrounding

them. Cash wanted to remove her hat and bury his lips in her golden hair the way he had when they were teenagers. Unable to stop himself from touching her in some way, he reached out to carefully squeeze her knee. It was one of the only parts of her he knew to be uninjured.

“It will be okay,” he promised. Once her uneasy gaze flickered down to his hand, he withdrew it to fold his arms over his chest. “These ferries have been running this same course for decades.”

“Yeah, but do they normally operate when the weather is this bad?” she asked.

“Not really,” he admitted. “The morning news warned a brutal storm was coming, so I figured they’d postpone the morning schedule.”

“Awesome.” She settled back in her chair, resting the straw hat on her lap, and soon fell asleep. Cash arranged her head so it was leaning on his shoulder rather than bobbing with every wave. Once he was certain she was sound asleep, he buried his lips in her hair. Breathing in the floral shampoo the doctor’s wife had included in the care package, he silently prayed she’d somehow forgive him for leaving without a fight when they’d been kids.

A SOLID HOUR after they’d boarded the ferry, Cash noticed some of the passengers were beginning to look a little green around the gills. One woman even vomited inside her hand bag while another let it all out on the laminate floor.

Soon it seemed as if literally everyone around them was retching. The woman in the seat directly behind Nova began moaning, sounding very much like a zombie. A young porter frantically handed out vomit bags to each passenger thrusting their hands into the air. Cash felt bad for the kid since the boat was still swaying side-to-side, causing him to stumble around with great difficulty. In the first-class section over their heads, a cart would occasionally slide past the glass partition and its contents would crash to the floor.

Cash would've found the situation highly amusing if Nova hadn't stirred awake to throw him a wide-eyed look of concern. "This is a nightmare," she said, running her fingers along the sea band secured around one of her wrists. "Are you sure these will work?"

"They're better than any over-the-counter meds," he promised. He motioned to the injury on her side. He had changed the dressing every day and cleaned the wound whether she was awake or completely out of it. The cut above her eye was healing quickly, but her battered face still made most strangers react with shock or concern. One woman across the aisle had been shooting him dirty looks since they'd left the port, probably assuming he was responsible for the injuries. "Speaking of medication, how's your pain? Do you need another one of the doctor's pills?"

"It's tolerable today. Besides, those things make me drowsy as hell." She grimaced. "I've lost track of time. How long ago did you find me?"

"It will be a week tomorrow."

Her bruised lips wavered with a smile. "Your English is exceptional. I can barely detect your accent."

"I had an exceptional teacher, and almost a decade to perfect my dialect."

Her smile flattened. "What happened to you? Where did you go after my uncle made you leave? How did you end up back in Greece? Why did you tell me your name is Cash?"

"It's...*complicated*, and involves a very long story."

Retrieving the app she'd downloaded to track the ferry's progress, she let out a crass laugh that sounded more like a grunt. "It appears we have plenty of time. According to this, we have at least an extra hour tacked on. And I need to get my mind off of the weather outside."

Dropping the back of his head against the chair, Cash forced out a long breath and stared up at the swaying ceiling. "Even though your uncle was angry that I was in love with you, he made sure I was settled with a new identity to ensure

the mafia wouldn't find me. I didn't want to burden my mother with any more expenses, so I joined the Marines as your uncle suggested—went to boot camp in San Diego. The GI bill paid for my schooling once I got out. I majored in Homeland Security. I investigate drug trafficking for DHS out of Houston with an old buddy I met in the service. I wanted to stop assholes like my father.” Concern gripped his stomach when he noticed her trembling shoulders. “Are you cold?”

“No. Just...*proud* of the path you took, I guess.” Her voice shook with emotion when she said, “It’s a little overwhelming, Nikos.”

“I’d prefer it if you called me Cash—at least when we’re in public.”

“Sorry. I probably understand the need for anonymity more than anyone on this ferry.” One side of her mouth lifted with a grin as she looked up at him in a bashful way that reminded him of her teenage version. “Did my uncle pick that name?”

“I requested it...reminded me of the times we’d listen to that old country station together, and the way you’d light up whenever Johnny Cash came on.”

“Those were good times.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “I was so in love with you. Losing you was like mourning another death.” She braced herself, not so sure she wanted to know his answer when she asked, “Why didn’t you come back for me?”

Leaning in closer, he wrapped his hand around hers. “I wanted to come back. I really did.” He could feel tears building up behind his own eyelids. “I love you too—more than I’ve ever loved anyone. But after the way you looked at me when you learned the truth about my father, I figured you were done with me.”

“You were wrong.” She twisted her wrist, freeing her hand from his, and glanced out the windows to watch the rain stream down the windows. “I was hurt that you hadn’t told me about him earlier. But in the end, I decided I love you too much to let it come between us.”

His heart swelled. Did she purposely say she loves him in present tense, or was it a slip-up? “I swear to you, I didn’t know my father had ordered the hit on your parents. I knew your father was previously involved in the mafia—”

“Wait.” She turned back to him, her sea-blue eyes wide. “What do you mean by *involved*?”

“You mean you don’t know?” He combed his fingers through his hair and tugged on the roots, all at once feeling like an asshole for disclosing one of the secrets her aunt and uncle apparently didn’t want her to know. “My father and yours...they were friends too. At least that’s what my mother told me. She said your father had left the country long before I was born, but when my father first started selling drugs out of Turkey, they were already close. That’s how your parents met. She was stationed there when my father sent yours over there to deal with the business.”

Nova’s face blanched before she looked down at the hat in her lap. She appeared one second away from passing out cold. “That’s the secret she wanted my uncle Jason to protect,” she whispered, wiping at the tears slipping down her cheeks. “My dad wasn’t any better than yours.”

“You don’t know that. Your father wanted out. Maybe he didn’t agree with the way mine dealt with his adversaries.”

She met his gaze, holding it for a lingering moment. “Why are you here, Ni—I mean, Cash? What were you doing in Athens?”

“I’m finally going to put a stop to my father’s reign of terror.”

She shook her head. “How?”

In his peripheral vision, Cash noticed several passengers on the lefthand side were beginning to stand. He turned to them, finding their concerned gazes focused on something ahead.

“Hold on.” He rose to his feet and scanned the area on which their attention was focused.

A white puff of smoke snaked up toward the ceiling.

“*Fire!*” a woman yelled, soliciting a chorus of panicked cries from other passengers.

Nova’s slim fingers shot out to wind tightly around his.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” he told her, bending to brush his lips over the back of her hand before releasing it. He promptly located a fire extinguisher on the wall near the door, and jumped into action. “Everyone stay calm, and stay seated!” He announced. “*Meíne íremos. Meíne kathistós.*” He pulled the extinguisher off of the wall and removed the pin before charging toward the smoke.

When he discovered the source of the “fire” he wanted to kick some serious ass.

A flare gun had been discharged inside the ferry.

He squeezed the extinguisher’s trigger, sweeping the agent over the fizzling flare. Once the smoke evaporated, several people began to clap and cheer. Cash shot the general passengers a deadly glare, then handed the extinguisher to the dazed porter who had materialized at his side. It was understandable everyone had become unnerved by the storm and the constant vomiting, but it took a special kind of stupid to think discharging a flare gun inside a moving jet filled with people would solve anything.

“Someone shot a flare gun,” he grumbled as he lowered back down to Nova’s side. “We’re in the presence of some real idiots.”

To his complete surprise and then pleasure, Nova fisted the center of his t-shirt and yanked him to her, pressing her wounded lips to his.

NOVA

By the time they entered the pretty little hotel room in Little Venice that provided a stunning view of the island's famous windmills, the painful throbbing in Nova's head had disappeared. It was replaced with a pleasant buzz that started in her belly and blossomed into her chest every time she looked Nikos's—or rather *Cash's*—way. Although eager to find her sister, once the woman on the Ferry Ride From Hell had yelled “fire,” Nova was convinced they were literally going to die. If forced to jump into the raging sea during the storm, they would've surely perished.

Then she'd watched Cash jump into action to put out the fire, and all at once she realized that she was still madly in love with the immigrant who'd come to her family's vineyard. Only he'd become a strong, fearless man with great strength and an impressive beard. Not only that, he had literally saved her life when he'd pulled her out of the alley.

As soon as their feet were back on solid ground, it was as if someone had injected her with a shot of adrenaline. She needed Cash the way a strung-out junkie needed another hit. She wanted to be reunited with every inch of the beautiful man to see what else had changed.

