



SECRET LOVE

NATAŠA URSIC



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Synopsis



Giada, the daughter of Bari's most famous businessman, runs away from home and takes refuge in Santorini to escape the future her parents want to impose on her.

One of her best friends, Electre, is there to help her get her life back on track. She changed her identity to start afresh, far away from the apparently respectable halls that withhold nothing but hypocrisy and opportunism.

Things finally seem to be going well, until Jade comes face to face with her boss, Kristòs Princekaris, who makes her lose all her inhibitions.

Kristòs is a successful entrepreneur with a troubled past who, upon receiving an invitation to an important event in Athens, invites Jade to accompany him.

When all barriers between the two seem to be destroyed, Kristòs decides to thwart his feelings for Jade by attempting to crush them, pushing himself to the limit.

That is at least until their past comes knocking at the door.

*To those who believed in me
while I was looking for myself.*

We never choose our obsessions, obsessions choose us.

John Irving

Prologue



“ iada.”

G My friend’s high-pitched voice makes me raise my head in her direction. I’ve been sitting on the same bench at the Santorini airport for about an hour now. I’m so tired, I had dozed off without even realising. I blink a couple of times to bring her into focus, hoping not to increase the pain in my head that has been gripping me all day.

She walks towards me with that usual attitude of hers, reminiscent of a proud girl ready to take on the world at a moment’s notice. She recognised me even though I was wearing an incredibly drab outfit, consisting of a jumper, sweatpants and sneakers, items I’ve always done my best to avoid.

I slowly get to my feet, ready to dodge any questions she may have about my reasons for being here. I didn’t give her much of an explanation, yet she didn’t hesitate to help when I called.

After a few confident strides, I find myself face to face with Electre Kospiris, who frames my face with her warm hands, joins her forehead to mine and closes her eyes, regardless of what onlookers might think. I am powerless,

helpless in front of her, she is much more than just a friend to me: she is a confidante, a sister... my safe haven.

“Now that you’re here, will you tell me what happened to you? On the phone you were so vague that you scared me to death.”

“Sorry, but I don’t feel like talking about it right now.” I whine, shaking my head slightly in exasperation. At the mere thought of having to open-up my headache increases. I barged in on her unannounced, so sooner or later I’ll have to tell her everything. Right now, later sounds like a less exhausting option.

“Don’t apologise. You’ll tell me everything when you feel like it.” She hugs me tightly, and a wonderful feeling of warmth surges through me in such a loving way only she can convey. Her perfume invades my nostrils, which are being tickled by her long brown hair. “Let’s go home. Everything will feel less daunting over a nice hot cup of tea.” She places her hands on my shoulders and points her brown eyes into mine. “You can stay here for as long as you want. Don’t worry about a thing.”

She doesn’t wait for an explanation, nor does she demand one.

I bend over to grab the handle of my suitcase, but she reaches it before I do.

“I’ll take that, you carry the backpack.” I force a smile to thank her. I’m so devastated, both in heart and soul, that I can’t even show my appreciation.

She grabs my hand, intertwines our fingers, and urges me to head home with her. Without uttering a single word which could trigger a reaction from me, we leave the airport and head

for the car. I take my place by her side, close my eyes, and hold back the tears pressing up to my eyelids. I must restrain myself because if I start crying now, I will never stop.

Inside me a mixture of emotions are clashing. I want to scream, cry, stomp my feet and pull my hair out. Anger, pain, and disappointment are ready to burst out of me, yet I'm too exhausted to act upon them.

We leave the airport and drive through the deserted streets of this island which, for some reason that I don't quite understand, brings me tranquillity.

I have never been here before, everything is new to me, but something tells me I am in the right place.

As the car stops, Electre's first sigh is heard and I feel the warm touch of her hand on mine, which manages to soothe me further.

"It'll be okay, you'll see. Together we can get through anything."

I sigh because I don't know how to tell her that it won't be. I know my father and I know he will be looking for me everywhere. It's only a matter of time before he traces my location and orders his guards to come get me.

A bar is raising in front of us and, as I look around, I feel like I'm entering the grounds of a palace.

"I can never go back to Bari." A sob reaches my throat, erupting like the words that can't stay locked away. I spit out the first of many reasons why I ran. "They want to force me to marry a man without giving me a say in the matter." Feelings of anger mixed with disgust overcome me, making me sick to my stomach.

“Assholes,” she mutters without taking her eyes off the bar that never seems to finish rising.

She turns to me with wide eyes, concerned about what she just said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. It’s just that...”

“It’s okay.” She sighs and continues on, only to stop after a few turns.

“I don’t have the words to describe how I felt when Dad was making decisions for me. I wanted to...”

“You did the right thing coming here for a few days. Maybe they’ll calm down and realise you didn’t...”

“I felt like I was going crazy and ran as far as I could,” I reveal, interrupting her. “They don’t know where I am. I waited until they were all asleep before leaving. I left them a note with a few lines in which I expressed all the pain they have caused me with this choice and specified that Bari is no longer my home.” This is all I was able to say.

And the rest? Will I be able to tell her?

Electre’s expression becomes more serious. Maybe she has just realized that I will be a burden and is changing her mind about my stay as we speak.

“You’re right, this is simply too much.”

She parks the car in front of a beautiful little white house with blue trim, which overlooks the sea. The soft lights illuminating the porch are giving way to dawn. A series of plants embellish the curvature of the limestone wall on which a small sign hangs. I wrinkle my forehead as I look around and notice the neighbouring houses are all the same.

“The owner of one of these little houses is a friend of mine. He rented it to me with no time limit and no questions asked. He doesn’t need it and won’t be wanting it back any time soon,” she explains. “I’m sure you’ll like it; it even has a swimming pool and a private beach.” Maybe she changed the subject for my sake, to keep me from thinking too much about my situation, or maybe she doesn’t know what to say after my confession. In any case, I am infinitely grateful for what she is doing.

“Thank you, Electre.”

“For what? You know I love you and couldn’t leave you in the streets. You’re my guest, as I was yours.” She turns off the engine and faces me, lifting her hand to caress my face.

“Giada, everything will be fine, you’ll see. We will face whatever comes together and you will come out of it victorious. Like always.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to. I think...”

“If, if, if. Forget about ifs and start living. You can’t wallow in fear or doubt forever, you can’t let an unknown future ruin your life. You’re here now, and you can stay as long as you want. You can do anything.”

Her warm, smooth hand caressing my cheek feels comforting on my tear-stained skin.

“Could I even start a new life of my own?”

“Of course. And if you want to create it here, I’ll help you,” she proposes. I sit in silence, gazing into her eyes, until I decide. I sigh and let go, telling her everything. Or at least, almost everything.

“My dad found out I was having an affair with...” A sob stops me from revealing the name. “And he saw fit to impose

his will.” I finally say the thing that perhaps hurts the most. “After all I’ve done to make them proud of me: the good grades, the degree, the unwavering respect, what do they do? They sell me to Nicola. And me? I give in. I give in again, just as I always have, unable to assert myself, to impose my boundaries.”

Anger. This is what I feel as I listen to my own words. A feeling almost unknown to me, now rising inside me like lava ready to erupt. Everything was flowing through me without repercussions, nothing had ever hurt me so deeply, but this decision, this imposition is something I cannot accept.

“Nicola?” Electre interrupts me as if she hadn’t heard anything else. “That gutless, cheating squirt who dresses all cocky to make Tik Tok videos and obscene Instagram posts?” I smile softly at this colourful description of my supposed future husband.

“Do you know he friended me on Facebook? Maybe he forgot the time I made him look like an asshole in front of his little friends.” She laughs and I instinctively follow her at the memory of how she caught him with his hands in a girl’s panties. “But the other guy, the one you were in a relationship with, does he know about your parents’ decision?” I shake my head without adding anything else. Just the thought of telling her I’m a complete idiot hurts.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell him, but I don’t think he would have objected... quite the opposite in fact,” I answer bitterly. “I adored him from the first moment we spent together but all he knew how to do was take advantage of me and disappoint me. That being said, there’s no way others should claim the right to decide who I should marry.”

“Absolutely not. You are free to date and marry whoever you want. No one can force you. We haven’t been in the Middle Ages for a while now.” I nod: she’s always been the stronger and more sensible one.

“How about I introduce you to the owner of the flat tomorrow? Just to take your mind off things. He’s a nice guy and I’m sure he’d like to meet you.”

“No, please. I’d just like to evaporate and never be found again.” I don’t know if she truly realises what’s going on inside and around me. I can’t turn a blind eye and live my life as if nothing has happened. I know that as soon as I let my guard down, they will find me. My father will force me to go back to Bari and marry Nicola.

“You are thinking too negatively. You’ll see that, because of what you’ve done, they will reflect on their actions and understand that their demands are outrageous. Besides, you can’t barricade yourself inside the house forever.”

I know she is doing it for my sake, but my answer is still negative. I still have to process everything that’s happened to me and doing it by going clubbing or having fun, doesn’t really seem like a good idea, at least not yet.

“Okay, let’s go step by step then. First let’s get out of here, go into the house and take a relaxing bath in the Jacuzzi and tomorrow... we’ll see what the world has in store for us.”

Chapter 1



“You are a disappointment! How could you do this to me?
Y He’s my partner, damn it.”

“What difference does it make?” I whine.

“He’s married and expecting a child with his wife, that’s the difference” he thunders. I blink, incredulous. This is absurd. It’s a lie made up simply to hurt me. Raffaele always swore to me that things were ending between them. He couldn’t have done this to me, he couldn’t have fooled me.

I shake my head refusing to believe my father’s words.

“Don’t tell me he promised to leave her to be with you,” he rages with a sarcastic smile.

“Yes, he did. At least a thousand times.” I lower my head because I don’t want him to see my tears.

“Tomorrow we’re announcing your engagement to Nicola,” he states facing my silence.

“No.”

“Oh, yes we are.”

A VIGOROUS KNOCK on my bedroom door makes my eyes open widely. My heart is racing, and my cheeks are dampened by tears. I don't know what time it is; I don't even know what day it is, all I know is that I'm locked in here and I don't feel the need to leave.

“Giada, I have to go downtown. If you ever get hungry, I left you something to eat in the oven.”

Electre's disappointed voice echoes in the dark room. I roll to the other side of the double bed and bury my head under the pillow to block the world out. Even though I promised her not to lock myself away, I did. I'm sorry I didn't keep my word, but the pain that overwhelmed me once my anger subsided is too strong to contain. I struggle to react, to be the same Giada my friend has always known. I've found myself doing nothing but crying, as it's the only effective way I've found to vent my feeling.

I close my eyes, which are burning from the incessant tears, and try to let the thoughts and memories leave my mind in order to let me sleep.

I'm not allowed to though. I can't accept the way things turned out. I can't accept that my father threatened me with his arrogance. I cannot accept that I gave in to the advances of a man who swore he would leave his wife to be with me.

He who seduced me, made me touch the sky and then let me fall to the ground as if I were worthless, abandoning me and denying everything that had happened.

I believed in our hypothetical future because he gave me reason to.

“Giada.” Electre's voice comes back to fill the room and echo in my head. I jerk in fright. I thought she was out, going

on with her life regardless of me acting as dead weight. She knocks and tries to come in, but the door is locked.

“Giada, please. Get out of that room and come to dinner. You haven’t eaten anything in three days. You can’t go on like this.” Her voice is increasingly bitter, laden with fatigue, and it’s all my fault.

Between the tears and sobs, I didn’t realise how much time had passed.

“Giada, please, I know it’s hard to start again, but let’s face it together. Don’t isolate yourself, at least not from me. Take matters into your own hands and come back to life. You can’t give up.” Maybe she’s hoping to shake life back into me, but the only reaction she gets is a pillow to the face. Or at least that’s what she would have received had I opened the door and let her in.

She’s right though, I can’t keep this up.

“Giada.” This time her voice sounds more like a moan and once again I shove my face into the pillow. I press it as hard as I can, hating myself for driving her to exasperation as well. What kind of friend am I? A bad one, it would seem.

“I swear if you don’t come out on your own, I’m going to break down this door and drag you out myself.”

I don’t answer even though I know she might. “Please open up.”

I sigh. I get up from the bed and reach the door only just managing to rest my hand on the handle.

I rest my forehead on the wood feeling the cold that surrounds me and pierces into my bones. This is a new, different kind of cold, one which I am subconsciously creating with my own hands, through which I feel I can protect myself.

My head starts to spin, catching me off guard. My legs give way under the weight of my body, which feels like lead.

“I’m sorry” I whisper before everything turns black.



I SLOWLY OPEN MY EYES, convinced that as soon as the air touches my pupils, I will start crying again. But no. I lazily move between the sheets, limited by the pain. I ache all over, yet I don’t remember a thing. I feel like a wreck, much more than I should at twenty-two.

“Hey, you’re awake.” Electre’s warm, loving voice comes to me loud and clear as if she were in the room, by my side and not outside where I had confined her.

“Ele,” I whisper, trying to get up. What prevents me from doing so is my friend holding me by the shoulders.

“Don’t move” she orders. She pulls the covers over me and sits on the bed beside me. “How...”

“How did I get in? After I heard you fall to the floor, I had to call the owner who unhinged the door. He helped me get you into bed, but I had to explain your condition and promise many favours to keep him from taking you to the hospital. Do you realise you haven’t eaten in days? You can’t go on like this.”

That’s not at all what I needed, a motherly lecture. She is disappointed by my behaviour and has every reason to be. I didn’t think that what happened to me could completely knock me out. Of course, I never imagined that those who were supposed to love me no matter what, would be ready to sell me

off as easily as an old, weathered object. Nor for that matter did I expect to be mocked by those I thought loved me.

Electre hands me a glass of fruit juice in hopes of giving me some strength. She directs the straw towards my lips and gently pushes it into my mouth, waiting for me to drink. I take a small sip and let the tingling flavour invade my taste buds. When I eventually swallow, it feels like running razor blades down my throat. I endure the pain, I must, because I don't want to show her how much her caring gesture hurts me. She's the only one who cares about me and she's showing me that.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"No, honey... no need to apologize. Now you sit up and eat something. You have to pick yourself up and start living again as if nothing happened as if that blackmail had never been directed at you and as if the affair with that man had never taken place. Because the Giade I know would do that. Make up a new identity if you want, but fight back, please."

She's irritated, I can tell by her expression and the tone of her voice. Her eyes are shining, though, and I really want to listen to her and make her happy, but I can't. Festering inside me are only emptiness and pain. I squint my eyes and a tear rolls down my cheek. Before I even get a chance to sob, she hugs me tightly. I don't know if I actually feel better but knowing that she will fight by my side and that I won't be alone through this ordeal gives me more strength.

"Let it out, scream to the point of exhaustion if you need to, but please do it on my shoulder and not locked within these four walls." I release my arms from her grip and wrap her body against mine.

I sink my face into the crook of her neck and do as she asks. I let the anger, frustration, disappointment, and sense of

helplessness leave my body, and stifle a desperate cry that burns my throat, eyes, and heart.

“It’ll pass, you’ll see,” she whispers into my hair between outbursts as she gently strokes my back.

“I’m so tired. I want to react, I really do, but...” I don’t know how much time has passed. I’m exhausted and my voice dies in my throat from the effort.

“Then do it. You can’t treat yourself like this. You came here to do what? Sob desperately by yourself? I don’t think so.”

Electre stands up, grabs my hands, and pulls until she manages to rip me from the bed.

“You’re now completely relying on me. Do what I say, and you’ll see that you’ll come out on top.” I nod with terror in my eyes. “Good. First thing first...” She leaves my side and walks over to the window. She opens it to let some fresh air in, but the light that follows burns my eyes. “Now come with me.” She grabs my arm and leads me to the bathroom where a Jacuzzi is placed in front of the window. In one corner, hidden behind a glass wall, there’s a shower gorgeous enough to make a spa envious. The shiny black and blue tiles combined with the endless series of buttons promise first-class relaxation.

“Let’s start here: a nice relaxing shower while I prepare something for you to eat. Use anything and everything that calls your name.” She strokes my arm, perhaps to entice me to do what I’ve been told. “Would you rather I helped you?” she asks mischievously after noticing my hesitation. I shake my head, gathering my thoughts. I don’t want her to be reduced to being my caregiver, going as far as to wash me. The last time this happened things went way beyond that.

“Hurry up, when you’re done, we’ll go shopping.” She swiftly walks out, closing the door behind her. “Make sure you don’t take hours, or I’ll come in and do it for you, but trust me, that wouldn’t be any fun,” she yells from the hallway. I smile like a fool and start undressing.

I can’t thank her enough for her determination. I knew my trust would be well placed.

As the water soaks my body, I close my eyes, trying to relax as much as possible. I really want to move on, get on with my life, leave everything behind, especially the adventure I had with Raffaele.

If only Electre knew it was him that I was having an affair with.

“Giada, I’ll leave something clean for you to wear on the chair by the sink,” my friend says as she enters and exits the bathroom at lightning speed.

I shake my head when I hear her voice, snapping out of my daydream, and proceed to give myself a quick wash with the products I find in the holder.

As soon as I get out, I grab one of the folded towels on the cabinet and wrap myself up trying to dry off. They are incredibly soft and remind me of home. Consuelo, the housekeeper, always left them in these exact conditions for me to find, freshly scented with a hint of Parma violets.

I turn to look at what Electre brought me to wear and sigh as I find denim shorts and a tank top. It wouldn’t usually be an issue, I like to dress like that, and I have the body for it, but I somehow expected to find something more chaste.

I get dressed, brush my hair, and tie it up. I look up at the mirror and the sight of my reflection makes me even sadder. A

pale face embellished by dark circles under my eyes which seem to be my most prominent feature as of right now. I don't want to look like someone who spent days moping in her bedroom, so I try to find some make-up.

I open a cabinet drawer where personal items are usually kept and, fortunately for me, I find a well-stocked set. Next to them is a small bottle of perfume. I don't use much as I don't want to exaggerate or look like someone who wears an excessive amount of make-up at this time of... is it morning? Afternoon? I don't know. It's so bright outside that it seems to be early afternoon, but I can't be sure. Maybe the sun is really intense here even early in the morning or near sunset. When I'm ready I come out of the bathroom and, to my enormous surprise, I find my friend leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed.

“Makeup? Wow.”

“Don't grumble. I'm trying, appreciate the effort,” I huff crossing my arms in turn.

“Don't be so sour, it was just a compliment.” Maybe I should calm down, she's right after all, her tone wasn't meant to offend. “When you get out of here and I finally see your trademark dazzling smile on your face, then I'll leave you alone. But, until then, I will be your worst nightmare.”

“Are you done?” I giggle as she plays the fool in an attempt to make me crack a smile.

Maybe this new Giada can't handle it, since the one she met was completely different. If only she knew it was Raffaele's fault I'm in this mess.

“Let's go, otherwise we won't get anything done.” She grabs my wrist and pulls me in close, until our breasts are

touching. This contact brings back old memories I had put aside. “Now eat something,” she whispers as she strokes my cheek with her knuckles, then runs along the outline of my chin with her thumb. Her eyes fix on my lips. “Then we can go shopping.” She lifts her gaze, pointing it into mine. She smiles, trying to reassure me with her sweetness. I sigh and return her smile, hoping it’s enough for her since that’s all I can do right now.

In the kitchen, she had prepared a hearty meal and made sure I ate it all, staring at me from the very first bite to the last.

Scrambled eggs, toast, diced feta with sliced cucumbers and halved cherry tomatoes on which she had smeared cheese. A glass of grapefruit juice accompanied by a glass of water and a coffee, just the way I like it.

“If you ate meat, I would have added two slices of bacon or a grilled chicken breast, but since you’re a vegetarian I avoided it.” I look up at her staring in disbelief at all the love she’s giving me. “You still are, right? Because if you’ve changed, I’ll rustle something up for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine, thanks.” Never has anyone outside of Consuelo been interested in what I eat or what I like best.

Chapter 2



“Speaking of business interests...” she says, changing the subject for the umpteenth time since we’ve been sitting in the restaurant. She managed to drag me to the hairdresser before coming here to completely change my look. I was forced to say goodbye to my long raven hair and accept the platinum blonde ‘kindly’ recommended by Ele and her trusty coiffeur. Thinking she was joking, I dared to go further by asking for a peculiar colour, resulting in me now having a rainbow on the back of my neck. Yes, they took me seriously, and now I have multi-coloured hair, visible only if I tie it up.

“I’ve been talking to my cousin these days,” she reveals, whilst poking an olive. “He has a little restaurant similar to this one out on the harbour, and he told me that if you’re willing to work every now and then, you can start right away.” She smiles, happy to have helped me. I look at her with a surprised look on my face. I part my lips to say something that might ruin the moment, but she interrupts me just in time. “At least you’ll be able to buy yourself some more clothes or something. You’ll at least be able to be independent and start a new life.” She widens her smile in the hopes of making me feel her joy, but I feel like crap. I was ready to snap back at her, but she’s doing all of this for me after I shut her out of my pain without hesitation. I’m such a bad friend.

“Thank you,” I whisper and print a smile on my face. I really hope she can’t see its strained nature. The thought that I confided in her about something I didn’t feel ready to is dispelling the surge of sweetness I was feeling.

“When you’re free you could accompany me and introduce us, then we’ll see.” There’s tension in the air, I can feel it. Something that gives me the impression I’m in the wrong place. Maybe she’s not very happy with my presence, maybe I’m nothing but dead weight to her since I only have very few possessions on me and am relying on her entirely, but I really didn’t have anywhere else to go. I reach out my hand grabbing my glass and, before taking a sip, I speak. “Although I’ve never been a waitress. In fact, I’ve never worked in my life,” I mutter. I’m afraid that this will penalise me.

Silly me... I’m twenty-two years old and after graduation I preferred to have a good time instead of looking for a job based on the skills I had acquired. But I guess it’s normal that after so many years of studying one would want to have fun.

“I suppose it’s just a matter of bringing plates to the tables without spilling them on the customers. I don’t think it’s that hard,” she chuckles. I shrug and start eating, amused by her answer. If it were that easy, there wouldn’t be a specific school for that line of work.

I only take a few bites before I feel completely full. I’m still not very hungry, after what she had prepared for me this morning.

“You know, I like you as a blonde. You look like a different person, almost unrecognizable.” At these words, I look up at her and find her questioning gaze fixed on me. I guess she has a lot to ask me, or maybe she doesn’t know how to point out that I’m not reacting seriously.

“We could find you another name,” she whispers. I can’t tell if his is a statement or a tease.

“This is ridiculous. My father will find me before I even manage to get out of this damn chair and, at that point, it will all have been in vain.”

“Giada, please stop moping. This isn’t who you are, you’re...”

“I’m not moping, I’m just angry as hell. I wanted to spend at least one day not thinking about what they did to me and instead it seems like that’s all we can talk about. Let’s just do what you say and see how long it lasts, okay? From now on I’ll be Jade Kastis, born in Athens but of nomadic descent, is that okay?” I answer rudely just to get a moment of peace.

I cross my arms over my chest and roll my eyes. She doesn’t answer, preferring to look at me with wide eyes. “The date of birth can stay the same, it doesn’t change shit anyway.” I lean forward and bang my hand on the table. “My father will find me and drag me with him to hell.” As I say this, all the rage that had been building up exploded out of me. I look at her and see only fear. Hell, I’m so ungrateful. She’s putting her soul into this and me? I’m ruining everything for her with my bad mood and pessimism that won’t let up. I huff and drop my head forward. “Sorry. I can’t seem to find the light. Everything is dark, so bloody dark, and it’s making me furious.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to stop them from finding you. I promise.” She reaches out her hand towards me, grabs mine and squeezes it tightly. “Maybe I know how to cheer you up. This time for real.”

I find her determination truly unique. I hint at a smile to let her know I appreciate it even if it doesn’t seem like it. Good thing she’s here or I’d still be in my room moping.

“I’ll introduce you to your employer. Maybe a new, smiling face could give you the right push to react. His cheerfulness is very contagious, he always puts me in a good mood and who knows, he might have the same effect on you.”

“He’ll feel so sorry for me that he’ll hire me out of compassion,” I grumble.

“Nonsense. You’re magnificent when you’re not having these ‘drama queen’ episodes. I swear, I wanted to slap you for the way you answered me just now.” She raises her hand to call back to the waiter and have the bill prepared. “You’ll see, he’s wonderful and kind, as well as handsome.”

“You’re not trying to pin him on me, are you?” I blurt out amused. The way she talks about men always cheers me up. When necessary, she knows how to enhance people’s qualities and make them more interesting than they actually are.

“As far as I know he had an affair with a married woman. I have no idea how it ended. The subject seems to be sensitive,” she reveals as she pays the bill. I get the feeling all of this is not leading to anything good. We get up and, in complete tranquillity, head for the car.

“Maybe the husband found out. Think of the scene. I couldn’t be someone’s mistress or even a betrayed wife. He’d be a dead man.”

You can’t blame her. Who would want to lose the love of their life because of an affair? Who would want to have to share their partner with another?

Yeah Giada, who would? You. You have been the lover of a man who turned out to have a wife expecting his child.

A few minutes pass before we reach the beautiful seascape enclosed in the caldera. After a few downhill bends we reach

our destination. At least I think so, as we've reached the port, which encases a pretty little restaurant embellished by typical island colours.

“You'll see that you'll get along fine. He's an easy-going man and...”

“Man?”

“He's thirty-three, I don't think it's ideal to call him a boy.”

Thirty-three? I thought he was our age.

As soon as I crossed the threshold of the restaurant, I was fascinated to find it completely different from what I had imagined. Even though from the outside it gives the impression of being tiny, inside the room is huge. The wooden tables which fill the space are embellished by beautifully decorated tiles and their legs are painted in that characteristic blue that I am beginning to adore. Everywhere you look, the atmosphere gives off Greek vibes.

“Electre Cospiris. Tell me this is not a mirage. At last, I can associate a face to the one who calls me at all hours, day and night, for comfort.” A deep voice makes me turn towards my friend who, with a huge smile, welcomes her cousin by running up to him and hugging him tightly. “So good to see you again.” I watch the scene in adoration.

“I show up every now and then. You know how it is, I'm constantly running around,” Ele chuckles, pulling away from him.

As soon as I can see his face, I notice how handsome he is: brown hair, eyes identical to Electre's, slightly darker skin. Maybe it's all the time he spends by the seaside. He is a few centimetres taller than her and, although there are well-defined

muscles protruding under his shirt, they are not overly pumped up. In fact, they are very pleasant to look at.

“Meet G...” Electre takes a few steps to the side to give her cousin a chance to see me.

“Jade Kastis,” I interrupt her, holding out my hand before they can say anything.

His eyes settle on me, and he reaches out his hand to grab mine. A strange shyness pervades our bodies at the same time.

Electre was right, he’s really beautiful.

“Pleased to meet you, I am Enea Cospiris, the co-owner of these four walls.” He smiles at me in the same sweet, warm way his cousin does. He looks friendly, without a shadow of malice. I tighten my grip, afraid only that he might choose not to accept my application.

He reciprocates, making a pleasant shiver spread through my body. His hand is warm, smooth, soft, and pleasant to touch. He seems to get lost in my eyes, which makes me blush.

“This is the friend I was telling you about,” Electre interjects, seeing us struggling. She taps him on the shoulder to get his attention and he, perhaps to lessen the embarrassment, pretends to be hurt. He releases his grip to massage himself. He turns to his cousin with a look of mock terror.

“Are you crazy, hitting me like that? You know I’m fragile. I could break into a thousand pieces,” he says mimicking outrage before smiling at her in amusement.

“You’re just dumb, not fragile.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. Let’s be serious for a moment: have you talked to your mother?” He inquires with a slightly worried

tone. Ele immediately changes her expression. Her mother? I know that the weeks Electre spent in Bari were because of a huge fight with her parents. I don't know whether things have changed yet.

What a lousy friend I am, I didn't even ask her if she had fixed her problems.

“Funny.”

“Do you need a job too my dear? I know they cut your funding and was wondering how you've been able to support yourself.” he asks overpowering my friend's words, putting her in the foreground of what we came to do.

“No, you prick. I'm here for her, and I'd like you not to divert the topic onto me.” The man casts a fleeting glance towards me, wrinkling his brow as if bewildered.

What the hell is going on?

“As I explained, she would like to stay here and support herself without asking her parents for help. You assured me on the phone that there wouldn't be any problems.” Enea turns back to her with a strange frown on his face. He grants her a tugged smile. He strokes his cousin's head just to mess her hair and take his revenge.

“Ele, are you okay? Mum's worried,” he rehashes, ignoring me.

I never asked any questions about her family because the only time I dared bring up the subject, she specifically asked me not to pry.

“I'm fine. I don't need a job and I don't need them either, I already have people to support me.” What? I thought she was working.

“Did you find a pimp?”

“Enea, please. We are not here to talk about me. Because if you really wanted to, then we could also talk about your little affair with that married woman.” The expression on Enea’s face turned serious. He glared at her while she looked back at him with an amused smirk on her face. She knows how to keep him at bay. It shows.

Enea turns back to me, pinning his amber eyes back into mine.

“Have you ever worked in this environment?” He stares at me with a serious expression, perhaps annoyed by what his cousin has revealed. I should look away, break this eye contact, but it’s impossible. He seems to be able to dig deep into my soul and read my thoughts.

“Whatever, right?” He shrugs and glances at Electre, then back at me. I can feel my heart beating in my throat, and I can already taste a big laugh with an accompanying tease, if not a full-blown scolding for thinking I can work without experience. “All you have to do is write down what they order and bring the dishes to the table.” He cuts through my thoughts, making me feel even more stupid and inadequate than I did when I arrived. I’m honestly ready to turn around and walk out of here without looking back if he turns me down.

“When can you start?” I swallow, incredulous at his manner. I try not to stumble over my words and sound like a silly little girl.

“Now, if the clothing is appropriate,” I venture. I had never said that. Enea takes the opportunity to thoroughly square my body. He scrutinises every inch of skin that the shorts and tank

top have left uncovered, and a sudden warmth makes me blush imagining things I shouldn't be.

I really do seem to have a problem with older men. Or maybe I just have a problem with men in general.

I look for Electre's help with my gaze, but she seems to be lost in thought. Maybe Enea's words made her think about her life.

"I don't see any issues. You'll make many tourists happy," Enea retorts, twisting his mouth into a mischievous smirk. "But there's no ship scheduled for today. Tomorrow on the other hand..."

"Then it's done," Electre began, hitting her cousin on the stomach to get his attention. His interest in me seems to bother her.

"I know she's in safe hands with you," she whispers through gritted teeth. It came off as more of a veiled threat than a statement, as she lifted her head to look him in the eyes. He doesn't seem to mind so much, in fact, he smiles blissfully when his cousin stands on her toes and leaves a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

"Alright." He pulls her close, revelling in that contact. "I'll expect you tomorrow by eleven. It's supposed to be a full house. Are you up for it?" That smile and those very white teeth surrounded by full lips really are quite adorable.

Just like Raffaele's.

I nod and extend my hand towards him to seal the deal. I hope I can do it, keep up the pace required, not disappoint either of them or most importantly, myself. This is a good opportunity to pay Electre back for hosting me.

“Sure, I just hope I don’t cause any damage and make you regret your choice.” I chuckle just to get rid of the tension I’m feeling.

“Other than getting a table wrong or knocking something over, what damage do you think you can do? I’ll be there to guide you, don’t be afraid,” he replies, grabbing my hand. Unexpectedly he pulls me towards him, heedless of his cousin, enclosing me in a hug. I don’t move, maybe this is their way of doing things, of reassuring people, of... what do I know, I’m only trying to understand what their customs could be.

He takes a deep breath as he runs his face through my hair, as if he wants to remember my scent.

“I’ll give you a hand and you’ll see there won’t be any problems. Don’t worry about it before time. We’ll face whatever happens together,” he reassures me in a warm whisper, far too sensual for my liking.

My goodness, is everyone on this island going to be like that?

As soon as he loosens his grip, I slip away from him and this unpleasant situation that I’m not enjoying at all. I haven’t given Enea the chance to think inappropriate thoughts, I haven’t led him to believe I’m into it nor have I tried to. When our gazes meet, however, I notice from his expression that he has perhaps realised he went too far.

“Go home, get some rest, enjoy your last day of unemployment; I want you energetic tomorrow.” He’s back to being serious.

Will I ever understand men?

“Sorry girls, but I have to go back to the kitchen and get everything ready for tomorrow.” He doesn’t even give us time

to say goodbye as he turns around and, with a few steps, vanishes behind a curtain.

Maybe I did something I shouldn't have?

I hope we can clear the air tomorrow and, more importantly, that he doesn't get involved to the point of making my job difficult. Resigned to the fact that it may be a trait of his character, I cast a glance at my friend urging her to leave the restaurant and go home, but she turns to the curtain behind which her cousin has vanished.

“Wait for me outside please, I'll be right there.” She walks away looking anything but peaceful. I huff and head outside where a row of blue chairs, along with the slight breeze tickling my skin, await me. I sit on the only one kissed by the sun and bask in its warmth.

Why does everything suddenly seem wrong to me? Running away from home, invading my friend's privacy and life, almost forcing her cousin to give me a job and approaching him in the wrong way. And now, most likely, they're fighting because of me.

Man, I miss Raffaele. His hands, his kisses, his perfume, his attention, the dozens of red roses he used to send me before we secretly met. It seems strange to say, but even though he landed a low blow on me, two years are hard to erase in a few days. He was my first true love.

I feel a tear roll down my cheek until it sneaks between my lips.

“Here I am.” My friend's voice makes my eyes widen. I turn to her, finding her head tilted and her brow furrowed, waiting for me to say something. I get up from my chair and

put it back before reaching her and stopping a few inches away.

I can't make eye contact with her because I feel like I've done something wrong.

"Are you okay?"

I nod, but she surprises me by stroking my cheek, where the tear fell. Without demanding an explanation, she hugs me.

"Everything will be fine, don't worry," she whispers in my ear sensing my state of mind. I had a moment of weakness, looking at Enea I saw Raffaele and that hit me harder than I expected.

I nod again and take a deep breath, inhaling as much air as I can, and then blow it all out, exhaling the sadness with it.

"What did you say to each other?" I probe, hoping to get a sensible answer. "Let me guess, I was too cheeky for him." Electre chuckles. She grabs my hand and leads me towards the car, determined not to say anything. Or maybe not, since after a few minutes she starts ranting about what happened in the restaurant between Enea and me, glossing over the fact that I felt sickened by the whole affair.

"Nonsense. He probably only saw long legs and..."

"You think he's that shallow? His eyes were fixed in yours, he didn't even notice your body," she reveals. "Rather, what about you? Maybe you found something interesting in him."

What? No. If having him around for a few seconds reminded me of Raffaele, I don't think I could see him in the same way. Not least because he's certainly not interested. This wouldn't even be the right time.

“Electre, please,” I bellow. I don’t want to hear about this. I just want to focus on work for now. I just want to earn some money so I can be independent. When I have recovered financially and emotionally, then I can think about other things.” I’m not going to mix the two, it wouldn’t be professional. Besides, I wouldn’t even be able to do it right now. “I don’t feel like throwing myself into anything with anyone. It’s too soon, you know that. Besides, do you know how many people someone like him meets on a daily basis?”

“Do you have any idea how many people go to his restaurant? Anyone who arrives in Santorini. You can’t live segregated forever.”

She’s right. I hadn’t even thought of that.



“HOME AT LAST,” I sigh as I cross the threshold of the flat. I theatrically drop the dozens of bags acquired because of Electre’s compulsive shopping and run towards the kitchen.

After talking to Enea, we went to visit the centre of Oia where my friend looted every shop. I don’t think she’ll ever wear all those clothes, even though she has them pegged as ‘must-haves’. We also managed to stop at a phone shop where I bought a new SIM card in Electre’s name.

I’m so thirsty I could drain a lake and, even worse, I’m in dire need of a coffee. I wasn’t even allowed to stop at a coffee shop to rest for a few minutes. The only break I was allowed was a ten-minute stop at the little bar where we got our takeaway dinner.

A light chuckle fills the small lounge and, when I turn around, I find Electre standing in the doorway staring at me.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re beautiful when you’re happy?” She moves a few steps towards me and hugs me. But, in spite of her smile, her eyes are sad and not knowing why bothers me. I just hope it’s not because of Enea’s behaviour, or mine.

When Electre arrived in Bari she caused quite a stir. She managed to make some of my friends hate her just because she didn’t hold back her tongue. What she had to say, she said straight to their faces. Even Raffaele couldn’t stand her. After Bari I kept in touch with her, but I don’t really know how her life went on, if she found love or if she is still as much of a free spirit as she had always declared. I remember her smile though, proud, and bright, which she always wore at any cost. A smile that today, however, is different, as if it concealed truths she did not want to share.

“You’re finally out of that room.” She squeezes me tighter. “I never want to see you like that again. You have no idea how scared I was.” As soon as she said those words, she pulled away from me, perhaps to gauge my reaction. Her eyes always have the same effect on me: hypnotic. Her hands caressing my cheeks and sliding down my neck remind me of moments I don’t know if I’ll ever relive. I sigh and look away from her.

“Enea sniffed me,” I reveal, changing the subject. I do this because I still haven’t recovered from earlier and can only deal with one mess at a time. I pretend to be offended by it as I retreat a step.

“Sniffed?” she chuckles. Her expression changes and I realise I haven’t upset her.

“Yes, sniffed. It’s not that...”

“Do you think he’s a maniac?” Her smile widens, but her eyes remain sad. “Enea is a good man. You just smell good. That’s all.” Electre walks past me, opens the cupboard, and grabs a couple of glasses.

“Okay. I trust you,” I say under my breath as I watch her. Only now do I notice that the kitchen is equipped with so many items that I don’t know the use of, but I assume that if they’re there it means they can be used for something. At least I think so.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask as she fills both glasses with fresh water. She nods as she turns to me and, leans on the counter and hands me a glass. “Who does this all belong to?” I look around, searching for clues regarding the owner, but there are none. Besides, the decor of this house is quite impersonal, but so rich in detail that it seems to have been made for an everyday life, not just a beach holiday.

My friend’s eyes lower to the ground. Strangely enough, she is more dumbfounded than I’ve ever seen her. The subject seems to touch her deeply and I would love to understand why. Maybe help her. Something is clearly not right and being in the dark about it certainly doesn’t make me feel well.

With one step I reach her, and she recovers, raising her eyes to me. She shakes her head and puffs out a soft giggle.

“You were saying?”

“You have to tell me how much rent for this place is.” I choose to take it easy on her this time and not go straight to the point because it apparently upsets her.

“Do you want a coffee?” she suggests, changing the subject and I, of course, nod. Everything to do with this flat catapults her into another dimension. She doesn’t want to talk

about it, but I want to know, and I decide that sooner or later I will come back to the subject. After all, wasn't it her who told me that the landlord would like to meet me? And didn't he help her unhinge the door to my room?

She turns to the coffee machine, starts setting the various functions, inserts the pod and as soon as she picks up the cup, it slips from her hands. I try to help her, but she pushes me away. I don't say anything, I leave her to it and accept her silence. At least for now.

“Did I mention I'm really glad you got out of that room?”

“About a million times.” Electre hands me the cup with the hot drink and I smile. She remembered not to add sugar nor milk, just the way I like it. “Instead, I was pleased to notice that my Greek still seems to be understandable.”

“Your Greek is perfect,” she reveals in a whisper as she watches the coffee fill her cup.

“Like your Italian coffee,” I continue, trying to engage her and get her talking. “I like the way you decorated the house. There are so many things the function of which I don't understand, but I like it,” I say hoping she finds my joke funny too.

“They were already here. Nothing you see is mine,” she explains as the smile leaves my face. I reach out a hand towards her, removing a strand of golden hair to tuck it behind her ear.

“What's going on?” Screw it, I'm determined to see this through because I don't like her expression at all. She closes her eyes at my touch and stops breathing. I grab her cup and set it down on the kitchen countertop before turning her to face

me. “What’s going on with you? And don’t say ‘nothing,’ I don’t believe you. Was it Enea’s words?”

“There’s someone in my life,” she blurts out suddenly catching me off guard. “I mean, I’d like someone to be in it.”

“And why does that make you so sad?” Usually love should not make you lose your smile.

“I’m invisible to him. I’ve tried everything: being sweet and compliant, inviting him out to dinner, here, or asking him to go to his house for coffee or a relaxed drink, but nothing happens. He doesn’t seem to want to go on any dates. At least not with me, since he always finds excuses, work commitments or trips to Athens that take him away for days. Sometimes he doesn’t even answer the phone, shows up the next day or forgets entirely. I barely managed to tell him about you and ask if you could stay. Not to mention the other night. I called him five times before he answered and came to help me open your door. Picture it, I was even sending him good morning texts, and you know how much I hate those.” She runs her hands through her hair then freezes. Eye to eye. “Sorry, I’m coming right out and saying this to you.”

I spent months after she left sending her a good morning message every single morning to keep in contact, the great thing being that she always replied. I never thought it would be annoying, maybe because I believed in our friendship and wanted to keep hearing from her. I smile at her for speaking the truth, but I don’t want to rub it in any further.

“Do you remember how close we used to be and how we used to tell each other everything? I don’t see why we can’t be like that again.” I caress her face in an attempt to comfort her. It only took a moment for the tables to turn; until yesterday I was the one who needed consoling, now she is. It only took a

moment for our faces to come together and our breaths to mingle. Just the way it was so long ago.

“Thank you,” she whispers. A smirk is drawn on her little doll face, warming my heart. If I’m not allowed to be sad, she shouldn’t have to be either.

“If he keeps making excuses, tell him I want to meet him in order to thank him for his hospitality and rescue. What do you say?” She opens her eyes wide and barely moves away, her expression that of someone who has been called out.

“How do you know it’s...”

“Well, you said this is his house,” I retort with a big smile, leaning her forehead against mine.

“Do I look that desperate?” I circle her shoulders with my arms to pull her to me in a comforting hug. I’ve never seen her so worked up over a guy, so I guess this is special to her.

“Nooo” I giggle causing her to react positively. “I’ll sacrifice myself if you want though, maybe I’m the perfect excuse to unlock him” I say with a sigh. “Electre, I would like us to have a genuine friendship, one of those you see in movies. Best friends, just like we were in Bari.”

“Also, because where else would you go?” she asks with a sly expression. “I don’t know your exes and I don’t think you’d ever go back to the man you were in a relationship with, otherwise you wouldn’t be here with me.”

“Oh, thanks,” I snort. I push her away from me just enough to turn around and grab my cup. “For the record, I knew full well I wasn’t going to get anything from him,” I lie. “I liked the idea of having someone my parents didn’t like.”

“But...” She stares at me and interrupts. I can tell she’s rethinking my acquaintances and, well, there aren’t many who

don't get on with my parents. When I notice a spark in her eyes, I nod.

“Raffaele: he's the one.” I reveal my secret because she was going to get there anyway. My friend's eyes widen, incredulous. “I know I promised you not to give in to his advances, but...” I close my eyes, squeezing them shut until I feel pain. I want to chase away all the memories I have of that creature, rid myself of that burden once and for all.

“I understand you,” she whispers. “I would have given in too because, let's face it, we knew it would only lead to trouble, but...” Maybe she's trying to comfort me, to make me seem less foolish and naive. I just nod.