The moment Cash dropped his duffel bag beside the bed, she yanked him against her the same way she had on the ferry and kissed him with the heightened fervor that came with years of longing. To her frustration, he responded with a touch that was feather light. His lips barely dusted over hers. Similar to the first time they'd kissed, a sole word invaded her

thoughts: *more*. Every movement she made admittedly hurt, but she needed passion. She needed all he had to offer.

“*Cardia mou,*” he managed between breathless kisses, “maybe we should—”

“No more talking,” she grumbled, yanking on the waistband of his shorts. “More kissing.”

“You’re injured.” He shook his head, backing away. “You need time to heal.”

“My heart is injured the most,” she insisted. “The only thing that can heal it is being with you. Now. I’ve missed you. I’ve missed your beautiful body.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “I don’t want to hurt you, sweetheart.”

“The only way you can do that is by pushing me away when I need you.” She took his bearded face in her hands, pressing another hungry kiss against his lips. “Please, my love,” she whispered. “I need this.”

“Okay,” he conceded with a look of defeat. “But only if you promise to stop me if it causes you too much pain.”

He did most of the work of undressing them both with deft fingers. She worried he’d recognize her lack of experience in the way she responded to his every touch as if his fingers were made of fire and ice. There hadn’t been any passion with the two men she’d slept with after she was sure she’d never see Nikos again. They’d each been a bump-in-the-closet kind of affair, neither soliciting a repeat performance. She tried not to wonder how many women Cash had been with in the time they’d spent apart.

Once he began to remove her bra clasp, she became anxious. How would he handle her unilateral mastectomy? She was well aware he would’ve seen it by then as he’d tended to her for many days while she’d been unconscious, but she still worried it would become an awkward thing between them. She hadn’t wanted to sleep with another man since the surgery, mostly because she didn’t want anyone looking at her with

pity. It was the same reason she hadn't disclosed the procedure to anyone in her family.

When the bra with the built-in silicon prosthetic thudded against the floor, Cash's jaw dropped.

"*Cardia mou,*" he whispered the nickname like a prayer. "What—"

"Breast cancer." She narrowly resisted the urge to cover herself. "I don't understand. How did you not see it before?"

His eyes returned to hers, radiating with love. "I respected your privacy. I never removed your underwear."

Although he'd always been a sensitive and romantic soul, she was moved beyond words by his thoughtfulness. She lifted his hand, holding it over the scar where her left breast had been removed while tears trickled down her cheeks.

"You are still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he told her with tears glistening in his dark eyes. He gazed lovingly at her chest, swiping his thumb along the long, jagged scar. "Your scars only prove you're also the strongest."

He cupped her full breast in his other hand as he got down on one knee and brushed his lips over the mastectomy scar. A closed-mouth cry vibrated against her throat as he then kissed the spot just above the dressing on her stab wound. He then rose back to his feet and kissed the healing wound on her forehead. He finally settled on her lips, claiming them with more force than before.

Endless tears were shed between them as they made love, slow and easy the way their first time as teenagers should've been. He was gentle with every thrust of his hips, treating her body with the mindfulness of a rare gem, but his tongue and lips didn't hold back as they exchanged endless, fierce kisses.

The sheer adoration on his face as he cried out with his final release tore a sob from Nova's throat. He peppered her face with kisses and held her more tightly than he'd dared as they'd made love. "I don't believe in coincidences, my beautiful girl with the sea blue eyes," he whispered. "Fate brought us back together for a reason. Our story is far from

over.” He brought his mouth back down to hers, sliding his tongue along hers one last time. “Now let’s go get your sister and bring her back home with us.”

NOVA BOBBED her knee from the passenger’s seat of the ridiculously small rental as Cash surveyed the property through a pair of binoculars. They had already wasted too much time at the hotel in Little Venice, even though she doubted either of them would’ve had the willpower to stop the reunion of their bodies and souls. What if they were too late to save London?

“I’m not seeing anyone who fits the description of this Kostas prick,” he reported. “I still don’t understand why I hadn’t come across his name while running surveillance on my father.”

“Maybe he gave me a bogus name,” she muttered. He wouldn’t have been the first person to fool her with a false name. “He told me all the bartenders at the resort knew where to find him.” She remembered how Elias had appeared irritated by Kostas. “There was a really friendly one named Elias who took a liking to me and London. I have a feeling he could be easily persuaded to give up Kostas’s location.” Then she remembered her condition, and frowned. “But I can’t go in there without raising suspicion that something is seriously wrong, or being spotted by Kostas if he’s actually on the property somewhere.”

“I’ll handle it.” Cash turned to her, cradling the back of her head. “Please do me a favor and stay here. I couldn’t survive losing you again.” He gave her a lingering kiss that she felt in the depths of her soul. She sank against him, realizing for the first time how badly she needed him. She’d never needed anyone that way before.

Her heart sank as he stepped out of the tiny car and crossed the road before disappearing inside one of the whitewashed buildings. She was aware he’d been well-trained by the military to handle dangerous situations, but she was terrified by the idea of him not being in her life anymore.

Seconds after she lost sight of him, the driver's door opened.

A man began climbing into the car.

She quickly reached for a pen in one of the cup holders, sticking it inside her fist as she delivered a hammer strike, aimed at the man's sternum.

It took her an extra rapid beat of her heart to recognize her uncle when he reached out to smoothly deflect her strike. The skin under his eyes was dark from lack of sleep, and he sported a new beard. He could've been mistaken for a homeless man. "At least you remembered some of the moves I taught you."

As he studied her face, confusion flickered through his eyes before they became hard with rage. He made a noise sounding as if he'd literally swallowed his tongue. After a moment, he captured her chin between his fingers. "Did that son-of-a-bitch do this to you? I'll kill him!"

"It wasn't Cash!" she snapped, pulling her chin away from his hand.

"What the hell happened? Where've you been? I've been camped out at this place for days, waiting for any sign of you girls! They told me you'd checked out!"

"We were drugged by a man who claimed to own this resort." It killed her to admit out loud that he'd been right, it hadn't been safe for them to go there. She had endlessly berated herself over the past several days for agreeing to ride on Kostas's boat. "Cash found me unconscious in an Athens alley a week ago. I lost my memory for a time after he found me—didn't know my own name. I still can't remember anything that happened right before that. We came here to find the man that drugged us."

Her uncle's face became an unnatural shade of scarlet red. "Where's London?"

"We don't know."

For several minutes, he scrubbed his large hands over his face, as if literally trying to absorb the news. She waited for

him to lecture her on how he was right when his hands came back down to grip the steering wheel. “How did Cash—*Nikos*—just happen to be in the right place at the right time? You said he found you unconscious. Are you sure he didn’t do this to you?”

“Give me a break. You know his history better than I do. He wouldn’t join the military and work for the government only to lure me here and try to kill me, then nurse me back to health. He came to Athens in search of his father.” She pushed on the waistband of the skirt Cash had bought her in Athens, revealing her new tattoo. “He says this is the mark the mafia gives women before they’re forced into sex trafficking.”

Her uncle beat his fists on the steering wheel so hard that she was shocked it didn’t break in half. “God damn it!” He then flung the door open and began pacing alongside the car, swearing into the warm sunlight.

Nova nervously watched the resort entrance, hoping Cash would stay away a bit longer until her uncle’s rage was better contained. Jason Hulburt was a reasonable man for the most part—he just needed a minute to comprehend everything before he’d realize Cash was most definitely one of the good guys.

Around the time she was ready to head inside and warn Cash, she spotted him jogging back across the cobblestone road. She raced out of the car, wedging herself between him and her enraged uncle.

“Your father did this to them!” Jason roared, trying to step around her. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kick your ass!”

“He has nothing to do with his father, and you know it!” Nova reminded him, molding her back against Cash. “This isn’t his fault!”

“I came here to put an end to his bullshit!” Cash told him, feathering his fingers up and down Nova’s bare arms. “Now that he’s hurt the woman I love, I want him six feet under!”

With the profession of love, her uncle's wide-eyed expression bounced between the couple.

"We never stopped loving each other," Nova grumbled. "Even after you sent him away."

With a scowl, her uncle peered over her shoulder to address Cash. "Where's London?"

"I don't know," Cash answered in a grave tone, "but I was just given directions on where to find the man who kidnapped them. It's just a few miles down the road. Let's go see if the asshole's home."

CASH

Cash hadn't seen Nova's uncle, Jason, since leaving the vineyard. Crow's feet and a little slower gait showed his true age, but the man was still scary as all hell when he was angry. As they devised a plan on how to breach the gated estate on the highest point of the cliff—of which they'd taken extensive pictures before reconvening at the hotel room in Little Venice—Cash caught Jason glaring at his arms whenever locked around Nova's waist. Yet Cash couldn't help himself. Once they'd reconnected on an intimate level, he needed to keep her close as a reminder he wasn't dreaming. More importantly, he wanted to do everything in his power to ensure she remained safe.

Neither of the men had stated aloud that Nova would most certainly *not* be joining them on their mission, but Cash was positive her uncle would wholeheartedly agree. He just wasn't sure how he was going to walk away from her for that long.

"We'll go in three hours after sunset," Jason decided, locking eyes with Cash. "Catch them off guard. I'll take out the two armed guards at the gate while you sneak in through the side door."

"How are you taking them out?" Nova challenged.

"That's none of your concern," Jason told her with a dismissive sniff.

"Well, you might want to go over the plan in a little more detail, because there were *three* armed guards, not two," she

said, pointing at the Xs on the map. “One was around the side while we were there, taking a smoke break.”

Cash kissed the top of her head. “Speaking of breaks, we need to get you something to eat.”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Your body needs nutrients to heal,” he argued.

“He’s right,” Jason said, bobbing his head in a nod. “We’re all going to need to fuel up anyway.”

Cash was becoming increasingly nervous that things would go south, and Nova would lose two of the most important people in her life. He kissed the top of her head again. “The buddy letting us stay here owns a great little place down the road that’s known for its shrimp orzo. He’ll make sure we’re given privacy, just in case this Kostas character is out and about. We could walk from here.” It was also the most romantic setting in the area, so he was grateful when Jason shook his head.

“Bring me something back,” he told them. “I have some calls to make, and the one to Val is going to take a good while.” He ran a hand over his blond head, holding Nova’s gaze. “I don’t know how I’ll convince her to stay put once she hears about London.”

“Tell her we’re bringing London back tonight,” Cash said, throwing him a grave nod. He then took Nova’s hand and led her into the hallway as he called Michalis to let him know they were coming.

They were quiet on the short walk to the back alley of the establishment, but clung to each other as if literally glued on their sides. Cash sensed she was also becoming increasingly anxious about their plan the way she became his relentless shadow.

Michalis immediately answered the knock on the back door and hugged Cash. “It is so good to see you, my old friend!”

He was just as gangly as he’d been as a young kid, and still possessed the same lopsided smile when he introduced himself

to Nova. She comfortably laughed at his lame jokes as he ushered them through the kitchen and up a set of rickety steps to where a table and two chairs had been arranged on the rooftop. A lit candle and a bouquet of peonies were arranged around a bottle of red wine and two wine glasses.

“True love looks good on you, my friend,” Michalis said, throwing Cash one of his lopsided grins. “I will bring you orzo in one moment. Now, you enjoy the view.”

Nova headed over to the edge of the rooftop, fingers splayed over her chest as she took in the elevated view of the sea. Cash poured them each a glass of wine before crossing over to where she stood. He took his time, admiring every detail about the woman he loved. A strong breeze brushed her hair away from her face, showing her pensive expression. The long dress he’d purchased before they boarded the ferry hugged her soft curves, and its blue hue matched her eyes. Not only was she more beautiful than he would’ve imagined possible after thinking she’d been stunning beyond words at age sixteen, she was so damn strong and determined to protect those she loved. He’d made the worst mistake of his life when he’d walked away from her rather than fighting Jason.

He intended on doing everything in his power to keep her in his life permanently.

“When we first arrived in Mykonos, London said it was the definition of paradise,” she said in a monotone voice, her gaze still locked onto the sea below. “I’m starting to think it may actually be hell on earth. How could a place this beautiful be so dangerous?”

“I wish you could’ve seen Greece through my eyes as a kid. It wasn’t all bad.” He handed her one of the wine glasses before slipping his arm around her back. “Your uncle is handling this better than I would’ve thought.”

“He was suspicious of your timing at first,” she admitted before taking a sip of wine, “but he came around once he gave it some thought.” She turned to him, molding her hand to his bearded jaw. “I know you’re going to fight me on this, but I want to be there when you and my uncle rescue London.”

“Nova—”

“My uncle trained me how to fight.”

He let out a dark laugh. “I remember...too well.”

“And I’m a good shot.”

“I know you are. Hell—you’re the one who first taught me how to fire a pistol. But—”

She drew away from him, grinding her teeth together. “Don’t you dare write me off because I’m a woman.”

“I’m not. You’re already hurt, my love. If anyone hurt you again—”

“You and my uncle won’t let that happen.”

He wanted to throw his head back and holler at the blue skies. He loved everything about the woman, except that she was stubborn as hell. “And that’s exactly why we can’t let you come along. We’d be too focused on keeping you safe. It would make us sloppy.”

Determination wove through her like a living thing. “You can’t expect me to simply hang out alone at the hotel while you’re gone,” she gritted out. “I’d be sick with worry.”

“I’ve arranged for Michalis to come stay with you. He may seem like a harmless goofball, but he was a helluva fighter when we were kids. I once watched him take down a guy twice his size. And before he took over this business from his grandparents, he worked for the local police. I trust him with your life.”

The smell of cooked shrimp permeated the air as Michalis emerged from the stairwell behind them. “Your dinner is here, my friends! Please come! Sit!”

Nova all at once became still. Trance-like.

Her wine glass fell from her hands, smashing at her feet.

Cash set his glass on the ledge and gripped her by her hips. “What is it?”

“Something wrong?” Michalis called out.

Cash turned to him. “You can set the food on the table. I’ll fill you in later. Thanks, man.”

When he spun around, Nova’s face was bone white. “I remember seafood...” she muttered, gripping his arms. “Someone was singing. Then he was pulling my hair—”

“*Who* was pulling your hair?” he demanded. A surge of white rage clawed at his throat with the visual.

“He told me I was—” she snapped back to the present moment, meeting Cash’s stare and shaking her head. “After I blacked out on the sailboat, I woke up inside a cage...in a basement. My wrists were bound together with zip ties.” She winced as her fingers wound around one of her wrists. “It was dark, and stunk of standing water. I was groggy at first. Once I snapped out of it, I called for London. My throat was raw from screaming before she finally answered. She said she was okay, but I could tell she was scared. I could hear it in her voice.” Tears slipped down her cheeks. “I promised her we would be okay, but said she needed to be brave and stay alert. I reminded her she wasn’t weak and told her she could survive anything.”

Cash framed her face with his hands, using his thumbs to dry her tears. His heart thundered in his chest as he registered everything she was telling him. “That’s good, baby. What else do you remember?”

“After a while, we both fell asleep. I woke to the sound of a cage being opened. They threw a cloth bag over my head and pulled me up a set of concrete stairs. I begged them to let London go, but a deep voice only laughed and said, ‘*échei eidiká schédia gia aftó*’.” *He has special plans for that one.* “I was shoved down into a soft armchair before the fabric was removed from my head. I was in a room full of men, on a little stage. They began...bidding.”

Teeth clamped together, Cash stroked his beard maniacally as his stomach muscles clenched. He wasn’t sure he could listen to the details of her capture any longer without committing murder. Meeting her teary-eyed expression of defeat, he clarified, “They sold you.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “They put the bag back over my head and led me back out of the room. Only I was taken a different way, down a shorter set of steps, and we were soon outside. The sun was bright enough that I could see through the fabric.” A stone-cold expression crossed over her face. “It was Kostas’s house. The cages were in his basement. I remember seeing that exact same house now, plain as day. If that asshole hasn’t sold London yet, she could still be in his basement.”

“What happened to you after you were sold? Who hurt you?”

“The man who bought me was older, probably in his mid-forties. He took me on a helicopter ride to a mansion on the water. He made me change into a provocative dress, said they’d kill London if I tried to escape. A woman in a maid’s uniform served us steak and lobster, but I couldn’t stomach the idea of eating. The man got drunk and began to sing that song about California girls. When he—” she paused, licking her lips and looking away. “I tried fighting him off. He didn’t like that very much. He was slow and clumsy because of the alcohol, but he was too big. Then he tore the dress off of me and instantly became furious, said he’d make them pay for selling him defective goods. I was pretty out of it by the time he dumped me in that alley. I remember him saying, ‘*eísai skoupídi*’.” *You’re trash.*

Cash spun away from her, slamming his arm against his wine glass, only slightly satisfied when it shattered against the cement roof.