“Were you already dating him when we...?” I shake my head instinctively.

“What difference does knowing that make? You were the first for me and I could never forget you.” I'm completely honest now. This is what I've carried with me since that day. “I looked to him in hopes of finding what I felt with you that night on the beach, and even though it seemed impossible at first to feel the same strong emotions again, he seemed really sincere and...”

“You had a crush.”

“Worse. I fell in love. He promised me he would leave his wife to be with me and I believed him like a fool. Then I found out she was expecting his child and...”

“What an asshole.” She shakes her head giving voice to my exact thoughts.

He was lying to me and can't even be bothered to look for me now that I've run away. Maybe he's even happy that I'm gone.

“Giada, we must stop being sad over those who don’t deserve us. Rather let’s think about dinner, otherwise it will get late, and the food will get cold.” Electre moves towards the coffee table in the living room where she had left the bags with dinner and starts to prepare.

“Just give me a minute, I need to do something,” I say heading towards the room. At a fast pace I head straight for the suitcase and grab my beauty case which contains my contraceptive pills. I certainly won’t be needing them for a long time, but I would like to finish the month before stopping.

When I grab them, I notice something’s wrong.

“Electre, what day is it today?”

“Thursday,” she shouts in response. “Why?” Her voice is close now.

“How long have I been locked in my room?”

“You arrived on Monday” she reveals with a hint of doubt “Why?” I turn to her with the pills in my hand and, pointing to them, reply.

“I haven’t been on the pill for a week.” She shakes her head not understanding my bewilderment. “I usually get my period between the second and third day of withdrawal.”

“Are you saying you’re late?” Everything around me suddenly stops. No noise, no rustling is heard by my ears, just the pounding of my heart as I realise what’s happening.

“Honey, it can happen. The stress, the journey, the fasting your body has been forced into, it all contributes towards delaying your period.” Mentally I’m trying to go over the last few weeks in Bari and when I last had intercourse with Raffaele, but it’s all a blur.

“Giada.” Ele’s hands framing my face and forcing me to look at her bring me back to the present. “Trust me, it’s just stress. Nothing more.” I nod, squinting. “If you want, we can go to the pharmacy tomorrow and get this thought out of our heads.” The caress she gives me warms my heart but makes me feel sick again. I had finally managed to recover, fight, get back to living and now this. The biggest problem that could ruin my life forever.

“Come on, let’s eat. You’ll see that tomorrow, after you’ve rested, eaten a hearty meal and taken a relaxing shower, it’ll show up.”

“Okay. Give me a second and I’ll be there,” I whisper, giving her what she wants. I smile back and, as she leaves the room, I reach for the door, locking it.

Chapter 3



It was easy to slip away. This morning I got up at dawn and managed to avoid Electre and her questions.

I know I was wrong in locking her out of the room again and not letting her in even though she threatened to unhinge the door several times. I wasn't myself and I'm still not.

I preferred to leave the house and walk alone to the port. It took me forever, but it gave me time to think and to look for a pharmacy to buy a pregnancy test. As soon as I arrived at Enea' I decided to eat something. Well, he demanded it actually.

Luckily for me I managed to keep my mind focused on work, completely forgetting what was happening to me. Or at least I managed to do so until a little while ago, when I sat at the counter drinking a lemon and lime juice with lots of ice.

I look over at Enea as he arranges the glasses.

I was surprised to see how he has changed since yesterday. I thought he would be upset about my behaviour, but he was really friendly. He told me how to place orders, which glass should go with each drink, how to arrange the cutlery and that, if any customer has any special request, to always tell them I need to ask the chef.

Overall, I think I didn't do too badly considering the tips they handed out.

Now that the place is empty, I can have a chat with him as we haven't done that yet. I want to clarify, explain that I'm not looking for anything.

"You're making me waste away with all that staring." His voice brings me back down to earth. I look up finding his eyes on me. We're alone and only now do I get to contemplate him the way he deserves. His brown hair is very neat, without a single wisp out of place. His eyes are still bright, but his face is tired.

I smile at his words; the first ones addressed exclusively to me and not work.

"How did I do?" I ask. I had to look away to do so. It seems like the old Giade doesn't exist anymore, because she wouldn't have minded. I grab the glass with both hands and take a sip, as if it were liquid courage. "Be honest. I don't want any favouritism just because I'm friends with Electre."

"Better than I thought. Honestly, as soon as I saw you, I thought you were a snot-nosed brat, unwilling to get your hands dirty. But I quickly changed my mind. Customers even complimented me on my new employee." He smiles, puts down the cloth and approaches me. "You did well. Even the tips say so." He points to the bag in front of me. A normal person would have divided them up, but instead he emptied the entire contents of the jar into a plastic food bag, tied a knot in it and handed it to me. I smile with satisfaction, not so much for the money, but for exceeding expectations. But that's not all, there's one more thing I want to make clear.

"Enea, I wanted to apologize for yesterday," I begin, trying to sustain his gaze. He has magnificent amber eyes, almost

hypnotic. “I didn’t mean to...”

“What are you talking about?” Now his brow furrows, making me question my perception towards his gesture. “Oh, wait. You mean the hug yesterday?” He smiles in amusement as I bite my lip. “Maybe you misunderstood.”

“Electre did, too,” I lie, clutching my shoulders.

“She misunderstood too” he chuckles quietly. His friendly tone is comforting. At least he’s not angry with me.

“To be honest, she’s already thought about the degree of kinship” I mutter looking away from him, seeing how pathetic my words were. Enea doesn’t answer right away rather he takes several puffs of air before expressing himself.

“But... aren’t you and her... yeah, well, that is... lovers?”

I could call myself shocked, but somehow, we were, even if only for one night. Enea bursts out laughing since I didn’t answer his question.

“She’ll never change. That brat always makes a fool out of me.” He shakes his head and goes back to what he was doing prior to our conversation. “I swear you misunderstood. I could see you were tense, and I just wanted to put you at ease with a brotherly hug. Well, maybe sniffing your hair wasn’t such a good idea,” he concludes as a victorious smirk draws on my face. I knew it wasn’t just a sigh. “Your scent though... it had a familiar feel to it, and I took advantage of it. That’s all.”

“So... that’s all cleared up?” I’m not quite sure if he’s taking it in stride or pretending to.

“If you’re okay with the explanation I gave, it is to me.” Enea turns around again, leans against the counter in front of me pointing his eyes into mine. He’s stretched so far that he’s inches from my face.

“Jade, not everyone is a pervert who only thinks about sleeping around. There are people who might even like you as a friend,” he whispers with all the calm in the world, continuing to watch me. “If my behaviour has destabilised you, I promise it won’t happen again.”

He couldn’t have used clearer words and I really hope he doesn’t change.

“Okay.” I stand up and make to pull away, but he stops me by placing his warm hand on mine.

“Really?” I nod and give him one of my most sincere smiles.

“Of course; I’m glad we could talk about it so freely.” I try to pull my hand away, however his grip is firmer than I thought.

“So, we’re done talking about this?” I nod again, slightly frightened by his behaviour. I didn’t think he’d taken it so hardly, after all, he was the one who made the mistake.

“Do you have plans for lunch tomorrow?” I wrinkle my forehead and shake my head slightly. “Perfect, then I’ll see you at the same time as today. Two ships are scheduled.” That’s one thing I don’t understand: his strange attitude. He finally loosens his grip letting me go. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, thanks. I’ll walk.” Without waiting for his permission, I turn towards the storage room to grab my backpack. When I grab it, the first thing I do is rummage through my front pocket looking for my phone. As soon as I unlock it, I find a flood of calls from Electre. Surely, she must have been worried, as well as incredibly pissed off.

“No way. Wait ten minutes and I’ll give you a ride on my bike to... where do you live?” he shouts from the other room.

Enea pops into the storage room just as I bring my phone to my ear to listen to one of Ele's messages.

"I know you're at Enea' and I hope you're okay. I just wanted to tell you to call me back and that I'm not too cross to stop worrying about you."

Without meaning to, I frown at him. From his expression I think he understands why.

"She made me promise not to tell you. She called me to ask if you had arrived," he explains, raising his hands in surrender. "Did something happen between you two?"

I don't answer and let the second message play.

"I'm at the beach below. Join me and I'll introduce you..." An annoying rustle doesn't allow me to hear anything else. The message stops and I'm stunned.

"Sure you don't want a ride?" he asks, glossing over the previous question. I take a deep breath and bite my lip. "You don't want to, do you?" I shake my head and inhale, more fed up with his stubbornness than Electre's. "Then I won't insist anymore, I do want to lend you one of my bikes though. At least to ride to the beach and back tomorrow. Or at least long enough for you to settle in. What do you say?"

"I must look pretty desperate." He continues to make himself available without being asked.

"No. It's just that if I can help you out, I'd be happy to. You're friends with my cousin, I don't see why I shouldn't." As well as being handsome he is also wise, two qualities I really like.

"Alright, but I'll bring it back tomorrow. I promise." I can't and won't live on other people's shoulders. Even if it is just a loan.

“You have come back to work after all,” he smiles. “Come on, I’ll give you the bike and then you can speed home.” He takes a few steps to the left, out of the restaurant, and towards a door that he opens smoothly. It’s a huge room with brick stairs on the right-hand side leading to the upper floor. A French window occupies the entire wall and overlooks a tiny, neglected garden, while the wall facing the sea has another huge French window that he has obscured with sheets of newspaper.

He could have a beautiful flat with a view of the sea, but instead the room is full of weights, benches and various equipment that would make any gym envious. Too bad they’re dusty and thus give off an air of neglect.

“Here it is.” His voice booms through the walls. “I hope it’s the right size.” In his hands he holds the handlebars of a women’s mountain bike. “I’ve got a couple in case any customers want to take a ride around the island instead of using polluting vehicles.” He rolls his eyes and gives an amused smirk letting me know that this brilliant statement is not his. “It would be better to have scooters, but for those you have to spend a little bit more and right now business isn’t in its prime.”

“What about your partner? You told me yesterday that you are the co-owner. Can’t he help you?” Enea turns serious again and his eyes go blank as if caught in a memory. “Usually partners split the costs unless there’s some special deal that...”

“Yes, that’s right,” he interrupts me. Maybe I’ve hit a nerve and, without realising it, reopened an old wound.

He pushes the bike towards me and with his head signals me to leave. His face is serious, which makes me even more curious.

“Thank you very much,” I whisper. He sighs and, with a fake smile, urges me to leave.

I hope I can make it in time even though I won't be able to bathe since I don't have a swimming costume.

Ele is going to kill me, I know, but I have to rely on the navigator on my mobile phone, hoping that there are no last-minute detours.

With great effort I ride up the slope that connects the port to the first village and, as soon as I get to the main road, I pull over to catch my breath.

I take advantage of the stop to click on the geolocation that my friend sent me via WhatsApp and wait for the route to load.

“Fifteen minutes,” I sigh, looking around. I lock the screen and slip my phone into my pocket letting the voice guide navigate me. I turn left and as the robotic voice makes itself heard, an annoying sound overpowers it. A screeching of wheels, a strange sense of release and a pain in my side draw me to a single conclusion. An accident.

I close my eyes and try to process what just happened to me. The sound of a man shouting prevents me from doing so. I don't understand what he's yelling about since he does it so fast, but I can safely assume it's addressed to me.

My goodness, I'm laying on the ground and this man is doing nothing but screaming at me.

“Slower. I don't speak Greek very well,” I bark, hoping he understands me. I couldn't be more grateful for my choice to sign up for Greek class and consequently making Electre's acquaintance.

“How are you?” he asks in a calmer and, finally, understandable way. He walks over and kneels at my side, covering the sun shining in the sky. My blurred vision prevents me from getting a good look at his face, but I can tell he’s... huge. His hand brushes my cheek to move my hair from my face.

“Hey, are you alive? Are you okay? My goodness, you flew! Didn’t you see the stop sign?” I move my neck slightly and a twinge hits my back. I try to settle down better but now it’s the hip’s turn to make itself heard.

“I’m talking to you, of course I’m alive,” I murmur through the pain. “Though I have my doubts about being whole.” I try to shrug him off to get up, hoping that once I’m on my feet the pain will go away, but he brings his hands to my shoulders and stops me. As an excruciating pain arises in my lower abdomen, he hisses something about having to call an ambulance and the police for proper findings, given the damage to his car and my possible head injury.

“No.” I try to sit up again, but he keeps stopping me. “Get your hands off me,” I blurt out, irritated by his overbearing gesture. I look up at him, and only now do I notice his shapely features. Powerful muscles constrained by a white shirt, perhaps a size too small.

Either that or his posture leads to his biceps swelling to that point.

His dark hair is short at the sides and slightly long in the front. Neatly trimmed eyebrows and a barely-there beard contour his slightly elongated face. Staring at me, brown eyes, so full of passion and....

Fuck, where the hell did he come from? Surely the cover of some fashion magazine, otherwise I can’t explain it.

This man is more attractive than Enea, that's for sure.

“Take it easy, I don't want to hurt you. I just want to see if you hit your head by any chance.” He massages my skin so gently it almost sends me into ecstasy.

“I'm fine,” I whisper, enjoying the caress. He manages to tame me, lower my defences, calm the pain I feel, both physical and mental with a simple touch. His closeness numbs my reactivity.

“Can you stand up or is your head spinning? Can you feel pain anywhere?” His voice goes straight to my heart, filling it and making me believe that someone actually cares about me. I shake my head slowly letting it rub against his hand. I ache all over, but I don't want him to stop touching me. Then I get my feet back on the ground, remembering my appointment with Electre. I'm late, he's going to make me late. I break free from his grip. I have to run or my friend won't forgive me.

I stand up with an atrocious spinning in my head and a pain in my lower abdomen that makes my legs give way. Luckily, he manages to catch me just in time. I lay down with my hands on my stomach and clutch the fabric of my shirt hoping for some relief. I gasp.

“Come on, I'll take you to the hospital.”

“No.” I bring my hands to his arms to remove them from my body. I look around, trying to wrap my head around what happened. He doesn't resist or chase after me when I take a few steps away from him. Man, what the hell just happened?

“I have to... go...” I stutter messing up my hair. I scratch my scalp right where I hit my head and a twinge forces me to squint in pain.

“Are you kidding?” He raises his voice startling me. “Did you see the damage to the bodywork?”

I open my eyes and turn in his direction. Goodness, why can't he just let me go? The one with the most damage is me and not his stupid car.

“I'll pay you back, it's no big deal.” What does he want a slight dent on a stupid hatchback to be? “Even if it takes forever,” I whisper to myself.

“And how do you expect to do that without involving the authorities? Do you know what it's worth?”

I swear, squaring up to the luxurious German supercar. I can't figure out where to look for the damage. Whether the impact was frontal, sideways or... the only thing buzzing around my head is the cost of that specific model.

What about my bike? Where is Enea's bike? If the car has suffered any damage, I can't imagine what happened to the bike. I look for it hoping that the unpleasant feeling that hit me is just a vain fear and that it hadn't been damaged, but when I find it, the panic rises into my throat.

“Jesus Christ,” I curse, hoping he didn't hear me.

My head continues to ache, my vision blurs every time I move, and a feeling of panic assails me. I can't stay here; I have to leave quickly. I shake my head and, trying not to fall, I walk towards my bike, but he grabs my wrist, blocking me in my tracks. I stumble, but he manages to catch me and turn me around, trapping me in his tight embrace.

I thank God that his wonderful eyes are stopping me from slapping him by making my brain go crazy as the pain keeps surging through my head. He's invading my space, taking liberties that I haven't given him. And yet, I feel good in his

strong arms. His warmth manages to calm my heart and the throbbing of my temples. I could compare it to a painkiller, so powerful that it erases everything in a single instant.

This man has an intoxicating perfume that tickles my nostrils and incites me to calm down. Around his neck he wears a thin gold chain with a wedding ring as a pendant, flanked by a small crown studded with Swarovski crystals and a letter, K. As if it couldn't get any better, he's sporting a tan that would make anyone envious.

Who the hell are you?

I look up at his face finding his gaze slipping into mine. So magnetic, so hypnotic that it could ravish me and make me forget even my name. His lashes flicker as his chest rises and falls in the same rhythm as mine.

A Greek god, that's what you are. One of those who came down to Earth to bewitch an earthling and procreate.

Our faces are so close that I can feel his breath tickling my lips. He smells good, I'm sweaty as hell, yet he doesn't seem to want to leave me.

"Give me your details," he says sensually. My senses are in turmoil. I've never had anything like this happen to me, I've never craved to breathe the same air as a stranger.

I bite my lips nodding, aware that once he has what he wants, he will let me go. He loosens his embrace and I feel myself missing him. He slides his hand up my arm and countless shivers take over my body.

"If you don't want me to call the police."

I blink, feeling revulsion at what he said. He practically threatened me.

He backs away a few steps and then drags me with him towards the car.

His overbearing gesture disgusts me. I hate people who impose themselves in this way.

He leans over to rummage in the glove compartment and my eye falls there, on his firm bottom squeezed into his jeans. What is wrong with me?

I squint and lift my head. I'm a basket case. I need to fight back, get him as far away from me as possible and run away. I have to stand up for myself, show him who he's up against. But when he gets back up and turns to face me, the air stops in my throat. His eyes scan me, and he manages to block my every gesture, my every thought. He intoxicates me, removes my inhibitions, messes with my brain.

Without looking away, he hands me a notepad and a pen, which he shakes to encourage me to comply.

Damn it.

I hesitate, still dumbfounded by the man in front of me. I close my eyes and furrow my brow at the pain in my head, but he misinterprets my gesture and tugs on my arm.

“Choose, it's either this or I call the police.”

Is it possible that no one drives along this street? Was I that unlucky to have an accident with the only car on the road?

I hold my breath and try to free myself from his grip, but he prevents me from doing so by increasing his grip further. He waves the pad under my nose. I sigh and as I grab the pen, he brings the pad to his chest for support. With his help I manage to scribble something that could be mistaken for my address, first and last name. But this is not the case. I can't tell

him who I am. Besides, I don't even know the street where Electre's house is.

"Your phone number too" he adds authoritatively making his chest vibrate under my hand. I snort shaking my head at his insistence.

I comply to his demands. I want him to go away, to leave me alone. Let all the emotions he's causing me fade away as soon as he gets in the damn car. The rest will work itself out somehow.

When he leaves my wrist, I feel lost. His grip keeps my feet on the ground, making his presence all the more real. From the pocket of his skinny jeans, he pulls out his mobile phone and dials a number.

"W-what are you doing? You said you wouldn't call the police if I gave you my details," I stammer with terror in my eyes and voice. I don't know whether to sigh when my phone rings and a mischievous smirk appears on the man's face or kick myself for looking like a fool.

He mumbles a few words that I don't understand and puts the phone back in the pocket of his jeans. He pats my bottom, right where I'm keeping mine.

"Well, Eleni..." He pronounces the name I wrote on his slip of paper in such a sensual way that he seems to be mocking me. "Did you think you were going to fool me? I know exactly who you are." He smiles, proud to have discovered a truth that only he knows.

Fool him? Maybe he knows who I am, knows my real name, and wants to take me home. Oh, Jesus Christ. What if he's a private investigator hired by my parents to find me?

Wide-eyed, I flinch, but he comes back and grabs my wrist. A nightmare, that's what this is, a monstrous nightmare from which I can't wake up. Maybe I'm still lying on the ground unconscious.

"Get off me, you're hurting me." I can't go back to my family, and I wouldn't go back for anything in the world.

"You purposely cut me off, but I fooled you instead," he says in a victorious tone, convinced he's right. "Go, now you're free to run anywhere you want, you little scammer. Expect a letter from my insurance company, maybe even my lawyer, or why not, a nice lawsuit. Depends on the outcome of the missed appointment you caused me," he growls as he pushes my arm away.

What? Why?

Dazed by what has just happened, I turn back to my bike. I try to reach it, but the roar of the car engine makes me turn around. It's so fast that, in the blink of an eye, he's already far away.

If he thought I was a scammer, why didn't he call the police instead of making such a fuss?

I try to retrace every single moment, every single word we exchanged as I watch the road ahead. Not because I was dazzled by him, but because I don't understand his attitude, how we came to collide, him going away and leaving me here alone after running me over. Yet, he seemed concerned about my wellbeing. The phone rings, bringing me back down to earth. My heart is pounding at the thought that it could be that weird man. I don't want to and don't have the strength to hear him again.

When I see Electre's name I breathe a sigh of relief, even though I already know she's about to scold me. As soon as I answer she does, in fact, scold me for being late and asks for an explanation, seeing that Enea told her that I left half an hour ago with one of his bikes. I apologise and promise her to get a move on and that I will be there in a short time even if I am not at my full strength.

"Never mind. I wanted to tell you that he just called me. He can't come," she blurts out in a sad tone. I think about it for a moment, and I assume she's probably talking about the landlord. Maybe, in the message she left me earlier, she wanted to tell me that I would be meeting him. I run my hand over my forehead trying to collect my thoughts.

"Let's hear it, what did he come up with this time?" I don't know what to say to her since I still can't construct a cohesive thought. Maybe he doesn't want anything from her and she's too stubborn to realise it, or maybe he's just as crazy as the guy who just ran me over.

"A mishap with the car. Or something."

Oh, shit!

I instinctively turn towards the direction where the man from the accident disappeared, drawn by something I'm not sure how to define.

"Well, who cares. The important thing is that you and I spend time together," she states trying not to come across as sad, but I can totally sense that she needs company. I shake my head, realizing I've been acting like an idiot. And a bitch, given my behaviour.

"I'm coming," I say with a surge of pain piercing my chest. I don't deserve her as a friend, that's for sure.

As soon as I grab the handlebars of the bike, unfortunately, I notice that both the frame and the wheel are completely twisted.

What have I done wrong?

I drop the bike in a fit of rage. I'll be very late and now I'll have to pay for this too.



“THE DAMAGE EXCEEDS the value of the bike. The only thing I can suggest is to buy a new one. If you let me have this one, I can give you a good discount on that one.”

Markus, the owner of the petrol station who also fixes bikes, continues to talk to me about things that matter very little.

“I can't accept it. It's not mine and I can't go to the owner with another one, can I?”

“Well, it would have been better if you hadn't done that to it, don't you think?” He smiles as if making an amusing remark. “The important thing is that you weren't injured.” He peers at me in hopes I refute his words and, perhaps, to deflect from the boorish joke he just made. Thankfully, the pain was gone after a few minutes, or maybe it subsided thanks to the trek I took to get up here. “Did the driver even stop to help?”

Why do you want to know?

He leans over to look for something, maybe a form he'll have me sign. Of course, if he was slightly tidier...

“I ask because the damage could, and indeed should, be paid for by him,” he explains as he continues his search of the archive behind him. He grabs a binder and places it on the table, opening it. He flips through it and then closes it and puts it back in its place.

“He escaped,” I lie. What should I tell him? Why should he even care? I don’t have the man’s details; on the other hand, he has my mobile number.

The mobile phone... I have his number; I could give it to him.

“Bastard,” he mutters, shaking his head. Even though his back is turned, I can easily imagine the grimace on his face. “Hell, if only I knew where I put the forms” he huffs placing his hands on his sides.

“Delivery forms?”

“Yes. Can you see them anywhere?”

“Here, on the counter” I point them out to him, finding this whole situation really absurd. Markus turns around and spots the binder. “Oh, thank God. I hired an intern and in one week she moved everything around...”

“She tidied the place up.”

“Not in my eyes,” he chuckles. He pulls out the form from the folder and hands it to me. “Do you happen to have the receipt for the hire?” I wrinkle my forehead trying to figure out what he’s talking about. “The bike. Either you rented it, or you stole it. But since I don’t consider you a thief...”

“The co-owner of the restaurant where I work lent it to me.” This time I’m telling the truth. Being thought of as a thief doesn’t sit well with me.

“All right. Now, about the payment...”

“I can only leave you a deposit for now.” I say in order to set the record straight right away.

“No problem, but it’ll be six days before the parts arrive and then another two for the job. Is that okay?” I nod. In eight days I’ll be able to find the money to pay him. I have to. “After eight days, if you don’t come by to pay, I’ll contact the rental company and they’ll take care of the balance.”

“That won’t be necessary.” I pull out my mobile phone and find the number of the man who reduced my bike to that state. I’ll make him pay for the damage and give it back to Enea, explaining how he ran off instead of providing further assistance. I sign and give him the paper.

Most of it is finally behind me, now I just have to go back home and figure out how not to be discovered by Enea.

Damn that man.

The walk home was really hard. If before the pain had vanished, now it seemed to demand attention. I thought I would find Electre in the throes of some nervous breakdown because of the missed appointment or because I left the house without telling her, but instead I’m alone. She didn’t even reply to my messages. I’m incredibly tired and hungry, but I absolutely have to take a shower to remove any sign of the accident. I head to my room to get a change of clothes, but I make the biggest mistake in these scenarios: I sit on the bed. A few seconds go by, then darkness.

Chapter 4



It's been three days since the accident. The man with the Porsche hasn't contacted me, and I have no intention of contacting him, even though I have his number. Electre, on the other hand, is still blaming me for the missed appointment, as if the problem with her friend's car was my fault.

Or was it?

She stayed by my side, especially when she forced me to take the pregnancy test. I was so anxious I didn't even dare to breathe. Shortly after the result came out negative, I got my period.

I was also lucky on the work front: Enea hasn't noticed anything yet, too busy in the kitchen to take notice of me.

"You know, I still don't believe you," my friend begins, pointing her fork at me with pasta stuck between her teeth. Strangely, we had been eating lunch in silence, each with our own thoughts. I look up at her, waiting for some clue. So much has happened that she could be talking about anything. "I'm talking about the bike."

"I swear, I..."

“Enea lent you the bike.” She brings the fork to her lips and then, with her mouth full, starts listing the various points that seem strange to her. She subjects me to this interrogation every day. The last time was while I was taking a shower, just to see if I would change my story. “But where is the bike?” she asks. She chews nervously with her eyes widened, waiting for my usual explanation.

“I got a puncture and left the bike at a garage. I’m sorry about the date with your friend, okay? It wasn’t intentional. We can reschedule it if you want.” She stares at me intently, trying to figure out if I’m lying or telling the truth. Sure, the damage goes way beyond the small, insignificant puncture, but I won’t tell her that, even under torture.

“You know there’s insurance? You’d bring it back and the cost of the repair would scale it,” she informs me in a dead pan tone. She smiles and licks her lips, convinced she’s fooled me. I shrug, ignoring her clarification.

“Alright, let’s pretend I believe you.” She shifts her focus back to the fusilli with cherry tomatoes on her plate. She pushes the vegetables aside to get free access to the pasta. She hesitates, gloating amusedly before continuing to speak.

“I’ve managed to extort my friend for another date, which, guess what, is tonight,” she reveals, smiling like a child. Up to the other day she was crying that he didn’t want to go out with her, and now she’s managed to get herself two dates in no time. I wrinkle my forehead waiting for her to continue. I know her well; I know perfectly well that she will have more to say. “And just in case, we’ll go with the car.” There it is.

“Don’t...”

“Don’t you dare make excuses this time, Giada. I very well know that you have to keep a low profile in order not to be

discovered, that you only want to think about work and blah, blah, blah... But not having fun, not having a social life, not feeling the slightest impulse to go out until late at night on the most beautiful island in the world seems too much. Besides, nobody knows you here but me.”

She chimes in, convinced that I’m against going out. She’s nervous, I can tell by the way she skewers the pasta, but I decide to leave her to her convictions. It amuses me to see her in this state when I know it’s not serious. She drops her fork onto her plate and grabs my hand. Inevitably our eyes meet.

“Giada, don’t worry, they won’t find you. I promise.” She finally finishes saying what was on her mind. She caresses the back of my hand transmitting all the warmth she is capable of.

“That’s not the problem,” I whisper, giving her a shy little smile. I rejoice that she cares about me this much, but really, the problem this time is not about being recognised.

“You’ve been here for a week and besides work you have nothing going on. You can’t live like this. Not if you want to rebuild your life.” These words hit my soul. She is trying to revive Giada the party girl, the one who never missed a chance to have fun and do whatever she wanted. Unfortunately, I don’t want to be like that anymore, I don’t want to exaggerate.

“I don’t have anything to wear. Everything I bought isn’t appropriate for a night out. Having fun was not in my agenda for my time here.” Now that I’ve revealed the real reason for my reticence, I hope she’ll stop with the lecturing. I hate it when she’s right.

“My wardrobe is always at your disposal, my love. You can choose whatever you want as long as I’m not already planning to wear it and you return it to me intact. That is, if you don’t find someone who wants to bite it off you and make

you touch the sky; in that case I may as well get over it,” she replies in a mischievous tone. I close my eyes, widening my smile. She is unbelievable. “After all, you can take whatever you want, whenever you want,” she reassures me. Amongst all her other qualities, she has always been exceedingly generous.

“All right. You win.” Electre gets up from her chair, and lunges towards me, hugging me tightly. I hear her whisper words of gratitude. With her by my side, all my fears vanish. I don’t know how she does it. She is my strength. “But we can’t be out too late, I have to work tomorrow.”

“I promise.” Her cheek against mine causes me an unexpected emotion. It feels like this point of contact is burning hot.

“Sorry.” She moves away from me very slowly, keeping her head bowed, reminding me I still don’t know what’s wrong with her. Maybe she felt it too, or maybe she’s afraid she’s being too intrusive and that it’s bothering me. “Now go get ready to release the bitchy Giada I adore.” She smiles at me and then walks away heading for the stairs.

“Electre, is everything okay?” I try to call her back, but she’d already made it to her room.

I clear up quickly and wash the dishes, leaving everything tidy. I don’t like it when dirty dishes are left lying around.

I join my friend upstairs and as soon as I arrive in front of her room, I stop and look inside and find her busy looking for the right dress. Knowing her she won’t take the time to put them back into her wardrobe; she’ll put them up to her body pretending to wear them and, if not satisfied, will throw them on the bed huffing. But she’ll change her mind even after she’s chosen it, after she’s already put on her make-up or worse, halfway through.

“They all look good on you.”

“I’m afraid he won’t notice me,” she whispers throwing yet another dress onto the mattress, just as I predicted. I take a few steps towards her, placing myself in front of the wardrobe. “I just want to be perfect, that’s all.”

“You are, even without all those frills and if he doesn’t notice, he’s got big problems.” She scrutinises me as if I’ve said something stupid, but I genuinely mean what I said. She is perfect in everything she does.

“This, for example.” I pull a killer little dress out of the huge wardrobe. Although the black lace joining the top to the puffy collar seems to make it chaste, the neckline is well accentuated given the perpendicular cut on the chest. The skirt comes down to mid-thigh with two small slits in the front.

Electre’s eyes widen, and she holds her breath, bewildered by the dress I proposed.

“I’ll wear that if you wear this.” She turns to the bed and grabs a dress, or rather, a strip of fabric that would cover from the breasts down to mid-thigh. It’s pitch-black with a sash over the breasts and a shimmering hem. I swallow because it’s not exactly the epitome of sobriety. “It’s not over the top, quite the opposite.”

I pretend to think about it.

“Okay.” I shrug my shoulders, extending the little dress I picked out for her. She reciprocates the gesture and we both grab the hangers at the same time.

“You’re going to do great with this,” she says. Then a mischievous smile appears on her face. She leans over and grabs a stunning pair of shoes, perhaps too high even for me. “Add these.” She places them in my arms before turning and

reaching for a jewellery box she keeps in the middle of her dresser. She pulls out what looks to be a Swarovski necklace but, when she unravels it, I realize it's some kind of garter belt. I wrinkle my forehead trying to understand how anyone could take pleasure in admiring a strand of glitter on my thigh. "It's something I recommend you wear under any little dress or dress with a slit. They love it here," she says hanging her garter over the heel of her shoes.

We went from: "*I don't know what I'm going to wear*" to "*I have a clear idea of what you're going to wear*" in less than ten minutes.

"I'm going to look like a prostitute."

"No, you're not. It'll look great on you, and you'll find someone who wants to take it off too." Her victorious smirk irritates me and, as I close my eyes, she places her hands on my shoulders and forces me to turn around. She pushes me out of the room, letting me know she doesn't want me with her.

"You're going to wear that dress, aren't you?" I manage to ask before she closes the door in front of my nose. I remain there. I don't even have time to move before the door jerks open again.

"Remember to tie your hair in a high tail."

"I'm not the one who has to pick up your friend," I blurt out, then turn, lengthening my stride towards my room. What the hell.



"I'M HERE, I'm here. I'm ready."

I quickly walk down the corridor that divides the night area from the day area and join Electre, who's been waiting for me in main hall. She looks sulky because she's late, her folded arms highlighting her mood.

"My friend has already called. Since we're late, he's waiting for us inside the club," she reveals in a cautionary voice, as if she's chastising me for falling asleep in the bathtub. I didn't do it on purpose.

"That is, if he doesn't leave first," I mumble, giving myself one last look in the mirror. Nothing seems to have changed since the evenings in Bari. After all, you can't change a 'slut'. That's how my father labelled me.

I look at my body and find something wrong with everything. Goodness, why must I always feel compelled to dress like this?

"Funny."

"Sorry. He might have some patience and actually wait for us for once," I mutter looking at my reflection in the mirror. I frown noticing a detail I had missed before.

"Hey, you didn't wear the dress I recommended." She's wearing one with the thinnest of straps that shows off her busty breasts and covers her long, slender legs like a cloud. She is simply magnificent.

"No. But you took my advice." She smiles and prepares to leave the house, leaving me dumbfounded. I shake my head and try to catch up with her, only to find that as soon as I get to the door, her garter belt drops from my thigh. With an angry gesture I pull it off. I don't care what Electre says, it's already the third time I've had to retrieve it. "Come on!" my friend's

scream calls me back. I have just enough time to put the bloody thing on the countertop and leave the house.

In the car, Electre's mood changes completely. If she was angry with me before, now she seems to be agitated and, frankly, I don't know which is worse. She keeps babbling nonsense, moving from one topic to another.

"Can you tell me about this friend of yours?" I begin after a short silence. She's worse than a metronome when she's anxious. Apart from the fact that she would like something more and that he is the owner of the bungalow where we live, I know nothing about him. Not even his name, not even a hint of what he looks like.

"I have nothing to say to you except that he is incredibly handsome. Tall, dark, amber eyes... a real hottie. He's thirty-five years old and..."

"What?" I interrupt her, incredulous at her words.

"I know, there's just over ten years difference, but believe me, when I'm with him it doesn't matter." Ten? I've counted a good thirteen and that's not a few. Maybe I'm exaggerating if I say he could be her father, but this difference really seems a bit too much.

Like the difference between me and Raffaele.

"I don't know what worries me more. You thinking like an old woman or him thinking I'm a kid," I chuckle, teasing her. I adjust myself better on the seat, trying to keep my skirt from riding up more than it should or my top from coming down and revealing things I don't want to show off. Even though my breasts are small, I want to keep them safe.

"At thirty-five you're not old and at twenty you're not a kid," she huffs irritably, looking away from the road just long

enough to give me a dirty look. “Also, why do you have to start being bitchy now?”

I let out a thunderous laugh, dragging her with me. I have no idea what I said that was so unseemly that it got her to call me a bitch. I only stated what I think about the age gap, which is also an opinion shared by most ordinary people. Nothing more.

A few minutes later we arrived at the club.

“Be careful,” she says and adds nothing more. I shrug and take a deep breath.

I really don't know what she's referring to.

We get out of the car and walk towards the line of people waiting to get in. Electre takes me by the hand, intertwining our fingers, and, dragging me along, overtakes them all. She stops in front of the bouncer who looks at us as if we were yet another couple of young girls trying to get in without waiting their turn.

“Electre Cospiris, plus one. I'm... we're guests of Mr. Senesikos.” The man in front of us looks at us as if he doesn't believe her words. He shakes his head and tries to dismiss us with a snort.

In Bari, all I had to do was hand over a wad of cash to get in without all this fuss.

“Come on, check it out,” I interject, seeing him hesitate.

“Or do you want me to call him, and have you fired? I know for a fact that he's Mr. Princekaris' friend, best friend.” she threatens. Intimidated, the big man checks the clipboard in his hand and, with a resigned sigh, lets us through.

“Thanks,” I whisper hastily as I pass him. I hate people who feel superior for no good reason. He just had to do his job.

Entering the club, Electre prances around like a little girl who has made her greatest wish come true.

“It’s a dream come true.” Her eyes sparkle, her wide smile almost reaching her ears; I bet her heart must be pounding. She looks around, admiring every detail. She walks over to the balustrade in front of us and leans so far over that I’m afraid she’ll fall off.

“Good thing you’re not a kid in your twenties.” I repeat her words from earlier, trying to imitate her voice. Even though I reach her, she doesn’t listen to me because she’s too busy looking around for her friend. She bites her lip and mutters a frustrated moan, stamping her foot on the ground.

What happened to the Electre I knew? The one who never submitted to anyone, who always had the situation under control?

I gloss over her behaviour to admire the place. It’s really nice. A few characteristic objects reminiscent of the island are strategically placed in the best spots and, most importantly, do not weigh down the decor. Illuminated by LED strips set in the cracks between the wall and the ceiling, these decorations give the whole nightclub an intense atmosphere, but not at all in a vulgar way. Here and there are floor lamps that help to create a sort of see-through effect by the more secluded tables.

Definitely inviting.

“Where the hell are you?” she whispers, scanning every person in the room. I try to help her out by trying to find a guy who fits the description she gave me, but I struggle to find

him. “There he is!” she exclaims, flashing yet another smile. She grabs my wrist and drags me down the staircase until I’m only a few steps away from the man. And what a man, might I add.

“Hi!” She greets him after drawing his attention with a tap on the shoulder. His gaze, surprised at first, calms down and he smiles from ear to ear. His cerulean eyes highlight his amber complexion.

But didn’t she say they were meant to be brown?

“Hello, agápi,” he says, returning the greeting. He leans towards her and leaves a tender kiss at the corner of her mouth that makes her blush like never before. “What are you doing here?”

This man makes quite the impression despite wearing a hideous floral shirt fitted into white linen trousers. The first few buttons are open, revealing a gold chain and well-defined muscles under his taut, hairless skin.

“I wanted to see you and introduce you...”

I square off in front of him, trying to find something sensible in his outfit, but nothing. Not even the espadrilles on his feet can save it. I raise my head again and find him staring at me in annoyance. His outstretched hand gives me a hint that he would like to introduce himself.

“You must be Ele’s friend,” he starts, but I block him by grabbing his hand. I nod as I tighten my grip. The smooth, warm hand reminds me of Enea’.

“Athos, this is Gia...”

“Jade. Nice to meet you.” I interrupt her just in time.

Did she magically forget about the fake identity? To think, she's the one who proposed it in the first place.

I use a neutral tone, careful not to let out any feelings. I am not the one he has to concentrate on, rather my friend. I smile to myself, thinking of their reaction if I were to urge them to hide in the warehouse and unleash their raging hormones.

“Jade,” he repeats, slow and doubtful, casting a glance at Ele. He seems to be weighing up his next words. “Jade, stone of the same name which conveys courage, purity and honesty. I don't know why, but it suits you.” He leans towards my hand not taking his eyes off mine.

Why did he say these words? Does he know my name? Has Electre revealed it to him?

As soon as his lips settle on my hand, my eyes swiftly shoot a glare towards my friend.

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sweet little Jade,” he murmurs, accentuating my name. I turn back to look at him fearfully.

“The pleasure is mine, Athos,” I reply, slightly bowing my head. Although I'm flattered by his behaviour, even though it's obvious he's acting, my heart is pounding. He certainly flirts around with everyone, heedless of hurting the feelings of those who interpret that kind of attention as interest.

“I'm glad to see you've recovered,” he adds, reminding me that it's thanks to him that Electre managed to open the door to my room and pick me up off the floor.

“Thank you. Also, for letting me stay at your place and helping Electre get me back into bed” I say as sincerely as I can. Wrinkles are drawn on his face, the kind that appear when

you're thoughtful and sorry. His eyes move away from me to point elsewhere.

"Well," he says finally, "what can I offer you?" He turns away from me, making me feel uncomfortable for saying something I shouldn't have. Did I do something wrong? Did I talk too much?

"The usual for me. Thank you," Electre squeaks, taking a seat next to the man who looks at her in fascination.

The usual? I thought she didn't see him as often as she'd like to.

"Do you really like that greenish, sugary shit?" he chuckles, resting his forearm on the counter and continuing to smile. Athos looks at Electre as if she were the only woman on Earth and she does the same to him. They completely ignore my presence at this point.

"Yes. Do you mind?" She bites her lip, holding back a mischievous smirk. Her face is so close to his that, if he wanted to, he could kiss her.

"Not at all." He moves a strand of hair behind her ear and then strokes her earlobe. He ran his thumb along the line of her jaw until he pinched her chin. He did it with so much sensuality that it made me wish I was in Electre's place.

"Jade. What about you? What are you having?" he asks without having the decency to turn towards me, too busy seducing my friend.

"A room. So, I can push you two in there and you can give free rein to your raging hormones," I state dryly, even though I'm telling the truth. I cross my arms over my chest and tap my toe on the floor, annoyed by their attitude.

Why did she have to take me with her if their intention is to be alone and keep each other company?

Even though Electre glares at me, Athos bursts out laughing, amused by my joke. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and draws me to him until my cheek rests on his chest. I feel him turn around and put his lips on my head.

What the hell is he doing?

“You’re hilarious. I like you.” Then he lets me go. Or almost. His hand crawls down my arm to my hand, where he demands to intertwine his fingers with mine. When he succeeds, he takes a step back and returns to squaring me as if he hadn’t yet fully scanned my body. “By the way...” The barely audible tone of his voice makes my eyes widen as my body quivers.

Has he gone insane? What does he think he’s doing?

“Ele mentioned that you’re looking for a job.” He only lets go of my hand to stroke my cheek. A gentle touch, reassuring and not at all vulgar. “Have you found one yet?” He doesn’t take his hand off my face, instead he keeps moving his thumb thinking he’s instilling confidence in me, but instead he’s just... turning me on?

This man is not my type at all, but his touch is making me tingle. It can’t happen, I can’t be with the man my friend is interested in.

What if he’s a pimp? One of the men Enea was talking about?

I close my eyes and collect my thoughts because I’m not enjoying this at all. I open them again and begin to look around, finding a quiet and festive environment, not one where women of dubious morals entertain millionaires.

Although Electre has not denied her cousin's words on the matter, she is now saying nothing about her friend's behaviour.

"I work in one of the little restaurants on the harbour." I dismiss the matter in a serious tone, aimed at not letting him know that I might be interested in something else. If he thinks he can get me into some kind of shady business, he's got the wrong girl. Athos is very confident, he's not afraid of being rejected or being a tease in the eyes of others. He looks for my eyes, but I don't look at him because otherwise I'll burst.

"Is that really enough for you? Are you happy?" I see him lower his head to look at me through his lashes, "or are you looking for something more? Something that might satisfy you and make you feel good financially? On the docks the wages are low," he continues. He finally removes his hand allowing me to take a step back. I turn to my friend who is looking at me doubtfully.