Another man had made his kill list. And he’d do everything in his power to ensure this one suffered.

NOVA

As the memories of her capture returned in bits and pieces, Nova merely picked at her food enough to satisfy Cash. She had spared him the vivid details of how the man had become unglued once he'd realized she was missing a breast. She'd used the man's shock to her advantage, throwing her elbow into his neck, and simultaneously kneeing him between the legs. Once he recovered from the attack, he had spit in her face and slammed his crystal glass against her forehead. Although she became woozy as blood rushed down her face, she tried like hell to fight back. He hit her several times before she felt the blade of a knife sink into her side.

"What can I do?" Cash asked, glancing up from his nearly empty plate. Taking her hand, he guided her into his lap and kissed her cheek before curling up against her chest. "How can I help you forget what happened?"

She stroked her fingers through his thick hair, knowing the reality of what had happened to her cut him just as deep. "London has already been alone in that place for too long. If she's still there...if they haven't hurt her...I need to rescue her before she suffers a similar fate."

"We will, my love," he muttered. "I will do whatever it takes to bring her back to you."

The dark, determined tone of his voice sent chills racing down her spine. Even more than before, she feared he'd lose all control once he came in contact with Kostas, the man responsible for her near-demise. It would make him reckless and vulnerable.

“I have to use the bathroom,” she announced, guiding his head so he was facing her once again. “I love you more than you could possibly know.” She bent to feather her lips over his, gripping his head with all her might. She leaned back with tears in her eyes. “Always have, always will.”

“As do I, *cardia mou*.” He brushed one side of her hair behind her ear. “We will survive the nightmares of your past by making a beautiful future. Together.”

She kissed him one last time. Her heart plummeted to her feet as she began to walk away.

It was her parents who were killed and her sister they’d taken. She knew the way in, and she knew what she needed to do.

No one was going to stop her.

THE SUN WAS BEGINNING to set as Nova approached the driveway of the sprawling estate. She stood behind a tree, watching the three guards interact. One was telling an animated story with his hands. The other two laughed while puffing on cigarettes. They were considerably muscular, and wore rifles strapped to their bodies. Nova was well aware she wasn’t equipped to take them down on her own, so she snuck past them to the backside of the gated property, eyeing a dilapidated shed. Her uncle and Cash were convinced the fencing wasn’t electric, but Nova threw several sticks at it to be sure.

Once she was certain it was safe, she slowly shimmied up the side of the shed and did her best to carefully slid back down the other side, pressing her lips together as her body was rocked with a wave of blinding pain. She hadn’t healed as much as she’d believed and knew she’d pay for her naivety later. When her feet connected with the ground, she noted the security camera her uncle and Cash had marked on the side of the two-story home. She quickly hobbled beyond its range of motion, reminding herself she was there to save her sister and could deal with her injuries later.

She was surprised the fence hadn't been electric, there hadn't been any guard dogs on the property, and the side door she crept up to was unlocked. It seemed far too easy to get inside once out of sight of the guards in front—until she came face-to-face with a man on the inside. She was relieved to see he was at least short and not as built as the others.

His features creased when he threw her a deep frown. “*Ti —*”

She wrapped one arm behind his and half embraced him before throwing him down on his back. It was a classic self-defense move that she'd never actually had to use until that moment. Despite the pain it caused her already bruised ribs, a part of her wanted to shout victoriously. Instead, she snatched the pistol from the holster strapped to the man's chest. As the man recovered and started to pull himself back up, she released the safety and shook her head.

“*Pósoi ántres me ópla?*” *How many men with guns?*

The man held his hands up at his sides. “*Den gnorízo!*” *I don't know.*

“*Páno,*” she told him, motioning with the barrel of the pistol for him to rise to his feet. “*Argós.*” *Slow.*

Hands still held up at his sides, he scrambled up to his feet.

“*Pigáino.*” *Go.* Once again, she used the gun to illustrate her command, just in case she was using the wrong word. The minute the man turned his back to her, she clubbed the back of his head with the pistol's grip and he fell hard to the floor. She winced with her lips pressed together and hid behind the open door, waiting for someone to come running. When no one came, she surveyed her surroundings.

The hallway's dim lights revealed a series of doors. Her uncle and Cash had discussed the possibility of security cameras being mounted inside as well, but she didn't have time to plan anything else through, nor did she have the knowledge needed to disable the system. She didn't have long before the guard woke, and alerted everyone of the intrusion.

She opened every door inside the maze of a hallway until she came across a descending stairway.

She drew in a calm, steady breath before heading down as quickly as her injured body would allow.

The basement was exactly as she'd remembered. Dark and dank with a faint odor of urine. Nova felt her way along a stone wall, taking every single step with extreme caution. For all she knew, there was a second basement filled with more sinister things. She wondered if that might be the case when she heard a feminine snuffle.

"London?" she whispered. Her pulse thudded against her eardrums.

"Who's there?" a high voice answered from somewhere nearby.

"London?" Nova repeated. "Is that you?"

"Who's London?" the voice asked.

"Nova?" a second voice slurred from somewhere behind her. "S'it really you?"

"London!" Nova's voice cracked with intense relief. She didn't know what she would've done if London hadn't been there. "I'm here, short stuff! Where are you? Keep talking!"

"I'm o'er here," she replied.

Nova's skin crawled with her sister's incapacitated voice. Had they kept her drugged the whole time so she'd do their bidding? Had they already sold her to someone, and brought her back again? There wasn't time to dwell on what she'd been through as Nova felt along the stone wall leading to London's voice.

"I'm coming, London! It's over! I'm taking you home!"

She came to a cage, crying out when she recognized her sister gripping the bars. She wrapped her fingers around London's and quickly surveyed her face. Her blond locks were in tangles and her face was dirty, but Nova couldn't detect any physical damage. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

London's eyes appeared to be incapable of focusing as they lazily drifted around. "I'm fine."

Nova tugged on the padlock clipped to the door. "Go stand in the corner and cover your ears. I'm going to shoot the lock off."

"Y're badass." London giggled as she shuffled away.

Nova shot at the lock, relieved when it sparked and then dropped to the floor.

A moment later, Nova heard a muffled footstep directly behind her. She twisted around and delivered a groin kick to the man, bending as fire tore across her middle.

As he fell to his knees, he smirked up at her and chuckled. "I knew you were a tough one."

Kostas.

Cradling her stomach, she pressed the pistol's muzzle against his temple, willing herself not to pull the trigger. She didn't want to kill him until he gave her some answers. "If you're smart, you'll stay down. Who are you? Why did you lure us to Mykonos?"

"I'm a hitman for the mafia."

Fear slithered through her belly with more intensity than the pain radiating through her body. What were the chances they'd get out of there alive? "Did you know my dad?"

"I did." His smirk turned into a wide smile. "I'm the one who killed him. Your mother too."

A violent pang spread through Nova's chest. "You're lying."

"You were so young...so frightened. I asked if you were his daughters and told you to pretend you hadn't seen me. You were shaking so hard—I actually worried you'd drop your baby sister."

Nova drew on every bit of her strength to prevent herself from crying. She refused to give the bastard her tears. "Why did you kill them?"

“When I was young, I sold drugs on the streets of this island with my best friend. It was nothing too extreme—mostly weed and a little coke we stole off of tourists. Orion Nikolaidis heard of our business and beheaded my friend, sending a message that no one else was to sell in his territory. I was forced to watch his execution. Orion said he’d spare my life if I proved I could be worth something to him. A few days later, he heard your father had returned to Mykonos. Orion told me to kill his entire family. I had to follow you back to America after your father discovered he’d been spotted here.”

“Why didn’t you kill me and London?”

“I myself was young. Stupid. Everything was good until my boss discovered you were still alive through your sister’s fitness blog. He threatened to hang me by my balls if I didn’t make it right. I assured him you’d be taken care of.”

She wished his boss had carried through with the threat. “By selling us as sex workers?”

“Only you.” His bright white teeth flashed beneath a sinister grin. “I saved your sweet sister for myself. She’s far too beautiful to share.”

Nausea ripped up her throat. She removed the pistol’s safety, and shoved it against his temple with more force. “What did you do to her, you sick son of a bitch?”

Kostas flashed a righteous smirk. “You won’t pull the trigger.”

“Try me.” She kicked one of his knees with all her might, feeling a slight tick of satisfaction when he hollered in pain. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing,” London slurred from somewhere. “He’s like re’lly small. So it was nothing.”

“*Mikrí skyla,*” Kostas growled. *Little bitch.*

The pistol trembled inside Nova’s hand. *Just a little longer,* she promised herself.

“Where is Orion now?” she demanded.

“In Germany. On business.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“You can check my phone. I installed a tracking app on his phone as I don’t trust him. It’s in my back pocket.”

She sensed it was merely a ploy so she’d lower the weapon.

She wasn’t going to let him dupe her a second time.

“I’d tell you to say hello to my parents, but they won’t be anywhere near where you’re going.”

The sound of the pistol discharging in the basement was deafening. She didn’t feel an ounce of remorse as Kostas’s corpse collapsed to the dirt floor.

“*Nova!*” Cash roared, suddenly rushing in at her side. He held her at an arm’s length, dark eyes frantically scanning over her body. “Baby, are you okay? Did he hurt you? Talk to me, sweetheart!”

“He didn’t touch me,” she promised, letting the weapon slip from her fingers. It thudded onto the ground at Kostas’s side. All at once, she felt every bit of agony she’d endured since breaking in, and slumped against him. “I’m okay.”

“I wish you’d left him alive so I could kill him myself,” her uncle seethed, glaring down at the corpse.

“Who’s h’re?” London called out. “Who’s that?”

Her uncle let out a choked sob as he stepped past them to open the cage door. “London!” He lifted her off her feet, cradling her in his arms. Her head lulled to one side. “London, sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“She probably passed out from whatever they drugged her with,” Nova told him. “She was a little out of it, but otherwise seemed unharmed.” Her eyes locked with Cash’s. “There’s another woman down here. For all I know there could be more.”

“We’ll make sure everyone gets out of here,” he promised, wrapping her in his arms. “Baby, what the hell happened? Did Kostas jump you at the restaurant?”

“I came here on my own,” she confessed, drawing back. “I’m sorry for scaring you like that. It’s just...I knew you would lose your mind once you came face-to-face with Kostas, and he was a smug son-of-a-bitch. I couldn’t risk letting him get under your skin with some crude comment.”

He glanced down at the pool of blood surrounding Kostas’s head. “When I think of all the things he could’ve done to you—”

“He didn’t touch me,” she repeated, framing his face in her hands. “I’m okay, *kardia mou*.” She briefly brushed her lips over his. “I want to go home,” she said, falling back into his embrace. “Please, Nikos. Take me home.”

CASH

Cash hissed as his blissful release came with the force of a tsunami. He grazed his hands over Nova's supple skin and kissed her soundly, adoring the way she always fell apart two seconds behind him. She had almost completely healed in the three months since they'd returned to America, allowing him countless opportunities to worship her body.

If he had his way, they'd do nothing more than eat, sleep, and make love on an endless cycle. In reality, however, they had some major decisions to make regarding their future and careers. Nova had given notice to the children's hospital that she was taking an extended leave to heal both mentally and physically.

Cash had filled his supervisors in on the events in Greece and was granted a temporary leave of absence until he and Nova decided where they would live. It'd never been a question whether or not they'd stay together after they'd boarded the plane in Athens alongside Jason and London. However, Cash was eager to move into the next phase of their relationship and make things more permanent. He sensed Nova felt the same way, but she claimed she wanted to settle into a comfortable routine before they made anything official.

Kostas hadn't been lying to Nova when he'd claimed Orion had gone to Germany. Cash had been able to verify with German officials that his father had entered the country three days prior to London's rescue. He tipped them off to several of Orion's illegal activities, including the auctioning of women,

and was assured Orion would be taken into their custody once he tried to leave.

Cash still had concerns about Orion's business. A part of him knew he would eventually have to return to Greece to verify with his own eyes that the mafia's sex-trafficking practices had been shut down. He wouldn't feel true peace until he knew something his father had created was no longer causing innocent women to suffer unspeakable pain and anguish.

He still hungered for the opportunity to confront his father for all of his evildoings, but he didn't have the willpower to leave Nova alone for any amount of time. The time for retribution would have to wait.

Nova's naked skin glistened in the moonlight piercing the cellar's windows as she attempted to catch her breath. Cash merely had to look at her to become hard again, ready to go another round. He ran his fingertip along her lower lip, admiring how it had swollen to twice its size from his eager kisses. He'd forever associate the musky smell of oak barrels with moments like those.

"I have to admit, I wasn't thinking of the winery when I asked you to take me home," Nova rasped, wiping stray hairs away from her face as she looked down on him. "But returning here with you has been a trip. Especially now that we're no longer kids."

"I should've taken you up on the offer to have sex in here with you the first time you begged for it."

"I didn't *beg* for it," she scoffed, clicking her tongue.

"You kind of did."

She twisted out from beneath him, shoving him down to his back with an arm braced over his chest. He was beginning to appreciate how she'd decided to rescue London on her own, even though it was incredibly stupid and reckless. She was stronger—*braver* than anyone in her life could've known, including herself.

Leaning over him, she nibbled a path along his cheek. “Are you going to make me beg for it again?”

“Hell no.” In a flash, he maneuvered out from beneath her and pinned her wrists on either side of her head. “Well, maybe a little.”

The rusty hinges on the cellar’s barn door creaked. Cash and Nova each froze, holding their collective breaths. Cash prayed it wasn’t Jason, because he was convinced her uncle would make him leave the winery again if he were to walk in on them in a compromising position a second time—no matter how much things had changed, or how much Jason seemed to appreciate everything Cash had done for Nova.

London’s voice muttered, “*What the hell?*” right before she came tiptoeing around the corner. Once her eyes swept over the scene before her, she slapped a hand over her eyes. “Dear God, Cash! At least cover your ass with something before I’m tempted to take another look! I mean I’m used to seeing hot men in tight shorts, but *come on*. You’re practically my brother.”

Nova giggled as Cash snagged his boxer briefs and jeans off of the floor beside them. “Then don’t look,” she told her sister in a teasing tone.

London groaned. “Seriously, you guys. They sell this wine to *customers*. Nothing about this is kosher.”

Cash quietly huffed when Nova began dressing at his side. The amount of time they spent naked together was never enough.

Nova shot her sister a quizzical look. “What are you doing in here, short stuff?”

“Uncle Dizzy sent me in here to get the first bottle they made back when they first took over this place.”

Cash held his breath while giving London a wide-eyed stare in warning.

Nova blinked rapidly at his side. “Really? Why?”

Unaware of Cash's silent directions, London shrugged and turned away to scan the racks that stretched up to the ceiling. "I don't know. He said something about celebrating."

"Celebrating what?" Nova wondered. She kissed Cash on the tip of his nose before she stood and pointed across the warehouse. "It's way up on the top lefthand side. Cash will probably have to get it down for you."

Cash jumped to his feet to help London, both grateful she didn't know anything more about the celebration, and eager to get her the hell out.

Nova's younger sister had fared better physically after what had happened in Greece, but was still battling the demons that materialized after being kept prisoner and forced to do things with Kostas. She outwardly appeared well-adjusted, but Cash sensed she was only good at hiding her emotions. He climbed up the ladder and grabbed the bottle, blowing the dust off the glass before placing it in London's hands.

"Go get 'er, tiger," London whispered, throwing him a wink before spinning around on her heels. As she began to close the cellar door, she called out, "As you were, lovebirds!"

Laughter stuck in Cash's throat as the door slid back over the track, leaving him alone once again with the woman of his dreams. He'd wanted to ask her to be his wife ever since they'd made love in Little Venice. He had gone through the scenario in his head a thousand times since they'd arrived in America, but he wasn't sure of the exact words he'd use. Since they'd been reunited, there were very few words left to be said between them. They knew better than to leave anything to chance after all the years they'd tragically lost.

As he headed back to Nova, rummaging into the pocket of his jeans to find the little velvet box he'd so carefully shopped for two and a half months prior, she answered a call on her cell phone. "Hi, James! What's—"

Even though Cash was well aware Nova's flirtation with James had been extremely short-lived, he felt a tug of jealousy.

Then her expression paled. “Oh my god,” she whispered. She met Cash’s concerned look with tears swarming her beautiful blues. “I’m so sorry, James. I know how much you loved her. What can I do?”

Cash moved in closer to put a supportive arm behind Nova. As she mumbled a series of raspy “*yeahs*” and “*okays*”, he began to massage the back of her neck. After all she’d been through, he couldn’t stand to see her in any kind of pain.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” she said before ending the call. Slipping her phone inside her back jeans pocket, she sighed and gripped Cash’s arm. “I have to go to New York.”