"It is. I don't care about living in luxury, I want to be able to repay Electre for the hospitality." I reveal my discomfort. Even though my friend emits a whining cry and gives me a small slap on the arm to admonish me, my mind doesn't change. I can't stay with her and not contribute to the costs.

"I understand," he mutters, wrinkling his lips. He seems to have taken offence.

"You could talk to you-know-who and get her hired at one of his clubs," Ele begins, laying a hand on his arm. Athos pretends to think about it and shortly after he nods, miming the arrival of an idea.

He turns to the bartender and mumbles a few quick words in Greek.

“Hey, hold up, everybody. What are you guys talking about? What is this job about? If it’s something of dubious morality I don’t even want to know about it,” I warn, raising my hands. Even though my attire isn’t exactly saintly, that doesn’t mean I’m willing to do anything.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about, we’re not that kind of people,” Athos explains without a shadow of offence, flashing me a reassuring smile when he meets my gaze. “Of course, the way we presented it, it can give off the wrong idea” he laughs amused and slightly embarrassed, “but I assure you it’s not like that. I’m going to call him now and see if he’s around so we can talk about it right away.” He reaches across the counter and grabs his phone to call someone.

I’m not in the habit of listening in on other people’s conversations, so I turn around feigning a sudden interest in the French door that leads outside. I want to see what the garden decor is like, whether it is reminiscent of the interior or is a world of its own. I take a few steps towards the exit and lean out, just to have a look. And that’s when, without meaning to, my eyes go straight to him. The man who ran me over.

Oh, shit.

Perfectly styled hair, smooth skin and absent of any sign of imperfection. Not even his beard, which was present last time, is noticeable. Not to mention that unruly lock which falls on his forehead, making him sexy enough to make many people envious. He’s wearing a white shirt that perfectly wraps his muscular, tanned body.

Jesus Christ, he’s handsome. Nothing but an arrogant and insensitive asshole, but a damn good-looking one.

He's leaning against the bar with an empty glass in his hands that he plays with without a care in the world, as if he runs the whole place.

How I wish I could be that glass. How I wish he would play with my breasts in the same way.

What am I thinking? What is wrong with me? I shake my head, feeling a strange sensation. Is it the desire to go up to him and talk? Is it anger? Annoyance at seeing him again? The thought that he's blissfully sitting on that stool while I have to find a second job to pay for the damage he's caused to the bike makes me absurdly angry.

I would like to join him, stand in front of him as Giada D'Agostino, the daughter of the biggest businessman in Bari, and smack him in the face for the pain he caused me that day, insult him in front of everyone, tell them what he did to me, grab the ice bucket, and pour it on him just for the way he dared to treat me.

As soon as I take a step in his direction, he moves to the side, brings his hand to his butt, and grabs the mobile phone he keeps in his pocket. As he brings it closer to his ear a hand grabs my arm and makes me turn around. Electre's probing eyes scan me, impatient to know what I'm doing. I swallow in fright.

"Ele." I greet her using the same nickname Athos gave her. She rolls her eyes. She hates her name being mispronounced by diminutives.

"Who are you looking at?"

"No one," I answer quickly. Maybe too quickly. She crosses her arms over her chest, tilts her head to the side and squints her eyes. She doesn't believe me and this time I'm

afraid I don't stand a chance. She takes a big breath and steps outwards.

“Who...” she starts out loud, but I block her.

“Okay, okay,” I whisper, pulling her behind the wall, away from curious eyes. I sigh and give in. I have to tell her everything. “Remember that missed date with Athos you always hold against me?” She nods, but tilts her head the other way. “Over there: the one who caused the delay is sitting at the counter of the outside kiosk.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know, I lied. I didn't want to tell you that some guy ran me over and took off after threatening me, because I know you'd go ballistic and move heaven and earth to find him.”

“What problem would there be with that?”

“I know, I was wrong not to tell you and that it sounds surreal, but I swear, that's what happened.”

“Where is that asshole?” she asks in a tone I don't like at all. I look in Athos' direction, hoping for a helping hand in case things escalate. After all, he's a man and he's the owner's best friend.

“Giada!”

“It's the one in the white shirt sitting at the corner of the bar playing with the glass,” I reveal, turning towards her, terrified.

Electre clenches her jaw and, without further ado, leans in to check. I'm ready to snap, to hold her back, to convince her not to intervene and leave him alone, but instead she bursts out laughing. She asks if I'm sure I'm okay because there's no one at the counter who fits my description.

What, is she blind?

I lean over to her side, checking to see if she might have missed him, but to my astonishment I have to agree with her. He's not there.

"I don't know what's happening to you, but if you've told me another lie, you'll pay for it dearly. Now come, Athos is talking to his friend, maybe something will come out of this." I close my eyes and sigh. "Maybe he can introduce you. I know he's a really busy guy."

"I don't know if..."

"If? What now?"

"I already have a job and... you got me one... I can't leave it," I stammer in a fit of anxiety. He didn't specify the job description, I don't know what it is, I don't know if... Man, I don't want to get myself into a situation I can't handle. Even though the place seems fine, it could be hiding some shady business, and honestly, I don't want to put my life in more danger than it already is.

"Jade, you'd be working here. The pay is great, not to mention the tips. Enea' isn't adequate for someone who wants to fend for themselves."

"I still think it's enough for me," I reply hastily. Of course, who wouldn't want to work in a place like this, but that's another matter. My friend's eyes narrow, revealing her annoyance at my hesitancy.

"At Enea', why didn't you deny the pimp story? Is it him?" I ask through clenched teeth pointing at Athos. I'm sick of all this mystery, of things only being half-told.

"Have you gone mad? No one here is talking about prostitution or anything like that," she retorts in a harsh tone.

Her widened eyes terrify me. “I won’t allow you to denigrate those who want to help you like that.”

“Then tell me the truth, what do you do? You never told me. You came in here without waiting in line and said you knew...”

“Why, didn’t you do the same thing in Bari? You used to rub up against the bouncers to get us in, but there wasn’t a second when I doubted you. I met Athos by chance, in a club where I hosted an event. Because that’s what I do, I’m in P.R. Talking about this and that, it came out that I was looking for a house and he offered up the flat.”

Now that I know everything, I’m satisfied, but also slightly embarrassed. Or worse. I didn’t trust her, and I didn’t hesitate to accuse her of absurd things. I will never forgive myself.

“Jade, trust me. I would never go against certain principles; I would never sell my body for money.”

“Sorry, it’s just... what if the guy...” I point outside now, hoping she’ll understand that I’m referring to the man in the accident. “What if that was a regular customer? Maybe one of those guys who spends a lot of money, and the boss chooses him over me? I wouldn’t want to have to serve him a drink and smile at him or worse, get fired because I slapped him.”

A simple ‘sorry’ for the things I accused her of would never suffice. “Electre, that day was really hard.”

“There’s no one out there,” she thunders angrily. I can’t believe it. I shake my head in exasperation. I close my eyes and take a step backwards, moving away from her. “Either you’re misremembering it, or your brain sees him everywhere because he’s become an obsession,” she continues.

“I’m going home” I whisper softly, with a sudden wave of anxiety taking over my body. I turn to walk away from her and join Athos, but I am blocked.

“If this guy really is here, if you happen to see him again, just point him out to Athos and he’ll take care of it. He’s the owner’s best friend.” I nod, unconvinced by her words. “Now, let’s see what Athos says, have a drink and, if you really want to leave, I won’t hesitate to go with you. But now, let me introduce you to Athos properly.”

“He’s not hitting on me, is he?” Her face is but a millimetre from mine. Her eyes, staring into my soul, make me incredibly uncomfortable. I feel like a complete idiot. I swear I don’t know what she sees in me, I’m a terrible friend, now more than ever.

“That’s just the way he is,” she defends him using a soft little voice.

“He’s a flirt.”

“I guess so, but I really like him and, I’m going to sound like a fool, but I want him in my life. I’m not thinking about marriage of course, but I’m not looking for a one-night stand either. I want something more with him.”

I smile, thinking to myself that she’s being silly.

“Unfortunately, he’s busy and can’t see us.” Athos’ voice brings us back down to earth as he approaches us, hands in his pockets and proud bearing. “But he said you can start whenever you want. Odin, the head of the employees, will keep an eye on you until the boss returns from his business trip. Then you’ll assess how to proceed together. What do you say?”

I say that he is more hopeful than I am. I didn't tell him I was looking for another job, I didn't say to proceed with the phone call, I didn't...

"I say you're putting too much hope in me, and I don't think I can do it. I mean, it's a beautiful place, but I already have a job and..." I have just enough time to shrug my shoulders, and Electre is standing beside him and whispers something in his ear that seems to infuriate him. He points his green eyes at me, but his intense gaze is a consequence of Electre's words, not my reluctance in accepting his job offer.

"Where is he?" He turns to Electre, who answers with a shrug. Immediately he turns back to look at me angrily. "Has anyone been bothering you?"

I blink and hold my breath. Did she really just tell him?

"Because if so, you have an obligation to report it to Odin who will arrange for his removal. Kris doesn't like such behaviour on his premises, so, don't hesitate."

"No, Electre misunderstood what I said." I cast a glare at my friend to admonish her. "Maybe my mind played a trick on me, no need to worry. Thank your friend, both for the opportunity and the time he spent, but..."

"Honey, no one spends time in vain. At least stay for the trial period. If you're comfortable and can handle everything, you can stay, otherwise you just made a little extra money."

"Fine." I give in. Eventually, I'll have enough money to afford the room rental. "I promise to abide by every rule I'm given."

"Rules," he snorts, sporting a truly infectious smirk. He manages to reach my face with his hand and strokes my cheek. "He doesn't have rules. More importantly, he cares about his

staff and wants a quiet life. If you feel well, you'll work well and so will others, meaning he won't have to lift a finger. That's all." He goes back to pinching my chin before tapping the tip of my nose with his index finger.

"Alright." Athos turns to walk back to the counter followed by Electre, but I block her. "Can I ask you one more thing?" He pauses and proceeds to sit on a stool. He looks at me and waits for me to speak. I have to ask because, if she doesn't want to tell me, I'll make him spill the beans.

"How much to rent the room?"

"We'll discuss that later; enough business talk now. Let's have fun," he says quietly. Then he raises his eyes over my shoulder and broadens his smile "Ah, there he is." He raises his arm, moving it to show himself. "Odin!" he shouts, heedless of the customers watching us. "This is Jade and from tomorrow she will be your colleague."

"Oh, that's nice!"

I turn around to face my doom.

Holy shit.

Chapter 5



An enormous headache kept me from sleeping all night.

After Odin's arrival, Athos decided to buy us a drink to celebrate my change of mind and the start of the trial period. Only he didn't stop at a single bottle. When it comes to partying, I have to admit that the 35-year-old can handle it.

Odin proved to be a sweet guy, although his 'size' could be misleading. To be honest, I feared the worst for a moment when I noticed a similar build to the guy from the accident. Even the shirt was identical.

He's a few years older than me and he's easy-going, friendly, and funny. We bonded immediately. I think I'll have no problem working with him.

I have an appointment with him this afternoon, even though the club is closed. He's going to introduce me to the environment and assess where I will best fit in, as I have little experience. Well, 'none' would be the appropriate word, but we played it cool.

Athos recommended that he keep an eye on me, given what Electre spilled to him, and Odin, being a good employee, gladly accepted. I just hope he doesn't overdo it.

I carefully get out of bed, as even the slightest movement causes surges of pain in my temples.

“I will never drink champagne again. In fact, I will never drink on an empty stomach again.” I repeat it to myself, almost like a mantra. I don’t even have the strength to go to the bathroom to clean myself up, given the way my room is whirling. I’d better down a painkiller first.

I head for the kitchen, but when I hear Electre’s voice fill the room, I stop by the door. She’s talking to someone, probably over the phone, so I lean over to peek.

“I don’t know, she seemed pretty shaken up for just being a vision. Even if she only mentioned what happened, she was really upset. I wouldn’t want her to meet him at the club,” she whispers. Suddenly a shirtless Athos appears. He very quietly sits by her side, grabs her hand, and brings it to his lips to fill it with little kisses. He runs all the way up her arm until he reaches her lips.

Was I so drunk that I didn’t notice he was staying here?

“All customers are registered,” he reveals pulling away from her to grab his cup and pour himself coffee. “If anyone has a record or anything, they’re not allowed in.”

Electre rolls her eyes and snorts as if the matter touches her personally.

“Does that apply to us too?” Athos nods. “So, you know everything, both about me and...”

“Agápi,” he begins, brushing past her again, “if it makes you feel more comfortable, I’ll check for myself. If he was there yesterday, he can be there tomorrow or the day after. I’ll ask the employees if they remember anyone matching your

description.” He caresses her cheek with infinite sweetness. “They won’t find him, rest assured. I’ll...”

“What?” I blurt, coming out from my hiding spot. They turn away in fear when they hear me, but I don’t care. “Did you tell him everything?”

“Jade...” Athos stands up, ignoring the fact that he’s only wearing boxers and has a killer body. He reaches for me and extends his hands in an attempt to touch me. I know exactly what he wants to do, physical contact is essential to convey confidence and make me trust him, but I don’t want him to touch me. He can’t do it on command or, at least, when it suits him. I step back, preventing him from touching me. He’s not very happy about that, but I don’t care. I don’t want his hands on me. Full stop.

“Listen to me. You and I barely know each other, and, on our first meeting, you lied to me about your name; so, explain to me why I shouldn’t have feared you would do the same to the rest of us?”

I shake my head, indignant at him prying into my life.

“And she told you everything, didn’t she?” I turn to Electre, who is watching us. Her gaze doesn’t match mine, as she looks away in fear. Where’s the determined girl who was lecturing me yesterday?

“Oh great, thank you very much. You’re a really good friend,” I say performing a round of applause. “Did you also tell him about the mishap that brought me here in the first place?” I raise an eyebrow to mark my words. Her eyes are glistening, but I don’t care.

“Don’t...”

I turn to him, giving him the same look.

“How dare you?”

“How dare I do what? Inform myself about who planted themselves in my house? Who I had to break down the door for, fearing she’d be hurt since she’d been locked in for days? Who, after all, showed up with a different name and insinuated nastiness about my work without knowing me?” he replies with wide eyes.

“Guys, please,” Electre whines. Even though I have a crazy headache I don’t give in and face them.

“You could have left it alone,” I hiss, looking at him crookedly.

“Sure, and blindly trust anyone I meet along my way! Do you think I was born yesterday? Do you think, at my age, I give every person I meet the benefit of the doubt?”

“Look, let’s just leave it at that, okay? I still don’t understand how we went from going out to accepting a job at the club where we just wanted to have a good time.” I look away taking a deep breath. I cover my face with my hands because I want to shake my head, but I can’t afford to. “It’s all so absurd.”

“Agápi.” With a step he’s in front of me, placing his hands on my neck, forcing me to look into his eyes. I grab him by the forearms trying to pull him away from me, but I can’t, he’s too strong. “I got you covered. Just take it easy and give me a few days to study the situation well. Now that I know everything, I’m on your side. You can trust me.”

“Giada, Athos is a lawyer and...” I blink, incredulous by what is happening. He’s begging for my trust, all whilst she’s defending him.

“Stay out of it,” I say through clenched teeth trying to free myself to no avail. “It’s my choice and I don’t...”

“I know and I fully agree with you, that’s why I want to help you. And I’ll do it, whatever it takes, I promise.” He brings his face closer to mine until our foreheads meet. His warm breath irritates me. He’s too close for my liking.

Who does he think he is, the hero of the situation? The only one who can keep me safe? I don’t want anyone else involved, maybe he hasn’t figured that out yet.

“Athos, thanks for your concern,” I whisper with all my remaining calm, “but no.”

I manage to free myself with a tug. I back away a few steps to avoid further contact. “This has already created too much trouble and I don’t want any more.”

“That’s not the point, Giada. When Electre told me you needed help and told me what it was about... I saw the same situation in my best friend’s life. Instead of receiving help and avoiding the biggest mistake of his life, he was abandoned by those he trusted. From that moment on, I vowed to myself that if I ever heard another such story, I would fight with all available means. And now I’m here and I just want to prevent it from happening again, since I have the chance to help you.” He moves towards me, slowly, like a predator with its prey.

I let him move closer, bringing his hands over me, this time laying them on my bare shoulders forcing me to look at him.

“You are not and will not be alone. Whatever you need, you can count on me, on us.”

“We’re only talking about a marriage, not any other injustice you might need a lawyer for. I don’t know what kind

of trouble your friend was in, but I just ran away from home.” At my words, his eyes widen. “I don’t need protection; I just need it confirmed that my name is Jade Kastis and that I was born in Athens on August 30th, 2000, to nomadic parents. No one needs to know that I am Giada D’Agostino, that I was born in Bari, and I am the daughter of the most famous businessman in Puglia. That’s all.”

“What happened with that man? How did you introduce yourself to him? What if he’s a private investigator hired by your parents to find you and bring you home?” Electre raised her voice, convinced that this way he would listen to her. “I’m sorry Jade, but I... I can’t accept what they’ve imposed on you. Get over it.” Without waiting for a reply from me she gets up and goes to her room. Athos sighs, letting me go to join her.

What just happened? Was it real or did the headache create this hallucination?



I’M STANDING outside the club where I’ll be working, or at least I think I’ll be working. That is, if I don’t pull off an epic disaster. I hope this week of probation goes by quickly and the guy from the accident doesn’t show up again. I’m just here for extra money and to keep Athos and Electre happy.

“Jade?”

Odin’s voice makes me wince. I’m happy for his arrival, at least it distracts me from unpleasant thoughts. I hold out my hand which he shakes without hesitation, and I smile at him.

“I almost didn’t recognize you dressed so casually, my only tip was the blond hair,” he begins. “I just ended a call with Athos. He was pretty insistent on certain points.” He rolls his eyes, fills his cheeks with air and then huffs out an infectious laugh.

“Really?” I chuckle amused by his manner. “I hope there’s nothing I have to worry about.”

“Oh, yeah. I mean no, nothing to worry about.” He scratches the back of his head without losing his smile. “In some ways he and Kris are identical, but don’t worry, you’ll see that you’ll fit right in with us. We’re like family.” He then pulls out the keys from the fanny pack he carries over his shoulder, allowing him to open the place.

Poor naive guy, he doesn’t know that after the trial week I’ll be leaving here.

“The only drawback is Kris’s absence so, for now, just settle in, try it out, see how you get on and, as soon as he returns, you’ll talk about the paperwork. He’s in charge of that stuff, not Athos.” Odin keeps smiling as if he doesn’t know how to do anything else. He has a kind soul that I liked immediately.

“Alright,” I reply with a nod before following him into the club.

“Nice neon yellow tank top, you look good in the dark” he says after a few moments. He chuckles in amusement, convinced he’s made the joke of the century. “We do have uniforms, but they’re not neon, sorry.” He walks past me, going down the stairs and jumping behind the counter. He then laughs to downplay it. “You’re going to have to get used to stupid comments and people hitting on you all the time, sorry.”

He turns some lights on illuminating only the parts that seem useful to him in order to show me around.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I whisper looking around. This place looks completely different to me. The decorations that I found fitting last night now seem out of place.

“I don’t believe you. I think you have a line of suitors outside your door.”

He smiles, inviting me to follow him. His cerulean eyes are intense, his boyish features accentuating them. He proudly wears a tuft of very blond, almost white, hair, which he keeps gathered up in a headband. The sides of his head are completely shaved. Dressed in sweatpants and a Marvel T-shirt, he gives me the impression that this meeting was not planned. Or, that he miscalculated and arrived late. Alternatively, he didn’t take it seriously and Athos scolded him. At the end of the day, despite the perpetual smile on his face, I find him adorable.

I’m not really dressed to the nines either. The fluorescent tank top isn’t really appropriate for a job interview.

“Come on, I’ll show you around the place, then we’ll decide what you can do.” I comply with his wishes and let him show me everything that I’ll have to learn to know my way around. We spend hours alone, with no one to interrupt us. He continues to tell stories of this place, of how he met the owner and his best friend, Athos. How, when he found himself short of money, they didn’t hesitate to include him in the workforce, accepting him as a member of the family. He owes them everything.

He takes me to visit the ‘magic terrace’ which is unfortunately closed to customers because it is still being renovated; it has a magnificent view over the caldera.

He explains all the technical aspects to me, shows me where the various products are and how the most popular cocktails are prepared. He lists the various tasks and the unpronounceable names of the employees. He confirms Athos' words on the customer issue: they are all registered and no one can enter if they have a stain on their criminal record.

"Kris is demanding in some ways, but you'll soon realise he does it for the sake of peace and quiet. So far we haven't had any problems."

"It's a nice environment. I noticed it right away. You understand each other with simple gestures, without too many words."

I sit down on the stool at the counter where we were stationed the night before. I move my hair over one shoulder and rest my head on my hand. Tired, I watch Odin pour something into a couple of glasses and then hand me one.

"I can't complain. But now, please, tell me something about yourself. Why did you choose Santorini as your destination? Athos barely told me anything, he was hermetic."

I'd like to know what he said too.

"Electre."

"Let me guess, you came to see her and fell in love with this magnificent island."

I smile and shrug my shoulders. If that's what he wants to believe, I won't be the one to disprove it.

"And why did you choose to colour your hair like that?" He brings the cocktail straw to his lips, takes a sip, and sets the glass down on the paper napkin. I instinctively touch my hair, moving it to my other shoulder.

“I wanted to do something extravagant and went for a rainbow,” I reveal, trapping a strand between my fingers, bringing it under my nose, pretending it’s a moustache.

“Extravagant would have been colouring your whole head, not just the back of your head. You can’t even see it this way,” he giggles, biting his lip. He’s right, but that would have drawn too much attention and that’s not what I want.

“It is for me, and I find it to be quite enough.” I grab my glass and imitate his gestures. Unlike him, I don’t keep staring as I fill my mouth with this liquid that looks like water. I look away, losing myself in distant memories of nights out in the most famous bars in Bari. So many evenings spent drinking, waiting for the bar to close just to hit on the bartender and have the last drink of the night.

“That’s a shame, they would look good on you,” he whispers.

I put aside the strange feeling that his words are aimed at an approach that is beyond professional and swallow the bitter drink that has started to burn my mouth. I close my eyes waiting for the taste to fade.

“Is this your first time drinking one?” he asks in a soft tone.

I nod biting my lips. “It’s strange, maybe straight alcohol is too strong for me.”

Odin manages to snatch the glass from my hand. I open my eyes and see him adding soda and a slice of lemon. He stirs with a straw and hands it to me again.

“Lighter variant: Spritz, Ouzo and lemon. That’s what Kris prefers to drink.” I nod and make it a useful piece of information. If I ever need it, I’ll be able to take this drink with

me to sweeten my boss. “Taste it and tell me if it’s still undrinkable.” I smile at his thoughtfulness and cautiously take another sip, finding it much better. I nod and thank him, hoping that’s enough for him.

“Well, I think I’ve explained everything. Do you have any questions?”

“No, you’ve been very thorough. I just hope I don’t let anyone down,” I say with a stuffed mouth.

“I doubt it. Worst case scenario, prepare this and you’ll see it all works out.” He raises his now empty glass and continues to smile at me. “For starters, you could think about cleaning glasses and keeping the bar stocked. Then, when Kris arrives, we’ll see about teaching you more.”

“No problem, although I was aiming for the chief of staff position. I’ll just have to deal with that until then.” I take the last sip of my Spritz as he rolls his blue eyes. He’s dumbfounded, as he didn’t expect me to say something like that.

I set the glass down on the counter and get off the stool, adjusting my trousers and finally giving him some attention.

“Odin, I was joking.” Only now does he recover.

“I fell for it like a fool. I have to admit, you were really convincing.” For the first time all evening he fixes his hair. “If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to get a rush.”

“Sorry it’s just that I’m exhausted and this...” I clink the ice in the nearly empty glass, “doesn’t help. Rather, tell me about Kris. Who better to enlighten me about my future boss than you?”

His eyes lock into mine and a dark veil falls over his face.

“What do you want to know? Are you interested in his love life too?”

“I’ve never seen him. I don’t know who he is or what he looks like. I just wanted to know a little more, some funny anecdotes. That’s all,” I reveal, shrugging my shoulders.

“He doesn’t have a very active social life. He mainly thinks about work. Since I’ve known him, he has opened two clubs and is about to open a new one in Athens at the end of August. He may stay for a few days or not show up for months,” he explains, annoyed. “It depends on how often Athos needs him to sign the paperwork.”

I nod and grab my glass, drinking the last remaining drop.

“I guess it’s getting late,” I mutter with my head slightly in the clouds.

“Do you want a ride?”

“Only if it doesn’t offend you” I say looking him straight in the eye. Now he’s the one shrugging and shaking his head.

“I’m not offended so easily. I guess it’s normal to want to know a little more about your future boss, right?” He tilts his head, waiting for my answer, which is slow in coming.

“Of course, you could have asked something about me since I’ll be your boss for a few days, but I’ll forgive you.” When he sees a look of displeasure on my face, he bursts out laughing. I could have done it, it’s true, but honestly, I don’t care about anything more than what he has already told me. “Come on, let’s go, it’s getting late.”

He’s kind, another quality I like. I accept and he doesn’t take offence if, once in front of the entrance to the residence, I don’t invite him in and leave him with a simple: “thank you very much, goodbye”. He gives me yet another smile and

slowly walks away, not before recommending that I be punctual for the first shift.

I accept this veiled threat as well, nodding and rethinking my goal of staying only for a week. But I won't tell him now.

I walk down the small driveway thinking about everything that has happened to me so far. Minus the accident and the misunderstanding surrounding Electre and Athos' work, I can say that it's going pretty well.

As soon as I cross the threshold of the house, I turn on the light in the hall.

"Is this the time to come back?" I gasp in fright. Electre is sitting on the couch with her arms and legs crossed, wrapped in a pink organza dressing gown. She looks like my mother when she used to wait up for me whenever I came home late at night. She's missing the curlers on her head, or she'd be her spitting image. I smile to myself as my brain is picturing them having coffee together even though I know it's impossible, since when they met, they looked like they were about to kill each other. "Wow, what a satisfied smirk. So, you've had a nice day with blondie," she giggles. I take a deep breath and join her, throwing myself onto the couch.

"My dear Electre, if you only knew," I explain pretending that there was some tenderness between Odin and me. With the little strength I have left in my body, I turn to her, hug her, and leave a kiss on her cheek. This morning we parted badly, then I had to go to work and now it seems like nothing happened.

"He's such a sweet boy." I get up and head to my room to get my underwear and have a refreshing shower.

“Jade,” she yells from the living room. “What happened?” I hear her footsteps approaching. Slowly, I turn towards her, fixing my eyes in hers and waiting. I’m good at teasing her with my gaze. “Don’t keep me on my toes.”

“Nothing, Electre. Nothing happened. We just got lost in conversation. That’s all.” I laugh, amused by her wide eyes and her anticipation over inexistent spicy details.

“I can’t stand you when you do that,” she huffs and runs to lock herself in her room, slamming the door. I don’t know if she got offended over the teasing or the realization that nothing happened between Odin and me.

I shrug, dismissing her behaviour, and head towards the shower.

Tomorrow is a new day and I sincerely hope I refrain from drinking a single drop of alcohol.

Chapter 6



The trial days went by in the blink of an eye. I spent them washing glasses and keeping the counter tidy. If necessary, they had me wait on tables, and Odin congratulated me on my elegant bearing and friendly manner with customers.

I have only my mother and her tips on how to behave and deal with people to thank for this. Her choice to categorise them based on prejudice and, consequently, not treat everyone equally was her business. In my opinion, that attitude was useless and derogatory, and I never approved of it or even partook in it myself.

I stayed until the end of the night, when I was asked to load the fridges and sweep the room. I gave it my best because, even if I don't stay, I want them to have a good memory of me.

From unofficial sources I heard that the big boss might delay further, lengthening my trial period. Although Athos called him often to sign important documents, he never showed up. How can anyone behave like this? The continuous absence of the owner is a lack of respect towards their employees or those in need.

“Jade!” Odin’s voice resounds in the packed hall of people having a good time, bringing me back down to earth. I look up in his direction, fearing that I’ve made a mess without realising it, but he simply gives me a double thumbs up with that characteristic wide smile of his that calms me down. He wanted me to know that I was doing well; I immediately return the smile and get back to work. Every now and then you need a bit of recognition, especially during a particularly busy evening.

“He’s here,” says one of my colleagues whose name is reminiscent of a cocktail: Margarita. I turn to her with a questioning look. “Kris is here,” she whispers with an amused grin, the usual one she reserves for me since she doesn’t like me.

“Good, maybe I’ll get to meet him,” I answer with fake malice. I can tell from her glare that she has something to say, but I turn my back on her and ignore her. Her childish behaviour annoys me, and I tease her just to see how she reacts. Most of the time I manage to shut her up and get her to annoy someone else.

I carry on with my work as if nothing had happened, as if the knowledge that at the end of my shift I will finally meet my boss does not agitate me.

I haven’t seen a penny since I’ve been here, and this is really irritating me. Even though Athos reassured me that Kris would show up and stay for a few days before leaving for Athens and settle everything. Maybe I could now get what I’m owed and be on my way.

“Jade!” Odin’s call jolts me again. As soon as I look up, his eyes lock with mine. Hands resting on the counter and face tense.

What have I done?

“Make me an Ouzo spritz as I taught you to,” he requests, drumming his fingers on the dark wooden countertop. As he looks around to keep an eye on the room, I imitate him terrified. My heart has now shot up into my throat.

“Me?” I know who the drink he ordered for me is going to, and I don’t think I’m ready to make it.

What if I get the wrong glass? What if I get the dosage wrong? What if I put too much ice in it? What if the lemon slice isn’t cut the right way or the right thickness?

No, I mustn’t mess up, he might fire me without a second thought.

Well, that’s what I want, isn’t it?

“Move, I’ve got this.” Margarita growls, shoving me off the bar and making me drop the glass I was holding. Odin turns around and blocks her.

“I asked her. Stay in your lane.” he reprimands her in a harsh tone. I’ve never seen him like this. His sweet, boyish features have turned sour. His cerulean eyes glare at our colleague, who steps back and then angrily turns and vanishes around the corner.

“Come on, you’re capable of it. I showed you. Just keep a level head.”

“Okay,” I sigh. “Worst case scenario I knock him by overdoing the Ouzo, right?” I ask hoping to see his frown fade to make room for one of his beautiful smiles.

“He might fire you,” he replies seriously, “but if you want to picture your version, it is admittedly funnier. I’d love to see the boss with a hangover,” he chuckles. “It wouldn’t hurt him

to have a little distraction.” Odin smiles mischievously, imagining who knows what hilarious scene. I grab the glass, pour in the liquor, and add water. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

“When do I get to meet him?” I ask in a low voice. I grab a napkin and place it on the counter.

“Depends on that.” He says, pointing at the glass. I frown, not quite understanding what connects of the two. “If it’s too strong and you get him drunk, he might collapse and your rendezvous with him would be off. If, on the other hand, it’s too light, he could walk out of his office, freak out, and fire you before you even show up.” That being said, he grabs the glass and napkin and walks off towards the boss’s office.

Oh shit, he’s kidding, right?



IT’S FINALLY CLOSING time and Odin is walking the last customers towards the exit. I’ll never get used to these hours, and frankly, I really don’t want to. I still have a few glasses to wash.

“Jade, Kris wants you in his office.” Margarita stands with folded arms and a scowl right in the middle of the corridor leading to the staff area, probably annoyed at having to be the boss’s secretary. “Get ready to lose your job.”

I decide to pay her no mind, take a deep breath and leave what I was doing to go talk to the boss. I knew this moment would come, but I didn’t think it would trigger so much anxiety inside me.

Every night, before falling asleep, I thought about what to say over and over, how to behave politely so as not to come off as rude. In my head I imagined this moment and how, without any problems, I would explain to the man in front of me that I had no intention of continuing to work for him. The best outcome included him accepted my conditions without objection.

I pause for a few moments before his door, afraid of what I might find inside the office. What if this Kris is an old man with a smoking habit, or a tycoon who likes to smoke cigars profusely and make everything around him soggy? What if it's a woman? What if he's a complete bastard, in spite of the beautiful descriptions Athos has given me?

I build up all courage I can muster and, with my shoulders straight and head raised high, I raise my fist and knock on the door. I don't wait for an answer, and I go in, convinced that I'll be standing in front of a Prince Charming look alike: blond, well-combed hair, tall and with a gentlemanly bearing, just like a businessman who is used to being among people should be.

In front of me, on the other hand his pitch black, wild hair, blends almost perfectly with the rest of the furniture, which is also dark. He sits at his desk with one hand in his tousled curls and his elbow resting on the desktop. He wears elegant bracelets that cover most of his wrist. The other arm is stretched across the desk, leaving a tattoo on display: a full cross.

Oh, shit!

Suddenly he looks up and...

"Gesù Cristo!" I swear in Italian without even realizing it. I cover my mouth with my hand and try to avert my eyes from

his, but I can't, he's too hypnotic.

"You?" he whispers bewildered. In front of me is the man I fear most, the one who ran me over and managed to make me feel guilty even though I wasn't at fault.

We don't speak, we don't breathe, and we don't move. I am paralysed to find him in front of me. Of all clubs on the island, he had to own this one? The one where I work?

I'm trembling, I don't know why the sight of him has this effect on me, but I'm not going to stay here.

With all the strength I have left, I back away to get as far from him as possible. I can do without the money he owes me; he can keep it. I'll tell Athos that I can't keep up with the shifts, that it's too stressful a job, if he ever asks me for an explanation.

I put my hand on the handle to leave, but he stops me.

When did he move? How did he reach me in such a short time?

He's by my side and his grip hurts everywhere. My hand, my bones, my brain, my heart.

"You never called me," I whisper fearfully, reminding him of his threats. Although I wouldn't have answered if he had, I had some hope. I can't bring myself to turn around and look at him.

"I've been busy," he reveals quietly, like it's no big deal, like nothing happened. "You could have done it."

"The victim never calls their executioner. I was more committed to not dying from my injuries than thinking about contacting you and confronting you again," I retort with the

hope of making him feel guilty. “Now leave me or I’ll call my boyfriend and you’ll have to deal with him.”

“I can’t,” he explains with difficulty. His breath tickles the skin of my neck making me fantasize about why he’s trying so hard. “Athos would kill me,” he whispers against my cheek, causing a shiver to run down my spine. That sensation can only be tamed one way, and that’s not good, not good at all.

Why am I having this reaction?

“You are now my employee and...”

“...and you’re going to keep my paycheck to pay for the fake dent on your beloved Porsche that I allegedly caused after you broke the speed limit?” I turn to him, and his eyes are eating me alive. I have to resist him, I can’t allow myself to be afraid, to be subdued by this sketchy yet charming man. He treated me badly and I only let him do it because he caught me off guard. But now I know him, I know who he’s friends with, so Athos could give him a piece of his mind if he so much as lays a finger on me.

“That might be an idea.” He stretches his lips into a lopsided smile, perhaps thinking he’s being funny. He’s sensual as hell and he knows it perfectly well, that’s why he’s toying with me, wanting me to fall at his feet. But I won’t give in, now or ever.

I have to come to my senses, fight him before it’s too late.

I shake my head and, with a fake smile, shove him away from me in order to leave the office. I don’t run, I don’t freak out, I don’t want to attract the attention of colleagues who might talk. Like Margarita, who doesn’t seem to have moved even a millimetre since I last saw her.

“Get back here immediately!” Kris’s shout makes me cringe, but I’m not intimidated. I lengthen my stride past my colleague.

“This is going to be fun,” she chuckles with her usual air of superiority.

I make my way up the stairs with complete peace of mind, and before I leave, I turn my head towards the hall, waiting for Kris to appear.

One... two... three. There he is, hot as the Sun.

He looks so majestic, with his proud posture, his white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the first buttons unbuttoned. His pinstriped trousers give him that touch of elegance and superiority. A tired but penetrating gaze reveals his weariness. Or perhaps his exasperation.

Am I the cause of it?

I place my hands on the handle and push open the door. As soon as the fresh air hits my face I realise that I have been holding my breath. I take a few steps to the right even though I don’t really know where I’m going. If before I had agreed to stay only a week, now I regret that choice as well. I worked for him, he who didn’t hesitate to mistreat me while I was injured, because of him might I add.

Suddenly I hear the door of the club slam and my blood freezes. I don’t turn around; I start running as fast as I can towards Electre’s house.

Or at least that’s the intent.

“Stop!” His voice is close. Too close. “I said stop,” he thunders before grabbing my arm. How did he reach me?

His grip makes me even angrier. His gesture triggers a fury in me that I can't handle.

"Let go of me or I'll scream," I threaten through clenched teeth.

"Please," he snorts in amusement. "Look..." I don't let him finish I take a deep breath and start screaming.

Kris yanks my arm until I'm slammed against his chest and covers my mouth with his free hand. His eyes are in mine, which glaze over as he looks at me.

"Shut up. Can we talk without acting like kids?" he whispers. The scent of his skin is just as I remember it. "I'm going to let go now, but don't scream." He slowly pulls his face away and removes his hand from my mouth, hoping to be pleased.

"You're not going to bait me this time, I'm not taking orders from..." and I square him in disgust.

"From whom? Who do you think you're dealing with?" I squint at the pain in my wrist. I didn't realise he was still clasping it in his hand. "Let go of me and let's pretend that..." I whimper.

"Stop it. Let's talk about this in my office like grown-ups and not on the street," he proposes pointing behind him. I puff out a laugh. I'm not going back in there. Not after I found out he owns the place.

"No way. I know exactly what you're up to," I blurt out with the conviction that he's the same as everyone else. Hints here, hints there and then he only wants to solve it one way.

He rolls his eyes and mutters something incomprehensible. He lets me go with a shove and then points a finger at me.

“You don’t know anything about me or what I’m up to. But if you think you do, then go, run home and never set foot on my premises again.” He doesn’t move, waiting for me to give him my answer. With a quick wave of my hand, I sweep his from in front of my face.

I could let him have it without a problem, agree to go home without making such a scene, but that wouldn’t be right, it wouldn’t be like me. After what he did that afternoon, he deserves all the rage I’m capable of.

“I’ll go with you, but only because I left my bag in the club and not because you’re making me do it,” I state, trying to get him to see that that’s the only reason why I’m even entertaining the thought of heading back inside.

“Oh my goodness.” Kris turns around, spreading his arms and bringing them to his forehead. Next thing I know, he starts walking towards the club, leaving me alone in the middle of the street. He takes a few steps before stopping and turning around again.

“Will her royal highness follow me, or does she expect me to bring her purse out here?”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea. You finally figured out how to address me,” I mutter, flashing a victorious smirk. His head leans slightly to the side as if he heard what I just said. I hope not. Perhaps I do, maybe then he’ll send me off without replying.

“Did you say something?”

Come on, just laugh it off and get it out of your system.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re arrogant?” I cross my arms over my chest looking like I’m offended by...I don’t know, everything?

“Of course,” he replies as if he doesn’t care. “They do that a lot, and I like hearing it because, guess what? I don’t care.”

“It must be a distinguishing trait of yours.”

He resumes briskly walking back towards his club. I can see the contours of his muscular body perfectly as he sinuously moves under the streetlamps. A pleasure for the eyes, a torment for sanity.

He doesn’t pay any attention to Odin who, with a quick glance, hopes to get an explanation as soon as we enter the club.

He fixes his cerulean eyes on mine, which I hold up without a problem. I don’t owe anyone anything after having an argument with my boss, least of all him.

As soon as I walk past him, Odin grabs my arm and corners me.

“Don’t worry, he just didn’t like the drink. We’re considering whether to opt for summary dismissal or flogging in the public square,” I smile, trying to reassure my friend, but with bad results. Nothing... I guess he doesn’t get my sense of humour.

“Stop talking nonsense. Hurry up and join me,” thunders the boss. I smile at Odin’s astonished expression as he still waits for my explanation. I shrug and do as Kris says. I dodge my colleague and, in complete silence, walk down the stairs pretending to be at a fashion show, while everyone’s eyes are on me. Except for Kris’s, whose back is turned with his hands resting on the counter. From his posture, he looks tired, exhausted, angry, and it’s certainly not my head injury that’s to blame. I’m sure there’s more to it than that.

Margarita sensually moves her lips, and, in response, Kris's head turns towards me. As soon as his eyes land on my body a rush of adrenaline shakes me. I look him straight in the face as I walk the last few steps towards him feeling my excitement rise as he watches my curves with those dark eyes.

I stop a few steps away from him and take a bow. I smile at his wrinkled face, fixing it well in my mind. This is how I want him to look at me, he doesn't have to understand me. He won't find me submissive this time.

Am I being brazen? Absolutely. Am I behaving like a child? Of course I am. Can I remedy that? Hell no, he's the one whose arrogance brought out this side of me.

I walk down the corridor to his office, but don't go in. I cross my arms over my chest, waiting for him to make a move. Out of the corner of my eye I see him walk towards me. His hands in his trouser pockets make his torso look even more sculpted than it really is. He walks past me and opens the door, demanding with his gaze that I comply, for the umpteenth time, with his wishes.

I do it, mostly because I want to talk to him, spit in his face, and everything else I could not do that day. I feel like showing him all the anger I have been accumulating because of the damage he has done to me.

I take a few steps towards the interior of the room, finding it too dark for my taste. I hadn't noticed it before. Kris is enchanted for a few moments before he closes the door behind me with a strong push and returns to his seat. He waves me over to the chair in front of him, but I don't comply. This time I choose to stand.

"Eleni... Jade, don't complicate things for me." I widen my eyes finding his statement nonsensical. I bring my hand to

my chest and stretch my neck to let him know I didn't quite understand his words.

I'm complicating things? Is he serious? Well, maybe he won't like my silly behaviour.

"I don't know what Athos sees in you," he whispers, shaking his head before lowering it and shuffling some papers around. "You don't know how much he begged me to hire you."

What?

"He doesn't have to see anything in me, and if it's such a huge inconvenience to you that you gave in to his insistence, I can always ease your burden and leave. We can agree to tell him that I'm no good, or that I responded badly to a customer who was alone at the counter fiddling with a glass of water, or, I don't know, that I snapped back at the big boss when he put his hands on me." I emphasize my speech with a wave of my hand. I don't know why, but he seems to be pretending to listen to me. "Pay me for the days I worked and..."

"What are you talking about? Pay you?" he interrupts, pointing his eyes into mine, uniting us like never before. My breath gets stuck in my throat. His eyes really are quite unique.

"What you earned isn't even enough to pay for the call from the shop."

"I guess you've already done the math," I grumble, looking away.

"Leave me all your details, the real ones. We'll talk about the rest as soon as I have the estimates in hand."

"No," I begin. "You can ask Athos for them anyway." If he thinks he can dictate the terms, then I want to be able to decide them too. He snorts an "I can't" in that warm tone I hate.

“Eleni... Jade... Goodness, I don’t even know what your real name is.” He bites his lip and closes his eyes.

“No, you listen to me.” I point my finger at him. I move closer, stretching across the desk until I’m a breath away from his face. “Let me work until I pay off that damn debt, which I can’t explain to anyone why I have, and then that’s it. Hold off as long as you can to shorten my stay here. If you need to, hold back all my salary, let me work overtime, use me to... do your house cleaning or whatever. Then we go our separate ways. Like nothing happened.”