Cash considered the party Nova’s family had planned for later that evening. “Now?”

Wiping at a tear, she nodded. “James needs me. His sister was murdered last night.”

Cash’s empathy for the deceased woman instantly faded as the earlier stab of jealousy intensified. “Why does he need *you*?”

“He’s upset, and he doesn’t really have time for friends. He’s so busy growing his own brand and helping London that we’ve become the only people he’s close to. His parents live in Mexico, and won’t arrive until sometime tomorrow.” The corners of her mouth lifted slightly. “Come on, babe. You can’t seriously be jealous of another man, especially when I told you I never really had feelings for James to begin with.”

“I’m not jealous,” he lied, lifting his chin a little. “Just concerned. Last time we stopped by your place, you seemed on edge. I don’t think you’re ready to be surrounded by so many strangers.”

“Good thing I have a big, strong man to come along as my bodyguard,” she teased, lightly pinching his bicep. “Besides, I should really swing by the brownstone to check on things—make sure my plants are still alive and the pipes haven’t sprung a leak. I doubt my neighbor was as helpful as she claimed she’d be.” Her grin grew as she nudged Cash with her

hip. “She seemed more intent on flirting with the hottie at my side.”

Still unconvinced it was a good idea, Cash grunted his hesitant agreement.

Nova turned into him, winding her arms around his neck and pressing her sweet body against his. “After his parents arrive, we can spend the rest of the weekend locked up in my bedroom. It would just be you and me, without any interruptions.” She stood on her tiptoes to deliver a searing kiss, then backed away with a sexy smile. “Unless you’d rather continue sneaking in here like a bunch of teenagers, praying my uncle doesn’t catch us one of these times.”

The idea of having Nova all to himself in the privacy of her brownstone created a warm buzz in his gut. He supposed he could alter his plans, and tell her family he was postponing the celebration for a few days. Asking her to be his wife against the Manhattan skyline lights could prove to be more romantic of a setting anyway.

“If you need to be with your friend, I’ll take you,” he decided, gently gripping the back of her neck as he held her gaze. “I’m willing to give you whatever you need.”

NOVA

By the time Nova and Cash arrived in lower Manhattan, the gym's late-night members had thinned out and the midnight fanatics had yet to take their place. A small handful of men and women occupied the weight machines, stationary bikes, and treadmills. It was as quiet as Nova had ever seen. She glanced up to the glass window on the second floor where James spent his precious few hours of downtime and wasn't surprised to see it dimly lit. She imagined he was attempting to mourn in peace.

Nova pivoted into Cash with a swell of adoration that nearly choked her to death. Concern flashed through his dark eyes as he gripped her tightly. He was so fierce, so loyal, that she still sometimes laid awake at night, wondering how far he would've gone in Greece to defend her honor.

"Do you mind hanging out down here for a few minutes before joining us?" she asked. "I have a feeling James is a bit of a mess right now, and he'd be embarrassed for another man to see him that way." She cozied up to him and framed his bearded jaw with one hand. "Don't you dare worry about me being alone with him, my love. I'm yours. Always have been, always will be. Understand?"

The lump in his throat bobbed as he nodded, then bent to feather his lips over hers. Wild flutters attacked her stomach, urging her for more. She had to remind herself she was in a public setting and couldn't afford to get carried away as she released him. "I'll send a text when it's safe for you to come join us."

Walking away from him was akin to leaving a limb behind. They had been inseparable since they'd settled in one of the resort's remodeled units. Although unrecognizable as the room where Nikos and his mother had once stayed, the building still evoked countless memories, both good and bad. It was a brutal reminder of how precious their relationship had become. It made her appreciate even more that they'd been gifted a second chance.

Lost in her euphoric thoughts, she was caught by surprise when she turned the handle to the office only to be grabbed by a set of strong hands. Before she could deliver a strike against her attacker, a hand pressed over her mouth from behind.

"Play nice, or your lover is dead," a grave voice warned in her ear.

Nova's heart sank as a sickening feeling nearly brought her to her knees. The voice carried an unmistakable Greek accent. It had to be someone from the mafia. Did they think she was involved with James? Did they know Cash was waiting downstairs?

Relaxing into her attacker's hold, she glanced upward to find James gagged and bound to his office chair with thick rope. Eyes swollen and rimmed with red, he fought vigorously against the restraints. She begged him not to fight with a slight shake of her head. He had only been a pawn in the mafia's quest to lead her away from her uncle. James would be considered dispensable.

"It's not my intention to hurt you, Nova," the voice explained. "I merely want to get Nikos's full attention. I know he's been hunting me...I know he's the one who alerted the German authorities. I'd like him to stop."

Nova's bladder gave a little tug.

Orion.

Her fear was replaced with blinding panic. Was he alone, or were one of his men waiting to attack Cash too?

"I can't say I was disappointed to hear you'd eliminated my hitman," Orion said, his tone light and nowhere near

wistful. “I never trusted the slippery bastard. It angered me to learn he’d planned on keeping your sister all to himself. He was sloppy and reckless—should’ve followed orders and taken care of you two along with your parents when you were young.”

Chills ran down Nova’s back. She doubted he intended to let her walk away. London would be next.

She had to stop him.

She gently tugged on the thick hand covering her mouth, letting out a calming breath once it was removed. “I’ll do whatever you ask. Just please, leave James out of this.”

“He’s not of any concern,” Orion answered.

A heartbeat later, a second figure emerged from the dark corner behind them and advanced toward James. Nova opened her mouth to shout in protest, but the hand once again covered her mouth. As the second man raised a handgun with a silencer to James’s head, something sharp was inserted into Nova’s neck.

She drifted away...

WHEN NOVA CAME BACK AROUND, her stomach seized with fear. *Was she back in the cage in Mykonos?* A dampness clung to the blackness and the smell of stale water overwhelmed her senses. Her ankles and wrists were bound with rope. For several minutes, she twisted her arms back and forth with as great of force as she could manage.

Her heart beat a frantic rate as she reached behind her back, feeling her surroundings. It seemed she was sprawled across a concrete floor. How long had she been unconscious? Where was Cash? What had happened to James? She suspected she already knew, but she wouldn’t allow herself to cry. At least not yet. She refused to play the part of anyone’s victim again.

“Hello?” she croaked. Her sore throat yearned for water. She cleared it before trying again. “Is anyone there?”

“Ah, good morning,” Orion’s voice answered. “You slept like the dead.”

A moment later, the room was flooded with light. A man with dark hair and dark eyes materialized, crouched down at her level. He was exceptionally handsome for someone of his advanced age, hair marked with light gray streaks and face lined with deep lines.

Sickness rose in Nova’s throat. Aside from the wrinkles, his facial features were nearly identical to Cash’s. Only it was as if she was looking into the eyes of the Devil himself.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“Somewhere I can reason with Nikos in private, without causing a scene. He should arrive at any moment.”

Nova sensed Orion didn’t intend to let her live to see another day. How many of his men did he bring along? She worried Cash wouldn’t be thinking straight once he arrived to find his father holding her captive. She remembered the argument they’d had in Mykonos when she announced she wanted to join their rescue mission for London.

“That’s exactly why we can’t let you come along. We’d be too focused on keeping you safe. It would make us sloppy.”

She had to find a way to unnerve Orion too. “Why did you tell Kostas to kill my parents?”

“Your father knew too much of my business. When he left, I needed to send a message. No one betrays the Nikolaidis crime family.”

“What did you do to Katerina—Nikos’s mother—to make him so angry? Why was she afraid you’d hurt Nikos next?”

“You mean my son never told you? And here I believed the two of you were in love.” Orion shook his head and laughed in a dark, menacing sound. “Nikos knew his mother was untouchable. As least as long as he continued to do my bidding.”

Her stomach twisted. “Your bidding?”

“Nikos was training to become next in line as the mafia’s enforcer.”

“No,” she whispered with a violent shiver that she felt in her soul. Fighting against an onset of tears, she repeatedly shook her head. “Nikos is too kind...loving. There’s no way that could be true.”