He’s literally hanging on my every word, incredulous at what I’m saying.

Maybe he thought he’d won, that he’d be able to assert himself and continue to dominate, but I’m going to win. I can feel it.

“You have the day off tomorrow. But don’t think that...” He restrains himself from continuing as he shifts his gaze from my eyes to my lips and then looks further down at the neckline of my blouse.

“What?” I humour him using a sensual tone. I add to the dose by biting my lip. I want to see how far he goes.

“That I’ll give up so easily. If you’re not registered, you can’t work. Not here, not anywhere else,” he replies. I clench my jaw. I turn away from the desk and walk out of his office. I nonchalantly grab my things and leave. If he wants me to, I’ll work and pay off the damn debt on my own terms, otherwise he can forget about the damage. Forget about me.

I leave the club proud of myself. Shocked by what I’ve done, but proud, nonetheless.

I look left and right, searching for the right road to take back home.

It's going to be a long walk.

Chapter 7



Today I woke up with the urge to go to the beach. The beautiful private pool is very inviting, but the sea is irreplaceable. The sound of waves breaking on the sand, the smell of the salty air and the sound of the wind are nothing short of miraculous.

Electre has accepted my proposal to spend the day together without anyone interfering in our conversations. I'm happy because, since yesterday, Athos hasn't left her alone for a second. Even this morning they spent hours on the phone talking about what they might do in the next few days. She assured me that there would be no sign of him, and I believe her, also because she knows that I could take it very badly.

It was enough for me to find out about his incursion into my life to put him at the top of the list of insufferable people, and although it's his right to have information about his employees, nothing changes the fact that I hate busybodies. Besides, I don't need a lawyer. He has to learn to mind his own business when it comes to me.

We calmly walk towards the beach. All we have to do is walk down the little road that runs alongside the apartment complex and we're in our own little paradise in no time. I like the way it looks; I have always admired it from afar, but in

person it has a completely different effect. It looks like a quiet little place, not at all lively. Just what you need for a little rest.

Also included in the rent of the house is a gazebo on the beach with four sun loungers adorned with beautiful pearly white cushions. There are beach towels hanging from each of them, not to mention a kiosk in the corner offering a wide selection of drinks, snacks, and ice creams. You can also order lunch, which can be taken to the adjacent tables or directly in the gazebo. Everything is beautiful and luxurious.

“Unfortunately, the sea is rough,” grumbles Electre, throwing her backpack onto the sun lounger. Sulking, she looks at the dark horizon and the waves crashing on the rocks nearby.

“Come on, let’s enjoy what little time the clouds will allow us. I’m afraid we won’t be able to spend all day here though.” She turns towards me and gives me a smile, the special kind, full of expectation. I’m sure she thinks I’ve recovered, that the disappointment that drove me to run away from home has passed, but it’s not like that. Maybe I don’t think about Raffaele anymore, but the rest is still there.

We take off our tank tops and denim shorts and shove them into our backpacks.

“How on earth did you get those bruises?” she exclaims, startling me. When I notice my side full of purple spots from the accident, I shake my head to let her know I have no idea and position the towel to lie down.

“Giada, now that we have some time to ourselves...” she starts, but immediately interrupts. I hear her sighing and moving on the bed, so I turn towards her, convinced I’ll find her gaze on me, waiting for some confession. Instead, all her

attention is on her mobile phone. She types a message, then freezes it and hides it under the sheet.

“Are you okay?” she asks after finally looking at me. “Is something bothering you or are you...”

“Everything’s fine,” I confirm. What on earth am I supposed to tell her? With Enea everything was great, with Kris... Well, I don’t want to talk about it for any reason.

“Did you get to meet Kris?” I close my eyes and sigh, trying not to let her see my sudden annoyance at hearing that name. I don’t want to ruin my day off.

“I know he’s back from Athens and I was wondering if you had met him.” I ignore her, pretending I didn’t hear her because I definitely don’t want to talk about him. I look away, hoping that’s enough for her not to continue. “Giada!”

“Not today, okay? I don’t want to hear or even think about him.” I warn her, flashing a smile. “Not now, not ever,” I add under my breath.

“I take it you’ve had the pleasure of meeting him. He’s cool, isn’t he?” Maybe she’s expecting to get a positive response and start salivating at the mere thought of being able to talk about him. Delusional. I’m not interested, full stop. “Brown eyes, wild black hair. Never fixes it, prefers to keep it unkempt. He always has that mysterious air of someone who has something dark to hide, like a torrid and frightening past. Not to mention those perfectly sculpted muscles,” she continues, listing everything I unfortunately couldn’t help but notice myself. I can confirm his air of mystery, for the rest, who cares.

“Electre, please.” I roll my eyes showing all my exasperation.

“Just think, the first time I saw him I was in the bath. He burst into the bathroom...”

“Aren’t you head over heels for Athos, or did I miss something?”

“Yes, but I still have eyes. And he’s really handsome. He has that kind of beauty that makes you all wet,” she giggles.

“Ele!” Okay, he’s really handsome and I’m sure his closeness wouldn’t make me indifferent, but...

She’s always been explicit, but this is too much. Especially if the subject in question is my boss, and....

“I’m going to take a refreshing shower,” she huffs, pretending to be offended as she gets no response from yours truly.

“Didn’t you get wet enough talking about him?”

“No, you idiot. I just want to get dried by the Sun while it’s out, it’s something I love.” She gets up and walks away. When I turn around, I can’t tell which way she went, but it doesn’t matter. I close my eyes and let myself be carried away by the light breeze that tickles my skin and gives me some well-deserved peace.

Even though the black clouds in the distance are torn by lightning, it’s still sunny and warm here.

“Hi!” My friend’s shout comes sharply to my ears, but I don’t give it attention. Maybe she greeted someone she knows.

“Agápi. Easy, you’re all wet.” No! I open my eyes wide and turn in the direction of the voices and, to my amazement and irritation, I find Athos approaching shirtless.

It’s not possible. Today?

Ele practically leaped into his arms, and he held her close, his hands under her bottom, while he stared at her, bewitched, proud to have conquered her. He presses a kiss on her lips, which she reciprocates with zest worthy of a soap opera: she wraps her legs around his torso, smile on her lips and whimpers, proceeding to throw her head back; he takes this opportunity to kiss her generous breasts. Finally, he releases her from his arms and sets her down, not without vigorously rubbing her against his private parts on her way to the ground.

Eww! When are they going to get their act together?

“Hello, Athos.” I greet him rudely, hoping to break them up.

“Hi agápi,” he retorts. He walks past my friend and stands in front of me, kneeling down only to mess up my hair. “Everything okay? How’s it going with Kris?”

There he is, with his unbearable eagerness to know everything! I glare at him, but his expression doesn’t change.

I’m not going to tell him anything about it since he already knows too much, and I don’t want him to butt in any more than he already has. I’m not going to tell him that the man who caused the accident, the one I was afraid of that night, is his beloved friend and my boss.

Or I could and...

I close my eyes and murmur a positive response in the hope that he won’t investigate further. When I open them again, I find a mischievous smile on his face. His eyes focused on my small breasts, covered by a tiny costume. Instinctively, I cover myself with my arm, hoping he will stop and look at my face. “They’re adorable, tiny and... too adorable,” he exclaims voicing his thoughts. “Can I touch them?”

“Are you a pervert?” Athos smiles as he gets up and reaches his girlfriend.

Because she’s his girlfriend, right? Or is she just someone he decided to have fun with?

I turn around and hear him complaining to Electre about my behaviour. She, in response, bursts out laughing revealing that this is nothing compared to how I was a few months ago.

I can’t blame her, the social context I find myself in now is quite different from what I was used to. The closest thing I have to my previous life is what goes on in the club where I work: wealthy entrepreneurs who spend their earnings on expensive parties just to show off their wealth. Accompanied mostly by trophy wives or, why not, younger mistresses.

Is this the case with Athos and Electre?

I grab the headphones I had put in my backpack and connect them to my phone. I’m not going to risk listening to their conversations, wasting time talking about work or my life. I came here to relax.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the two lovebirds heading towards the kiosk.

Maybe they will lock themselves in a booth and stay there the whole time, leaving me alone.

Ready to say goodbye to their company, I lower my eyelids and try to relax. But apparently my plans are not going to be fulfilled: a laugh makes my eyes widen.

Unnoticed, I turn towards my friends and freeze. My brain short-circuits for a few moments. I can’t process what I’m seeing. Kris is here. And he’s bloody hot as he smiles at his friend. His mouth looks like a painter’s drawing as he opens it

to form that sweet, mischievous smirk that makes him irresistible to us mere mortals.

I repeat, he is a God in the flesh.

What? Did I call Kris sexy? And what's with all the praise anyway?

“Jesus Christ!” I exclaim and all three of them turn to me. Their questioning looks are squaring me while I do the same to my boss. He is stunned. Maybe they have set a trap for him like Electre did for me. It seems I can't go a day without hearing from him or worse, seeing him. I'm destined to have him around.

“Hello to you too,” he says in a mischievous tone. I shake my head, close my eyes, and let out a big sigh. I'm not going to keep staring at him like he's the only thing worth looking at, like his presence is okay with me. I lie on my stomach trying to completely extricate myself from them and, if possible, pretend they don't exist.

I am trying to convince myself that I will be able to relax anyway, when I feel someone sit on the edge of the bed and then lie slightly on top of me. He rests his chin on my shoulder and removes the earpiece from my ear.

“Giada” Athos whispers. I open my eyes to see if I should tell him to go to hell or if I can regain my privacy somehow. My friend chats with Kris like he's a long-time friend, oblivious to the fact that her 'lover' is next to me. Or on top of, if we really want to be picky.

Or maybe she trusts me so much that she doesn't care.

“What do you want?” I ask in a cold and irritated tone. I don't like the direction the day has taken. I find myself

surrounded by those I wanted to avoid. “Have you come to apologise for prying into my private life?”

“Loquacious,” he huffs quietly. “Look, we got off on the wrong foot. I got carried away and came across as a first-class busybody, I know. But when Ele revealed to me how she felt about you when she was in Bari... well, I felt threatened.” I widen my eyes because I never expected such a revelation. “Honestly, I still feel that way.”

Someone threatened by me? That’s a good one, sounds like a joke.

“That day, when she phoned me asking to help you, I confronted her about it and forced her to tell me everything. I only looked you up because of a fear of mine.”

“Satisfied?”

“I know what I’m about to tell you may not do much good, but you’re special to Ele and I wish we could get along. What do you think? Could we start over?” he asks placing his hands on my back and beginning to massage. He is gentle in his movements and that freaks me out.

“Did she make you come here for this?” I hardly manage to ask.

“I asked her if I could come over and let us have some alone time to clear the air. She doesn’t know I’m jealous of you. I’m actually ashamed of it.” His hands are more confident now as they rub against my back. I mumble because what he’s doing is seriously pleasing me.

“Smart.” If this is his way of apologizing to me, he should do it more often, maybe on a weekly basis, then yes, I could forget his behaviour.

“And why aren’t you jealous of your friend instead?” At my question, Athos pauses for a few moments and then resumes more decisively, perhaps angry at what I said. “If I was a mere parenthesis, he could fill up a few chapters.”

“No. I trust him completely.”

“What about her?” I get a shrug in response that has nothing pleasant about it. I hold my breath and open my mouth wide to muffle my annoyance. “She’s head over heels for you, you know that, right?” He strokes my arms, stretching up to my hands masterfully. He moves up and then down again to the middle of my back, rubbing his knuckles on my spine. This man wants to slaughter me, render me defenceless.

“Just because she’s talking to a man doesn’t mean she’s hitting on him.” With an unexpected gesture, he runs his hands over my hips and back up, stretching far beyond what’s allowed. With his forefinger he tickles the skin left uncovered by the fabric of my bra, as if trying to attract Electre’s attention.

“Athos!” I call back to him.

He moves his hands away making me feel the emptiness. Although that touch tickled my soul, it’s a gesture that... What? He didn’t do anything wrong; he didn’t overdo it; he just grazed my breasts while massaging me. Did it bother me? Oh God, with everything I’m going through I don’t know anymore.

I was surprised when he started touching me again. I thought he was done asking questions, apologising, torturing my back.

He doesn’t move. His hands are still on my lower back.

“I know. I’m not some kid on his first fling,” he says without disguising a slight offense. “Why does everyone keep thinking that?”

Maybe someone pointed out their age difference or made him think that could be an issue in the long run.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Do you want to know what he likes? You might need it.” He says too close to my ear, implying God knows what. “Don’t get the wrong idea, but I’d like Electre all to myself and you...”

“Me?” I ask in the same tone as him. I rise up on my elbows and look him straight in the eye.

“Hey, calm down. You don’t need to get mad. I was just...” He runs his hand through his hair, unsure of something that’s also not quite clear to me. “Believe me when I tell you that I love Ele and I wouldn’t do anything to hurt her, that she makes me feel good in a way I didn’t think possible. I just... I’m jealous of you, that’s all, and I don’t like that.” I wrinkle my forehead, continuing to not understand the reason behind this feeling of his. “It may sound silly, but I’m afraid you’re going to take her away from me.”

“That’ll never happen,” I say, shaking my head. “There is nothing but close friendship between us and what happened in Bari will never happen again. It was just a one-off occasion.”

It seems strange that I should have to reassure a big man, who physically has nothing to envy anyone, about my feelings towards his girlfriend. Athos looks up at our friends and sighs.

“Fuck, Giada. I love her. She makes me feel alive and every time she looks at me I feel reborn.”

I manage to murmur a fairly choked “Good for you.” but I’m still shocked at what he said.

“Does she know?”

“Does she? She’d laugh if she knew I lost my mind the moment I saw her at the club on the bay. I tried to keep her away, any way I could. But when you showed up, I knew I couldn’t resist or waste any more time.” His words are incredibly sweet. Knowing that he wants her, that he could make her really happy, cheers me up.

“I won’t stand in your way. I have no reason to. Believe me, Athos.” I doubt he was seeking my blessing, but he seems to have made his peace with it. He shyly releases a lopsided smile and gets up from the bed to join his beloved. Even though she’s conversing with Kris, he wraps his arms around her waist to pull her to him and kiss her passionately. I smile, finding it all really sweet.

Kris, on the other hand, looks away slightly annoyed. He turns to me and gives me a shy little smile. Now it’s my turn to look away and go back to lying on the sunbed. I squint and, as if attracted by a magnet, raise my head just enough to peek.

It’s absurd, I want to watch him, see what he does, pick up on the details that tell me about him.

Needless to say, he is a man who exudes charm from every pore. He knows he’s attractive and does nothing to prove otherwise. He is proud of himself and what he is. Handsome, intelligent, good at business, maybe even single and looking for a woman to have fun in bed with. Or start a family.

What are you thinking? Would you like to be that woman? Come on, he’s too good for you.

I bite my lip as I watch him sip his drink, fantasizing about his lips touching my skin.

Oh, my goodness, he's your boss! The one who left you on the street after running you over, what the hell are you thinking?

"The heat is getting to me," I mutter covering my face. As soon as my attention returns to Kris, I find his eyes locked right into mine. He smiles and raises his glass slightly in greeting, then turns around again when Athos puts a hand on his arm.

Did he notice me?

He nods and all three of them come towards me. Well, Kris is the only one who doesn't come very close to my bed, maybe he prefers to keep his distance.

Or maybe he's completely indifferent to me, how should I know.

He puts the glass down on the coffee table and starts to undress. I can't believe it, he's undressing in front of me, and I can't take my eyes off him.

Bloody hell.

Slowly he takes off that damn polo shirt that has kept his pecs covered until now, preventing me from being able to admire his physical perfection.

What am I thinking? He's my boss, he's the one who... Oh hell, just shut up and admire, enjoy this moment like it's the only one.

His muscles tense and contract in so many ways I didn't think possible. His physique is nothing shy of perfection, exactly as I had imagined. A true Greek god with a smooth

amber complexion. On his forearm is that damned cross tattoo that has tormented me for nights on end. When he starts taking off his trousers, is a breath-taking sight. He's got thighs like a footballer. I have never seen anything so perfect, harmonious, attractive, and divine.

I would love to feel those muscles above, below, and around me. Feel how they contract as he grabs me, squeezes me, lifts me up and...

“Holy shit,” I curse under my breath, biting my lip. I close my eyes and sigh, calling myself a fool for the thoughts I'm having about him, about a man I don't even know. He might be a no-good crook given that tattoo. Maybe it's the signature sign of the local gang or something. He's too perfect not to be part of some gang, he's got too many clubs to be a simple businessman. I could look into it, ask Athos or Electre or maybe Odin or...

No, I need to calm down and cool off the boiling spirits Kris inflamed. I can't keep thinking about him. Besides, I hate meddlers! Why would I stoop so low just for a little testosterone.

Enough is enough. I get up and, leaving my mobile phone on the deckchair, I head towards the shore to try to clear my mind of all the thoughts that crowd it. I shake my arms to stretch my shoulders and reach the crystal-clear sea.

I wince as the water splashes and cools my hot skin, but I don't stop, I want to freeze and not feel anything. I can't let anyone into my heart, or in this case, I don't want anyone in my bed. Especially if he thinks I'm a fraud.

“Jade!” I ignore Electre's screams and don't turn around, even though I know full well she wants to stop me.

But at her, “Fuck, Jade!” I turn around to tell her not to bug me and let me soak in just for a moment to cool my hot spirits.

“Get out, don’t...” That’s all I hear. A strong wave hits me in full force, knocking me off balance. I end up underwater with no chance of getting back up. The current is strong and it’s dragging me. I only wanted to get my feet wet.

I think I’m doomed when something grabs my arms, pulls me upwards and, before I can breathe again, squeezes me. I channel as much air as I can, coughing from the ingested water.

“Are you okay?” A rough, worried voice rings very close to my ear. I let go, my head falling onto his shoulder.

Am I okay? No, my head is spinning, and his grip is the only thing keeping me afloat. This has never happened to me. I’ve always ignored rough seas, always swam in high waves, but there seems to be little shoreline here.

“Hey,” he calls back, stroking my face with his hand. I squint my eyes trying to collect myself. I look up finding his mouth inches from mine. His lips are so beautiful and perfect. “You’ve been drinking.” His breath tickles my wet skin, causing me to shiver all over. My whole body quivers. He makes me quiver.

“Yes,” I whisper, startled by his gesture. “Why?” My eyes move to his finding them fixed on my lips.

“You disappeared suddenly and... I thought you were drowning,” he reveals with an edge to his voice.

When his eyes rest on mine I find my doom. I want so many things right now, like zeroing in on him and kissing him

like there's no tomorrow, losing myself and letting him take me wherever he wants.

“Jesus Christ,” I curse in a whisper. “I’m an expert swimmer, how the fuck...” I open my mouth only to screw it up. I have to, I can’t afford to give in to weakness.

“Sure, and I’m the prince of a planet named after me.” I smile at his joke with the hope that I’ve amused him but he, like every time, snubs me by letting me go.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d put the top piece of your costume back on.” Then he tosses me the bra. I don’t catch it, I just let it fall to the surface of the water a few inches from me. Incredulous. I hadn’t realised it had come undone. I cross my arms over my chest to cover myself. “This place is frequented by many of my clients, and it bothers me that one of my employees is showing off...” He points to my breasts. “All that.” I wrinkle my forehead and reach out to grab my bra before the waves take it away. I lower my gaze with a sense of shame that I can’t explain, because no one has ever managed to make me feel this way before. I usually don’t care what other people think, but him... I latch on to his every word.

“And I’d appreciate it if you’d stop using my name to swear like a sailor. Even if you do it in another language, the meaning is the same.” He turns and heads for the shoreline. “Get out before the lifeguard arrives.” I am fascinated by the muscles in his back that contract with every movement, as if even the simple act of walking serves to train and inflate them even more. He walks the last few steps, unaware that he has caught the ravenous eyes of the ladies sunbathing. They have all turned to look at him with one common thought: having him just for themselves.

I close my eyes and shake my head finding this pathetic. I wanted a day to myself, in peace and quiet, away from all kinds of problems, but instead things never turn out as I hope.

With a bitter taste in my mouth, I go along with Kris's wishes and put on my bra and then get out of the water at the call of my friend who asks me how I am. I pretend not to have heard her.

I throw myself down on the sun bed and close my eyes, pointing my face to the sun as if nothing was wrong. I hope they leave me alone because that's the only thing I want right now.

"Kristòs, have you found a name for the new club?" asks Athos.

Oh God, did I hear right? Kristòs? Is that your name? That's why he gave that lecture about my swearing.

"Not yet." I barely turn around and see my boss drying his hair. I feel sorry for what happened. It wasn't my intention not to notice the unfastened bra. It must have been Athos rubbing my back.

"Jade, you could give him a hand since you're so creative," Athos continued, earning a slap on the gut by Electre. "What?" he whispers to her. "I was only trying to initiate conversation. Why do you always have to hit me?"

"Because you don't know when to bite your tongue." She then walks past him on her way to the booth. He follows her, calling her back with cheesy nicknames.

"Jade, do you want something to drink?" shouts Athos. I smile unwillingly.

"No, thanks." Those two manage to make even Kristòs smile as he turns to look at them. He shakes his head and then

chooses to approach me. He makes his way through our backpacks resting between the beds and tries to sit down.

I admire his determination in wanting to deal with me, even when I'm up to all sorts of mischief.

He bends over to spread out his beach towel, which had folded in the wind, and reaches for the glass on the table.

“So, your full name is Kristòs?” I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from laughing. I've never heard such an unusual name before.

“We haven't been able to introduce ourselves properly, even though you work for me.”

I have to agree with him on that. We got off on the wrong foot and, between commitments, never got the chance.

“Do you want to start again?” He extends his hand towards me. “I'm Kristòs Princekaris, the owner of the bar you work at and a few other bars in Athens, no big deal.”

“A millionaire,” I snort quietly. I don't look at him, I pretend not to care. Also, because I don't really care. He could be the poorest man in the world, and I would look at him the same way.

“A successful entrepreneur sounds better,” he corrects me, chuckling. It's adorable when he does, when his voice changes pitch. He is adorable when he smiles and two small dimples form on the sides of his mouth, accentuating his frown lines. Maybe his definition could make him sound better, but that doesn't change anything: he must have a few million in the bank.

I take a deep breath and, trying to be polite, I humour him in his presentation. It won't hurt if I try to get to know him.

“Jade Kastis, I’m a nomad.” I fire off the biggest lie of the century. Maybe that will explain my weariness towards revealing my identity for the job. I don’t shake his hand; I don’t want to indulge him to that extent.

“A nomad. Interesting.” He doesn’t retract his hand, instead grabbing mine and shaking it firmly. A shiver of pleasure runs down my spine. He seems to be one of those men who takes what he wants at any cost, and I don’t know whether I like that or if it bothers me.

“Nice to meet you, Jade. If that’s even your real name.” Annoyed, I turn to him and glare at him. I try to pull my hand away, but his grip is strong. While I’m getting irritated, he’s having fun. I sit up and tug on his arm, but the only result I get is to bring him closer to me. When I realise that my knees are touching his bed, I am stunned. I can’t believe he managed to drag me so close.

“I want to make one thing clear,” I whisper harshly, “you’re not my father, you can’t tell me what I can or can’t do, especially if it’s my day off.” I pick up the conversation regarding the scene just now. I hate people who give me orders outside of the work environment.

His gaze narrows and I can safely say that his mood has changed. He tugs on my arm again, but doesn’t let go of me, instead stroking my wrist with his thumb.

“Believe me, if I were your father you’d be on my lap, and I’d be giving you so many spankings that you’d get over being so foul-mouthed and arrogant.” He says it so slowly and in such a sensual tone that it causes me to shudder just thinking about it actually happening.

“Of course, Daddy.” I smile, watching him from under my lashes. He flinches uncomfortably for just a moment and bites

his bottom lip. Then he opens his beautiful mouth to answer me, but my phone rings. I grab it with my free hand and, to my amazement, notice that it is Enea calling me. In a breathy voice he asks me if I can go and give him a hand because a cruise ship is about to dock, and the place is full.

“How far is it to Fira from here, on foot?” I ask Kristòs in a whisper.

“About forty minutes.”

“Okay, give me half an hour and I’ll be there.” Without waiting for an answer, I hang up. I pull my arm back with ease, paying no attention to Kristòs and his astonished look. I get up and gather all my things into my backpack. I put on my denim shorts in a hurry.

“Where are you going?” he asks only after I button up my shorts. “You won’t make it to Fira in half an hour.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find a ride.”

“You can’t.” I stop and wrinkle my forehead. “I mean, you can but... I had arranged for us all to go out for dinner,” he reveals, startling me. I didn’t know anything about it. I shake my head and shrug as if I didn’t care.

“You tell them that I have to run. My fiancé demands me,” I lie, but it’s for the greater good. Mine, of course. “It’s been a pleasure, Kristòs Princekaris.” I sling my backpack over my shoulder, and as my eyes settle on the small table where his glass sits, an idea flashes through my mind. “May I?” I don’t wait for his permission; I grab the drink and bring the straw to my lips as he watches me in astonishment. I smile mischievously as I swallow the sip of iced tea. “Thank you.” I turn and walk away.

I take the first steps and, by chance, run into Electre and Athos. With a worried look they ask me for an explanation that I don't give, dismissing them with a simple: "I have to go." I don't know if they believe me or not, but it doesn't matter. I know they're wondering what happened, why I'm running away like this, or if my running away is related to the fact that they left me alone with Kristòs.

"Do you want the car?" my friend shouts. I answer with a wave.

No, but I'd like my bike back.

I mentally curse Markus and his delay in returning my bike. It would take much less time, but instead I have to walk. Fortunately, I have my phone and all of my favourite music with me, so the road feels less tiring.

Suddenly something catches my attention. A sports car pulls up beside me and stops. As the window goes down, I bend over to see who's driving. Maybe it's the usual tourist who got lost. To my amazement I find Kristòs.

"What do you want?" I snap, rolling my eyes. Although his presence irritates me, I don't turn away from the window. Surely this can't be an accident, it's impossible.

"Do you need a ride?" he asks with a friendly smile. I glare at him, imagining what might happen if I accepted.

"No," I reply dryly. I start walking again, hoping he'll leave me alone. But of course, he won't. Kristòs turns off the engine, gets out of the car and joins me, standing in front of me.

"Do I have to remind you what I'm capable of when I'm told no?"

I wrinkle my forehead and laugh. I'm used to these warnings. Raffaele used the same tactic to spice up our encounters.

"Let me take you to where you need to go," he proposes. I shake my head and try to get past him, but he grabs my arm. "I said I'll take you."

"I said I don't like being bossed around." I tug on his arm and free myself from his grip.

"I'd appreciate a ride together." His voice is warm and comforting this time, and it confuses me. What the hell is he doing? Why does he want to be nice to me all of a sudden? Maybe he wants to see who "my boyfriend" is?

"That is, if your ladyship pleases." I turn around to find him with his hand on the handle, ready to open the door for me. In his last words, however, I find arrogance and a desire to offend me.

"Fuck off, Kristòs." I don't know what he wants or what his intentions are, but I just can't take it. There's shock in his eyes and that's what unsettles me. He looks away, bewildered. I turn my back on him and start walking again with a knot in my throat that I can't explain. I try to dampen it by biting my lips, but it doesn't work. Maybe this time I really screwed up; I went too far in telling him off. After all, he was only trying to help me, even though I told him several times that I didn't want to.

The roar of the sports car brings me back down to earth. He's pulling away.

What the hell is wrong with me? In the end, he's my boss, he just wanted to be nice and start again. Obviously, I've ruined everything.

After about ten minutes of brisk walking and a bit of running, I get to the harbour and get straight to work, trying not to think about the consequences of the words I addressed to Kristòs. It was hard though, since his face kept presenting itself before my eyes.

Against all expectations, time flew by, and I didn't realise that it was night when I finally finished my shift.

I didn't have a free second to allow those thoughts to stagnate in my mind.

"Jade, you saved my life. I swear..." Enea places his hand on his chest at heart level. "I swear I'll give you a hefty tip." I know for sure he will, I can trust him. I smile as I finish clearing the last table to join him.

"You're free tomorrow, right?"

"For you, always," I smile. He hands me a cold beer which I accept with gusto. I take a sip and feel like I'm reborn. I know I shouldn't drink, but right now I feel the need to.

"Tomorrow at lunchtime another wave of tourists is expected. I think we'll be able to close by 17:00. At least, I hope so, I'm seriously tired after today." He continues to sort out the last few things behind the counter. He loads the dishwasher and covers the ones that just came out with a cloth.

"Can we sort out your payment tomorrow? That way I can write you a cheque and..." I shake my head and, like the previous time, ask for cash.

"Sorry, but I hate banks and everything that has to do with them. I prefer to manage my earnings and savings myself." This is what I led them to believe. Instead, the truth is only one: my family could find me, and I don't want to run that risk.

“Whatever.” He raises his hands in surrender. He can do nothing but accept.

After taking the last sip of beer, I get up from the chair, grab my things and say goodbye to Enea with the promise to come back tomorrow for lunch, and not to need a ride since I have the bike he lent me. Even if he turns his nose up at my statement, he gets over it and accompanies me to the door which he then locks as soon as I leave.

On the way home I have plenty of time to think. From my affair with Raffaele to what happened with Kristòs. I don't want to fall into the hands of someone who turns out to be no different. I don't want any kind of involvement. I just want to work to support myself and live my life as I see fit. Nothing more.

When I finally get home, I run to have a shower. I've been in my swimming costume all day and the saltiness was pulling at my skin. I hope I don't meet Electre or Athos and receive some big speech about my behaviour.

After the shower I finally slip into bed and, with a tired smile, I grab my mobile phone to send a goodnight message to Enea.

“I arrived home safe and sound.
Thanks for the chat and good night.
See you tomorrow.”

“SEE YOU TOMORROW.”

Chapter 8



The sun has almost disappeared, leaving a starry sky without any clouds.

I run as fast as I can trying to limit the delay. I must hurry. Odin will kill me, or Kristòs will as soon as he finds out. I can feel it, I'm in deep trouble.

I've never been late, I've always been on time, so I hope that this time he'll turn a blind eye but, above all, won't tell Kristòs anything.

The lunch shift lasted longer than expected and, without any means of transportation at my disposal, it's difficult for me to be on time for my evening shift.

When I cross the threshold of the club, I'm glad to see Odin isn't around. Keeping my head low I walk down the stairs and along the corridor hoping not to bump into him as I make my way to the changing room. Quickly I give myself a rinse, put on my uniform blouse and tuck it into my skirt. After quickly fixing my hair I'm ready for yet another shift.

"Jade." Odin's voice makes my eyes widen. "You're five minutes late."

"Has Kristòs arrived yet?" I cut in, ignoring his words.

“Yeah, but I told him you asked for a few minutes’ leave.” I step towards the exit of the locker room, but he stands in front of me. “At the end of his shift he wants you in his office.” Panic. My heart is in my throat. When I was at Enea’ I realized that I sent the goodnight message to Kristòs and not to Enea as I had thought. I wanted to try to delete it, but he had already read it and even replied believing it was for him.

I nod and thank him, passing him by.

All I have to do is work without losing focus and mostly trying not to think that in a few hours I will have to face Kristòs.

Odin seems to have put aside the quarrel we had in the locker room and Margarita is on duty today in the kiosk outside, so I’m safe. So far everything is going well.

“Hello, agápi.” Athos’s voice makes me look up at him. He is alone, without Electre, and that worries me.

“Hi,” I reply in an astonished tone. I want him to notice my surprise. I look around for my friend, then back at him, intent on staring at the counter outside as if he should be keeping an eye on someone.

“She’s at an event. She left you a message on the table,” he explains. “I just came to talk to Kris, then I’m going back to her.” Seeing him exchange intense glances with another and being reciprocated with an intensity that would make anyone blush is not exactly what I expected from someone who declared his love for my friend.

“I don’t...”

“Hey, agápi. I’m not here to hook up or anything, I explained my feelings to you, did I not?” He raises his hands in surrender and takes a step away. “Do you happen to know if

the boss is in his office?” I nod, rolling my eyes. I was doing so well without hearing his name.

“What’s going on? I thought you two were getting along,” he whispers. “You guys spent a lot of time alone at the beach yesterday talking.” He chuckles, amused by my face, and turns away from me. “See you later.” I reach out and grab his arm before he manages to turn the corner.

“You’re not going to tell him anything about me, right?” Athos points his eyes towards my hand, then meets my gaze. He smiles mockingly and that terrifies me.

“Your secret is safe. Rather, I’d like to make sure you don’t investigate on your own or have any doubts,” he reassures me, but his smile makes me more anxious than ever. “You know, I’m hurt by your continued distrust of me.” He raises an eyebrow and waits for my reaction.

“I don’t...”

“Really? Come on Jade, I could have spilled the beans to Kris about who you are from the get-go; instead, he keeps asking me why my words should be enough for him to keep you here, given your behaviour towards him,” he replies, making me feel uncomfortable.

He raises his free hand to caress my face and brings his face closer to mine until our foreheads are joined. “I know it’s hard, but trust me. I would never betray you. And if you give him a chance, Kris won’t either,” he whispers.

His behaviour destabilises me. All the men who have approached me up to this point have only wanted one thing. He’s different. He’s my friend and has no ulterior motive.

I nod and attempt to pull away, but he prevents me by bringing his hand behind my head.

“No, look me in the eye and tell me you trust me, or I won’t let you go.” He tightens his grip hurting me. Maybe that’s exactly what I want from him. A real friendship, one that you fight to make work.

“Okay, I trust you,” I admit and close my eyes, resigned to having to do as he wants. When I open them again, his gaze has softened, and he immediately loosens his grip. A sweet smile makes its way onto his mouth, and he slowly moves to place his lips on my forehead. My heart is racing. Fear mixed with anger that almost makes me lose my breath. I’ve never felt all these emotions at the same time, and I don’t know if I can handle it.

Immediately, he heads towards his friend’s office. He knocks on the door and enters, leaving it ajar.

I look around and throw my words and intentions into the bin. True friendship or not, I follow Athos. I take advantage of the ajar door and start eavesdropping. I know it shouldn’t be done, I know I should trust Electre, but the fear of being discovered makes me doubt everyone, even the one who promised to fight for me. I lean my back against the wall and hope I don’t get caught.

“Sounds cool, you should go. It’s not every day you get an invitation to such an exclusive event,” Athos exclaims.

“Maybe. Honestly, I don’t really feel like it. Too many entrepreneurs bragging about their wives and I...”

“Imagine if we went together. They might think you’ve converted. From playboy to raging homosexual.” He laughs at his sleazy joke. It wouldn’t be believable at all since....

Hell, since... nothing! It might be.

“By the way, I emailed you all the preliminary documents. You print them out and hand them to me, signed. Then we have to wait for your move, hoping you’ll meet the demands.” Athos keeps talking about things that don’t make sense to me. Maybe they are contracting supplies for the new place or even buying the building.

“I hope that’ll be over quickly.” Kristòs’ voice, warm and quiet, fills my heart. I smile like a child. He doesn’t seem to be angry or anything, it will be easy to handle later.

“It’s just the first step, Kris.” Then silence, broken only by the sound of a printer in action. “Do you need money?”

“Not for the moment,” my boss replies. Why would he need money? Maybe business isn’t good? Is he in trouble?

“Just don’t tap into the credit card for anything in the world, you know he could find out where you are.” What?

“I know. You don’t need to tell me every damn time I see you.” The sound of a fist given on the desk creates silence between them.

“I’m telling you again because every time you forget and have to walk away.” Athos raises his voice. “Kris, I’m trying to help you, but if you don’t cooperate it’s all work thrown down the drain.”

“I’m sorry. I should be thanking you for everything you do and instead of attacking you.”

“Nonsense. We’re brothers and it’s normal for us to bicker. The important thing is sincerity and loyalty. Speaking of which...” I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall. Athos will expose me. He cares too much for his friend, and this is a credit to him, but he will betray me.

“Athos, we should postpone the opening.” My boss’s voice is so sad and tired that my heart tightens. What on earth ails him so? Athos seems to answer him with a grumble. “Right now, I don’t really have the head for...”

“Come on, let’s change the subject, it’s better. Maybe you’ll smile again if I ask you about Jade. What do you think?” His question makes my legs shake. This time he went straight to the point without mincing words. Now I see my end approaching faster.

“Is that why you came here? If you don’t have papers for me to sign or have your little girlfriend by your side setting up weird blind dates, you never set foot here.” Kristòs laughs and seems to have regained his usual mood. “What, are you afraid of Margarita? Or that Odin will make you pay your debts?”

“I asked you a very different question. Besides, it’s over with Margarita. I know as much as she does. Odin can go to hell since he is also my employee,” Athos continued, apparently irritated by his friend’s words. I had no idea they were partners. “I also came here to find out about...”

“Jade. What can I say except that she’s a frigid girl with a bad attitude, sometimes unmanageable. High-handed, snotty, conceited, arrogant and grimacing. You never know what’s going on in her head, you can’t tell if she’s going to snap or let you talk to her like an adult. A spoilt brat for all intents and purposes. Yesterday we had a fight, and, in the evening, she sent me a goodnight message,” reveals Kristòs. Man, that’s a load of crap. “But otherwise, I think she works well. Odin praises her, Margarita hates her, like she does with all of them.” His words hit me right in the heart. I didn’t think I’d given him that impression. I mean, maybe I did. It’s not that I behaved politely towards him, even though he tried to be nice

to me. But come on, he ran me over and blamed me, it's not like I can throw my arms around him and be nice. "She called me daddy and told me to fuck off, see for yourself."

"Jade, frigid? Are you talking about that girl who went into the water topless and didn't give a shit about onlookers? Who didn't flinch when she saw you?" Oh God, is it now a crime to be careless and not notice my bra was undone?

"Yes, if that's her real name." I hear his fingers tapping rhythmically on the table. "Did you know she introduced herself as Eleni?"

"Before or after the accident? I'm not silly." A clatter of papers makes me worry. "Jade Kastis, born in Athens on 30 August 2000. Mother and father nomads. Only child. Lived in the capital until she was ten, then started moving around. They never stayed in the same place. Nevertheless, she got good grades at school. Since graduation she could sort out all this paperwork with just one look," Athos explains in a tone that allows no comeback. I don't know how much it's costing him to lie to his best friend, but if he has gone this far, he must be really worth trust. "By the way, thank you for your disinterested opinion regarding my friend, but I meant what you thought about her at work." I smile in amusement.

"Are you going to explain to me why you're walking around with information about Jade in your breast pocket?"

"I've been researching who placed themselves in the house. Seems normal to me." Silence; neither of them speak anymore.

"Anyway, yeah, not bad, she's doing well. She can sustain conversations, is never vulgar and always willing to work harder. Odin adores her," Kristòs explains with a note of annoyance.

“Odin adores them all, I wouldn’t want him to take a few more steps before...” Athos is interrupted by Kristòs’ cough. “Alright, I’ll stop. So, can she stay?”

“Are you so afraid of Electre that you go along with her every whim? You know she’ll ruin you, don’t you?”

“For the moment she’s dedicated to exhausting me by wanting more and more and you don’t know how satisfying that is.”

He seems to be bragging and that’s really disgusting.

“Imagine if the paladin in you would back down from satisfying the perpetual cravings of a little more than a teenager. What, are you feeling old and in need of a little toy?”

Athos bursts out laughing, and I would love to intervene, enter the office, approach Kristòs, and slap him for the words he is using to describe my friend.

“This is where you are mistaken, my dear Kris. I love her. And you know what? You should find someone to wear you out like Ele does me, my dear ‘daddy,’ because you’re becoming worse than a bitter old spinster.”

No, I can’t listen to any more of this. I can’t listen to all this nastiness.

“If you love Electre as much as you say you do, why do you care so much about Jade? Does she wear you out too?”

What? Is he insane?

“What? Don’t tell me you’re jealous.” chuckled Athos. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Absolutely.”

“You are once again mistaken. The sooner you realise that, the sooner we’ll all be happier for you. Jade is the little sister I never had, nothing more.”

The sound of a chair crawling across the floor makes me jerk my legs and hurry back to my station. I play dumb when Athos stops at the counter and sits down. I flash him a smile and he stares at me expressionlessly. I hope he didn’t see me running away.

“Are you okay?” He follows me with his gaze and when I stop right in front of him, he raises his head to look me in the eyes. “Athos...”

“I lied to my best friend to get you to stay here.” His words hurt me. I didn’t want it to come to this. I close my eyes and bite my lip.

“I’m sorry. I can always...”

“Don’t worry, we’re the ones who dragged you into this. I have a strange feeling though; I don’t know how to describe it.” He brings his elbows up to the counter and covers his face. I instinctively clasp his wrists, trying to comfort him. “It’s done now. He’ll be satisfied with my answer for a while. I’m going to go now, Electre must be wondering where I am.” He removes his hands from his face, frees himself from my grasp in order to place them on the counter and push himself up. With a lopsided smile he bids me farewell.

“Athos,” I call back. He turns and stares at me, waiting to hear what I have to say. “Thank you for everything you’re doing, I’m sorry if I ever doubted you.” He certainly deserves all my gratitude and, after what I’ve heard, my trust as well. The good thing is that I don’t even know why he decided to do all this, he doesn’t know me and the excuse of “I don’t want someone else to make the same mistake as my friend”, doesn’t

make much sense. He nods as if to call himself an idiot for helping me and walks out of the club.

It's my fault if Athos feels bad and the worst thing is that I don't know how to fix it. Maybe, if he hadn't taken sides, he wouldn't have bickered with Kristòs and wouldn't have revealed his love for Electre to protect himself. Maybe... No, there's no time for maybes. It doesn't have to be that way. Without thinking, I run to the locker room, take the money that Enea gave me as compensation and run to him. I want to pay off my debt and leave, so Athos won't have to lie anymore.

I run to my boss' office without knocking, ready to face him. As soon as I close the door behind me, my brain melts. Dishevelled hair, tanned skin and dark eyes that are tracing trails of fire across my skin.

"Yes?" His voice takes my breath away. His thoughts seem to be mixed as well. "Jade?" His eyes are fixed on me, waiting for answers I struggle to give. Kristòs sits quietly in his swivel chair behind the desk. His gaze distracts me, renders me helpless, fries my brain. It is so penetrating. I open my mouth to tell him all sorts of things, but no sound escapes my lips. I close them again and wrinkle my forehead so hard that his expression changes. "Okay, I'll start then. I really wanted to talk to you," he begins. "I have the estimate and..."

"Here. I was wondering if there is anything I can do to speed up the debt repayment," I whisper in a sensual tone. My brain is no longer thinking logically, it's making me imagine something I shouldn't, but I see it as the only alternative. He frowns and purses his lips. He looks away from me to focus on the papers.

"Like what? Other than overtime I don't know what to suggest." He speaks in an obvious tone as he begins to clean

up the mess on his desk. He doesn't seem angry or about to be, so I can try to ask for leniency.

I approach him slowly, pretending to look around but admiring his taste in decor. Simple and essential. I reach the desk and stroke it along the inlaid edge. I love doing this, feeling the mouldings under my fingertips makes me relive my childhood.