“I assure you, it is.” He glanced up at the ceiling, rubbing his broad chin. “When Katerina first discovered she was carrying my child, she tried to hide it from me. She asked my brother Christos for his help to terminate the infant, saying it would only be a ‘monster’ like its father. Only they fell in love. I found out, of course, and kept her locked away until Nikos was born. By then, I foolishly believed his mother was loyal to me once again and let her out of her confinement. But by the time Nikos was a young boy, I learned Katerina planned to run away with Christos. I let Nikos choose between letting his mother become a bonafide whore...be sold to the highest bidder, or terminating his uncle’s life. Which do you suppose he chose?”

Had Nova’s hands not been tied, she would’ve cradled her violently churning stomach. Her Nikos was brave and exceptionally kindhearted. Had he really killed his own uncle? “He would never hurt someone unless they deserved it.”

“Think again, Miss Nova. Your lover...he was only ten when he first took a man’s life. And I can assure you, it wasn’t the last time.”

Despite her resolve to stay calm, silent tears slipped down Nova’s cheeks when her heart squeezed. She couldn’t imagine the kind of terrors a young Nikos would’ve experienced when his diabolical father had threatened to sell his mother as a sex slave. She narrowly resisted the urge to spit in Orion’s face.

What kind of man would put his own son through something so vile? With a bone-cold chill, she realized the true level of his depravity. She needed to stall him some more.

“Nikos already knows you have me. When he gets here, he’ll be ready to kill you where you stand. He may even have backup. Why not make him suffer a little longer instead? Take

me back to Greece with you—take control of the situation there. You'd have the home advantage.” She dared a smoldering look, amazed that her features would cooperate with the lie. “You can make him irate, and I can make you happy.” Batting her eyes, she licked her lips while giving him a once-over. “You know, you're even more handsome than your son. I'm sure a mature man like yourself could teach me a thing or two that Nikos has yet to learn.”

“You expect me to fall for that act?” he scoffed.

“It's not an act, Orion. Why don't you come a little closer, and find out?”

His thick lips and broad nose lifted with a scowl. “I should've known my son would fall for a whore like his mother.”

His hand darted to the back of her head, gripping her hair by its roots as he dragged her face in close. She tried not to whimper when his lips claimed hers with brutal force. She squeezed her eyes shut and allowed him to continue until she felt the sweep of his tongue. Her teeth clamped down, refusing to give in even as he yelped and tried pulling away. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth before she let go and drew back, smashing her skull into his without restraint.

Orion fell onto his back, howling in pain. She loosened the rope around her wrists a little more until she was able to slip one free. She untied her ankles a mere second before Orion recovered enough to lunge at her.

Nova dodged his attack and leaped to her feet, rushing toward the only door in sight. The building was under construction, stripped down to its studs. Warped plastic sheeting hung from the rafters, covering the room's sole window. A blur of lights shone through the plastic.

In the same moment as Nova reached for the door's handle, a hand clamped down on her ankle. With all her might, she kicked with her other foot right as a gunshot echoed through the room.

The sting of a bullet tore through her skin.

Pain shook her to the core.

CASH

Cash heard a gunshot the moment he entered the hallway. His vision blurred as a sole thought pinged through his brain: *Nova*. He almost didn't have the strength to run the remaining distance. His limbs went numb once he burst into the room in the abandoned warehouse and his frantic eyes found Nova's. Her mouth was bloody and she was down on the floor with a hand clamped over her shoulder. A hand that was also covered in blood.

He almost dropped the Beretta clutched in his grip. "Are you—"

"I'm okay," she blurted, although the strained look in her eyes and the clench of her jaw told a different story. She was clearly in pain. "The bullet only grazed my arm. It's more like a scratch."

His peripheral vision turned black when he focused on his father. Considering Cash had spent half of his life tracking down the man who had once made their lives a living hell, he expected to feel something profound. He expected to feel a jolt of satisfaction in seeing Orion weak and defenseless as he tended to the dark red bump on his head with blood trickling from his mouth.

Yet the ghost of a grin touching Cash's lips had nothing to do with the old man. He felt a rush of blinding pride in knowing his girl had put up a fight.

The urge to end the bastard's life once and for all electrified his veins. "*Slowly* throw your weapon over to me,"

he growled through clenched teeth, rushing forward to aim his pistol at Orion's forehead. "Don't make me tell you twice."

His father appeared both angry and flabbergasted as he wisely tossed the weapon on the floor. "How did you get past my men?" he managed with a strange lisp.

"Your men are brainless morons," Cash replied, daring a glance at Nova's face and offering his free hand to her. "Can you stand, *cardia mou?*"

Nodding, Nova took his hand and stumbled to her feet. With his eyes on his father, Cash pulled her close, tucking her in at his side. More than ever, he didn't know how he was going to let her out of his sight. He suspected a shit-ton of counseling was in their future.

A chorus of police sirens wailed in the distance.

"It's over," he told his father. "The DEA is on their way. Better take your last breath of freedom while you can, you sick bastard."

Chuckling and shaking his head, Orion replied, "*Min polemás ti moíra sou, gie mou.*" *Do not fight your destiny, my son.*

"I'm not *your son*," Cash sneered. "And my destiny has nothing to do with you. Having the same blood doesn't make us family and doesn't make me fated to follow your path. We'll never be the same."

"Think again," Orion told him, rising to one knee before standing. "That burning anger you feel deep in your gut...the need you feel right now to pull that trigger...the thirst for blood that made you join the military...you got that from me, Nikos. Why do you think your mother felt a need to bring you to America? She wanted to move you far away before you focused your anger somewhere else...you were bound to walk in your father's footsteps."

Sickness rose into Cash's stomach. Looking into the old man's dark eyes, he saw a bit of himself. "You're a con-man and a crook. A murderer. I'll never walk in your footsteps."

Orion's smile intensified, revealing blood smeared across his pristine teeth. "But you have. Your mother tried to pretend you were still a good boy, but she knew you were a monster after you murdered her lover."

A dark coldness spread through Cash's veins. He hadn't told Nova about his sordid history, even though she had every right to know. He'd been so young and naive that he didn't think he had any other choice. He'd spent the last decade trying to make good on his mistakes but his history could never be rewritten. His father was absolutely right. He was a monster.

Orion held his gaze and nodded as if he could read his thoughts. "Come back to your homeland with me, *gie mou*. It's time you return to your roots and fulfill your fate."

Nova stepped away from Cash and delivered a sharp front kick to Orion's jaw, knocking him down onto his back and rendering him unconscious.

Cash's heart stuttered as he studied her calm expression. He wasn't sure if he was more shocked or proud. Although she was the bravest woman he'd ever met, she still continued to baffle him.

"I was tired of listening to his bullshit," she grumbled. "We both know your fate has nothing to do with him."

A lump rose in Cash's throat. "Nova, what he said about my uncle—"

"You did what you thought you had to in order to survive and protect your mother, *agápi mou*." *My love*. She pressed a kiss against his cheek. "I know your heart isn't black like your father's."

Cash's gut plummeted to his feet. Orion must've told her the truth about his childhood. He never dreamed she'd understand the things he'd done in the past and hadn't expected her to be so forgiving. Her uncle had essentially kept secrets from her for all of her life and she had only recently begun to forgive him.

She was perfect in every way.

Eyes wet, he gripped her beautiful face in his hands. “Marry me, *gie mou*,” he rasped, his voice thick with emotion. “I don’t want to waste another damn second without you being my wife.”

The door burst open behind them. A string of officers in tactical gear filled the room, shouting all at once. Eyes still locked with Nova’s tear-filled blues, Cash slowly lowered his weapon and set it on the floor before blindly fishing his badge out from his back pocket. Neither him nor Nova watched as the officers roused Orion and cuffed him while reading him his rights

“I had planned a more elaborate way of asking,” Cash continued once free to gather her inside his arms. “But none of that feels important anymore. You’re fated to be mine. A piece of paper might not change anything, but I want you to have my name. I want the world to know you’re mine.”

A smirked cracked Nova’s lips as she swiped her tears away. “Which name would that be?”

“Whichever one you’d like.” Laughing, he squeezed his arms around her. “Hell, you can call yourself Ophelia Nikos.”

She threw him a brilliant smile. “One thousand percent yes.”

“To the name Ophelia Nikos or to my proposal?”

“Both.” With more tears, she took his face in her hands. “And I agree, I don’t want to waste another minute without you being my husband.”

“Does anyone here have the number for a justice of the peace?” Cash called out to the officers.

Giggling, Nova tilted his head down until she could reach his lips with hers. Among the madness of the officers taping off the crime scene and hauling Orion away, Cash’s chest swelled as he kissed the girl of his dreams. Although life had tried to separate them time and time again, their paths were always destined to intertwine.

NOVA

TWO MONTHS after Orion was hauled off to a federal prison while awaiting extradition back to Greece for prosecution, Moon & Stars Winery became a flurry of pre-wedding activities. Nova feared her aunt would give herself a heart attack the way she ran ragged in an attempt to make everything perfect. The morning of the ceremony in which they were to be officially united via her recently ordained uncle, Val and London fussed over her for an eternity before her uncle stepped in to rescue her.

“Give the poor girl a break,” he grunted at his wife. “She was supposed to meet her fiancé ten minutes ago. They deserve some time alone before this circus starts.” His eyes became glossy as he took in Nova’s white ball gown with a bodice that gleamed like diamonds and the complicated way her blond hair was pinned around her head in wavy curls. “Besides, she looks perfect just the way she is.”

A wide smile spread across Nova’s expertly made-up face. Although her fierce uncle looked out of his element in dress pants and a tie, hair buzzed down in military style, she felt a swell of appreciation for the man who had raised her as his own. They’d had their differences over the years, but their relationship was on the mend.

She crossed over to him, rising on her bare tiptoes to place a kiss against his cheek. “Thank you, Uncle Dizzy. You look pretty amazing yourself.”

He pulled her against him for a tight bear hug. “I’m proud of you, kiddo. Your parents would’ve been too. You look so much like your momma did on *her* wedding day.”

Nova swallowed the lump in her throat, telling herself she wouldn’t run her makeup. She had purposely asked her aunt to style her hair the same as her mother’s had been in their wedding pictures.

“You’re gonna ruin her hair!” London cried, prying them apart. Her navy blue, A-line bridesmaids dress swirled around her ankles as she spun around to face her sister, fists pressed to

her hips. “If you’re going to meet up for a rendezvous with Romeo, at least promise me you won’t ruin your makeup.”

Snuggled up next to her husband, Val giggled. “Good luck with that.”

Nova pressed a kiss against her aunt’s cheek. Val was easily the most beautiful person among them in a silver dress that moved like flowing water with every shift of her curvy hips, raven hair pulled back in a high ponytail that made her appear a full decade younger. “Thank you for making me look like a bonafide princess.”

“You made it easy,” Val told her with a teary-eyed wink.

Nova then hugged her sister. “You too, short stuff.”

“It warms my heart to see you this happy,” London whispered. “I’m so glad you found each other again...after everything.”

“You’ll get your happily ever after one day too,” Nova promised, brushing her lips over her sister’s cheek before releasing her.

With a burst of excitement, Nova slipped into her ballet shoes and threw her family a curt wave. “I love you all to death, but I’m outta here. No promises we’ll make it to the ceremony on time.”

Among the protests of her family, she skipped out of her childhood home, laughing, and raced off to the cellar with the organza skirt gripped in her hands. Happy tears pricked behind her eyes as she was reminded of all the times she had snuck off to steal time with Nikos as a teenager. Their journey had come so far and the vineyard that had once felt like a prison had become her ideal paradise.

Her breath caught when she rolled open the doors and stepped inside. Cash—who she would forever regard as her *Nikos* deep in her heart—wore a gray slim-fitting suit, dark hair recently trimmed on the sides and worn longer on the crown area. At her request, he had grown his beard back to the length it had been the first time they made love. The desire

that shown in the depths of his gorgeous eyes made her stomach twist and swirl with need.

He was the perfect man, both inside and out.

And he was hers for all of eternity.

Once his expression became troubled, she was no longer sure of herself. Her heart sank. “What’s wrong? You don’t like the dress?”

“You’re more beautiful than an angel, *agápi mou*,” he insisted, rushing in to draw her into his arms. With a shake of his head, his complexion turned ashen. “It’s just...I just got off the phone with my contact in Athens. Someone under my father has resumed the mafia’s massage business in Plaka. They’re still trafficking women.”

Disappointment hallowed her chest. After everything Orion and Kostas had put her and London through, she couldn’t stomach the idea of other women suffering a similar fate. She gripped his broad waist. “So we go over there and help the authorities shut it down.”

“You can’t possibly want to return there,” he scolded. “I’ll find a way to help them shut it down from here...where I know you’ll be safe.”

“I won’t feel at peace until I know someone has rescued those poor women.” Her expression softened as she stroked her future husband’s cheek. “We can go to Greece for our honeymoon. Once we’ve stopped their operation, you can show me the Mykonos you loved as a boy. The parts that didn’t involve your father. You could even take me to a different island if you’d prefer.”

He gave a mournful shake of his head. “Nova...my beautiful girl with sea blue eyes...”

“Please, *agápi mou*. You must realize by now I’m not made of glass. And if someone doesn’t help free those women, they’ll never be able to fulfill their destiny the way we have. They may never be reunited with their loved ones. How can you expect me to live with that?”

Tears trickled down his cheek. “I can’t stand the thought of seeing you in danger again.”

“You won’t. This time I’ll have my brave, noble husband by my side.” She wiped his tears with her thumbs before kissing him soundly. He eventually relaxed his tense stance and kissed her back, threading his fingers through her complex hairdo.

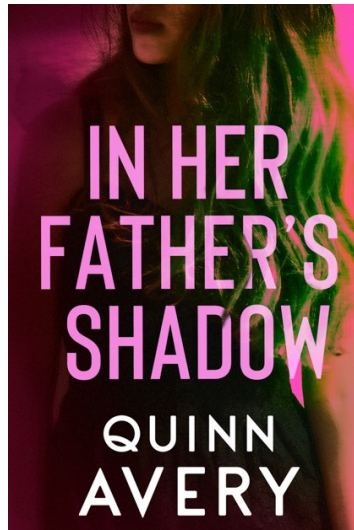
She spared no time in unbuttoning his suit coat and guiding his hand to the zipper on her dress. They may have had the rest of their lives together, but she wasn’t going to waste another second without giving the courageous, selfless man she loved the affection he deserved.

THANK you for reading *Deadly Paradise*! If you enjoyed Cash and Nova’s story, please take a minute to leave a review on [Goodreads](#), [Amazon](#), and [Bookbub](#).

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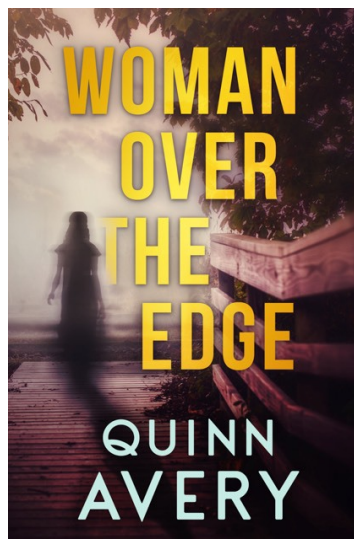
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Nightmares, paranoia, guilt, and a mistrust in men weigh her down as she navigates her way into adulthood, forging important friendships that will shape who she becomes. Once she takes the first leap toward her dream career, she’ll unknowingly seal a fate that will circle back to her father’s transgressions. When she finally allows herself to form the most important relationship of her life with a man who earns her trust, however, a new level of terror will arise...

Start reading *In Her Father’s Shadow* now!

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Perfect for fans of *Don't Lie To Me* and *The Night She Disappeared*, award-winning author Quinn Avery's newest book, *Woman Over the Edge* follows Mia's decades-long search for her sister's killer.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although I did actually visit Mykonos in the spring of 2022, I found absolutely nothing about it sinister, except maybe for the ferry ride from hell—that scene is based on events that actually happened (both the extreme vomiting due to a storm and “fire” from what was reportedly a flare gun discharge). The people of Greece were extremely friendly and the views were simply phenomenal. I hope one day life grants me the opportunity to return as it truly felt like paradise!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Clover Autrey for your hard work and expertise with this one! I'm so grateful I had another opportunity to work with you!

Thanks again to Najla Qamber for the beautiful cover. You are truly a gifted artist, my friend, and I appreciate all you have done for me over the years! You're the best!

Thank you to Christy Freeberg for being my #1 fan and keeping me sane through everything. Your friendship is a rare gem, and I cherish it every day!

Thank you to my (sometimes) sweet daughter, Samantha, for taking a risk and traveling an excessive amount of hours with your (too often awkward) mom. I'll forever cherish our adventures in Greece (just maybe not the ferry ride)!

As always, thank you to my husband for all the love and support as I stumble through my dream career. None of it would be possible without you at my side!