“Did you happen to come in for more overtime?” I look up at him and find him staring at me. I shrug and join him, positioning myself by his side. His eyes remain anchored to mine, hoping to know what's going through my head, what I'm going to do or if he should stop me before I do something I might regret.

I turn around, rest my butt on the wood and cross my legs so that my skirt rises just enough to be enticing.

“If you want to call it that.” I take his hand to rest it on my inner thigh. I've seen so many easy-going women snare older men with this simple move. All they have to do is make it clear that they're willing to give a little more and the man doesn't ask twice.

Kristòs looked away to view his hand, which strangely enough remained still.

He must be gay.

“What do you want to call it?”

“Extinction of debt through benefits for both of us,” I answer, undoing the first button of my shirt. Kristòs stands up, spreads my legs, and places himself between them. He leans over me, bringing his hands to the desk, pinning me down.

Fuck, I didn't think that would work.

He brings his face closer to mine, so close I'd only need a breath to close the distance. His eyes peel away from mine only to rest on my lips. He moves his head as if tormented by some contradicting thoughts. His breath caresses the skin of my décolleté, making me shiver. He smells good; his scent that of a rough but delicate man, arrogant but gentle. A scent that intoxicates, ignites the senses and is hard to forget.

He will now kiss me and take me on his desk. We'll have wild sex, better than we've ever had, and he'll finally free me from that damn debt he saddled me with. Then, we go our separate ways.

"I don't sleep with my employees, even if they owe me a debt." While he looks amused, I turn serious. The more his mischievous smile widens, the more my anger rises.

I raise my hand and make it collide against his cheek. Yes, I just slapped him in the face, and I don't regret it. I push him away from me, get off the desk and get out of this room as fast as I can. He calls me back amused, the asshole, but I don't listen to him.

What the hell was I thinking? What the hell did I do? It makes sense that he doesn't sleep with his employees. I'm becoming exactly what I told myself I'd never become. I'm making a fool of myself, giving a bad impression of myself.

I choose to take a five-minute break before going back to work, so I head to the second terrace overlooking the sea. It is still undergoing completion works, which is why it's not open to the public. The outside lights are off, except for the ones on the side of the wooden walkway that connects the door to the platform outside. I have known about this corner since day one. Odin took me here and told me in broad strokes how Kristòs is transforming it into an exclusive private room.

I feel pathetic. I've never been a girl who used sex to get around problems, in fact I hate those who do. But just now, it felt so natural and... pleasurable. Is it in my nature? I know my mother did the same with my father and... Fuck!

I rest my elbows on the balustrade and look out to sea, trying to figure out what the hell I'm doing. My rational side seems to have broken down. What's happening to me?

I take a deep breath and cast my gaze down to the emptiness of the cliff below my feet. I feel a tear slip and disappear without a trace. A grimace of pain arises on my face, but it is not physical pain.

"Don't do that." I would recognize Kristòs' voice among many. "It's not a solution." I dry my eyes in a swift gesture so as not to give him any more leverage against me. He grabs my arm, pulls me away from the balustrade, and pulls me into an embrace. I keep my head bowed when, in a voice made hoarse by gloom, I order him to leave me. "Were you crying? Why?" I try to break free, but his powerful arms are too strong for my slender frame.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's happening to me."

"Did you think I was playing along? Jade, do you know how many advances I get? Why would I accept yours?"

"How dare you judge me? You don't know me; you can't say I'm frigid. You can't mock Athos if he has fallen in love with Electre, you can't..."

"Did you eavesdrop?"

"It doesn't matter, you..."

"You eavesdropped on my conversation with Athos?" He shakes me, tightening his grip around my body, making me bring my face even closer to his chest. Silence. I don't answer,

I don't because I know full well, I might burst into tears. "Answer me," he whispers softly. With his chin he rubs against my temple. I bite my lips.

Maybe because it's the first hug I've had in years?

I swallow and sniffle. Kristòs loosens his grip, brings his hand to my head, and draws me back to him. I burst into unrestrained tears, not caring that he is my boss and could use this outburst against me. I am afraid, afraid of what will happen.

"Yes, I eavesdropped and I'm proud that I did because I got to know what you actually think of me, and I know for a fact that you weren't lying because he's your best friend." His hand stops moving, and he loosens his grip. I turn away from someone who I thought was a serious person. "You don't know me, you didn't even try to do that, but you didn't hesitate to spit on my person like I was the worst of the worst just because you ran me over. You demanded my information and put your best friend in an uncomfortable position. What kind of person are you? How do you sleep at night?" I'm out of breath and he's cashing in on everything I'm telling him with his hands in his pockets, like he doesn't care, like he's used to it.

"Are you done?" I point my eyes into his, astonished at his obliviousness. "Good. Because you too are judging me without knowing me, by believing I'd slam you on my desk just because I didn't take my hand off your thigh. And do you want to know why I didn't? I got all misty-eyed over the bruises thinking about how much I hurt you. Believe me, I'm trying to make it up to you, by being nice and friendly, but you're making it really hard for me. Now, either we keep

judging each other or we start getting to know each other. You choose.” He shrugs as if he’s indifferent to it.

“You don’t really care.”

“What do you mean then by getting to know you, Jade? Do you want to date? Do you want to have a sexual relationship with me? Do you want to be the little girl who sleeps with the boss in the hope that he’ll pay off her debts? Do you want, nay, hope that I can support you and pay for your every little whim by giving you that queenly life that everyone dreams of? Explain yourself!” He raises his voice so high it scares me. “Because if you think you’ve found some clueless kid, you’re sadly mistaken. I know very well what people like you are like. You’d love to set me up, but I was smarter than that.” His words hurt me. I don’t understand to what I owe all this anger towards me.

“I didn’t want to and don’t want to screw you over; will you get that into your thick skull? I don’t know where this absurd idea came from,” I whisper, wrinkling my forehead. A new tear doesn’t hesitate to appear. These insinuations hurt me, they really hurt me. “I don’t care what you do with your money if that’s what you’re afraid of. I just want to establish a friendship since you are Athos’ best friend and my boss. That’s all” I continue revealing my thoughts. By now I’m in tears and I don’t care if he thinks I’m nothing but a little girl who starts crying out of exasperation.

“Sure, because what happened in my office is the approach you use to get to know people.” He laughs, amused by the whole situation.

“I’ve apologised, what do I have to do to...”

“Oh, now I get it, that’s how Athos met you too. Only it worked out well for you with him.”

I don't believe it. He did not just say that. He can't have spoken like that about his friend. I march up to him and slap him as hard as I can, but he takes it without blinking or trying to block me.

"I won't let you talk about me like that, much less him. You may be friends, but you're rotten on the inside; I don't know how he can stand you," I scream as I walk past him on my way back inside. Although the altercation may seem small, to me it's not. He made some really despicable insinuations.

"Jade," he calls back to me in a bored tone. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sure, you drop a bomb like that and then apologise. It doesn't work that way, not with me" I yell. I don't want to turn around; I don't want to continue this pathetic conversation. I have only one problem: I don't want to go back in. I stall, hoping he'll catch up to me and, needless to say, I feel his presence behind me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath inhaling his scent. He's so close.

"Jade," he whispers. I feel his breath tickle my neck. "I apologise. I've been under a lot of pressure lately and I'm seeing everything black. I got confirmation that you're sincere because while you were yelling your thoughts at me your eyes were doing the same." I close my eyes and hope he lets me go without continuing to talk. Even if everything he said is a product of his state of mind, I don't care. Somewhere deep down he means it. I reach for the handle and this time he does not stop me. I open the door and enter.

Chapter 9



The ringing of my mobile phone wakes me up. I'm sure it's too early, as I only managed to fall asleep a few minutes ago.

I grab the phone and answer it.

“Hi, this is Markus, the owner of the garage where you left your bike. I'm calling to tell you that the bike is ready.” I smile to myself at this wonderful news.

“Hello. Thank God, I couldn't take it anymore!”

“Anytime you can, you know where to find me. There's just one small problem, the cost has gone up because of customs fees. You know, the parts come from the mainland and...” I close my eyes, squeezing them shut.

“At this point you have to give me a few more days,” I interrupt him without wanting to hear more. “You owe me that since you knew there was going to be a raise and didn't warn me,” I sob. “I'll pick it up by the end of the week, not before.” Markus accepts with a snort and hangs up, perhaps annoyed by my words. I let myself fall on the bed, defeated. I just wanted peace, to be left out of obligations too big for my age, but it seems that one way or another, it's impossible for me.

I get up reluctantly and head to the kitchen for breakfast, hoping to find Electre already at the table drinking her usual latte, but there's no one there. Maybe she's still sleeping, after all, yesterday Athos told me she was at an event. Maybe they came home late.

I open the fridge looking for a yoghurt which I grab and sit down at the table to eat. My breakfast has changed since I've been living with Electre; it's now faster and less filling. In Bari, my table was full of croissants, fruit, and cheese. So were lunch and dinner. Meals that were thrown in the rubbish because nobody really ate them. A waste.

As soon as I finish, I clear the table and run to take an invigorating shower. I need it after the night I've had.

Maybe it can wash away the constant memory of Kristòs' words echoing in my head.

As soon as the water hits my skin, the image of my boss in a swimming costume flashes before me. I bite my lip, finding it decidedly exciting. While the vision of him rinsing off under the shower adds to the excitement, I can clearly see his eyes on me. He signals me with his finger to reach for him and as soon as I move, he opens his arms wide. When I get in front of him, he pulls me to him and kisses me with so much passion it could lead to something more.

“Are you my baby?” he whispers against my lips.

“Of course.” At my answer, Kristós pushes my back against the wall and slips a hand between us.

The slamming of the bathroom door makes me open my eyes again and realise that I'm just daydreaming.

“Jade, is that you?” Athos' voice makes me panic.

What if I said something? What if he opens the curtain?

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Would you be offended if I brushed my teeth? I have to go to the office and I’m already running late.”

What?

“Go ahead, just don’t open the curtain,” I warn him. He mumbles in response and shortly after I hear the sound of him brushing.

“This is your tenth shower, are you trying to forget something?” I don’t answer, pretending I didn’t hear him. I hope he doesn’t insist on that point, not least because I wouldn’t know what to say, “Jade?” Of course, he calls me back by also tapping on the curtain. “Did something happen with Kris?”

“No,” I snap. Damn it.

“Okay, because if it did, just tell me and I’ll take care of it,” he explains in a crooked voice. Maybe he still has his toothbrush in his mouth. I snort and raise my face to the ceiling. I hope he gets out and leaves me alone, I just want to be able to take a shower and forget Kris’ words. “Got it. See you later.” He taps the curtain once more to say goodbye. I smile and go back to devoting myself to my shower.



“JADE, can you clear table 20 for me? The couple who made the reservation has arrived.”

Enea is busy taking orders. I nod and execute. When I get to the counter to seat the customers, I almost have a heart

attack. Kristòs is right in front of me. With him, a middle-aged gentleman.

Damn, now I really am screwed.

He looks tired, like he's had a few too many late nights. He's wearing jeans and a tight black T-shirt, just tight enough to show his muscles, dishevelled hair that makes him irresistible and a hint of beard that wraps up the whole look.

I take a deep breath, turning away a in hopes that he won't recognise me. I guide them towards the table I've set as the man doesn't stop talking about things I don't understand.

"These are yours," I say placing the menus on the table and slipping away faster than ever. I can't serve them; he'd find out about me and possibly freak out. If not now, tonight at the club.

I ask Enea if he can take care of their order and serve them, inventing the excuse that that customer is someone who keeps following me. Even if he turns up his nose, he ends up accepting, extorting endless favours from me. Anything as long as he doesn't make me serve Kristòs.

With all the restaurants around, why did he have to come to this one?

I try not to let him see me, I try to avoid passing by his table in any way, or if I have to, I try not to let him see me.

From a distance I watch him curiously, always hoping that he won't notice me, although I think he is too busy looking at the paperwork he has spread out in front of him. His face is worried, wrinkled in a way I've never seen, even though, since I've known him, his face has contracted in ten thousand ways, almost all because of me. I hold my breath when the man at his side hands him a paper and Kristòs closes his eyes. I smile

when I see him smile, frown when he scribbles something and then hands the piece of paper to his colleague. When they finish eating, they get up and head for the till. I do my best to clear the table. I am happy to see them leave, accompanied to the door by Enea, who only shakes hands with Kristòs' friend; the man doesn't seem to mind too much. Maybe they don't know each other, maybe there's something going on or, more likely, none of this is any of my business. I look away and continue to clear the table, hoping that the two, or at least Kristòs, will disappear from my sight.

As soon as the place is empty, Enea approaches me to find out as much as possible. I've never asked him for a favour like this, so the incident caught his eye.

"Are you ever going to tell me what you did to get stalked by Kristòs Princekaris?" He leans on the table in front of me. I shake my head, exhausted from the day. "Jade, he's an important man. If he stalks you like you say, you know that..."

"Don't worry, I can handle guys like him," I reply, hoping that's enough for him. He nods and hands me the envelope with the paycheck which I grab greedily. Now I can go and collect my bike.

"Are you sure? You're not lying to keep me quiet, are you?" I smile and nod. "I know him very well, and I know he's someone who's willing to do anything to get what he wants. Be careful," he continues as I make my way towards the door. I say goodbye to Enea and walk out of the club looking around, hoping that Kris is really gone.

It's too early to pick up my bike, so I decide to calmly walk to the workshop. Now I have the money to redeem it and I can get back to pedalling the streets of this magnificent island.

“Are you going to explain what you were doing in there with an apron on or do I have to go in and ask Enea about it?” I jerk in fright. Then I see him. Kristòs is leaning against a car.

“Jesus Christ, are you trying to give me a heart attack?” I bring my hand to my chest and close my eyes.

“Well? Are you going to answer me?”

“No. Why should I?” Kristòs doesn’t answer, the only thing he does is walk towards the entrance of the restaurant. I try to stand in front of him to stop him, but as soon as I place my hand on his chest, he immediately moves away. He walks past me as if I didn’t exist. I grab him by the wrist, but he manages to drag me a few steps.

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell you on one condition.” He stops and turns around. He points his grim gaze at me.

“No conditions. What the fuck were you doing in there?” he yells through clenched teeth. Maybe there is bad blood between him and Enea, resulting in his current mood.

Yeah, Giada. Maybe he is angry, how could you tell?

“I work there, OK? I have been doing it since I arrived in Santorini. After the incident with you, I had to find something else because what I earn there isn’t enough to pay you back. Electre and Athos had the bright idea of hiring me at your place. I didn’t know you were the owner.” He’s still furious even though I told the truth.

“I don’t care why; you should have asked me. I don’t like my employees hanging out in certain places,” he complains with anger pouring out of every pore.

“Certain places? I had to ask you? Are you even listening to yourself?” His aggressive and possessive attitude scares and disgusts me at the same time. “If anything, I should have asked

Enea if I could work for you since you came later,” I thunder, offended in turn.

“Get in the car and I’ll take you home” he orders. He walks towards the car and, when he sees that I don’t comply, he tries to encourage me. I shake my head and take a few steps towards the restaurant. I don’t want to listen to him. I don’t want to be the one who has to put up with all his accusations and insinuations. “Jade,” he calls back angrily, but I don’t listen to him. I’m sorry I have to act so stubborn with him, but he has to understand that I can’t accept certain behaviours. I am not his object.

After the umpteenth call, I raise my arm, showing him my middle finger. If he has conflicts with someone, I don’t see why I have to get involved. Let him handle it himself.

Strangely enough, he doesn’t chase me, and for that I am grateful. I don’t feel like fighting him.

I walk towards the workshop and when I arrive, I find it closed. Not because I’m late, but because the dealer has chosen to take half a day off for family reasons. This really pisses me off. He could have at least warned me by giving me a call. This is the last thing I need right now.

Maybe he really has had family problems and I’m being a bitch towards him. But damn.

I try calling him, but his mobile is switched off. I snort again and roll my eyes, wondering if I’m really willing to put up with this or if I’m letting Karma get the better of me, unable to react as always. Still, I thought I had it rough in Bari, when instead, if I had listened to my parents, I wouldn’t have had to lift a finger and I would have achieved anything. I would have managed to carve out some sort of happiness somehow.

What brings me back down to earth is the roar of an engine coming alongside me. I close my eyes, already knowing who it is.

“Look.” I turn around and find Kristòs staring at me. How did he find me? “You look like a stalker; you know that right?” He doesn’t even get out of the car because of how much he wants to...what? Apologise? Stir the pot?

“You’re actually right. I just saw red. Finding you working at another place and being unaware of it literally threw me off.” His eyes lock onto mine. I want to look away, turn around and continue insulting him, go on my way and leave him here, alone, as always. But no. The image of him in the shower soaping his amber skin appears before my eyes blocks all my ill will. I imagine him holding out his hand and urging me to join him.

I bite my lip and close my eyes in hopes of driving him from my thoughts, but it doesn’t help.

“Need a ride?”

I shake my head. I just want the idea of doing something, anything with Kristòs, to leave my mind this very second and never appear again.

“I swear, I’m at peace and you’re without a bike by the looks of it,” he chuckles, not realizing that if I am it’s because of him. I huff out a laugh as in my mind’s eye I see him moving to the beat of a disco song with water washing the foam off his body. I squint as I enter the image myself; clinging to him like a koala to its tree, I kiss him with longing and passion. “Jade, are you okay?” His hand, caressing my face, is large, soft, and fragrant. I open my eyes and find Kristòs inches away from me, his fingers on my face, just as I imagined. I lift my head and look straight into his gorgeous

eyes. Slowly, his hand moves to the back of my head and his face comes closer.

Jesus Christ, is this a daydream or is this really happening?

I touch his chest and realise it's not a dream. I go up to caress his neck and with my index finger I touch his chin. My toes are aching due to the way I'm stretching. Then Kristòs steps back and turns just enough to stop me from kissing him.

I can't believe it; he's done it again!

I pull away from him and, without realising it, my hand rises and collides with his cheek. No one has ever dared to refuse me. Twice!

Kristòs takes the blow without a word, without removing his hand from the back of my neck.

It's not what he should be doing, why doesn't he move away?

"Sorry," I whisper, framing his face with my hands. I try to draw him to me, and, to my amazement, I succeed. To make up for it I try to leave a kiss on his affected area. He does not object to this either. I rest my forehead on his shoulder, and he hugs me.

"Don't you dare do that again. This is the third time you've slapped me, and I don't like it. You're taking too many liberties." He pushes me away violently, turns around, gets into the car, and drives off, leaving me here, alone.

What have I done? What the hell have I done?

Confused by what has just happened, I head home.



“JADE, IN MY OFFICE. NOW.” I look up from the glasses I’m setting down. I follow his gaze as he strides down the hall, his arm outstretched towards me. He holds them up until he disappears around the corner.

“What did you do?” asks Odin. I turn to him and shrug with the most innocent expression I can muster. I don’t waste time and do what I’ve been thinking since he left me on the side of the road: I make two Ouzo Spritzes. One for him and... the other one, also for him. Maybe I can sweeten him up.

“If he told you ‘Now’ that means you have to run.”

“All right,” I complain, as I finish making the drinks. I grab the two glasses and, with my entire pay from Enea in my pocket, head to Kristòs’ office. I go in without knocking, close the door with my butt, careful not to spill the contents of the glasses and look up at him, leaning against the desk. He has his arms folded and his gaze does not look promising. His thick eyebrows are furrowed and fearful.

He doesn’t speak, maybe he’s waiting for me to start, to apologise again for the slap I gave him. Or he’s looking for the most vulgar words he knows to throw me out.

I choose to move closer, take the same position as him and then hand him the glass. He humours me only after I give him a nudge with my shoulder that brings him back down to earth. He grabs my wrist, takes the glass away from me, placing it on the desk and pulls me in front of him. His legs are between mine now wide open to his assault. He grabs the other drink as well and places it next to the first one.

“What do you want from me, little girl?” he whispers. I stall, resting my eyes on his full lips. “Why do you keep pursuing me?”

I look into his eyes. I could say that “what I want, I take” and that I don’t learn from mistakes. Or that I strangely want him so much that I bang my head against this metaphorically over and over again.

“Do you want me?” I inhale and Kristós brings his arms behind my back, dragging mine as well. The gesture makes me arch backwards and bring my chest out, closer to him. It hurts slightly, but when he looks away to rest his gaze on the hint of my exposed breasts, it all passes. His breath tickles the skin of my chest.

I gasp, already feeling his lips on me. He brings his mouth closer to mine and I wait for that kiss I didn’t know I craved. “Get that out of your head,” he whispers. With a vulgar gesture he pushes me away from him. “I’ll tell you again, I don’t sleep with my employees. Besides, you’re engaged and too young to...”

“So, I can call you daddy?” I start offended.

What did I just say? Call him daddy? Where did I get that idea?

I cover my mouth with my hand in an attempt to make up for it, but it’s obvious that it’s useless. Kristòs’ eyes widen, incredulous at what I just said.

“Is that what you want?” he whispers without looking at me, perhaps thinking he won’t be heard. “Do you want to sleep with me, to call me daddy as I enter you over and over again? Do you want to call me Daddy as you scream in pain because your little body can’t handle everything I might do to

you? Or do you want to call me Daddy because you know I can afford things that you will never have, given what you are?”

Why does he have to insult me? What am I to him? He doesn't know who I am, he doesn't know that I could buy his damned clubs and whisk him away to scrub floors and kiss the ground I walk on.

He waits in amusement for my answer that doesn't come. Maybe that's what I really want. To hear the insults he gives me and maybe convince me to leave him alone.

“Come on, Jade. Come here, take it in your mouth and scream that I'm your daddy as I go inside you until you bleed.” In two strides he's in front of me and, from fright, I back away. He stops with his hands on his belt, intent on undoing it. “Isn't that what you want?”

What the hell is he doing? Why is he acting this way? Can I say I'm afraid of him? Yes, I can say that.

He shakes his head and smiles mischievously. ‘I don't know if I've made myself clear. I don't want anything at all from you and I'd appreciate it if the feeling was mutual.’ I can't help but look at him, it's hypnotic.

“A few hours ago you proved otherwise,” I point out in a whisper. I don't know why I'm continuing to struggle. He's made it clear. He doesn't want me.

“A few hours ago I found you working for someone else,” he replies, leaning towards me. He is furious.

“I have to earn a living since you'll be taking all my salary to pay for what seems like endless damage. Still, you have other cars at your disposal, I only had that bicycle.” I shrug as the answer becomes apparent in my head. “But what do you

care? You don't care if a person is in trouble, goes out of their way to pay for their wrongdoings and is then taken for a ride by the person who created the whole mess in the first place," I conclude, raising my voice. I know it's useless to do so, but I must allow myself this outburst. By now he has a certain idea of me, and I won't be able to make him change it. We could start over as many times as he wants, but his impression of me won't change. I put my hand into my apron pocket and take out the envelope with Enea's money. I throw it on his desk in a gesture of annoyance.

"Here, so I'll reach the amount I owe you more quickly. Then we can finally go our separate ways." I wait for a few moments for a reaction, but he continues to stare at me in disbelief.

I reach for the handle and open the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" He finally makes up his mind to speak.

"I'm going back to my work. I know what you think of me by now, and even if I just say hello, we end up fighting. There is no point in continuing to insult each other like this. Not for you and not for me. Maybe we'd better call it a day, this time for real, because the way you're treating me is getting really out of hand." I remain firm in my stance, not dignifying him with a glance, not turning away.

"Sometimes I wonder how you would treat me if the accident hadn't happened. Had we met when I first set foot in this club or why not, at the beach, would you act the same way?" I walk out leaving him to his thoughts. It's best to end it here.

Chapter 10



I roll over in bed all night. The thought of having left all the money with Kristòs has kept me awake. I will have to tell everything to Enea and hope that he will be merciful.

I cried out of despair and thought several times about going back to Italy. Then I decided that, if I ever cross Kristòs on my path, I will literally change my way. I will not attempt to establish any kind of discourse, and if he tries, I will go elsewhere.

I was a fool to believe that he had the slightest interest in me. He was only upset because there was bad blood between him and Enea, everything else was a way to shut me up.

Resigned to the idea of looking like a zombie all morning, I try to get up and start the day, which will not be easy at all. I might as well just sleep until evening shift time, but I would feel even worse.

I get up reluctantly and prepare what I will wear after the shower. My head is in the clouds as I walk the few steps that separate me from the door of the room and, without meaning to, I kick my backpack. A metallic noise, like springs jumping, rings out sharply.

Shit.

I leave my clothes and I venture on the backpack looking for what created that sound. As soon as I find it my heart sinks. I had brought with me the most beloved object that my grandfather had given me before leaving. A music box that I listened to every night to fall asleep, to calm myself down after every fight with my parents. Since he's gone, I've stopped hearing its melody. I was afraid, and still am, of bursting and being overwhelmed by all the memories, both good and bad, of my childhood.

I miss him so much. He was like a father to me.

I decide to go to the kitchen to have breakfast. I put the music box on the table and prepare the coffee. I sit down and fiddle with the small inlaid wooden box, vaguely resembling my boss' desk.

How much could it be worth if I pawned it? Maybe, together with the money I've managed to scrape together, I could pay Kristòs back and put this story behind me.

But that's impossible, you can't put a price on sentimental value.

The whistle of the mocha makes me realise that the coffee is ready. I put the object down and rush to pour the drink into the cup and then take my place at the table. I sip the black liquid and stare insistently at my favourite memory, trying to find the courage to open it and let myself be enraptured by its sweet notes. Either choose to keep something that links me to my origins or....

“Can you explain why you're not answering your mobile phone?” I jump in fright when Kristòs' hoarse voice fills the room. I turn just enough to catch a glimpse of his figure and realise that it's not a mirage. Dressed in tight jeans and a white T-shirt that wraps around his smoking chest, he's sexy to say

the least. Too bad his presence brings up all the words said last night and, instead of admiration, a slight annoyance appears.

“It’s set to silent,” I reply, trying to come across as aloof and uncaring. I don’t know why I don’t think I can. I feel sad, bewildered, and lonely, maybe because of the object in front of me or, more simply, because of him.

“And where is it?” he counters as if he’s talking to a child.

“Charging, on the bedside table.”

After yesterday, everything changed. Me, him, us as co-workers, as people. I know we could never be friends, so it’s best to detach, to stop trying to get along.

I cover my face with my hands and sigh. Maybe this is a wake-up call for all the stress I’ve accumulated over the past few months.

“What’s going on with you? You look weird.” I hear him move his chair to my side, and when I drop my hands from my face, I find him at my side. His intoxicating scent hits me.

I curse you and your being such a damn attractive asshole.

I shake my head and reach for the music box. I feel the need to listen to its melody, so I lift the lid, but when I open it, gears jump out of the box.

I have broken it. My indifference has broken it. I’m a really horrible person.

“It’s an important object if it managed to take away your urge to tease me,” he whispers. I bite my lips to keep from bursting into tears.

“Kristòs, what the hell do you want? What did you come here for?” he blurts out, fed up with everything. “Because if you came to...”

“Listen. First, I apologize for the words I used and the way I treated you. I’ve had a chance to think about everything you’ve said, and I’ve come up with an idea I’d like to propose to you. Would you like to hear it?” he asks in a warm, reassuring voice.

“If it’s another tease, I’d avoid it. Thanks.” I really don’t want to listen to his bullshit. We’ve been trying for days with no results. I’m sick of it.

“I don’t think so. I’ve thought it through, and I think you’ll accept. It’s good for both of us.”

Resigned to having no peace, I urge him to speak.

“First of all, this, I don’t want it for anything in the world.” He lays in front of me the envelope I had thrown on his desk. “Second...” he pauses to pull a black coloured envelope from his pocket. “Open it and I’ll explain everything.” Hesitantly, I do as he asks and, when faced with an invitation, wrinkle my brow. “This weekend there is a conference I have been invited to attend. It will take place in Athens, a day based on an update that you won’t need to attend, and in the evening, there will be a small party. There, however, I need your help.

I read the invitation finding something that doesn’t add up.

“Evening wear is appreciated. For a small party, as you say, it is not used.” In response, he shrugs.

“If you’ll be my plus one, we’ll be even and each to their own.”

“Are you really that desperate to ask me? Did your current girlfriend dump you?” I snort in a sarcastic tone.

“As far as I know, so are you,” he whispers. “Desperate, I mean. Then, if you want to talk to your him about it...” she raises her hands in surrender.

“Will there be photographers?” I gloss over the boyfriend thing.

“There might be, I have no idea.” He returns to smiling at me hopefully. A baby smile that warms my heart. Would it be too much to ask for this? To talk without biting our heads off?

I look away from him and point at the small music box in front of me. I swallow and shake my head.

“Maybe I’d better not. I don’t think so,” I stammer with a chill. As much as I’d like to spend an evening in an evening dress in a hall decorated for the occasion, I can’t.

On the few occasions when we have had the chance to talk face to face, we have always insulted each other. If it happened in Athens, where would I escape to?

“What? No, you can’t say that. I’ve already booked the tickets, not to mention the hotel and the appointment at the atelier for your dress,” he says in a warm and comfortable tone, not at all accusatory as usual.

What, he’s already done everything?

“I’ll reimburse you for that too, eventually. I’ll work harder than I have to.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. This bullshit idea led you to hit on me,” he admonishes me, tilting his head, trying to look me in the eye. “Think of it as a favour you’re doing for me and not a way to pay back the car. If you come with me, then there will be nothing to force us to continue the working relationship. We could stop seeing each other and fighting.”

I sigh, thinking about what my life was like before he got into it, how I was fine without him. Well, I was going to be fine, and for a moment, I imagine things would be different if Kris wasn’t my boss.

“Come on, go get ready. I promise you’ll forget about that contraption and maybe you’ll find a nicer one among the market stalls in Athens.” I don’t know whether to feel disgust at his words or not. I close my eyes and do nothing but cash in, justifying him with the fact that if he knew where the music box came from, he wouldn’t talk like that. “I’ll even take you shopping,” he continues, hoping to convince me with such frivolous things. “Isn’t it every girl’s dream to be able to shop without limit?”

“Not mine, Kristós.” I turn to him and am surprised to have him so close. The brown of his eyes manages to take my breath away and his proximity doesn’t help in any way. He puts his hand on my cheek and caresses it gently, giving it cuddles that I had forgotten existed. Without realizing it, I close my eyes and tilt my head as if wishing for his touch on every patch of my poor skin. He humours me by bringing his thumb to the corner of my mouth, stroking it, and making me wince. I bow my head and his thumb grazes my lips. I lift it back up towards him and, inevitably, my lip is pulled by his finger. When I open my eyes, I point them to the one who is driving me crazy, hoping to find the same reaction, instead I find a slightly wrinkled face, incredulous at what he has just seen.

And then what did he see? A dishevelled, unkempt, pyjama-clad, and unattractive girl who seems to want it badly? Or a silly little girl who doesn’t understand when it’s time to end it?

“What’s your dream, sweet little Jade?” He whispers in a rough voice. There’s only us in the room, everything else doesn’t exist.

“I won’t tell you. I don’t want you to make fun of him too.” A mischievous smile appears on his face. He comes dangerously close. He would seem ready to reset the distance.

“Are you judging me again without knowing me?” I shake my head and huff out a laugh. He moves his hand to my neck, swiping his thumb along the length, down to my throat. “Don’t get down on yourself like this anymore. The sad pout doesn’t suit you. I want to see you smile because I’ve never been able to notice how it looks on you. Or, if you really can’t do that, then curl your lips because you’re ready to fire off yet another insult at me. But don’t ever put yourself down again.” Then he gives me a sweet, friendly smile that makes me melt.

“You confuse me,” I reveal. All I do is tell the truth. It’s only fair that he should know. It’s only fair that, if he wants me to say yes, he should be aware of how I feel.

Kristòs traps both lips between his teeth and then swallows. I seem to have made him uncomfortable.

“Jade, I want to be clear. Our agreement will not lead to any affair, nor will it have any ulterior motives. What I want is to apologize to you for how I treated you and for you to save my ass by becoming my plus one. Nothing more.” There, it couldn’t have been clearer than that. I lower my gaze feeling slightly embarrassed. He doesn’t want me, that’s it. I have to get over it. “Now, though, would you mind going and getting ready? We’re slightly late.”

I shake my head, trying to pull myself together and smile. He’s always one step ahead, isn’t he? I snap towards him and leave a kiss on the corner of his mouth which he gladly accepts. I smile victoriously at what I’ve just done. I caught him off guard and he couldn’t move. He grabs my arm though and lifts his face towards me.

“Don’t ever do that again. This is just a favour trip, not a love getaway. Do we understand each other?” he asks through clenched teeth, as if my gesture irritated him. I nod, and as soon as he leaves my wrist, I run to take a shower.

He’s told me again and again, and yet, I just can’t seem to get it. The more he pulls away from me, the more my desire grows.

It doesn’t take me long to get ready, in the end I just have to go and buy my dress for the evening. After the shower, I dress comfortably in shorts and a tank top and put on a little make-up, just to get some colour. I don’t have to compete with anyone anyway.

I leave the bathroom and walk down the small corridor that leads to the kitchen, not finding my boss sitting at the table. I turn towards the living room and there he is, leaning against the doorframe of the front door. As soon as he notices me, he swallows. I can see his Adam’s apple moving perfectly.

“You’re ready, finally.”

“Apparently so.”

“Then let’s go, it’s already late.” I catch up to him, and as I get within a few steps of him, he has the kindness to open the door to let me through, but steps forward to hold me back. “Is that clear to you?”

“What? That you’re my boss and you invited me to some kind of rich people’s meeting just so you wouldn’t get bored?” I poke him, earning a glare.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re really spiteful?” he whispers with a slight smirk on his lips. I smile at his words and seeing him so relaxed, and not tense like other days,

gladdens my heart. Even though it's never been easy between us.

“Yeah, but I like to hear you say it,” I whisper in response, lifting my chin. I pass him and, shaking my ass, reach his car. Even though he's made it clear, I can't help but tease him, constantly challenging him. I can feel it in my gut that he's going to give in sooner or later.

“You're not going to stop, are you?” He catches up to me and pats me on the butt before circling the car. He's changed his attitude again. I shake my head and shrug my shoulders. “You're going to give me a hard time, I can feel it. I just hope I don't regret it.”

I just hope I don't regret it? What?

In the car the situation is quite different. Kristòs drives as if he has been forbidden to do anything else, as if that man who smiled while giving me a spanking had stayed at home. Any attempt to interact is dismissed with a disinterested grumble. I hope it is not like that in Athens, otherwise it will be hell. Resigned, I turn to the window and look out. Everything is more interesting than this deafening silence.

A few moments later, Kristòs parks the car just a few steps away from the centre of Oia.

“It's only a few minutes' walk from here and we're there,” he informs me, picking up his mobile phone and keys. “Is that OK, or...”

“Sure. You know what to do,” I reply like an automaton. Kristòs nods, dumbfounded to stare at a point beyond the dashboard. “If it's that hard, let's just forget it. No one's forcing us to do it.”

“Don't talk nonsense. I suggested it to you.”

“Yet they seem to have imposed it on you, that you struggle to be this close to me,” I explain. “Don’t worry, let’s go home.”

“Absolutely not. I always carry out my commitments. Including this conference thing. I could have gone alone, but maybe it’s as you say. I know I’m going to be bored out of my mind and having someone I know by my side relieves me of this torture,” he reveals, blowing off some of the tension. I smile because every now and then it’s nice to see his human side.

“Come on, let’s make this ‘business’ as fun as possible. What do you say?” I propose turning towards him. I look for his gaze, almost demanding it, but he doesn’t comply. I place my hand on his cheek in a gesture of affection. He humours me by covering it with his, squeezing it lightly. Just enough to hold me in case I get the crazy idea to take him out of there. He loves it, I can tell by his closed eyes and slow sighs. I’m not going anywhere if he doesn’t want me to.

“Thank you,” he whispers moving our hands in front of his mouth. He kisses mine and brings it to his chest, right over his heart. Then he comes to his senses and lets go of me almost brutally. “Let’s go. We’re late.” He gets out of the car and, as soon as I follow him, he walks off without waiting for me. I run after him because it’s the only way I can keep up.

He walks through the pedestrian streets of Oia without a problem, passing several small shops full of souvenirs and postcards that immortalise the beauty of the island.

“Here we are,” he says, stopping suddenly. I almost bump into his back. In front of us there is a small door with an anonymous shop window on one side, if it weren’t for the blue

sign, which certainly wouldn't go unnoticed if you weren't busy chasing your companion.

I get lost looking around, finding every detail magnificent and suggestive. I have never gone this far north of Santorini, and now I am bitterly regretting it. It is a magnificent island.

Kristòs calls me back, inviting me to join him in the little shop which, given the hour, I had no idea was open. Maybe he knows the owner and that allows him to come in whenever he wants. I smile at him with happiness in my eyes while he looks at me strangely. I'm used to shops like this, my mother used to spend hours there choosing clothes for various evenings, but now I see them differently. I shrug my shoulders and lengthen my pace to reach him.

We are greeted by a very elegant and slim lady with long Scandinavian blond hair. She greets Kristòs with a hug, three kisses on the cheeks, a grope on the shoulders and the classic motive: "It's been a long time. I never hear from you."

"You know how it is, I have little time to devote to a social life," he replies. Her hands graze his chin and I look away because it makes me uncomfortable.

She can and I can't.

"Sure. Karen? I haven't seen her in a while. How is she?" she asks bluntly.

"She'll be out and about in Europe, as usual," he replies, flashing one of those fake smiles he so often gives me. "Listen, I need an evening dress for my friend." Only now do I look at them. Him, handsome as the sun next to a woman who knows him better than his pockets.

The lady smiles at me and takes a deep breath, as if I'm a lost cause. Maybe my outfit is, but I honestly don't care. I'm

long past the age where I can be swayed by the opinion of people like her.

“I want it sparkling. I want them to turn to look at her and make all the women in the room envious. She deserves it.” Kristòs’s eyes and her words make me blush.

“You are in the right place,” she says in a frivolous tone. She puts her hands together in front of her lips and claps lightly. “I am Nina, the owner and long-time friend of Kristòs.” She finally extends her hand towards me to introduce herself. I gently humour her.

“Jade, a friend of a friend. I needed a hand for an evening, and he offered,” I lie, somewhat. Nina nods and seems to buy the lie.

“Yes, he is very generous when it comes to helping someone.” She turns to look at him in a way I don’t like at all. “Come on dear, I have something that perfectly matches your beautiful body shape.” I comply with her invitation and as I follow her, I turn to Kristòs hoping he will come with us, but he doesn’t. He runs a hand through his hair, massages the back of his head, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath.

“Kris, are you okay?” He recovers and looks at me.

“I’ll be right there. I have to make some business calls.” He turns and walks out of the shop. Nina calls me back saying she has already found something for me and, without looking away from the front door, I walk to her.

As soon as I turn the corner, I find her holding a dress that I don’t like at all. The dark colour and the Greek style clash with my taste. I turn my nose up at it and turn to the right, where a huge hanger hides the perfect one for me, so different

that it takes my breath away. I grab it and ask about it, but I get hit with a hint of disappointment.

“I’d like to try it on and personalise it.” I pull it over my body and attempt to look at myself in the mirror.

“It’s not a dress that would suit an event like the one Kristòs described, therefore...”

“Therefore, I want to try it on anyway.” I smile and head for the dressing room, ignoring all her muttering. If I like something I’ll take it, not caring if anyone objects.

I undress in an instant and put on the dress I chose. It is truly magnificent. The deep purple covering the bodice, which fades to lilac as you get towards the hem of the skirt, is a wonderful eye-catcher. It looks like it has a train now, only because I’m wearing my shoes, but I imagine it will look great in heels. What I love most is the figure-eight-shaped band, totally studded with Swarovski crystals, which covers the neckline and ties behind the neck, like a necklace supporting the whole dress. With this everyone will turn to look at me, I can feel it.

When I come out of the dressing room, Nina is watching me with her arms crossed and a strange frown on her face.

“It’s gorgeous, but it’s too loose over the breasts.”

“Couldn’t some adjustments be made? You’re set up for that too, right?” I flood her with questions just like I did in the boutiques I frequented.

“Darling, I’ve been doing this job for years and those who come to me rely completely on my experience,” she replies without having satisfied my questions.

“I don’t doubt it, but I ask for further services. If you can’t satisfy me, I can always ask Kristòs to take me somewhere

else,” I cut, continuing to look in the mirror. I’m not looking at her because I can’t find any reason to. I’m in love with this dress and I won’t change my mind.

“Of course, we provide tailoring. Although this dress wouldn’t need it if the wearer wore a few more bra sizes.”

This is really a low blow that I don’t like at all. I’m a customer like many others, even if it’s Kristòs who accompanies me and pays for it, and if I want a particular dress or want to make changes to make it unique, either I’m happy with it or I choose another boutique.

“Believe me, the other one would look better on you,” she begins, raising an eyebrow. Her grin is unsettling.

“I’m not questioning that, but I like this one better and I want it.” With an annoyed snort, Nina turns me towards the huge mirror. She stands behind me and moves my hair over one shoulder to devote herself to the zip, perhaps to gauge how much fabric she needs to have removed. She pulls down the zip, then suddenly closes it, then pulls hard on the bodice, making me breathless. She takes advantage of the proximity to lean in towards my ear until she rests her chin on my shoulder.

“Honey, I know you’re not as ditzy as the many others who hang around my friend, so you’ll understand what I’m saying. Kristòs is off-limits,” she threatens, squeezing even tighter. Is she going to suffocate me? I try to slip my fingers between my chest and the bodice to recover a few inches.

“Look, you’ve got it all wrong. He’s simply a friend of a friend. Nothing more.” It’s absurd to have to tell the truth to defend myself. She finally straightens up and loosens her grip, then adjusts her dress better, as if I hadn’t been able to wear it properly, as if my body wasn’t worthy of it.

I notice that Kristòs enters my view, he points his eyes at me, squaring me from head to toe. His lips are slightly parted, and I think he's holding his breath.

“Looks good on her, doesn't it? Too bad she's set her sights on this one which is too big for her breasts,” Nina whispers, convinced that he can't hear her. He nods and, without taking his eyes off me, sits down on the padded armchair beside him. It suits him, it makes him look like a king. My king who is watching me avidly.

“Give her what she wants,” he says.

“All right. We'll make a change for the closure, since you don't want to try on any other clothes, and I only have this size of this one. For example...”

“You could remove the excess fabric,” I block her. “The clasp at the back of the neck maybe.” I separate the hooks that hold the two parts together, letting them fall forward. “You could remove it or...” I grab them and run them across my back, hooking them, “do it like this. That way it's not noticeable.”

Even though Nina is hesitant she doesn't utter a word. I decide to turn to Kristòs, letting him see how I look.

“What do you think? Will my fiancé like it?” I ask, ignoring the woman at my side. Kristòs clenches his jaw. He doesn't seem to like my question.

“I don't know, you haven't introduced me to him yet. Let me see the footwear though.” He tilts his head, pointing at my feet only with his gaze. I comply with his wishes and lift my skirt up to show him my converse. He nods an amused smile and covers his eyes with his hand. “Nina, please. Think about

those too,” he chuckles and the owner snorts again. She walks away leaving us alone.

“Will this fit?” I ask doing a half twirl. I want to make sure that this dress is appropriate for the event we are going to attend. Kristòs doesn’t answer right away, he just points his eyes at me, squaring me from head to toe.

“Your fiancé? Does he know you’re here picking out a dress with me? For me?” he whispers heedless of the fact that Nina might hear him. After her words, I’m even afraid she’s lurking around the corner to eavesdrop.

“Of course. He knows everything.”

“Of course,” he repeats with a smirk on his face.

“Besides, what’s the harm? All you did was drive me to get a dress for the evening. He’ll see what’s underneath,” I tease him.

“Of course,” he retorts just before Nina shows up in a pair of heeled and wedge sandals that match perfectly. I don’t waste any time in small talk when I put them on to look at my image. I look in the mirror at myself and do half pirouettes to admire myself.

“Magnificent,” Kristòs begins a few moments later, giving voice to my thoughts. When I turn towards him, I notice that his gaze is greedy. I hold back a smile. “Do as she says. I want it ready tomorrow morning, delivered to the hotel in Athens. I’ll give you the address.” Though Nina looks at him ruefully, he doesn’t flinch.

“There’s an extra charge for tailoring and urgency, you know that don’t you?” She informs him, imagining that this discourages him. Only now does Kristòs take his eyes off me to focus them on his friend.

“What’s the cost?” I ask, not caring about the bon ton according to which one should never ask the price. I grab the label and find what I was looking for. The price is not excessive for the type of dress, but frankly too high for my meagre finances. I try to retort and suggest another cheaper dress but Kristòs snorts in irritation.

“It’s never been a problem; I don’t see why it should be now.” He gets up from the chair and stands in front of Nina to offer her his arm. “Jade, I’ll wait for you in there.” She shakes her ass, as if to strut her stuff, and all I have to do is get out of Nina’s shoes and into Jade’s. When I reach the two of them, Nina is standing in front of me.

When I reach the two of them, Nina pulls away from Kristòs and turns to run and hug me. An expression on her face that I don’t like.

“Mark my words, you little gold digger,” she whispers in my ear as she pretends to leave a kiss on my cheek. “It was a pleasure to meet you and that you found the right dress for you in my boutique. I would like to give you just one piece of advice though, style your hair so that the dyed ones don’t show. As you probably know, it’s not in good taste. Besides, you’ll look great, everyone will turn to look at you. She smiles. A fake smile that even a blind man would notice.

“Thanks to you, if they ask any questions, I won’t hesitate to direct them to your wonderful boutique.” I go back to calling her by her first name to put as much distance as possible. Nina nods and dismisses us, saying she has a lot to do because of the urgency of the delivery.

When we leave the little shop, Kristòs turns to me and suggests we go out to eat, given the time. I decline the

invitation even though he insists. Nina's words and behaviour have shaken me, and I don't want to be seen as weak.

Why would Kristòs be off-limits? Does she care?

He doesn't object or even try to strike up a conversation with me as we walk to the car. I'm grateful, I don't know if I could handle it.

"You're weird," he exclaims after we've driven a few miles in the direction of home. "You don't like the dress?"

"It's just gorgeous. Although..."

"Nina made you uncomfortable, right? She does it all the time, but she's harmless. We grew up together and she thinks she can be a mother hen. Besides, you stood up for yourself just fine." He smiles as if it's normal for him to excuse his friend, to accept her odd behaviour and for her words.

"If I was waiting for you," I retort disappointed. "She wanted to pitch me a dress that was unsuitable for my body shape, and when I found a really lovely one, she lashed out, telling me my breasts were too small for that dress." Of course, he witnessed something else entirely and doesn't know what happened between me and her, but it certainly wasn't pleasant to be told such things and treated like that.

"As long as you like it and feel safe wearing it. The rest doesn't matter," he mutters as if he's the offended one. "I ask you to excuse her. Please. Do it for me."

"Who's Karen?" I start to change the subject, not realising I've used a tone that demands an explanation. Kristòs clenches his jaw, and from gripping the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles are whitening. "Sorry, I didn't mean to."

"It's okay, she's my older sister." He quickly becomes serious. The magic is broken. He doesn't speak to me from

here on out. And I stand here, forcing myself to remain silent and put up with my travelling companion's long face.

"I'll text you later to make arrangements. Okay?" He only regains the use of words when we arrive in front of my house. I nod and get ready to get out of the car, but he holds me back. "Jade, I apologise for Nina's behaviour. I don't know why she wanted to stick you with a dress that..."

"Don't worry, I get it. It's no problem, in fact I'm happy to have it personalised. At least this way it's unique and I don't risk finding another woman in the same dress and making you look bad. Imagine the drama," I giggle to downplay. I try to reassure him, but it doesn't seem to do much good. He nods and begrudgingly lets me go. "I'll pay you back," I whisper.

"Don't be stupid."

"At least the change. That's my fault, an uncalculated extra that's served because of my disproportionate body." I keep babbling just because I don't really want to get out of here. I want what we had before back. I liked that weird chemistry.

"No, and that's it." His big brown eyes stare at me insistently. "It was my idea and I'm paying the consequences." He smiles and does so cheekily perhaps thinking he's nicked me.

"If that's the case, then I'll see if I can take advantage of it." This time I'm the one smiling. And I flash one of my best smiles.

"I foresee trouble for my bank account," he continues, humouring me. He's back in the clear and that cheers me up.

"I'm not as spoiled as you think. I'll settle for a few fancy dresses, a room with a sea view, someone to grant my wishes without batting an eyelid and, most importantly, without

snorting while paying.” I lift my chin to give myself a haughty tone. I want to see if he takes me seriously or if he’s realised I’m exaggerating.

“All material possessions. But feelings?” He bewilders me, I admit.

“Well, not huffing while paying is a big, big feeling.” I laugh and he finally does it with me, finding what I’ve just said ridiculous. And it is because this thought is my mother’s, not mine. She has tried so hard to get it into my head, but she hasn’t succeeded. The feelings are quite different.

“Thank you,” I whisper finally and get out of the car, running away from what he might say. I close the door and yet I don’t move, waiting for him to drive off and leave me alone.

“How about we all go out to dinner?” I turn around and am surprised to find him with his torso out the window. Sitting on the door and his arms resting on the roof. He looks at me hopefully, like a kid on a first date. Maybe he wants to make it up to me, even if he’s not the culprit.

Without thinking about whether this is right or not, I imitate his position, leaning against the car. One arm under my chin and the other at the side of my head.

“I have to work. My boss isn’t very sociable and asking him for permission to stay home to go out to dinner with my friends I don’t think he’d like that.” He smiles. And I love his smile.

“If you introduce me to him, I’ll talk to him,” he retorts quietly. “I’ll call Athos later and we’ll arrange it.” Then silence, only our eyes are interacting. Kristòs reaches out his hand towards me and strokes my forearm. “From this evening

and until we return from Athens, you can consider yourself free. I will speak to Odin and company.”

“You don’t have to,” I whisper and shrug my shoulders.

“You’re right, but I want to. I want to go out to dinner with my friends, can I?” I shrug again, pretending not to care. I attempt to move closer, standing up on my toes.

“You can do anything, Daddy.” And I pull away from the car. I smile mischievously and he snorts a giggle as he rolls his eyes. I head back towards the house, though I’m hoping he’ll say something, move or whatever, come to me and give me an unexpected thrill.

“Jade.” He calls me back, eventually. Just as I place my hand on the doorknob. So, I stop and, without thinking, bite my bottom lip, imagining him just a few steps away from me, ready to grab me by the waist, pull me to him and throw me into the void in a casque and then kiss me fiercely and passionately. God, that would be a dream.

When I turn around, I am disappointed to find him in the same position I left him in. I pull my lip from the grip of my teeth and look at him, impatient.

“The invitation is extended to your boyfriend as well. That way I can reassure him it’s just a business trip and nothing more.” I glower at him. I’m not sure what for, I have no idea, all I know is that he managed to ruin the harmony we had achieved.

I enter the house without saying goodbye to him. Irritated as ever. I slam the door behind me and lean my back against it. My legs give out, causing me to slide with my butt to the floor.

These two days with him will devastate me emotionally, I can feel it.

“What are you doing down there? Where were you? And why did I see you get out of Kristòs’ car? What are you up to?” Here was Electre and her unwanted third degree. The arms folded, the serious and determined look of someone who is ready to harass you until she gets the explanations she wants.

“I was shopping for an evening dress with Kristòs.” I spit out the harsh truth.

“Why?” I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I can’t lie, neither to her nor to myself.

“He asked me to...” Another deep breath. “To accompany him to a reception in Athens.”

“May one ask why you did not refuse?” She frowns and shakes her head slightly. “Not to mention the fact that it doesn’t fit the job description.”

“Because he asked me for a favour and... that’s all,” I whisper in a tired tone. I don’t feel like telling her about the debt and how crappy things are between us.

“And good thing you wanted to give up that life. It sounds like he’s chasing you and you’re okay with that,” she mutters offended. But why then? I’m the one who was wrong to accept, wrong to give in to every proposal that man made. “Don’t go back. You ran away from a toxic relationship, don’t...”

“You’re right. I’ll talk to him tonight and explain that I can’t go with him,” I mutter covering my face with my hands. I admit, she’s right as rain. “I don’t want to repeat the mistake of starting something with someone bigger than me.”

“Start? Do you happen to have feelings for him? Because otherwise I can’t explain this choice,” she whispers softly. She

walks over and places her hands on my head, stroking it. “Giada,” she calls me back and I finally take my hands off my face.

“He confuses me. First he’s nice, then he turns into a stratospheric asshole, when I get close, he seems to like it, but then he turns back into an asshole to the point of offending me.” I reveal everything to her, even though I know she doesn’t like him very much, that I shouldn’t fall back into the same situation as Raffaele. But I can’t. Kristòs is something I can’t explain.

“Darling, I know little about him, but maybe he’s just not interested,” she says, sitting down beside me. She’s not berating me or scolding me for what I’m feeling for the man even though she could easily do so. “Just remember that not everyone is like Raffaele.”

I close my eyes and huff, exhausted by this crazy attraction to older men, by not being able to get what I want. I bang my head against the door behind me and let a sob escape.

“Can I convince myself that he’s gay? That way I can keep my ego intact.”

“I think he is to the core,” she chuckles amused.

“No, because... I mean, look at me. I’m hot and they’d pay to be with me even if it was just for one night,” I continue.

“He’s definitely gay,” she continues, giving me a hand.

Man, what a mess.

Chapter 11



“I’ll pick you up at eight, be ready.”

This was the message my boss had sent me a few hours after dropping me off at home. It was now eight o’clock, but there was no sign of him.

Not to mention Electre, who had reassured me that she would arrive on time.

I sigh once, twice, three times. I’ve never sighed so much for anyone, let alone a man. Yes, because Kristòs is a man, not the usual little boy.

I walk up and down the living room in a unique state of agitation. Damn, am I really like this because he’s only a few seconds late?

I hope Electre arrives before Kristòs, otherwise I’ll have to suffer her irritating side.

I grab my mobile phone to call her, but as soon as I look up the number, there’s a knock on the door. I make the call anyway. It seems to be ringing off the hook, which annoys the hell out of me. I hate people who are late and therefore make me late.

The knocking becomes more insistent and, huffing, I go to open the door.

“You took your time,” begins the cause of my anxiety, Kristòs. I square him from head to toe to make sure nothing is wrong as my heart does crazy somersaults.

He’s perfect as always, elegant in his jeans and white shirt with the usual unbuttoned buttons that reveal his smooth, muscular chest. Maybe my white linen and lace dress isn’t adequate to stand beside him.

“Look who’s talking. It’s after twenty,” I reply, crossing my arms over my chest. He doesn’t enter the house because I won’t let him pass. I want him to apologize for being late.

“Okay, so...” He leans against the doorframe like he’s a GQ model. “Shall we go or stay and talk? Athos and Electre are waiting for us at the restaurant, and you know better than me how impatient they are.” He chimes in by leaning his head against the wall and starting to smile. I bow my head embarrassed by his penetrating gaze.

“She could have warned me she wasn’t coming here,” I mutter to myself. I turn around, grab my purse, and walk past him.

“You’re welcome, madame,” he says with a bow. I hear him chuckle as I approach the car. He’s adorable when he does that, my only concern is how he’ll behave in Athens. And afterwards too.

I have to tell him that I’ve thought about it and that I don’t want to go with him anymore. For my sake, I can’t.

I get to the car and wait for him to be a gentleman and open the door. To my amazement he humours me without objecting. I thank him with a slight reverence, and, under his

attentive gaze, I slip inside. I don't take my eyes off his body as he walks around the car, nor when he enters and sits down beside me.

"What?" he whispers, turning to face me. I shake my head and sigh trying to calm myself down as he starts the engine.

Go, now is a good time to talk to him. I'm sure he'll understand.

"I need to talk to you," I begin. I close my eyes in fear. Kristòs turns off the car and a rustle fills the silence. "I'm sorry, but I can't go to Athens with you." There, I've thrown the bomb and now I'm waiting for it to explode. A slight cough makes me weigh the decision.

"Why? What happened?"

"I don't feel like it. We've been at each other's throats for as long as we've known each other and I'm afraid it's going to happen in Athens too." I don't have the courage to open my eyes, to turn around and look at him. "I should have told you before, stopped you from buying the dress or..."

"Jade," he sighs. "I'm sorry you feel uncomfortable about something that..." Pause. "If it makes you feel more comfortable, I could get another room and then you don't need to be there all the time, just for the party that night. And I'll be good, I promise. I'll bite my tongue more than I have to."

"That's what I don't want. Why invite me if you're going to be uncomfortable? Isn't it better to go with someone you get along with?"

"I could, but I'm not going to. I behaved badly and I would like to apologise, I would like us to become friends and the only way is to get to know each other. What difference does it make whether here or in Athens? I promise to be good and that

if my behaviour is hostile to you, I give you permission to beat me up.” I sigh because he is managing to convince me. “If I overdo it, I’ll pay for your plane back in first class.”

“You don’t have to overdo it,” I snort amused.

“I’m not. I want you to feel safe and if promising you have permission to smack me around serves, well, you can smack me around.” I nod letting him know he’s managed to convince me. He turns around leaving me with a smirk on his lips that I don’t remember having and starts the engine.

He drives a few miles in total silence before my voice returns to fill the cockpit.

“Would you at least tell me the plans for tomorrow?” I don’t want to sound intrusive, but I’d like to be prepared and know if what I’m bringing will be adequate and sufficient.

“Nothing much. We’re leaving by ferry for Athens. The next day is the conference and in the evening the dinner and dance. We’ll be back the next day for lunch or so,” he informs me. “We could leave the day after tomorrow, but I have to run some errands in town, so I need to be there early. Is that okay with you or...” He’s nice. Is he making an effort, or does it come naturally?

“It’s fine. There’s no problem. It was to know what clothes to bring. That’s all.” I smile with the knowledge that I don’t have enough. I’ll have to ask Electre if I can borrow some.

“If you want, and if you need them, we could stop and buy some.” His words throw me off.

Why would he spend more money on me? I don’t answer, I let silence fall between us again because I wouldn’t know what to say. I look out the window at the buildings that follow one another and do not let me see the sea.

“My house is closer to the harbour, so it would be more convenient if tomorrow morning you were already there, instead of at Electre’s house.” I wrinkle my forehead and smile.

“Are you inviting me to sleep over at your place?” I hold back a laugh, turning to face him. I see him widen his eyes and swallow. He opens his lips slightly to say something, but I block him. “I’m messing with you, relax.” And I go back to looking out the window. “Text me the address and I’ll be in front of your house like I’m a stalker.”

When we arrive, I get out of the car by myself and wait for him to join me and guide me to the entrance of the restaurant.

“Did I happen to say something wrong? Did the proposal bother you?” he asks holding me by the arm. I shake my head and smile at him. Even though he looks at me crookedly, he’s okay with the answer.

Before he reaches the entrance, he stands beside me and when he opens the door, he puts his hand on my back to accompany me. A shiver runs through me, waking me up.

Kristòs asks the maître d’ about our table, but a male voice calls out to us. I turn around to find Athos standing there, bending over to be seen.

“He’ll never grow up,” he whispers before laying his hand on my back again and pushing me slightly towards our friends. “Did I happen to mention that already?” I turn slightly towards him, not understanding what he’s talking about. “You look beautiful in this dress, not to mention your choice of dark underwear.”

My cheeks catch fire. He’d never paid me such an outspoken compliment. Well, he’d never complimented me,

stop.

“Did you get lost?” chuckles Athos generating a wide grin on his friend’s face as he walks up to greet him.

“No, he was late,” I reply as the sweetest scene I’ve ever seen unfolds right before my eyes. Kristòs greets my friend with a kiss worthy of a gentleman.

But what has happened to him? He’s changed, he’s nice.

I detach myself from Athos and reach Ele who, with amazement in her eyes, hugs me tightly.

“You’re the one who didn’t want to move. You started to lecture me about being late or something,” replies Kristòs.

“But what did you do to him? He’s changed,” Electre whispers in my ear. I shake my head because I really don’t know what to say to her. She smiles amusedly at me as we pull away. “I don’t suppose you’ve spoken to him yet. I thought I’d give you two some alone time, which is why we came here early.”

“He assured me he’ll be good.” My friend’s eyes narrow in disapproval. I just shrug my shoulders. What can I do about it? I can’t be determined when it comes to him. Actually, I am determined to want him.

“Jade hates latecomers. It’s a fact.” Athos defends me by tilting his head and pointing his eyes into mine. Kristòs looks at him strangely when he sees his friend behaving like this. I have no idea how he could know this about me but seeing that it bothers Kristòs makes me smile.

“It’s not my problem.” He shrugs his shoulders and shifts his chair to sit down. His hard voice and serious gaze bother me slightly and make me doubt his good intentions. “Let’s order that’s better.”

We each choose the dish we like best, except for me. Under the pretext of being a vegetarian, I just get a well-dressed salad. Also, because that's all I can afford. Electre urges me to order something more substantial, but I don't give up.

Every now and then I cast glances at Kristòs, who doesn't seem to want to let go of his PDA. I get lost staring at him, often distancing myself from the others' conversations.

"Do you remember that?" Athos begins, tapping Kristòs on the arm, who hesitates to raise his head. He only mumbles a reply. After all he was the one who wanted this dinner, why is he doing this now? "Could you at least set aside your business to eat?" His friend urges him.

"I had to reply to an important email. Sorry." He then grabs his fork, stabbing his first bite of the evening. We're already long done eating.

"I was telling the girls about when we first met in primary school," Athos repeats. I hadn't heard the speech either. I was intent on watching Kristòs and understanding his mood.

"Why do we have to talk about this?" He twisted his lips, annoyed by the topic. "I don't remember what I did last night, let alone in kindergarten."

I roll my eyes, finding his words really funny. He was with me last night and yelled at me about everything.

"What do you get when I say Xeni?"

"Oh God. I don't want to talk about that. Let's move on, please." He tries to change the subject, but to no avail. Athos seems to be amused and tells that Xeni was a little girl to whom Kristòs gave a kiss because she asked him to. Then, however, he doesn't remember how it ended.

“It was you who gave her a kiss, not me. I didn’t even like Xenì,” Kristòs snorts, shaking his head.

“Yeah, but she was dying for you.”

“Do you want me to tell them about how I saved your ass from a complete moron who beat you up for kissing his little girlfriend?” taunts Kristòs.

“Hell, it’s true. You defended me from Enea.” Athos seems to fall from the clouds. He even pats his forehead to let us know that he had forgotten the detail. “I can say though, that from there on, my life changed.”

“Of course, you were full of girls thanks to the black eye,” chuckles Kristòs.

“Idiot. I found my best friends.” Athos rolls his eyes at his friend, receiving a pat on the arm as a warning. It’s adorable these few moments of normalcy make me realize what they’re really like.

“Did you say Enea?” interjects Electre. She looks at the two of them blankly. “Are you talking about my cousin?”

“If it’s the same one Jade works for, yes,” Athos mumbles putting me in the middle with no chance to defend myself. What? I wrinkle my forehead trying to understand Kristòs’ attitude when he found out I worked there. Why wasn’t he happy about it if Enea is their friend?

“Really?” Kristòs’ voice cuts through our ramblings. I turn to him, hoping not to find him as enraged as he was last night. I couldn’t handle it. “Is he your cousin?” Kristòs looks up at Electre, completely ignoring what Athos said, and waits for an answer that isn’t long in coming. “Did you know that? Did you know that too?”

“I don’t see where the problem lies,” Athos answers in an annoyed way. He grabs his girlfriend’s hand and brings it to his lips and kisses her.

Kristòs shakes his head slowly and closes his eyes. I think he is hurt by yet another secret. He drops his fork on his plate and rests his elbow on the table rudely.

“Let’s talk about something else. Okay?” I suggest, hoping to be accommodating, but Kristòs doesn’t seem to want that.

He grabs his napkin, wipes his lips, and pushes his chair away from the table. He gets up and throws the piece of cloth onto his plate.

“Excuse me, I remembered I have some urgent papers to print and sign. I have to send them in by today or they won’t give me permits.” He steps back past the chair he is careful to put back. “Don’t worry, you’re my guests.” And he steps away.

“Kris,” his friend calls back to him, but he doesn’t retrace his steps. I only turn to look at him when Athos also gets up and joins him.

“What’s wrong with him?” asks Electre, believing that I have the right answer. But I don’t know anything, and I don’t pay any attention to her. My attention is all on the two men who are talking animatedly in front of the restaurant’s counter until Kristòs turns towards the cashier and pays for our dinner while Athos tries to stop him. Suddenly, Kris’ eyes are on me. It is indescribable what I read on his face, I can only guess that it is disappointment or perhaps anger, given the reaction he had after my only words.

He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and when he opens them again, he leaves.

I would like to reach out to him, to know what's wrong with him, to apologise for what I said or if I did something wrong. I would like to clarify and try to make him stay.

I close my eyes and bite my lip trying to decide what to do in a hurry. I get up with the urge to run after him.

“Agápi.” Athos stands in front of me, grabbing me by the shoulders and holding me back from going to Kristòs. I raise my face towards him and wait for him to speak.

“Don't worry. He remembered at the last minute to send the papers for the new place. Without them the opening is likely to be delayed for a long time. He'll join us later.” His eyes are sincere, but they can't convince me completely.

“Is it my fault? Did I overdo it with the words?” I ask in a whisper. “I didn't mean to, I...” Athos takes my chin between his fingers forcing me to look at him.

“Do you trust me?” he asks in a whisper. He doesn't seem to want to be heard by his fiancée.

Why should I trust him? Why is he asking me this now?

“It's not the first time he's done this. The last time was that day at the beach. He ran away without giving us a chance to object,” Electre revealed, pulling Athos away from me. She is not bothered by her boyfriend's hands on my face, his behaviour, his being too close to me. Nothing bothers her.

“You're right,” he confirms, raising his hand to call the waiter back.

I go back to my seat, but I'm not going to stand by and watch. I grab my mobile phone and compose a message addressed to Kristòs. I don't ask for much, I don't write poems but just a simple:

“I apologise”.

I INCREASE the dose with another message recommending that he tell me what time I should be there and send me his address. I freeze the screen, pretending that none of this has hurt me. When Athos and Electre finish eating their dessert, they finally decide to go home. I’m happy to know that my friend’s car is not a very expensive two-seater.

“Are you staying?” asks Electre to her boyfriend as soon as they get home.

“I should go check on Kristòs, see if he needs a hand with the paperwork,” he grumbles with a veil of sadness.

I could go, I could make sure he’s okay, that he doesn’t hate me.

“Are you coming back? I swear I’ll wait for you” she whispers leaving a kiss on the corner of his mouth. Athos holds her close to him, searching with his face in the hollow of her neck.

My goodness how cheesy they are.

Athos accepts, returning his fiancée’s attentions with a less chaste kiss. I look away so as not to appear a voyeur and take the opportunity to check if Kristòs has answered me. I’m disappointed when I don’t find anything, not even the classic ticks of the display. Fed up, I try to call him, but his mobile phone is disconnected. I am furious.

Like hell I’m going with him tomorrow, like hell I’m going back to work for him, like hell I’m going to look for him again.

Ignoring the two lovers, I lock myself in my room and hope that all this will pass as quickly as possible.

Chapter 12



I thought it would be easy: shower, pyjamas, bed, sleep. But no. I didn't sleep a wink for fear of not waking up and being late. Is the invitation still valid, or has he changed his mind in view of his header yesterday?

I kept staring at my mobile phone in the hope of finding a message from him, a call explaining in broad terms the reason for his condition, but nothing. Not even a hint of an apology. The result? A huge headache and dark circles under my eyes to add to the ones I already had because of another man.

At least if they had been the same, I could have handled them, but nothing, Kristòs is completely different from anyone I've had the pleasure of knowing. Impossible to understand what he thinks, how he will react, what he will say and whether, after a dinner he wanted, he will find it so irritating to hear Enea name that he will have to leave the restaurant.

But what has happened that's so bad that you hate him?

I kick the sheet and uncover myself. I roll out of bed and check my watch. I have to take a shower and maybe go back to sleep for a few more hours. Enough to get rid of the dark circles under my eyes. Maybe.

I lock myself in the bathroom and slip under the hot stream. As soon as the water touches my skin, the tension

disappears. I manage to relax so much that I almost forget the reason for my mood. Finally at peace I go out, wrap myself in the soft towel and return to my room to throw myself on the bed and try to close my eyes a little more.

My mobile phone rings, breaking the silence. I sigh and grab it to check who's looking for me. I blink when I see the name I saved Kristòs' number with flashing on the screen. I'm tempted to "DON'T ANSWER" given how he ignores me. I let it ring until it stops. But he doesn't give up and calls again.

"What do you want?" I reply feigning a sleepy tone. If he thinks I slept with my phone under my pillow for fear of not hearing his calls or texts, he's sorely mistaken.

"*Good morning sleepyhead,*" he starts, but I don't let him finish.

"Are you kidding me?" I blurt out without masking my irritation. "Yesterday you left without explanation and when I tried to call you, you ignored my messages by turning off your phone. Does that seem normal to you?"

"...*To make sure you got there on time I decided to come wake you up,*" he explains quickly overriding my voice. He throws me off and is pissing me off. I can't believe he didn't listen to a single word.

Enraged, I end the call. I don't care if he is offended, made fun of or whatever. He has to understand that he can't treat me as he sees fit.

Intrigued, however, I get up and go to the window to see if he really is outside or if this is just another joke. I am fascinated when I see him in all his majesty, leaning against the bonnet of his car. He's really come out here and he's standing with his arms folded and mirrored sunglasses. I bite

my lip and smile like an idiot, finding him really sexy in his ever-present linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up and four buttons open. For the first time he has ripped jeans at the knees that wrap around his athletic legs, and I could call them the icing on the cake.

The anger melts away at the thought of him being here just for me. It's something I really appreciate, but it won't free him from my vengeance. I really think I'm going to make him wait another ten minutes, so he learns not to be an asshole.

I continue to watch him, eager and amused, from behind the semi-transparent curtain of my room. I'm proud of myself for the lesson I'm teaching him: make him wait and give him the impression that I don't care about the commitment.

I backtrack and grab the fluorescent tank top and a pair of shorts I had left on the chair and, very slowly, I get dressed. The phone rings again and, with a cheeky smile on my face, I answer that magnificent specimen of a man who's out there waiting for me.

"Tell me," I begin in the most honeyed tone I can muster.

"I know what you're up to. I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"And what do you think I'm up to?"

"You're making me wait like a dumb kid who can't go up to the house because he doesn't have parental approval. Too bad, if I remember correctly, Athos doesn't like to be woken up abruptly, and if you look out, you'll see I already have my finger on the doorbell." He is serious as he speaks, damn serious. I run to the window and note what he's just said. Shit.

"I'm in the bathroom, I can't..."

“I can see your neon tank top through the curtain,” he says. *“I’ll play now, let’s see when you can run fast.”*

“You’re not really going to do that,” I whisper, pulling the curtain away completely.

“Oh yeah, if you don’t open up. I’ll give you five seconds from now.” I blink in panic. *“Jade, we’re three seconds in.”*

You asshole, I know what happens if Athos wakes up in a daze. It’s only happened once, and I wish it wouldn’t happen again.

“Two.”

“Jesus Christ,” I curse, ignoring that I used his name and run to the front door to open it for him.

“One.” I open the door wide, and our eyes collide. His hand still in mid-air with his finger millimetres away from the button. *“Zero,”* he whispers. Without thinking I lower his arm. Soon after we lower the one with the mobile phone. *“Good morning, my gorgeous,”* he whispers, smiling slightly.

“Fuck off,” I shout at him. In response, he pulls me to him and carries me on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I don’t fight back because I know he’d never do anything to hurt me and there’s no point in doing so anyway. I give him a pat on the bottom to encourage him to put me down. I am satisfied almost immediately, just enough time to walk down the corridor and enter my room. He closes the door behind him and throws me down on the bed like I’m radioactive.

“Well now you can scream all you want, but in there you risked waking up the lovebirds.”

What? I was going to wake the two of them up?

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I shout at him throwing the pillow at him. “You show up at my house, load me up on your shoulder like I’m a sack of potatoes, and when you realize what you’re doing, you throw me around like I’m trash.” Kristòs shrugs his shoulders and then crosses his arms over his chest. He has that obnoxious little smile on his face.

“Have you packed your suitcase?” he asks as he looks away from me to look around without waiting for an answer. A grimace of appreciation spreads across his face as soon as he notices that I haven’t over-decorated the room. He doesn’t know that I don’t have anything of mine besides clothes and a few items.

“I’m not going,” I say offhandedly.

“Do you want to have breakfast before we leave?” he interrupts me grabbing an object on the dresser. He turns to me holding my neon bracelet with gummy bears as charms. He smiles and puts it on.

What the hell is he doing?

“I know a little place near the harbour where they make great croissants. We need to eat hearty, as we have almost nine hours of ferry time ahead of us without a single shred of food.” He speaks ignoring what I have told him. He points his eyes at mine looking at me as if I’m the only thing worthy of attention. “Come on, we have to go all the way to Athinios. Then on to Piraeus.” A shy smile is drawn on his face.

“I’m not coming,” I repeat determinedly. Even if the tone coming out of my mouth is not quite the desired one. His behaviour last night made me change my mind again. He had managed to beguile me with all those words, promising me that he would behave. Instead, he didn’t.

Why would he? He squares himself in front of me, too close for any sane girl who likes a powerful man like Kristòs. His brown eyes await my answer, which I find silly and childish. “Jade?”

“Are you kidding? Assure me that what happened at the restaurant won’t happen again. Last night it was Athos and Electre, but in Athens? Who can guarantee me that you won’t leave me in a restaurant scattered who knows where?”

“I won’t, I promise.” A shiver runs down my spine as he strokes my cheek. “I apologise for what happened. My brain went completely haywire.” I close my eyes, blissing out at this caress, but it smacks of teasing. “Jade,” he calls me back, and I go back to losing myself in those dark irises that are so damn beautiful. “I would like to reiterate, though, that this is just a business trip.” I nod and look away. With a single sentence he managed to freeze me after setting the fire.

Why is it only me that has to be careful while he can afford everything?

“Of course, as an employee and employer,” I whisper resignedly. I take a step to the side and walk past him starting to group the clothes I’ll be taking with me to this crazy event.

“Jade...”

“If you keep calling me, I’ll change my mind again. I’ll go with you to this event and then that’s it. Nothing more, I know.” I raise my hands to the sky. By now even the walls know this chant. “But you too must make an effort not to behave like last night.”

I grab my shirt and throw it into my backpack, wringing it out, hoping that this gesture will calm me down. The trouble is that he’s handsome and I’ve never received a rejection in my

life. Well, maybe that's the problem, he's a man not a boy who throws himself at the first girl who flatters him.

I leave the room and turn to look at Kris as he strokes the iron bed rail. He swallows and bows his head.

“Kristòs, are you okay?” He lifts his head and turns towards me, reaching me in one stride. A forced smile that saddens my heart. Why has he changed again?

Resigned, I take a few moments to leave a note for Electre and leave. Given Kristòs' mood swings, it is better that he knows where to find me.

I get into the car, and we drive off in the direction of the port of Athinios or to the place where we'll have breakfast, I'm not sure. He doesn't speak, he's too busy driving and I don't feel like interacting.

It takes us half an hour to reach our destination. Kris gets out of the car without giving me an explanation. With a wave of his hand, he signals me to follow him, his expression so serious that it seems the whole world is bothering him.

“Sorry, but should we get our luggage later?” He doesn't listen to me. He doesn't even stop, proceeding straight to a nearby coffee shop.

“We still have some time,” he replies distractedly as he seems to have his mobile phone in his hand. I can't keep up with him and I don't like it. When did he pick up the phone? Why is he acting like this? “Okay, so...”

We arrive at the bar and, as soon as I cross the threshold, the smell of coffee intoxicates my nostrils, suddenly making me want to drink an Italian one.

“You can speak Italian here. She...” Kristòs takes me by the shoulders and, with his right hand, extends just one finger,

pointing at a young woman. “She’s Italian.” I hold my breath at the unexpected contact. I was convinced he had stayed outside, intent on doing whatever it was that was distracting him from me.

“Who told you I speak Italian?” I ask worriedly, leaving out the fact that it’s rude to point. Could it be that Athos told him something? I turn to him and find him intent on looking at me.

“I heard you talking to a customer in perfect Italian,” he replies, looking away and pointing at my lips. “And then all those expletives that keep coming out of your lips. They’re in Italian.” I breathe softly, afraid of what might happen next. I’m so close to him again, to his lips, to the thought of having him.

“Geiá sou, Kristòs. Another business trip?” We are interrupted by a girl behind the counter.

“You know me well Xeni,” he winks back at her. There seems to be a certain chemistry between them.

“No agápi, I know your habits and when you have to take the ferry to Athens, you are here early in the morning to have breakfast” she retorts, shrugging her shoulders. The waitress, a beautiful woman with dark hair and emerald green eyes and a physique that would make a model envious, smiles at Kristòs, captivated, ready to respond positively to any invitation to dinner on his part.

Who could blame her? Who wouldn't accept? I for one did.

“So, you’ll have the usual? Coffee, chocolate croissant and cream?” With heart-shaped eyes she waits for him to confirm her order. He nods in amusement. “And what can I serve your friend?” she asks without taking her eyes off Kris. We’re off to

a good start. They look at him when they should have to turn to me.

“For her...” he whispers mischievously.

“For me, a three-chocolate croissant and an Italian coffee. Please.”

He doesn't know anything about me, let alone what I want to order for breakfast.

“Good choice. Do you want them at the counter or at a table?” she asks, continuing to look at Kristòs as if I didn't exist.

“Counter,” he replies.

“We'll take a table,” I reply, overlaying my desire on top of his words. I want them to stop flirting in front of me. It makes me feel unfit and worthless.

I roll my eyes at the situation that has arisen. He doesn't move an inch.

“All right. Whatever he says,” I murmur as I sit beside him. I don't want to argue, so I leave it at that.

The waitress serves us without batting an eyelash, but as soon as she steps away, I deliver my blow.

“Are you done hitting on her?”

“I wasn't hitting on her,” he giggles, biting into the croissant. He devours it in a few bites and drinks his coffee in one gulp.

“If you say so,” I mutter bringing the cup to my lips. I taste some of the dark liquid and mock its bitter taste. Finally, a proper coffee.

He waits a moment.

“Did you say his name is Xeni? Isn’t that...”

The asshole smiles mischievously.

“Are you jealous?” he dares to say. I have just enough time to widen my eyes and formulate a curt response before he stands up, pulls out his wallet and leaves some money on the counter. He turns to me and leans on the counter, waiting.

I gently place the cup on the saucer, take a bite of the croissant and stand up, taking the same position as him. With an unexpected gesture, I hold the pastry up to her lips and to my delight he doesn’t hesitate to bite into it.

“Would you like me to be?” I whisper watching his lips move. He mumbles clutching his shoulders and I snort a laugh. I pull my hand away with the sweet and move closer to his body. “No.” Then I shrug and walk out of the bar. I smile, but to myself, I know full well that I’ve just fed him the biggest lie in the world. Not to mention the one about my identity.

I walk towards the car, but the voice of that tempting man calls me back.

“Where are you going? The ferry is that way.”

“To the car to get the luggage,” I reply obviously, perhaps even slightly annoyed.

“The luggage is already on the ferry, as is the car.” I look at him in amazement. “You know how it is, just leave the keys with the bellman who takes care of it and poof.” He gestures with his hand in true magician style. “Everything transfers to the ferry.” There, I missed that step too.

“Okay.” I retrace my steps, while he answers some messages. I flank him and, with his head bowed, he turns to the right and starts walking.



I WALK AROUND THE FERRY, bored by the absence of Kristòs who does nothing but answer the phone. I'm looking for a quiet place to sleep, at least enough to make up for the lost hours. Apparently, we still have eight hours of travelling time anyway. I wonder why we didn't go by plane.

As soon as I turn the corner, I find a row of sunbeds with tables next to them. A secluded place where I can maybe spend a few hours in total relaxation. I choose the one furthest away and lie down enjoying the clear sky. While I try to empty my head, the gentle swaying of the ferry lulls me and relaxes me. Maybe I should write to Electre to update her. I quickly compose a message telling her what has happened to me and how Kristòs has behaved. Even though I try to understand something, I can't. He confuses me, puts me off and keeps pushing me away.

Of course, I won't tell him that.

I also have to write to Kristòs and tell him where I am, but without meaning to I close my eyes and magically fall asleep.

“Jade, wake up. We're almost there.” Kristòs' sweet, caring voice envelops me. A hand caresses my face, moving a strand of hair behind my ear. I open my eyes and the first thing I see is him. I smile and blink a couple of times, enjoying this magnificent touch. “Come on sleepyhead, come and see how beautiful Athens looks from the ferry.”

“How long did I sleep?” I ask trying to stretch. Something tingles my skin and when I check, I find a boiled wool blanket covering me.

Did I manage to send him the message? Will he be worried? Will he have found me immediately or will he have freaked out?

“Almost five hours. I couldn’t find you anywhere, I looked for you everywhere, you weren’t answering your mobile phone. So, I started asking people and an old man, with a huge smile, told me he had seen you coming this way. When I found you, you were sleeping peacefully and I didn’t dare wake you up,” he explains. Only now do I notice that I still have my mobile phone in my hand.

“I wanted to write to you, but my eyes closed early. I didn’t get much sleep last night and it’s all your fault,” I mumble as I sit up. “You weren’t answering me. I was anxious.” Maybe I should just shut up and not reveal certain details to him. He might use them against me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I apologise.”

“Did you cover me?” I ask and he nods explaining that my arms and face were cold, and he saw me shivering every now and then. Even though it’s hot, a shiver runs down my spine making me shrug. Kristòs reaches out to me and grabs the blanket to bring it to cover my shoulders like a cloak.

“Why did you run away yesterday?” He bows his head and then turns back to the sea.

“I had to sign some papers. I told you,” And then he turns to me, flashing a shy little smile. Why doesn’t he tell me by looking at my face?

Because he lied to you.

“Now come on, I’ll show you something.” He extends his hand to invite me to join him. As soon as I grasp it, another

shiver shakes me. It's pleasant though. I stand up and bump into him, bringing my hands to his chest.

"Sorry," I whisper and back up a step. He smiles and invites me to follow him again. We don't move far, just to get to the railing. He leans on it with his elbows and admires the landscape, entranced. Who can blame him? The view is magnificent.

"Why the ferry and not the plane?"

"Because I like to look at the horizon in peace, without being interrupted."

A strange feeling of unease creeps over me. He wants to enjoy the scenery without disturbance, and I am bothering him with my useless questions.

"In an aeroplane, I couldn't do that, and I couldn't enjoy this wonder," he points at the view with his hand. Wow, I didn't imagine such a response. I lean against the parapet and admire Athens with him. "Are you still cold?" I nod tightening my shoulders.

"I'll dress better next time," I reply, wrapping myself in the blanket. The wind blowing is laden with moisture and continues to make me shiver. Kristòs brings an arm around my shoulders and draws me to him, rubbing his hand on the blanket to give me a little more warmth. I sigh and close my eyes, delighting in this closeness.

"Next time put your bra on too," he whispers, resting his chin on the top of my head.

"Actually, I don't even have any panties on," I reveal with a small smile. I hear him swallow. He tries to say something but can't. He puffs out a giggle.

"Now I understand why the old man was happy."

“Are you jealous of the old man?” I ask raising my face to his. He smiles light-heartedly, and when he leans down to look at me, my heart stops beating. I’m afraid of what I think I feel for him, of what he can unleash in me.

Slowly, he brings his face closer to mine and, when he is close to zeroing the distance, he smiles.

“No,” he whispers, and then returns his gaze straight ahead. “If you remember, I’ve seen your breasts before, and then you have nothing more than the others.”

Damn him, he reveals as I crave his kiss.

Chapter 13



As we disembark from the ferry, Kristòs' calm face disappears again.

“Go on, he'll take you straight to the hotel,” he tells me in a cold tone as we approach the luxury BMW with its tinted windows. I wrinkle my forehead and turn towards him, ignoring the driver who opens the door for me.

“What about you?”

“I have chores to do. I'll see you later.” Without adding anything else he turns his back on me and heads towards his car parked a little further away.

“Kristòs,” I call back to him. When he turns around, he points his dark eyes into mine. I spread my arms wide, waiting for some explanation.

“Don't worry, I'll be there in an hour or so. You wait for me at the hotel.” He gets into his car and drives off, leaving me like this, incredulous and alone. All that's left is for me is to do what he asked and hope the rest of the trip isn't like this.

The road to the hotel is so short that I am there before I realise it. Being in Athens for the first time is something spectacular. As soon as the driver signals that we have arrived, I get out without waiting for him to open the door.

My mother would freak out if she knew how I was behaving.

I walk the short distance to the entrance of the luxurious hotel as if my old life is calling me back, as if Giada is taking precedence over me. I am aware that by accepting Kristòs's proposal I would be surrounded by everything I ran away from. Luxury, glitz, endless greed and a thousand other filthy things that so-called "decent people" are known to be guilty of. But what's wrong with that? We are not talking about living in this environment, but only about passing through it from time to time.

I enter it trying to be inconspicuous. I can see that we are not the only ones to arrive a day early. As I can see, my attire is not at all appropriate for a place like this. Okay, it's just men in suits looking at their mobile phones, maybe they won't even notice a girl in shorts and a fancy tank top wandering around.

You forget you're bra-less.

I look around and curse Kristòs for leaving me alone. He could have at least given me a few more pointers, like what name he registered me under, whether I can do what I want in the room or whatever. Damn him!

I venture to get in line to check in since there are five people in front of me. The way things are going, maybe I'll still be here in an hour, and he'll be back. At least I hope so.

I try to call him, and, in the meantime, I look up at the ceiling trying to improvise a conversation between me and myself, since I have never shown off my Greek outside of my friends. I could speak in English, but right now I can't seem to remember a single word. The call is interrupted. I don't know if the line went dead or if he rejected it.

Hell of a man. He could have taken me with him, I could have stayed in the car and contemplated his absence without the burden of registering.

The Asian gentleman in front seems to take forever and the only thing I understand is that there seems to be some problem with reservations. The hotel is fully booked because of the conference that will take place over the next few days.

Strange for a chain of this size, they should offer impeccable service. I sigh impatiently and hope to have the room as soon as possible. I want to take a shower.

I call Kristòs again, but he doesn't answer. I let it ring until the line goes dead and then try again.

Jesus Christ, answer me, damn Greek god.

“Hello and welcome to the Grand Hyatt Athens Hotel. I'm Valery how may I help you?” the girl behind the reception desk begins. She checks me out and is horrified to see my outfit. Who wouldn't?

“Yes, hello. There should be a reservation under the name...” Again, the line drops. I pull the phone away from my ear, ignoring the receptionist in front of me. I dial Kristòs's number and return to rest the phone between my ear and shoulder. “I'm here for the conference.”

“Sure.” She wrinkles her nose without trying to hide it. “Female companions are expected to arrive the same day and preferably enter through the back,” she says in an irritated tone.

“Excuse me? Look, there's a reservation that concerns me. I'm not a companion as you so politely phrased it,” I reply in kind. Even if I'm not the best dressed, she mustn't allow

herself to treat me like a slut. “Kristòs, try Kristòs...”. Of course, the call is interrupted.

“Kristòs what? Does your companion have a last name or...” She crosses her arms over her chest waiting for my answer.

Jeez, what's his last name? Why have I magically forgotten it?

I initiate yet another call to my boss, fervently hoping that he will deign to answer.

“Look, if you don’t have a reservation, please get out of this hotel. We are working here, and we don’t have time to waste,” she suggests in an annoyed tone. I look at her dumbfounded by her invitation. She doesn’t know who I am, because if she did, she would roll out the red carpet.

“No, look you...” I begin, leaning forward.

“Princekaris. Kristòs and Karen Princekaris.” My boss’s voice knocks me back a beat. He came to my rescue, preventing me from doing anything stupid. “I can’t leave you alone for even a moment?” he whispers as he reaches my side while extending the invitation to the girl.

“If you had given me more directions or the copy of the reservation, none of this would have happened.” I scold him, but he doesn’t give me a look as he hands over the papers.

When I turn to the receptionist, I notice her eyes on Kristòs. She’s literally eating him up with her eyes. I know what it’s like to be faced with a Greek god who oozes testosterone from every pore, capable of obscuring everything and everyone with his presence, but he’s mine. Sort of.

“Karen?” I ask softly.

“Don’t worry about it and just play along,” he replies between his teeth. He smiles mischievously at... what was her name? Yes, Valery. And I roll my eyes.

Why does he have to be like that with everyone? Does he do it on purpose or is it just his way?

I’m amazed at how she manages to throw languid, winking glances at every word she types on the keyboard. Kristòs, on the other hand, turns towards me and smiles sweetly. When he does that, everything disappears. If I just think that these days he’ll be everything to me, my ego swells.

“I apologise for my behaviour, Mrs. Princekaris. I had no idea that...” Even as I wrinkle my forehead at the appellation ‘ma’am’ she continues to act like a purring kitten. “Here you are. As an apology, I have dedicated 540 to you, namely the honeymoon suite. I hope I haven’t made a mistake.” She smiles, proud for doing her duty as best she can as she hands the key card to the man at my side.

What?

“Like the honeymoon suite? Is this a joke?” I ask looking first at her, then at him and then at her again. Sure, the choice of a single bed is really tempting, but I can’t accept it. I have to object.

I reach out to the girl and grab the invitation. I read it, trying not to skip any lines. Where did she get the idea that she could take such pains?

“If two suites have been booked and confirmed, two suites we demand,” I say without giving Valery a glance. My mother would have had her fired by now.

“Karen.” Kristòs’ voice has become deeper and more annoyed. He tries to snatch the paper from my hands, but I

dodge it, preventing him. “Look, could you change it to two separate rooms? Even two simple ones. Mrs. Princekaris isn’t much for politeness this weekend,” he asks, making me look bad. How dare he?

“I’m sorry, because of the conference we are sold out and the system has placed you in the only free suite, which is big enough to accommodate two separate beds, but is set up with a special bed.”

“Look, I’ve been a customer of yours for years,” Kristòs interjected slightly angry. Finally!

“I’m sorry, but ...”

“Enough, I’m tired of this, call the manager! I have never, in all my life, met such incompetents as you! Now solve this problem for me, otherwise I’ll give you a bad review and call...” Oh my God, this is all from the tantrums I’ve seen my mother have for years! I’ve witnessed these kinds of rants for as long as I can remember, and they’ve all seen the woman who gave birth to me as the winner. In fact, she always got more than she asked for just to get her to stop ranting. Valery looks at me incredulously and Kristòs is no different. I blink even more in the hope that the girl will give me a nod in response.

“No need to get angry, the manager is there, talking to a guest. I’ll go get him right away so that you can find a solution together. Please follow me.” She calls one of her colleagues who takes her place and accompanies us to the director.

“What the hell are you doing?” whispers Kristòs. He turns to me with his eyes wide open.

“You booked two rooms and...”

“I couldn’t book two rooms! Be thankful we have one where we can have two beds. At the end of the day, we’ll hardly ever be in the room and believe me, by the time we set foot in it we’ll be so tired we’ll not want to even have to get into our pyjamas let alone think about me hitting on you,” he replies admonishing me. “Hell Jade, you’re my employee. When are you going to get it into your head that I would never sleep with you?”

Did he really not say that in front of everyone?

There’s anger in his eyes as disbelief takes over in me. In addition to registering me under a different name, he’s also thrown his damn policy in my face, as if I was the one who organized this weekend with the intention of spending it exclusively with him. I grab him by the wrist, holding him back. He’s made me look bad in front of everyone here, he doesn’t deserve any leniency.

“Until proven otherwise, the one who’s getting upset about the room with a single heart-shaped bed is me. So, what are you talking about? I don’t share a room with my boss.”

Kristòs pulls his arm to himself and turns sharply to head towards the hotel manager. I watch as he gestures, nods, and makes excuses for my strange behaviour. He mumbles something I can’t hear because someone is coughing. The manager nods and pats him on the back.

It doesn’t take him long to walk back towards me in the company of the man.

“So, Valery, I’ve arranged everything with Mr. Princekaris. Give me two magnetic cards for suite 549.” Kristòs swallows noisily. “And for the mix-up, the cost will be equal to the Honeymoon suite.” Even though my boss is still wide-eyed, I smile slightly, proud to have won. At least then he can’t accuse

me of planning everything with the aim of getting him into bed.

My goodness, I look just like my mother.

The manager greets Kristòs with a handshake and smiles mischievously when he turns his eyes on me. I instinctively cross my arms over my breasts to cover them.

Pig.

He extends his hand towards me, but I don't reciprocate. No way.

“Could you put aside your bad mood and become the polite and kind person you are?” Kristòs interjects. I snort and, careful not to reveal myself too much, I comply with his wishes.

“I hope your stay with us is as happy as your presence for us, Mrs. Princekaris.” He barely bows and kisses my hand.

But Mrs. Princekaris sounds good.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the annoyance on Kristòs' face as he silently stretches out an arm behind me as if to mark his territory. I smile at his reaction because it seems really contradictory to what he said just now.

“Please, the lift is this way.”

In strict silence we set off and, as soon as the metal doors open, Kristòs waves me in. Will he be angry? Oh, who cares, I am too.

“We got the two rooms in the end,” I begin proudly.

“You could have avoided it and adjusted.”

“Adjust? My name is Jade, not Karen. Who needs to adjust?”

“Stop it.”

“What, you wish I was Karen? Are you sure she’s your sister?” I turn to him to see my little dig go in.

“I’m here for the convention, not for pleasure, so I’d appreciate it if you’d stop making stupid assumptions that aren’t in heaven or on earth,” he replies, attacking me.

“Why not for both?”

“Because if I wanted to seek pleasure, I wouldn’t have brought you.” A punch to the stomach that makes me want to spit him out on the floor. He says it seriously, his eyes in mine, his face angry.

I shut up, swallowing his words like a bitter pill, hard to swallow. I assemble them, I dissect them letter by letter imprinting them in my mind so that I have to remember them.

He doesn’t want me, full stop. I have to stop believing that he is interested in me. I have to stop thinking about him for once. The sooner I get that into my head, the sooner we’ll all be better off.

“I was the one who demanded two rooms, remember?” I point out. He can’t think that my sole purpose is to seduce him. Because if that was the case, I wouldn’t have made a scene. “Anyway, I didn’t mean that kind of pleasure. Even taking a relaxing bath can be considered that,” I counter a few moments later. I wanted to be edgy, but what he said to me just now can in no way be matched.

“Leave me alone, I don’t know why you insist on wanting at all costs...”

“I don’t know either.” I raise my face to the ceiling and close my eyes. I’m still banging my head against an impenetrable wall, and I don’t understand why.

The lift opens just as I try not to burst into tears in front of him. Without waiting for him, I grab my backpack and get out of the infernal box to go directly into the suite.

To my amazement, the room is very bright thanks to the pastel colours with which it has been painted. In the middle there is a glass table with beautiful flowers in an elegant vase, on the right a white sofa with a peninsula and two blue armchairs next to it, placed in front of a coffee table full of magazines and sweets. On the left, a magnificent kitchen with glossy white wall units. A minibar is nearby. There are doors on either side of the room, so I think these are the bedrooms.

I wander around the suite, touching everything I see. The leather sofa, the table, the chairs. Everything is magnificent and immaculate. Just like I was used to with my parents, just the way I like it.

“So? After the mess you made, do you even like it?” With his arms folded, Kristòs is leaning against the kitchen counter. I don’t know whether to answer him, nod or just grumble. I don’t know anything anymore.

I nod and give him a shy smile.

“Jade, I...” he starts, but I don’t let him finish.

“You’re right. I overreacted and I apologize. I got carried away.” I spread my arms wide, looking around. “We do have this though. Each with their own room and a shared space where we can bicker. As it should be.” I sigh as I turn towards the huge glass window overlooking the acropolis. He sighs too and approaches me. He takes the same position as me and smiles at Athens at our feet. “Right or left?” I ask after a few minutes of silence.

“Excuse me?”

“The room. Do you want the one on the right or the one on the left?” I turn around and find my doom. As always. His eyes are so magnificent I want to lose myself looking at them every single day. That hint of a beard, then, is so damn sexy it makes my breath catch.

Yikes.

“Out of gallantry I let the women choose first, oh sorry, there are no women here, there’s just a wayward little girl.” He smiles and my brain goes into overdrive.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” he chuckles. Maybe he thinks he’s made a funny joke, but instead I feel hurt. And angry. So much so that I can’t even formulate a meaningful offensive sentence.

Why can’t he see anything good in what I’ve done? Why can’t you see anything good in me?

“You are bad.” That’s the first thing that comes to mind. The most polite at least. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

I back up to my backpack, grab it, and head for the rooms.

“No, I like hearing it though.” With a smile on my face, I take the right room.

“I’ll see you at 7:30,” he says in a deep, loud voice as I place my hand on the doorknob. I instinctively turn my head towards him, trying to impress upon myself yet another word, yet another overbearing behaviour, yet another rejection and enter the room only to slam the door. I put my back against it and, taking a deep breath, slide to the floor.

Why does he make me feel so bad? I should not care, yet every word he says offends me, cuts me up inside.

I close my eyes and cover my face with my hands. I rub them over my face in a vain attempt to pull myself together and carry on, gritting my teeth and pretending as if his words don't hurt me. It will be hard, but I must succeed.

I open my eyes and do the only thing I can do, look around and live in the moment, hoping not to be hurt by every comment he makes.

I never gave a shit what the guys thought, if my behaviour towards them was okay. Even with Raffaele everything was easier. I felt like I had found my soul mate. With Kristòs it's different. I care about him and receiving sweet words would satisfy me like never before. Maybe that's the difference, he's completely the opposite of everyone I've ever been with, and his resistance grows my determination to want him. Silly me, instead of resigning myself and moving on, I set my mind on him.

On the other hand, the room I'm in is simply stunning. The four-poster bed towers over the white walls and the blue ceiling. Furnished in an elegant and essential way, with the same shades as the ceiling. If it had been my room, however, I would have already collected clothes on the chair and at the foot of the bed, just to make it "lived in".

I get up and head to the bathroom, being amazed by the sight of a Jacuzzi.

"Wow." Quickly I walk over and turn on the taps. "I want a bath in this wonder. For old time's sake. Then I promise to go back to living like Jade."

I have no intention of unpacking my backpack, at least for now. I undress while keeping my gaze fixed on the water level in the tub. Next thing I know, I rush to the bathroom and I've hit the jackpot. When I finally submerge, I empty my head of

all thoughts and let myself be lulled by the massage of the bubbles, until I slip under the water and hold my breath as long as possible.

I suddenly re-emerge when I remember the one thing I forgot to do before leaving: get back on the bike. I get out of the bathtub and, not caring that I'm wet, I grab my trousers looking for my mobile phone, but nothing. I run into the room and grab my backpack, emptying it of its contents. It's not there either. I try to look around and figure out where I might have left it, muss up my shaggy hair and close my eyes. Sure enough, it's left at home.

"Fuck!" I walk up and down the room hoping to get an idea.

I go back to the bathroom, put on my clothes as best I can, and leave the room heading towards Kristòs'. I knock as hard as I can until, with sleepy eyes, he opens the door. He waits in silence for me to start explaining why I interrupted his sleep with only his boxers on.

Why didn't he bother to get dressed? He could have just worn something else.

He scans me from head to toe and when his eyes stop on my chest, he swallows. I go along with the gesture and do as he does, finding the tank top completely wet and transparent.

There, now I curse the fact that I didn't wear a bra for the second time.

"What do you want?" he whispers. Is his voice hoarse from sleep, or is he trying to let me know I'm not that indifferent to him?

You. I want you, why don't you just get over it?

I try to imagine him with his clothes on and it's quite difficult.

"I remembered I have to make a very important call, but I don't know what happened to my phone. Maybe it got left on the ferry or maybe... I mean, I was wondering if I could borrow yours."

Ferry? I called him at the hotel.

"No." And he tries to close the door.

"Please, Kristòs." I try to block his gesture with my hand, and fortunately I succeed. "Then I won't ask you for anything more, I promise." He snorts but accepts. He waves me to follow him and, as I take a step into the room, I notice that two elegant suits are hanging on the wardrobe and each one is matched with the most fashionable pair of shoes. He looks like a maniacal perfectionist.

"Two minutes, no more." He hands me his latest generation iPhone and as soon as I grab it, he throws himself back on the bed. I close my eyes and look away from the perfectly made man.

I look up the name of the shop and the number on the internet, leave the room and head for the huge window to initiate the call.

"Hi Markus, I'm Jade, remember?"

"*Oh, hello,*" he looks bewildered. "*I thought it was...*"

"I wanted to tell you that I can't come by to settle up because I'm at..."

"*I'll stop you right there, I was forced to call whoever rented your bike.*"

“What? I gave you a deposit, how dare you? I even came by but you...”

“*I’m sorry.*” And he hangs up without giving me a chance to reply. I scream under my breath and bite my lip in exasperation. I’m dead, definitely. Enea won’t be happy, especially about my lie.

I put the phone to my lips, looking for comfort in an inanimate object. As if this ‘thing’ could lift my spirits. It really feels like everything is working against me. The accident, the job, Kristòs with his ideas to pay off a debt that I don’t even know how much it amounts to. And now this.

I could call Enea.

With trembling fingers, I dial his number and wait for him to answer. I thank my infallible memory for remembering his contact.

“*Hello?*” His voice sounds frightened. Maybe he wasn’t expecting my call.

“Hi.”

“*J-Jade? Y-you okay?*”

“Yeah, everything’s okay. I just have some problems this weekend and... I wanted to know if... by any chance, did Markus call you?” I close my eyes, hoping for an answer in my favour.

“*Markus? No, not to my knowledge. But are you okay? Did something happen to you?*” His concern is really surprising. I smile at that. “*Jade.*”

“Yes, I’m fine and there’s nothing to worry about. Don’t worry. I just have things to do.” Poor guy, no wonder he’s bewildered, I’m calling him with an unknown number, and

I've asked for some rather bizarre things. I greet him and promise to get in touch as soon as I'm free to resume work.

When I end the call, the iPhone vibrates and turns back on, revealing the arrival of a message. The preview gives me a peek into my boss' private life. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help myself.

"I KNOW we just broke up, but I need to talk to you.

We're having a few problems.

When you have a free minute, call me.

It's urgent.

Amanda."

WE NEED TO TALK. The usual two scary words. Never as much as "I know we just broke up" or "we're having some problems".

I sigh and get up to go back to his room to leave his phone, but it lights up again. I know I shouldn't, however I look at the screen and read what appears from Karen.

"WHERE THE HELL have you been?

I've been chasing after you for days."

I SMILE at the message from his sister.

Because she's his sister, right? Kristòs isn't the type to have multiple relationships. Or is he?

Trying to be as quiet as possible, I enter his room finding him in the same position I left him in. I bite my lip admiring his muscular and perfectly tanned body. The boxers wrap his firm bottom divinely. Everything about him is perfect except his attitude towards me.

Who knows, if we hadn't clashed like that, maybe he would behave differently.

I leave his phone on the bedside table, whisper a word of thanks, and go back to looking at his profile. I reach out to him, wanting to touch him, to feel his muscles under my fingers.

Without touching him, I caress his features, reaching up to his bottom. I clench my hand into a fist and then bring it to my lips and bite into the flesh, imagining it's his buttocks.

Damn, how lost I am.

I go back to my room as if nothing happened, as if having a Greek god a few steps away from me wouldn't shake my hormones.

That's who can change my mood. Unfortunately, he always does it for the worse.

Chapter 14



At 7.15pm I'm ready. I wore the only really elegant dress I brought from Bari, the black Gucci one, the same model that Victoria Beckham wore when she was part of the Spice Girls. On my feet were silver heeled sandals and a Swarovski clutch bag in the same colour. I used to dress like this when I had to go out and have fun with my friends. The hair tied in a high tail makes me look slightly older, or at least that's what Sarah and Luna told me.

This time I simply put it up in a half side braid.

I leave the room to head for the common area hoping that I'm not late or that Kristòs isn't angry for some strange reason unknown to me. I am surprised not to find him waiting for me, leaning against the doorframe, or sitting on the sofa, arms folded, muttering his disapproval. Instead, I find him on the terrace, calmly leaning with his elbows on the glass balustrade.

I join him, hoping he won't notice me.

"Don't. It's not a solution." I repeat the same words he used with me a few days ago. He chuckles and shakes his head and then straightens up without stopping looking in front of him. Only when I flank him does he turn slightly towards me and smile.

He looks beautiful in his elegant suit. And I'm in seventh heaven. I will be his companion, I will go with him wherever he wants, whenever he needs me.

I look away so he doesn't realise I'm admiring him more than I should and direct him to the beautiful view that has caught his eye while he's been waiting for me. The sun has coloured Athens red and orange, producing a reflection on the sea that seems to be made of wine and amplifies everything, even in the air there is a different scent.

"It is nothing short of magnificent." I interrupt the silence.

"Yeah, really lovely," he whispers. I look at him and find him staring at me. He scrutinises me from head to toe almost in disbelief that he's noticed something in me that's pleasant to look at. "Enchanting," he repeats in a barely audible whisper. I bow my head and smile to myself, trying to keep my cheeks from turning red. Of course, I could blame it on the reflection of the sun, but he definitely wouldn't believe it. "We'd better get going, otherwise we'll be late for the restaurant. I thought we'd walk there. It's only a few minutes away and taking the car would be more expensive than anything else. Can you?" He points to my shoes. His voice isn't as confident as usual and seeing him shy seems incredible. Like someone else is standing in front of me. I nod and he takes a step towards me.

"Look what I found among my things." He raises his arm and shows me my phone. I blink and he hands it to me. "I think I took it when I was trying to keep you from mauling the hostess. I don't really remember." I sigh and smile. He lets me grab the phone and, without looking to see if anyone has been looking for me, I slip it into my purse.

"Thanks."

“You might want to put a few blocks on the most important applications. Not all of them just check what name you saved them under,” he reveals, rocking back on his heels. I try to retort, but he quickly backs away. If he’s been nosing around in the phone’s gallery, then I’m toast. I have pictures from when I was still in Bari and....

“Will you hurry up? We’re going to be late,” he shouts.

“Do you know you’re awful?” I say chasing after him, while he’s already out the door and getting ready to call the lift.

“Yeah, but I like hearing that,” he chuckles motioning me to go ahead of him. I humour him and, as I hear him swear under his breath, I smile because I’m more than convinced he’s noticed my bare back. He sighs and, with a single step, is at my side. The lift doors close and an imaginary bubble encompasses us. It’s just me and him in a tiny space.

“Since I’ve known you, you’ve never worn anything so skimpy,” he whispers with a mischievous grin. “You look really hot. I’ve got to hand it to you.”

“That’s compliment number two. What happened to the grumpy Kristòs who supposedly found the cleavage a subliminal message to seduce him?” I ask in amazement. “Don’t tell me,” I start and point my finger at him. He looks at me strangely and afraid of what I might say. I’ve displaced him, what more could I possibly do? “I bet he’s on the bed sleeping. You’re his twin brother, the kinder, more polite and sexy as hell one.” He smiles and looks away from me staring at the display where the floor numbers scroll. “Or you slept and regenerated. You’ve calmed down and now, until you get tired again, you’re like the mythical Prince Charming.”

“I’m not so different.”

“Oh, believe me, you are,” I counter. “Besides, I thought I might find someone.”

“Excuse me?”

“Since you’ve told me countless times that there can’t be anything between us, I thought ‘why not take advantage of this weekend in Athens to find someone’” I explain. “I could hook up, bring him up and...”

“Wait a minute. You’d like to take a stranger up to the room I’m paying for?”

“What’s the big deal? There are two well soundproofed rooms. In fact, if you want, I’ll give you a hand picking up,” I smile, proud of my words.

“I don’t need help picking up,” he chuckles, pretending to be offended.

“A little help wouldn’t hurt.” I provoke him by giving him a gentle shove. I hope I’ve managed to bait the hook and he takes the bait with both hands. “You’re an attractive man, and for as long as I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you accompanied by a woman. The only two you’ve introduced me to, to make me jealous, don’t seem like your type.”

“And let’s hear it, what would my type be?” The amused tone gives me charge.

The lift doors open and, without waiting for him, I head outside. I turn around and, pointing my eyes at his, point to myself with both thumbs miming the word ‘someone like me’.

Cheeky and stubborn, that’s what I am.

He smiles, shaking his head. I’m sure I’m exasperating him, but I don’t care.

Even if it takes him a few moments to reach me outside the hotel, I don't get angry. I only do so when I turn around and find him talking to Valery. She smiles at him, fascinated by what he's saying, by the attention he's paying her. As soon as Kristòs turns around and notices me, he smiles in the typical mischievous way to which I have become accustomed. What the hell am I supposed to think?

Maybe he's giving me yet another demonstration that he doesn't want me? Or that he wants to see how far my tolerance goes?

Resigned, but no less combative, I turn around and grab my mobile phone to check if anyone has been looking for me while it was in Kristòs' hands. I cast a quick glance inside the hotel to make sure he's at a safe distance. I don't want him to find out anything.

The only thing that comes naturally to me is to try to call Electre to tell her what's happening to me, but I get no answer. Then, to waste time, and driven by an insane curiosity, I log onto my Instagram profile. The first picture that appears on the home page stops my breath. My best friend Luna is hugging the one she hated more than her own life until recently. The various messages that appear, about ten of them, are mostly from Sarah. I'm not going to open them because then she would know I read them.

"Are you ready?" Kristòs' voice makes me wince. I turn off the page and lock my phone, putting it back in my clutch bag. Serious, or at least I hope I am, I nod. With my hand I signal him to go ahead of me and, as soon as he does, I squeeze my eyes shut. Nothing is going right for me today.

"You're quiet. Did something happen?" he begins after about five minutes of total silence.

Everything, everything has happened. From the bike being sold to who knows who, to one of my best friends seeming to have turned her back on me, lest I forget you.

I shake my head and flash a fake smile. He doesn't ask for more, he just smiles lopsidedly, making my silence okay, and continues our walk, which stops after a few steps.

“Here we are.” Kristòs opens the door for me and motions me to go ahead of him. I overlook the fact that etiquette teaches that, when entering a closed place, it is the woman who follows the man, because I don't feel like bickering about everything.

The place seems very intimate, and I am surprised that our table - already booked - is next to the window overlooking the street. Everything is so romantic and luxurious that it feels like a fairy tale.

The waiter approaches and grabs the chair in an attempt to seat me, but Kristòs blocks him. He brings his hands up to the wooden backrest and gives the boy a nasty look, but he lets him do it and leaves. He moves the chair and puts his hand on my back, urging me to sit down. As soon as I do, he reaches out with his fingers gently crawling all over my skin.

He's just made something he did and wanted look like my fault. I shudder when the same fingertips move on to torture the base of my neck, right at the height of the tattoo, and then finish their run on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” I whisper, pretending I didn't sense any sensation. “Have you known this restaurant long?” I ask when he's sat down too. He adjusts his jacket, unbuttoning it, and rests his elbows on the table, his hands together holding his chin. He fixes his eyes on mine and I feel myself flare up.

What is he doing? Did he feel left out, side-lined by my sudden change of allegiance? Isn't that what he wanted?

"Folks, I leave you the menu," the waiter begins, handing us two cards folded in half. I don't miss his curious look at my cleavage. I smile at his gesture which irritates the man in front of me.

"No need, we already know what to get." Kristòs' tone is rough, aimed at admonishing the brazenness of the waiter who interrupted us. "Will you allow me to order for you too?" he asks quietly.

"Please, go ahead. I trust you." I sustain his gaze, ignoring the boy completely.

"Well, then, gnocchetti with clam sauce and for the main course, sea bream with lemon and baked potatoes. For my wife, gnocchetti with cherry tomato and feta sauce, vegetarian mussakas, please. I don't want a shadow of meat in any of her dishes. Seasonal fruit and house dessert for both. To drink... Do you want wine?" he asks, turning towards me. Her eyes fix on mine and wait for an answer, which comes immediately. I shake my head slightly in denial and he hints a small smile. "Just plain water then."

Out of the corner of my eye I notice that the waiter is leaving us alone.

"Do you want to start with the waiter?"

"Excuse me?" What is he talking about?

"You want to hook up, right? So why not the waiter, since he's hanging from your cleavage?" he continues to air his mouth. "Or is that too low? Are you looking for someone higher up? How about the manager? The owner, the majority shareholder?" He is quiet a while, in a veiled way, he accuses

me of being not only a traitor but also an unparalleled social climber.

“Why not the maid?” I cut in. “I saw her earlier and she’s really attractive.” With his eyes he searches for the girl as if he wants to be sure of what I say. He scans the room, checking every last employee until he finds her right behind me.

“You have good taste,” he mutters. He lowers her gaze to the table grabbing his napkin and placing it on his thighs.

“Tell me something I’m curious about, how do you know I don’t eat meat?”

“The perks of having Electre around,” he smiles proudly. It’s really unbearable when he refers to her like that.

“But what did she do to you? You talk about her like she’s a bad person.” If we have time to get to know each other, I want to know the reason for their animosity.

“I honestly don’t know. Maybe her ideas for launching the new club aren’t particularly exciting to me while Athos hangs on her every word and finds everything brilliant. I’m not that magnanimous,” he reveals. I didn’t know my friend was in charge of launching Kristòs’ club. “Athos wanted it. I was just going to open.”

“Understood.”

“So, you wanted to know if I’ve known this restaurant for a long time... Let’s say I visit it every time I set foot in Athens, which amounts to twice a week,” he explains in a low voice. “And you? Do you know it?” He doesn’t even look at me, he continues to adjust the piece of cloth on his legs. He folds and refolds it in every possible and imaginable way.

“Why would I know it too?”

“Because it’s been here forever. It has never changed management and it is passed down from father to son,” he concludes. I try, but I can’t understand why I should know this place. He looks up at me and my breath catches in my throat. “You said you’re from this neighbourhood and it seems strange that you don’t know this restaurant, it’s the most famous in the area.”

Shit.

“Um, my family was never wealthy enough to afford to set foot here,” I lie, “which is why I’ve never heard of this restaurant. Besides, I’m a huge fan of junk food.” Kristòs continues to keep his eyes on me as if he’s got me under his thumb.

“Folks, appetizers are on the house. Enjoy.” The waiter comes to my rescue at just the right moment. Even though my date doesn’t budge an inch, I thank the boy with a smile. Mum always admonished me for this gesture of kindness towards those who serve us, but I find it my duty, even if they are paid to do so.

The starter consists of vegetables with Greek yoghurt and bread croutons for me, ham with grapefruit pearls for him. Soon after, water is brought to us.

“Let’s toast” I propose while Kristòs fills my glass.

“To what exactly?” he asks amazed by my idea.

“To the two of us.” I shrug my shoulders at his question. What the hell does he want to drink to if not to us?

His face lights up as if no one had ever made such a proposal before. As soon as he puts down the bottle, we grab the glasses and raise them in mid-air.

“To the end of my debt and the beginning of something new for you.” There, now there’s a huge question mark on his face. “I mean your new place.”

“I like it. So, at the end...” he holds out his glass towards me, “and at the beginning.” And he brings it back to his chest.

“And to our friendship and complicity in hooking up.” He smiles back as he takes a sip of water. “We could do that,” I continue, and his eyes widen, understanding something else entirely. “I find someone for you, and you find someone for me.”

“Jade, I’m not here for pleasure. I just want to do this thing and go home. Nothing more.”

“Too bad, that would have been cool,” I mumble sadly.

“Is this how you young people have fun?”

“Young people? Why, you think you’re old?” I don’t think he is. Kristòs doesn’t answer, he just grimaces. “Anyway, no, we have other amusements. If you want, I’ll tell you a couple of them later. Some of them are even ‘nice’.”

“Do you want to share your vices with me?” he asks as if I’m hiding a state secret. As if certain shenanigans weren’t a kind of “spinning wheel” that sooner or later touches everyone.

“If you’d like to hear me out, yes.”

We spend the rest of the dinner as if we were a couple of tried and tested friends. We talk about this and that without ever mentioning our pasts, or without getting into something so private that we have to make up some strange lie.

I sigh as I finish my dessert, a Greek yoghurt cake with red fruits. Something divine.

He twists his lips before accepting. Maybe he had other plans, maybe he wanted to go to his room and go to sleep or he wanted to go out alone while I should have stayed locked in my room. I just want to spend more time with him.

“I saw they have an espresso machine at the hotel,” I say to break the tension I feel in my shoulders.

“Are you sick of me yet?” he mutters blocking the hand holding the glass of water in mid-air.

“Never,” I whisper instinctively.

“I remind you that you still have to tell me the secrets of you young people.” Then he brings the glass to his lips and, as he takes a sip, looks up at me from under his lashes.

“And stop calling me young, you are young too.”

“Agóri” He calls to the waiter with a strange hand gesture. A little later, the boy brings us a saucer with a dark envelope on it. Kristòs pulls out his wallet and takes out the gold-coloured credit card. I close my eyes remembering how many times I have swiped such a card and how much I miss doing it. Especially in the hardest of times, especially when I’m short on cash.

“Everything okay?”

Maybe he noticed that I was staring at the card?

I nod and smile just as the waiter comes back and hands the paper to Kristòs, who grabs it and puts it back in its place. I get up with an inner turmoil that I can hardly contain. Kristòs hurries to catch up with me, trying to pull my chair away, but I’ve done it myself. He takes the opportunity to bring his hand to the bottom of my back and, with a slight pressure, leads me out.

“You know, I often come to Athens, but I never have time to visit. How about you tell me about it?” He wiggles his thumb over the skin of my back and that literally freaks me out.

Now what do I do, I only know about Athens what Electre told me.

I swallow, trying to stay sane and not think about his hand on my body.

“Gladly.” I inhale, exhaling. “This, for starters, is the ancient part of Athens. Obviously, it came into being after the Acropolis” What do I say now? At this moment not even my education can save me, from the excitement everything has disappeared, tabula rasa.

Kristòs’ mobile phone starts ringing, and I mentally thank whoever is helping me from up there.

I think it is something super important to disturb him at this hour. He pulls out his phone and checks the name on the display.

“Sorry, I’m working. The new place is draining me,” he snorts a laugh thinking he’s made a joke, then puts the phone back in his pocket leaving me stunned.

“You could have answered if it was important” I whisper in a conciliatory tone. Sure, it would have bothered me, but it’s in the middle of launching a new club, so I would have accepted it.

“So, you were saying?” He changes the subject. Maybe he’s looking for a few moments for himself and not just to be an entrepreneur.

“To the right we should find the temple of Athena, if I’m not mistaken,” I explain, pointing with my index finger.

“Should we find?” he asks, but I no longer listen to him. My attention is caught by a flashing sign. I pass Kristòs and go straight towards my goal: a candy machine that, among other things, dispenses gummy bears. My favourite. I instinctively start rummaging through my purse for some change. I can’t resist, I want them.

“Is this a joke?”

“I love them, they’re my favourite,” I say continuing to rummage through my purse. “If I could, I’d fill a bathtub and dive in. I’d eat them every hour, I’d...”

“Okay, okay, I get it. You don’t need to keep going.” He pulls out of his pocket the change it takes to buy a packet. He grabs it and hands it to me like it’s nothing.

I smile at his gesture and thank him with a bow. I have to admit, he is really adorable sometimes.

Quickly but carefully, I open the envelope and smell its contents. I grab a teddy bear and pop it in my mouth, making an appreciative noise. How I have missed them. I taste it as if I had never eaten anything so delicious. When I see my knight’s shocked face, I don’t hesitate to hand him a bear, but he doesn’t take it. He keeps his hands in his pockets as if he were a mere spectator.

“I’ll tell you one of those ‘young people’s secrets’: at parties, we used to fill a basin with these bears and pour vodka into it. We’d let it soak up the jelly and then we’d stuff them down our throats.” With a mischievous grin I move closer, continuing to hold the bear between my fingers. I stop only because the distance between us is very small. “We used to feed each other.” I bring my hand in front of her mouth and bring the candy closer to her lips. The sparkle in his eyes gives me the charge to continue. When I brush them, he opens them

and lets me accomplish my intent. “That’s right.” He doesn’t give me time to remove my hand as he closes his lips around my fingers, sucking on them. A tremor starts in my lower abdomen and travels to my brain, shaking me. Something I’ve never felt until now.

“They really are divine even without alcohol, aren’t they?” I whisper, pointing my eyes to his lips and biting mine. He swallows and nods slowly. His hand rests on the small of my back and he holds me close as if he wants something more. His face moves closer to mine and my brain doesn’t understand anything anymore. I am so close to having what I have longed for, that I am now afraid.

Kristòs is something unique, so unique that I don’t even know how to describe him.

His scent envelops me and, if only I stretch my neck slightly, I can also taste him, feel his warmth. My heart is beating so fast I’m afraid it might burst out of my chest. I can’t hold this tension.

I lift my eyes to his just to close them and let go, but he flinches at the last.

My heart stops. I squint and go back to biting my lip. When I open them again I smile, trying to hold back the sadness. He knows I am not indifferent to him; he knows I long for his lips and what does he do? He deludes me in this brutal way.

“I’m sorry, Jade. I...”

“What about that?” I move my head to get a better look over his shoulder, preventing him from noticing the disappointment on my face. “A disco! Shall we go clubbing?”

I have to pull away from him, have to turn away and pretend nothing is wrong.

Kristòs looks away from me, looking away and inhaling heavily.

“I’d rather we continue our walk to the hotel.” His hands barely push me, but I don’t move.

“Come on let’s go inside.” I grab his arm and pull him, but he struggles again. “Please. Just this, then I won’t ask you for anything more.” Kristòs’ eyes narrow as if he’s trying to admonish me. “Cross my heart,” I add again, and he snorts a lovely little chuckle.

He accepts on the sole condition that we have a drink and leave. Out of happiness, I press a kiss to the corner of his mouth that he can’t avoid.

As soon as we enter, Kristòs clasps my hand in his and intertwines our fingers. I smile and move closer to him, feeling safer and more secure. Not that this place scares me, on the contrary, in places like this I feel at home. Much more than at home. He makes his way to the bar and, to my amazement, manages to order two shots of vodka right away. He draws me even closer to him, wrapping his arm around my waist. When the waitress places the two shots on the counter, I grab mine, make it collide with his and down it in one gulp. Kristòs looks at me in shock and, since I don’t understand why, I smile at him, looking him straight in the eyes.

When I hear my favourite song, the same one that inspired me for my tattoo, I close my eyes and let myself be carried away by the music of *Samsara by Tungevaag and Raaban*. I undo Kris’s embrace and hit the dance floor. I turn, eventually, and provoke him. I urge him to come and dance with me, but he nods no.

I keep dancing with my eyes on him until a boy stands in front of me. I look up, ready to protest at this intrusiveness, but I am enthralled. He's no slouch when it comes to beauty either.

He approaches me, confident, and says something in my ear that I don't understand because of the loud music and his Greek. So as not to make a fool of myself, I nod and, in no time at all, he draws me to him, starting to fondle my bottom with vulgarity. He hides his face in the hollow of my neck and starts licking me.

Oh, shit! What the hell is he doing?

I try to push him away, but I can't. He's too strong and sticky.

Suddenly he lets go, widens his eyes, and moves away. I can tell from his astonished expression that he's not doing it of his own free will. Kristòs pushes him aside and, ignoring his insults, grabs my hand and manages to drag me out of the club without being chased by the boy.

"What has gotten into you? Have you become a troglodyte all of a sudden?" I blurt out angrily, more because of the rough grasp than because I've dodged the boy. He continued walking without stopping even in front of the guards to whom he gave a strange nod.

"Kristòs, let go of me." I raise my voice as he continues. My wrist is hurting and he's not realising it.

As soon as we cross the threshold, we pass the line of people who are waiting to be allowed in. After a few steps, a Kristòs whom I don't know goes wild.

"What has gotten into me? Me? You let a stranger grope you and I'm the one who's out of my mind? Are you listening to yourself?" His nerves are on edge and, frankly, I don't

understand why he's taking it so hard. At the end of the day, there will never be anything between us.

“And pray tell, what do you care? The body is mine and I do what I want with it. If I had wanted to go further, I would have, but that wasn't the intent.”

“What?” I tug on his arm, and he lets go of me. “What is this, another weird little game you young people play? You're fucking engaged! Is it possible you're acting like this?”

“And what do you care if I ended the night with that boy? I think I've been as clear as you. If you're not going to have fun, I don't see why I shouldn't! And stop bringing up my fiancé, because he doesn't exist, okay? I was only teasing you so I wouldn't have to explain myself, and then I never denied it just to see the look on your face when I mentioned him!”

He hesitates in answering, and when he looks away from me, I can't take it anymore. I shake my head, pass him, and walk away. I take the road we took to get here from the hotel in hopes of not getting lost.

“Jade.” He calls to me in a listless voice.

“Jade my ass, leave me alone. You don't want me to be with you, but you don't want me to go with anyone else. Make peace with yourself and then talk to me!” He has to stop playing these games. I'm not willing to go any further. He keeps saying he doesn't want anything from me and then freaks out if anyone comes near.

I am furious and the more I think about what has just happened, the more the blood rises in my ears. We walk in silence, at a safe distance, each one lost in his own thoughts.

When we get to the hotel, I unfortunately have to share the lift with him.

“Jade, I...” he starts as soon as the metal doors close.

“Don’t say anything, you’ve already said and done enough.” My eyes sting from the tears I can’t bring down. Why do I keep banging my head against them? Why?

“Please look at me.” I don’t, I can’t. He squares off in front of me, but I push him away. I don’t want him to come any closer. He curses to himself as he tries to pin me to the wall, but the doors open and I slip out to lock myself in the room, slamming the door behind me.

I stay with my back against the wood and let the tears fall unrestrained. I don’t want to stop them, because if I did, I might die.

“Jade, let me in.” I don’t answer. I slide to the floor, cowering like a spoiled child. “Please clarify.”

“Go away.” Why have I started to feel interested in him? Why don’t I just give up and stop? Why do I want him? A knock on the door makes me shake.

“Alright, I get it. When you decide to clear the air, you know where to find me.” Immediately he slams the door to his room violently causing my heart to sink into the void.

I sob like a child who has been denied a toy. This is not me. I would never cry over rejection; I would never go further if the person concerned has no involvement with me. Yet, it’s different with him.

Hell, why do I have a crush on him?

I close my eyes and try to resign myself, to dampen this stupid feeling that is growing more and more.

Giada would fight, Giada would take what she wants. Or, if that wasn’t possible, she’d have her say without running

away like I did now.

You are Giada and not Jade. Jade is making a fool out of you don't you realise that?

I raise my head and take a deep breath. Even if I want to change my life, I can't uproot my nature. The whole 'you're my employee' thing has broken my balls. I get up and, determined to put an end to this situation, head for his room. When I raise my hand to knock, however, I freeze.

Why am I hesitating? What is wrong with me?

I need to clarify, tell him that I want him and that if he doesn't want me, he needs to stop playing with me and making up lame excuses. We have to talk about it and consider what to do. We can't go on like this. We are adults and we have to take matters into our own hands.

With determination I open the door and enter with a confident step. I am surprised not to find him. I thought he would be on the bed with his elbows on his knees but instead... A slight panic assails me.

I make too many mental films. What if he's gone?

The sound of water makes me turn towards the bathroom. Bingo.

I act. I reach for it. I open the door and my breath catches in my throat. The scene before my eyes is exactly the same as the one I have been dreaming about for days. My brain melts at the sight of Kristòs in the shower cubicle with one arm against the wall and his head bowed, naked. His muscular back and firm bottom are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

I open the glass door and close it behind me. I don't know if he heard me or if he's ignoring me on purpose.

“Kristòs,” I whisper.

“Jade” he sighs without moving. “What do you want now?”

“To clarify.”

“Does this feel like the right time?”

“Yes.”

“Please leave,” he murmurs almost desperately. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow, I can’t right now.”

“No. I won’t get out of here until you tell me by looking me in the eye. I demand your eyes in mine as you tell me you don’t want me. Even if I wasn’t your employee, even if I was a one-night stand and not Ele’s friend.” Water runs down his back, making me envy those droplets that can touch him. “You tell me what to do, because I can’t get you out of my head.”

“Damn it, Jade. Get out!” He bangs his fist on the tiles in front of him. “This is not a good time to talk.” His breathing is laboured, his shoulders rising and falling quickly. I place my hand on his back in a vain attempt to calm him.

“I’m not going to...”

“Do you understand that I can’t because then I’ll regret it?”

He is exasperated, I can feel it in his body that is shaking under my hand. I’ve brought him to this point, trembling in front of me, getting nervous at my insistence.

Perhaps I have gone too far and crossed the line. But why is it that when a man strongly desires a woman and she does not want to, he can drive her to exasperation until she gives in, and the opposite seems a crime?

A small step forward is all it takes to rest my forehead on his back. I don't want to overdo it; I think I've done enough already.

“Sorry for my insistence, it's just that when I'm around you my brain goes crazy. I don't know why I feel the need to feel you, to have you, to...” He grabs my arm pulling me in front of him trapping me against the wall. He pounces on my lips. A kiss that tastes of victory, desire, exasperation, defeat, and resignation.

He crushes me against the wall, thrusts his tongue into my mouth greedily. He pulls off my dress with a simple gesture and whimpers when he notices I'm not wearing underwear. He crawls his hands over my breasts and squeezes them lightly. We breathe in each other's air and it's the most exciting thing I've ever experienced in my entire life.

HE DOESN'T HOLD BACK; he gives free rein to his desire for me. He sucks my breasts, kisses my side where there is still some bruising from the accident until he does what I would never have imagined. He kneels in front of me and kisses my private parts, giving them most of his attention. He manages to make me lose control and I don't want to. I bang my head against the tiles holding my breath. I bring my hands over him, threading my fingers through his soft hair. I squeeze it and then pull it back, urging him to return his mouth to mine. As soon as he stands up, he grabs my hair, pulling it so hard that I throw my head back to give him free access to my neck on which he pounces.

“Tell me you're on the pill,” he whispers against my wet skin.

“No,” I gasp squeezing his buttock and pulling him to me. His arousal presses against my pubes.

“Are you a virgin?” he asks leaving a trail of kisses on my chin.

“No!” Suddenly he stops and points his eyes into mine, waiting for I’m not sure what. He seems to be bewildered by my answers, as if the two cannot coincide. I reach out to him and flush lips whisper something that I hope doesn’t ruin this wonderful moment. “Daddy.” I leave a tender kiss on his soft mouth and nibble on it.

“Another game of you youngsters?” he whispers in such a low key way that it makes my legs tighten.

“This is my game,” I reply. “You want to play with me?” Kristòs smiles mischievously and walks up to my face to leave a tender kiss on the tip of my nose. I’m afraid to hear a no in response, to be kicked out of the shower with a well-aimed kick. I’m afraid of losing my dignity at this very moment.

“So, you’d be my baby,” he whispers pulling away from me. I nod sensing the void between us. With a decisive gesture he closes the tap, grabs my hand intertwining our fingers and gently guides me out of the shower back into the room and stops in front of the bed. He leaves a kiss on my lips, smiles, and moves away to search the pockets of his trousers. He pulls out his wallet and immediately has a condom in his hand. He throws down what he is not interested in and pulls me in front of him, frames my face with his hands and kisses me. Greedy, pretentious, and carnal. I feel insecure and strangely afraid. I’ve been swaggering until a few moments ago, and now that we’re in front of each other, naked as mother made us, I fear I’m unsuitable for him.

The transport with which he swirls his tongue in my mouth is truly unique. He nibbles at my lips, sucks on them, pulls them between his teeth and manages to suck the air out of me. He seems to want to devour me. He seems to want me. Full stop.

“You’re my baby,” he repeats as he catches his breath. “You are.” He leans down, bringing his hands under my ass. “The.” He lifts me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist. “Mine.” He climbs onto the bed and crawls to get to the middle. “Baby.” Finally, he lays me gently on the mattress. He returns to kissing me greedily, and with each movement of his pelvis, I feel his growing erection teasing my intimacy.

I caress his muscular back, taste every patch of skin, and then slide down to his firm ass and cup it in my palms. He takes over and grabs my hands, bringing them above my head and intertwining our fingers before torturing my neck. He sucks, biting my skin then blowing on it.

“Say it,” he murmurs rubbing his face in the crook of my neck making me helpless and irrational. “Call me by that nickname again.” I smile at the transport with which he asks. I’ve always dreamed of using it and being able to do it for the first time with him is the most exciting thing ever.

“Daddy,” I huff a few inches from his ear, “You are.” I move my pelvis toward him making our intimacies collide. “The.” I arch my back. “Mine.” I squeeze my legs together to draw him even more to me. “Daddy.” I leave a bite on his shoulder. He grunts, returning the gesture. His heavy breathing turns me on even more.

As soon as he lets go of my hands I take the opportunity to caress his side and creep between us. Finally, I manage to grab his member and massage it.

We swallow almost in unison and a light giggle fills the room. I take advantage of his momentary distraction and run the length of it, making him quiver. He becomes serious again and holds his breath. I tighten my grip slightly and he closes his eyes, letting his head fall onto my shoulder where he deposits a few tender kisses until he lets go completely.

It all happens in an instant. He lifts up and, as I continue to touch him, unwraps the condom. As soon as it's ready, I let him unroll it over his erection.

I quiver in anticipation, but instead of leaning over me again he pauses to admire my body. His eyes burn into my skin. I feel them on every inch of me, and the more he watches me, the more I catch fire from the immense desire I have for him. Desire and fear. Fear and desire, all in one instant. That's what's going to my head, that's what's making my muscles contract and I can't be as calm as I'd like. I'm still afraid that, after we've come this far, he'll change his mind.

He moves his hand up my body, caressing me like I'm precious. He runs down my thigh and up my side. He rests his hand on my breasts, massaging them in a way that calms me down a little. When he moves, he grabs my hand and pulls me astride him.

I caress his head, his hair wet and wild, his face calm. I leave tender kisses on his face, until I stop in front of his lips, which I don't kiss, just brush.

“Are you my baby?” he whispers trapping my face in his hands. His eyes full of ardour are the most beautiful thing in the world.

“I'm your baby, Daddy.”

His soft hands wrap around my back, and with foreheads together, I slowly slide him into me.

My vision blurs from too much pleasure and my breath catches in my throat. I am amazed to see that his lips open as well and his breath fades. I smile at the sense of fulfilment I'm feeling as I feel his flesh inside me.

“You're so breathtakingly tight.” Lucky him that he can talk, I'm still brain-dead. I nod and start breathing shallowly because otherwise I risk ending our first time here.

I rest my forehead on his shoulder and try to pull myself together. I've never felt anything like this, never been out of breath to this point.

“Hey. You okay?” he whispers in my ear. His voice soothes me, giving me the strength to continue.

I nod and, with my forehead resting on his shoulder, I start to move. I rise and fall, savouring every little sensation this gesture causes me. I rise and fall, and his muscular arms encircle me tighter, accompanying me in my movements.

I pick up a steady rhythm as he squeezes me so hard it hurts. Suddenly he rises up on his knees and, holding me tightly, throws himself on the bed, trapping me between himself and the mattress. Now he is the one pushing into me, he is the one making me feel how much he wants me. I feel him all over, deep in my bowels, giving me a feeling of total satisfaction. He pushes hard, wanting to feel something that only the sexual act can satisfy.

“Don't come,” I try to say with my lips resting on his shoulder. I hope he understood even though the voice came out as a whisper

“What? Why?” he asks stopping and pointing his magnificent eyes into mine. I squeeze him tighter.

“Don’t worry about it. You warn me.” He tries to retort but I shush him with a kiss. “Just let go and trust me, Daddy.” Immediately I tighten my pelvic muscles causing him to widen his eyes slightly. “You come for me though,” he whispers giving me a thrust that makes me lose my breath. It only takes a few strokes for me to touch the sky with one finger and he chuckles when I curse using his name. He deserves it all.

“Baby, I’m going to cum,” he gasps. I have just enough time to get him off me and slip the condom off. I stroke him, squeezing him in my hand and his eyes close, his head bending back. He lets me do it without holding back moans of pleasure. Seeing him like this is wonderful.

“Come for me, Daddy.” And as I say it, I feel his penis grow even bigger. He brings his hands to my shoulders and follows my movements. I run faster and faster down his length until a squirt hits my belly. His face contorts in pleasure and more squirts soak me until Kris subsides.

I’m pleased with my headbutt, proud to have been an accomplice in his enjoyment.

He curses using my own words, the ones he forbade me to utter, and returns to me.

He blinks, perhaps to focus on me as he catches his breath. I bring my face close to his chest and leave a trail of wet, gentle kisses up to his neck. I embrace him and pull him on top of me to devote myself to his lips. He doesn’t disdain, doesn’t retort, and lets me cuddle him after draining himself of any strength, stress, anxiety or whatever else made him so grumpy.

“That was great,” he says looking into my eyes. “That little thing at the end then...” He kisses me softly on the corner of my mouth and then moves on to torture my neck.

“All thanks to the Kegel exercises.”

“I hope I feel it again.” I smile and take a big breath. “Are you tired?”

“You?”

“Not at all.” He leaves me with a kiss and gets up, leaving me alone on the bed, exposed. I close my eyes and sigh to relax. I hear him open the bedside drawer and fumble with something. Then the mattress moves and a kiss on my inner thigh makes me gasp. I smile at the pleasure he can give me and reach for his head when he sinks his face into my intimacy. He licks, sucks and nibbles at my hot flesh. He is simply divine.

“Jesus Christ,” I curse lost in pleasure.

One kiss at a time he moves up my belly until he reaches my lips. He places one hand on my throat and with the other grabs my hair, pulling it so hard I tilt my head to the side.

“You swore using my name again,” he whispers angrily. In his eyes, though, there’s only desire.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. I’ve been naughty, but I beg you not to stop doing what you’re doing.” The hand that was previously on my throat moves to my breast.

“You’re begging me?” he smiles victoriously as I nod mischievously. I wrinkle my brow as he gets up on his knees and with a quick move turns me onto my stomach. He unwraps a new condom and then goes back to rubbing his erection on my slit until he enters me making me feel his full

length. Again. He rests one hand on my hip and with the other pulls at my hair.

He pushes hard and it's turning me on like crazy. The umpteenth stroke makes me let out a little cry that makes him slow down. He leans on my back, kissing it gently, apologizing if by any chance he was too rough.

“Kristòs, I'm going to cum if you keep this up.” I try to hold my breath to dampen the pleasure. I want him to come with me.

“That is what I desire. Come for me, my baby.” Emptying my lungs, I scoot my butt back to take him in deeper and let go. He collapses on top of me after a few thrusts, exhausted and out of breath. He slips out and moves to the side.

When I turn around his eyes are on mine.

“You're beautiful even with your hair messed up.” He walks over and kisses my bare shoulder.

I hope this isn't yet another sex dream of me with Kristòs because I'd freak out.

“You are wonderful.” As I lean in to return the kiss. I stop inches from his lips. “Tell me you're real.”

He strokes my face with his hand, pulling my hair back.

“Tell me you're real,” he repeats, resetting the distance.

We kiss for a few more moments before snuggling into the soft sheets.

“Good night, Daddy.”

“Good night, baby.”

Chapter 15



I open my eyes reluctantly, afraid that I was dreaming. I don't know what time it is; I only know that this bed is really comfortable. I try to move but something prevents me. I lift the sheet and, besides remembering that I am naked, I notice an arm resting on my side. I smile when I see the tattooed cross that I like so much.

So, it's all true, it wasn't a dream.

Suddenly the hand moves, greeting me. I laugh and try to turn to embrace him, but he anticipates me and glues me to himself. He caresses my body, starting from my belly and then going up to touch my nipple. He plays with it until he traps it between his thumb and forefinger for a few seconds, before abandoning it and slipping his hand between my legs.

He pokes his face into the crook of my neck, leaving tender kisses there.

If it's a good morning, then it's going to be a beautiful day.

“Good morning, Daddy,” I whisper. I've never been able to wake up like this before and I have to say it's really wonderful.

“Good morning to you, my baby.” He reaches out to me until our lips are joined in a kiss that isn't even chaste by name. He can't seem to get enough. As soon as he dares to

pull away, I groan, trying to hold him back for a few more cuddles.

“Jade, we have to go to the convention in two hours,” he informs me. I let him win the fight and watch as he sits up, turns his back to me and puts his feet off the bed. I caress his bare back, feeling every sculpted muscle. Even this small gesture makes my desire for him grow.

“I have another proposition.” I join him, hugging him from behind. I rest my chin on his shoulder as my hands travel down his chest, slowly descending to his abdomen until they stop between his legs. He holds his breath as I play with his member. I leave wet kisses on his neck, teasing him into yielding to my caresses. “Let’s stay here, naked, having fun again and again.”

“Although I’d love to indulge your constant cravings, we can’t.” He pulls my hand away from his member leaving me unsatisfied. He gets out of bed, naked and unashamed, grabs the room phone and calls room service. He orders some food I don’t know and hangs up. Immediately he heads for the bathroom.

“Hey, where are you going? I’m right here.” I slump over myself in discouragement at this change in his behaviour.

“To take a shower,” he shouts closing the door with more force than usual. No way, are we going to be back to square one?

“Can I do it with you?” I venture. I bite my bottom lip in hopes of dampening the anxiety that’s rising in me. What if he tells me to fuck off? What if he tells me to go to the other bathroom and stop buzzing around him? That everything that has been between us will never happen again?

The door opens, revealing the wonderful man that is Kristòs in all his majesty. I hold my breath because this is the reaction he deserves. He smiles a little, finding me in a funny position. When he points his brown eyes at mine the smile becomes mischievous.

“I don’t know what you’re waiting for.” The dimples at the sides of his mouth are so pronounced it makes him really soft. He looks different, maybe what happened yesterday has done him some good. With a leap I get off the bed and, like a little soldier, I stop in front of him, he who doesn’t stop smiling at me. I wait for him to let me in and spend and to the few hours we have left before the conference.

He keeps looking at me, amazed at the way I snap whenever it comes to making love. It must seem strange to him that I want it all the time, and yet I do.

“We’re out of condoms,” he whispers before I can say anything.

“I know how to drive you crazy without them” I reply looking up at him from under my lashes. He swallows and bites his lip.

“I’ll have to order some more.”

“Better the double pack or rather, the biggest one there is, thank you.”

Kristòs sighs a smug giggle and shakes his head before throwing the door open wide to let me through. Only I can’t get in without teasing him. I lean towards him and leave a kiss on the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you, Daddy,” I whisper through my skin. I still don’t know if what I feel for him is love or just physical attraction. Maybe it’s the allure of the forbidden or the mature

man. To be honest I don't care, I only know that when we are together, I don't think about anything, not even the problems I left behind in Italy. He is my anchor; he is my happiness.

I would like to tell him all these things, but for now I just want to be with him and continue to do what we are doing without thinking about anything else. Kristòs turns his head just enough to put his lips on mine and kiss me gently at first, then more and more voraciously, as if my mouth were the most delicious thing in the world. He glues himself to me, grabs my bottom and lifts me up. I cross my legs behind his back, and, with his usual leisurely walk, he makes his way to the shower stall. He opens it and gets in without ever stopping kissing me. When he rests his forehead on mine his eyes say more than a thousand words, but the lust is as predominant as it is in me. I push my tongue into his mouth, not caring about anything, and suddenly it seems that this gesture has flipped an invisible switch, because Kristòs turns on and the kiss becomes a postscript to the pleasure he has given me in the night.

We are hands that move eagerly along every inch of our heated bodies. We are twisted tongues and interlocked bodies.

"You're so wonderful," he sighs as he pulls away from me. He bites his bottom lip and stares at my body like it's a cream puff. "Are you here for me?"

I can't tell if that's a question or a statement.

"I'm here for you," I whisper in response, but he doesn't move, doesn't continue what we were doing. I wrinkle my forehead when he brings his hand to his mouth and shakes his head slightly, murmuring inaudible "No."

No what? What's wrong with him?

He moves his hand to his head and pulls at his hair, admonishing himself for what he's doing.

"Kristòs," I begin, but I immediately freeze as he points his eyes into mine. He seems afraid of something I can't explain. "You're scaring me," I whisper, covering my breasts with my hands. He closes his eyes and shakes his head and then stares at the ceiling. With fear in my heart, I place my hand on his chest in an attempt to calm him down. I remain silent for a few seconds, waiting to hear his heartbeat at a more regular pace.

"Look at me," I urge him. He shakes his head in denial. "Please, look at me. I'm here for you." He sighs, nothing more. I frame his face and caress him. He finally lowers his head, letting me get close enough to be able to bring our foreheads together.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me," he explains in a hushed voice. He points his eyes into mine and gives me a shy smile. "Thanks for not running away." He strokes my face with his thumb. He draws the contours, brushes my lips, and smiles sincerely and spontaneously at me.

I give him a sweet kiss and let him continue.

"What time does the conference start?"

Kristòs moves away from me to turn on the tap and direct the spray at us. He grabs the shampoo and gently runs his hands through my hair and starts soaping it. There is no expression on his face, neither anger nor happiness. He doesn't look at me as he thoughtfully massages the skin and rubs the ends. He doesn't even do that when he rubs my neck, my shoulders, my breasts, lingering on my tattoo, my belly and then my belly, where he spreads his hand until he covers it all.

What the hell is wrong with him? Why is he behaving like this?

I interrupt this strange moment by stepping forward and imitating his movements. He comes to his senses, finally locking his eyes with mine. I trace his muscular shoulders, his arms, his chest. Kristòs leans towards me to leave a tender kiss on my lips.

We hurriedly rinse off and get out of the shower without speaking. He grabs a towel for himself and then grabs another one wrapping me tightly.

This man is bloody sensual even as he rubs his hair.

I look at him in amazement, wondering about the reason for the strange outburst that I can't define. Has he repented? Did he have a blackout moment?

"Hey, stop looking at me like that." His voice comes softly to my ears. I close my eyes for a moment, massaging my temples. It's as if everything around me is racing and the two of us are the only ones moving at a normal pace. When I open them again Kristòs is in front of the mirror, watching me through his reflection. I walk over to him and, while drying my hair, I look at our image.

"Anyway, answering your question, the convention starts at 10."

He moves behind me and wraps his arms around me, sinking his face into the crook of my neck.

"You smell like my body wash," he says. I decide to turn around and throw myself into his arms for him to pamper me but as soon as I do, he grabs me, makes me sit on the sink and spreads my legs apart positioning himself between them.

"Are you mad at me for what happened in the shower?"

I have to make an immense effort not to sob. I'm having an unprecedented emotional breakdown. I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say. I simply don't know how to deal with him, how to take it. Maybe I should express everything I feel, everything I think, but as soon as I open my mouth, he kisses me. He moves the towel away and slides his hand between my thighs.

"This is the most beautiful place in the world," he says as he rubs his fingertips over my slit and then penetrates me. He twirls his fingers, pulls out and then inserts them quickly making me hold my breath. I close my eyes from the pleasure he's giving me, completely emptying my mind. It's amazing, stupendous, satisfying.

"I'd love to, but..." He pulls out of me, making my eyes go wide. "Unfortunately, we have a conference we have to attend, so we can't keep having fun."

And I remain unsatisfied as he brings his fingers to his lips to suck on them.

I mentally curse him and grab his wrist to incite him to continue. I don't like this quirk of leaving things half done, I want it to end.

"That's not how you do it." You can't have a meltdown and act like nothing happened, you can't scare someone and distract them from the topic.

"Come on, baby. Let's go eat breakfast." He holds out his hand, but I don't go along with him. I'm not going to let him think that this strange choice of his not to complete something as important as my pleasure is unimportant. With a mischievous smirk he reaches over, places his hands on my face and leaves a small kiss on my lips.

“That’s not how it’s done,” I repeat sullenly for everything. For everything that’s happened since we opened our eyes until now.

“We need to eat breakfast.”

“You’re an asshole” I murmur against his lips.

“I love you,” he continues, holding my head up. He wraps his arm around my waist and gets me off the floor.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a huge asshole?” I’m offended and I want him to know it. I’m sad and I want him to know, I’m so many things and I want him to know them all. Instead of playing this little game, he could finish what he started.

Kristòs brings his hands to the knot that closes the towel and, with a simple gesture, unties it, making it fall to the ground leaving me naked in front of him. He steps back and continues to look at me, biting his lips, as if he is enjoying the show I am offering him.

“I know, my sweet little Jade. You should know I like to hear that though,” he replies before turning away. I catch up to him and return the favour. I grab his towel and remove it. I smile in satisfaction. Watching him naked in front of me, just for me, is priceless. I bite my lip, pointing my eyes right there, remembering the pleasure it had given me to have him inside me.

He spreads his arms and spins around himself showing me his B side as well.

This man is a sexpot.

I catch a glimpse of amusement on his face. I turn to look at him from head to toe and something catches my eye, an L-shaped scar that starts in the middle of his chest, goes down to

the middle of his stomach and ends behind his back. I had never noticed it, even though I've had plenty of opportunities to see him naked or in a swimming costume.

Kristòs bends down, grabs the towel and walks out of the bathroom without caring about me who remains there, like an idiot, dumbfounded by his body.

I snort noisily, hoping to get rid of the thoughts that crowd my mind. I grab the towel and go straight to my room, ignoring him. I slam the door and lean my back against it.

Why am I getting so upset? What for? Why didn't he tell me about the scar, the missed orgasm, or the shower scene?

Why am I still thinking about this? What is wrong with me? I got what I wanted and now what?

I sigh and start drying my hair. I have to get ready for this damn convention that will keep us busy all day. I hate conventions of any kind. I hated my father when he went to them because he would be gone for days at a time.

I empty the contents of my backpack on the bed as I try to remember what clothes I brought and figure out which one might fit the occasion. I pick out a tight-fitting, above-the-knee blue linen dress with a slit on the right side; it has a V-shaped neckline decorated with wooden beads.

I don't have the sandals to match though, as the ones that were under the mannequin cost at least three salaries. So, since it's a dress that can be described as not too elegant, I can wear my usual shoes.

Who knows if Kristòs will like me in this outfit? Whether he will accept my touch of eccentricity for combining Converse with a dress. The more I look in the mirror, the more my reflection shows a professional but girlish me; I wear light

make-up using nude colours; a simple daytime make-up, learned from the tutorials Electre follows. I used to wear heavier makeup.

I take a deep breath and leave the room to find Kristòs already sitting at the table, carefully reading something on his tablet.

He's beautiful even when he's absorbed. Well, he is also beautiful when he smiles at the screen and brings his hand to his mouth to disguise his magnificent smile, when he bites his nails and even with his scar to spoil his statuesque physique.

This time he's not wearing his usual jeans under his white shirt, these are ripped, but tight nonetheless. On his feet, sneakers, as if he had done it on purpose.

I want to immortalise this absolute beauty of his by taking a picture of him, so I grab my mobile phone and proceed. He doesn't notice my presence and I'm happy about that. I try not to make any noise, so I look at where I put my feet but, shortly after, I spot the table where there is food for an army.

“Aren't the things you ordered a bit too much?”

“Maybe,” he replies distractedly. I roll my eyes and approach him, slipping the tablet from his hands.

“We'll put this here.” I set it down on the coffee table without looking at what he was reading with such interest. He tries to take it back, but I prevent him from doing so by sitting astride his legs. “You can continue with that later. Now I have a small request.” He brings his hands to my bare thighs and reaches up to touch the elastic band of my panties. “Shall we take a selfie?”

My proposal seems to upset him. He wrinkles his forehead and loosens his grip on my thighs.

“Do you want to show your friends the trophy?” Now I’m the one upset. Does he really believe that? Does he really think he’s my trophy?

“If by friends you mean Electre and Athos, and by trophy you mean the fact that we’re still in one piece and didn’t get slaughtered like they were betting, then yes.” He keeps looking at me, waiting for my face to leak something he can use against me.

He moves his hands to my inner thigh running along the hem of my panties. Even though a shiver runs down my spine and the urge to kiss him is great, I remain impassive.

“What if we kept all this to ourselves? No need to tell the two lovebirds what we’re doing.”

“Would you lie to your best friend?” I circle his neck with my arms. “It’s not nice, it’s not done.”

“Lying, what an ugly word. Let’s just say we don’t need to tell our personal lives,” he whispers into my lips. With a simple gesture he manages to send me out of phase. “A little something between us, just ours, intimate, not to be shared with anyone” he continues teasing my senses. He knows very well that I can’t resist him.

“I’d like a picture as a souvenir though.” I complain pouting like a spoiled child. “I’d be happy to.”

“If it makes you happy, then, let’s take this selfie,” he huffs taking his hands off my thighs to frame my face and bring our lips together. He doesn’t pull me off his lap, or push me away from himself to hide any involvement.

As I reach out to grab my phone, he moves my hair and brushes against the tattoo on the nape of my neck.

“You shouldn’t have to hide it. The tattoo I mean.”

“Kind of like you with yours,” I reply in turn.

“You want to know what I was reading?” he mutters looking away. He looks offended by my words.

“I want to take the picture. Then, if you want...”

“I want” he interrupts me, as if to reiterate that he intends to make me a part of his previous activity.

What if he had found some pictures of me and found out who I am?

Think about it Giada, he would have freaked out. Maybe.

Serious and ready to defend myself should my fear become reality, I unlock my phone and prepare to capture the moment.

“Hey, I wasn’t posing,” he complains amused. A fake pout peeps out of his face, which makes him adorable. I refrain from laughing only because I’m terrified that I’ve been found out and he’s just waiting for the moment to tell me.

“Let’s do another one,” he proposes, flashing a smirk that highlights the dimples on the sides of his mouth. “Want to?” I nod and, more aloof than I’d like, try to smile.

Kristòs brings his face closer to mine with total naturalness and, as I’m about to take the picture, he brings his hand under my chin and makes me turn towards him. He fixes his eyes on mine and whispers the sweetest, sexiest of whispers: “Take the picture. I follow his command, dumbfounded and succumbing to his will. He moves closer, makes our lips brush, and repeats the magical word: “Take it.” I obey without replying; how could I? How could I respond to what I want, to what I like and crave?

“Keep snapping,” he whispers before closing the distance. His tongue tickles my lips to demand access and join mine in a

frantic rush. I keep snapping, I don't even know how many pictures I've taken, I don't even know if I've managed to capture every gesture or if I've framed anything else. Kristòs manages to send me out of phase every time, with every little gesture.

I only stop pressing on the screen when he moves away from me. He bites his lip as if to savour the moment.

“Shoot.” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, drinking in his scent and committing this magnificent moment to memory. He goes back to joining his lips to mine and I snap yet another picture. “Are you so afraid of forgetting me?”

“Who knows what will happen once we get back to Santorini. You might not even want to deal with me anymore, or...”

He doesn't let me finish and shuts me up with yet another kiss. If he wanted to give me the coup de grace, he has succeeded in a big way.

“Let's enjoy these days in Athens, we'll think about Santorini later.”

His reasoning might not make a dent if the future didn't scare me. I don't know why, but I can't imagine myself without him, without his kisses and caresses. I'm well aware that we've grown closer tonight, but it's like he's the one, like my heart beats only for him. Imagining that this could all end takes my breath away.

I nod and print a fake happy smile on my face. I bring the phone between us and check the myriad photos I have taken and find, to my delight, that they are all beautiful.

Kristòs puts his arm around my back and reaches up to my neck, distracting me. With his index finger he strokes my

tattoo as if attracted to it.

“It’s the symbol of Samsara,” I say, continuing to look at the screen on my phone. He doesn’t answer so I turn away. He doesn’t notice right away that I’m staring at him, but when he does, his eyes seem to search for answers.

“The tattoo. It’s the symbol of Samsara,” I repeat. He continues to watch me without a word until he moves me forward and reaches across the coffee table, grabbing the tablet. Lifting his leg slightly, he manages to settle me as if to cradle me and brings the screen in front of us. He types in the unlock password and shows me the search page he left open. Dread returns to me as he starts typing something. It’s only when I realise, he’s searching for the meaning of my tattoo that I calm down.

“It is not of one religion, but of four, and is about the cycle of life, death and rebirth. That’s why you’d never find it among religious symbols,” I explain in a whisper.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For explaining to me the meaning of your tattoo” I smile at his naivety.

“I only told you what it represents, not what it means to me. I’m of the opinion that when you get one, there has to be a ‘why’ firmly rooted in your heart. It can’t just be a whim,” I reveal shrugging my shoulders. I reach out my hand to his forearm where the full cross stands out and caress it. I want to ask him how he got this symbol tattooed, but I don’t.

“When will my dress arrive for tonight? If I’m not mistaken, you demanded it be delivered this morning.” Kristòs nods but looks thoughtless.

“Speaking of the dress, how did you know all that stuff in the boutique?” he asks continuing to look at the screen.

Now what do I answer, I didn't think he was listening.

“Well, because...” I try to find a plausible excuse without telling him anything about my past, but I struggle to find it. I open my mouth again to speak, but I am saved by someone knocking on the door. I take my leave of Kristòs with a small smile, warning him that I will deal with anyone who has dared to interrupt us.

As soon as I pass him, my face reveals all the tension that has built up in these few seconds. I exhale heavily without making myself heard and as soon as I place my hand on the handle, I put a smile on my face.

“Good morning, I have a delivery to make...” The guy in front of me when I open the door to the room freezes as soon as he sees me. In one hand he holds his suit and in the other a paper bag. He widens his eyes and opens his mouth wide, amazed by my presence.

“This is Giada D'Agostino.”

What? How does she recognise me?

“Who? You're making a mistake,” I reply, trying not to let the anxiety that ran over me like a truck in front of his statement show.

“Thank you. You can give it to me.” Kristòs' voice echoes behind me as the boy continues to look at me. I roll my eyes because he ignored my wishes and that irritates the hell out of me. The blue eyes of the guy in front of me are glued to my face, making me more and more uncomfortable.

“Bari, you're from Bari. I follow you on Instagram.”

“No, I’m telling you again, I’m not who you think. My name is...”

Kristòs passes me, grabs the hanger with the dress and the little paper bag. He takes care to hang up the dress and put the rest on the chair. The delivery man keeps his eyes fixed on me, completely ignoring Kristòs who, back at my side, irritated as ever, puts his hand in his pocket and pulls it out, handing it to the boy, who doesn’t understand the gesture.

“Is there a problem?” he asks, but receives no reply. At this point, he takes a step towards the delivery boy, slips something into his pocket and brings his hand to his chin to shut his mouth. “You’re looking at something of mine,” he whispers to him. Only then does the guy come back down to earth and shake his head in denial. “You’re going to have to sweat to deserve a woman like her.” He slaps him lightly on the back of the head and then pushes him away.

“e slams the door in his face and turns to me with an angry look.

“Do you realize that?”

“What? That the poor guy is going to have to sweat to deserve a woman like me?” I tease him.

“That one was looking at you.”

“You’re looking at me too, that’s what you do when you’re talking to a person,” I giggle increasingly amused. Is he being jealous? Seriously?

“Yes, I am looking at you, I can do that. But he, ever since you opened the door, he’s been looking at you in a way... I’m sure he would have loved to have you and that dress is to blame.”

I can’t resist, I burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, but you’re talking crazy nonsense. This dress, compared to last night’s, is about as chaste as a nun’s cassock,” I retort in my defence. He looks furious and I’m starting to find it irritating.

‘Dressed like that you are not coming to the conference. I don’t want others looking at you like that bellboy did.’ He points his finger at me and then moves steps toward his room.

“But...”

“No buts, subject closed.” I glare at him evilly as if it’s going to do any good since he doesn’t even consider me. He leaves the room wearing his jacket without saying anything.

I snort, exhausted by his behaviour. I go to the table and grab a brioche that I devour in a few bites. At least I put something in my stomach before facing Kristòs and his jealousy again.

I grab my mobile phone and dial Electre’s number. While I bring the phone to my ear, I go to my room to get the electronic key and reach Kristòs.

At the other end, no one answers. Maybe it’s too early and Electre is still sleeping.

I’ll call her back later.

Chapter 16



There are many people in the hall, some already have their conference passes around their necks, some have joined small groups, others seem to have known each other all their lives and some simply pretend that all this is useful. I look around for my companion, but he seems to have vanished into thin air. I head towards the hall that will host the event, hoping to find him already seated when my mobile phone starts ringing. It's Kristòs.

"Hello?" I smile as I look around, certain that I will see him somewhere in the room staring at me in amusement.

"Where did you disappear to?" he asks me slightly annoyed.

"I'm in the great hall."

"And how did you manage to get in without a pass?" he is surprised. *"That's okay, do you know how to get back to the hall?"*

"Yes." Does he really think I'm that ditzy? Maybe he's used to the ones he slept with before me.

I walk backwards down the hall trying not to bump into people who are about to take their seats.

“There you are.” His voice makes me turn towards him. It only takes a few steps to reach him, and my mocking heart is dying to be next to him. “I see you listened to me,” he complains pointing at my dress. I shrug in response and smile at him. He extends a hand towards me, which I don’t hesitate to grab, and I comply with his wish to position myself in front of him.

“Do you forgive me first?” With fingers intertwined, he brings his arms behind my back drawing me even closer to him. He’s apologized so many times in the past two days that it seems really strange. “I don’t know what came over me.” I lift my face to the ceiling pretending to think about it. Kristòs takes advantage of my position to kiss my chin and then move down towards my neck.

“Sorry,” he repeats with each kiss. I mumble in response, unsure if I should enjoy this apology of his or take more from him.

“We’re going to be late,” I whisper to free myself from his grip, but nothing. He only releases one hand. Then he pulls away slightly, just enough to point his eyes into mine. He smiles mischievously and something cold touches my cheek. In astonishment, I turn my head, my mouth hanging open.

“Do you forgive me?” he asks while waving a packet of gummy bears in front of me.

How can I be angry with him? More importantly, why would I be?

“I only forgive you for bringing me this,” I exclaim as I attempt to grab my present, but he promptly pulls his hand away preventing me from doing so. “Come on, I want the bears. You can’t just show them to me and not give them to me.”

“I want a kiss first.” I puff out an amused giggle and, impatiently, give him a kiss in the mouth. He nods, smiles, and tries to bring our lips together, but this time it’s me who escapes and reaches for the packet. Unfortunately, he manages to avoid me.

Reassured by my stubbornness, he releases his grip on me and motions for us to move.

“What about my bears?” I won’t move until he hands me the bag. “They’re for me and so I want them.”

“Are you throwing a tantrum? I remind you we have a convention to attend.” Of course he did. If he hadn’t shown them to me, I wouldn’t be doing this. He holds out his hand to incite me to follow him, but I don’t. I remain firmly in place. “Oh my goodness,” he mutters rolling his eyes. He leans in to get closer to my ear. “If you’re good, I’ll get you more... lots more.”

“As many as to fill a bathtub?” I challenge him. I won’t budge for smaller amounts.

“Let’s not go overboard,” he mutters with a crooked mouth. “Somewhere in between.” Contrary to what he hopes, I hold out my other hand inciting him to hand over the sweets.

Shocked by my gesture he finally humours me. He looks away just to pretend to be annoyed. Now, with the happiness that is invading my heart, I jump on him and fill him with kisses. Even though everyone is watching, and his embarrassment can be seen from a mile away, I grab his chin, turn him towards me and kiss him.

Maybe I’m crazy about him, maybe what I feel when he’s around has that effect on me, I don’t know. I want to show him that I’m happy and I don’t care about the rest.

Kristòs indulges me for a few moments, then complains about this intrusiveness and pulls me away to let me down.

“You’re crazy.”

“Yes, crazy about these bears.”

After getting our passes we look for a place in the hall and find it at the table in the front row. From Kristòs’ muttering, I deduce that it’s my fault that we have to sit there.

“What exactly are they going to talk about?” I grab the folder in front of me, provided by the organisers for taking notes, and try to figure it out.

“How to develop small businesses and how to deal with the period of crisis that has hit us.” He says the same thing I have just read on the header of the paper inside the folder. I take advantage of the few minutes we have left before the start to open the packet of gummy bears. Regardless of the others, I perform the usual ritual. I tear off the plastic, smell the contents and eat a bear. I taste it as if it were the best thing in the world. Immediately afterwards, I grab the little bottle of water provided and try to open it, but I can’t. Kristòs snatches me from the hands of the others. Kristòs snatches the bottle out of my hands and opens it, handing it to me soon after.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t overdo it.”

“In a few minutes we’ll start the conference, participants are requested to take their seats and turn off their mobile phones or, if unable to do so, at least silence them.” The speaker’s voice makes us turn towards the stage.

“Are you sure you want to endure hours of complaining about how the government is putting us out of business?”

I smile, shrugging my shoulders. I'm not going to give it to them. I reach out and pour water into the glass, filling it to the brim. Under the doubtful gaze and waiting for an answer from Kristòs, I quench my thirst by finishing all the water I had poured.

“Don't you dare ask me to go to the bathroom.”

“Don't worry,” I retort annoyed. “I have a capacious bladder and a truly amazing resistance to the urge to pee.” He rolls his eyes and mutters something unintelligible before turning to look at the stage, where two men in suits are setting up the projector while a woman in a beige suit sets up the microphone and other things I can't see.

We are alone at the table, but at the one on my right there is a really funny gentleman who keeps giving me mischievous looks.

“Good morning, everyone, we're delighted that so many of you are attending the first conference on small business.” A man in his fifties, with grey hair and typical Greek features, takes the floor. “The conference will be divided into two steps: in the first one, we will listen to Dr. Papodopoulos from the Small Entrepreneurs Association who will talk about the new financial manoeuvres conceived by the government in favour of small and young enterprises. Then, Dr. Dukas will take the floor to illustrate, through slides, the market trend in recent years. At 1.00 p.m. there will be a break that will last until 2.30 p.m., with a buffet lunch. From 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., accountant Dellis and I will take the floor and talk to you about contracts for employees and benefits for those who hire on an open-ended basis. Well let's give the floor to Dr Papodopoulos.”

Although not everything presented interests me, I find the subject interesting. After all, I have a degree in administration, finance, and marketing. That might come in handy.

As the speaker speaks, I grab the pen and tangle it in my hair, using it as a wand. I moisten my lips and lift my skirt just enough to allow me to cross my legs. I turn to the gentleman at my side, just out of curiosity, and to my amazement I find him staring at my legs. I smile in amusement at his interest before a hand lands on my thigh. I turn to the owner and give him a mischievous look.

Does he think he's won? He's sorely mistaken.

I loosen my overlap to cross my other leg again, trapping his hand between my thighs. He tries to remove it, but I tighten my grip even more and, with a quick gesture, cover the whole thing with my skirt. He widens his eyes as I turn to look at the stage and pretend to care about what the speakers are saying.

"Let me go," he whispers.

"I don't think so." I rest my elbows on the table to cover more of what's going on.

"You asked for it." Kristòs tightens his grip on my thigh causing me pain. I resist, it won't be a squeeze that will break me. He snorts in amusement as he loosens his grip and starts to move his hand upwards.

"You know..." he inhales, "I think this dress is very comfortable, especially for doing this." As he says this, he touches my intimacy through my panties with his middle finger.

I immediately grab his arm to stop him.

"You're playing unfairly," I declare, bowing my head.

“You started it.” I look at him pleadingly. I like to feel his hand on my skin, and the occasion meant that flap of skin was on my thigh, but I didn’t want to go that far.

Kristòs doesn’t stop moving his finger and, apparently, his enjoyment grows with every passing second. Trying to resist, I close my eyes and swallow.

“Release my hand Jade, or I continue.” Resigned, I loosen my grip. “That’s my girl,” he whispers. He shifts his position in the chair, grabs his pen, and starts writing something on the paper. Something incomprehensible.

My God, he writes terribly.

Without any other distractions I can follow what is being said. I find the arguments really good and very intuitive even if they are presented in a boring way, so much so that my attention is waning.

I should have listened to Kristòs and stayed in the room doing nothing.

I look away for a moment, just to rest my eyes and check on Kris, who I’m enchanted to stare at. I watch carefully so as not to miss a single word Dr Papodopoulos is saying. Beautiful as the sun, so beautiful that it seems drawn. Maybe, in fact I’m sure of it, he’s the most beautiful man in the world. And he’s all mine.

I would spend hours looking at him, because I’m sure I wouldn’t get tired of it. Unlike this conference.

Kristòs bends down to pick up something from the ground and my attention is caught by the man at his side. I smile because he has a really funny feature.

“Pst.” I try to get my companion’s attention to share in my discovery.

“Shh.” He cuts off all my attempts to divulge the discovery. I bite my lip and an idea pops into my head. I grab my phone and text him. In this world he won’t be able to ignore me and shut me up.

“Hey, look at the nose of the guy sitting to your left,
he looks like Mr. Potato Head from Toy Story.”

AS SOON AS Kristòs grabs his phone and reads, he looks up, turns in the direction I pointed and coughs to cover his laughter.

“Candy?” I offer him a gummy bear to justify my smile.

“Stop it.”

“What did I do now?” He seems to get annoyed at something I don’t understand.

“Shh.” This time the one scolding us is the gentleman on my right, the very one who was looking at my legs earlier. I take the liberty of giving him a dirty look, since we won’t see each other again after the conference.

I pout, lean back in my chair and stare ahead. Then I grab my mobile phone again and go back to sending a message to Kristòs.

“Do you see what you’ve done?”

You got us reprimanded.”

I SCOLD HIM AS WELL; I have nothing to lose anyway. As soon as I hear the slight vibrating of his mobile phone, a proud smile prints itself on my face. All this texting is fun and really intriguing.

Curious, I turn my attention to Kristòs who, to my amazement, is staring at me in an annoyed way. He looks away only to type a quick reply and put his iPhone back on the table in front of him. He doesn't turn around anymore, ignoring me completely.

My phone lights up, revealing the arrival of a notification.

“YOU'RE RIGHT, it's the same shape.

Just be careful now.”

JUST AS I FINISH READING, I get another message from him with a gif of Mr. Potato Head from the Toy Story cartoon. I snort in amusement as I settle back in my chair. I can't wait for this to be over so I can take a walk around Athens.

As if by magic, the speaker takes his leave and passes the floor to Dr. Dukans who introduces her topic, explaining it through slides. She presents it in a much more cheerful manner than her colleague.

“Kristòs,” I hiss, moving towards him. “I have to pee.”

“You didn't have to drink all that water,” he whispers in an annoyed tone.

“Can I get up or do I have to ask permission like in school?”

“You keep it till the end.”

“Well, I hope my speech was comprehensive and useful for your activities. If you have any questions...” I don’t let this opportunity pass me by and raise my hand. Even though Kristòs tries to block me by grabbing me by the other arm and pulling me to himself in the vain hope of managing to avoid being noticed by the doctor.

“Doctor sorry, could I...” Kristòs covers his face with his hand to avoid being recognised. The speaker’s attention is on me, and I’m in no hurry to relieve my neighbour of his embarrassment. I tell her one of the questions I found in the exam at the university and wait to hear her point of view.

In the meantime, Kristòs returns to his composure. He sighs with relief while remaining tense.

“Miss, allow me to congratulate you on your question,” the doctor interjects. Immediately afterwards she starts to answer in full and I agree with her thoughts. She gives her opinions to all those present, who will certainly be able to make good use of them.

“If there hadn’t been so many witnesses, I would have spanked you at the exact moment you raised your hand.” Kris’s revelation chills me. When he turns to me, his gaze is even grim. I swallow slightly, afraid of his sudden change in mood. I don’t think I’ve done anything bad enough to deserve a scolding or, as he says, a spanking.

“Nothing detracts from the fact that I still have to pee,” I reply ruefully, crossing my arms over my chest. If he’s annoyed that I gave him a scare, I’m annoyed at the way he spoke to me.

“Does anyone else have any questions for me?” the lecturer asks.

“Aren’t you going to raise your hand?” hisses Kristòs making me testy.

“Should I? Maybe this time I’ll ask you where the bathroom is instead of asking a sensible and coherent question, showing that in addition to this” I point to my body, “there’s also this” I tap my index finger on my temple.

“Well then, I’ll see you this afternoon for the second part of the conference. Be sure not to be late. Enjoy your lunch, everyone.” I grab the mobile phone I had laid on the table and stand up.

“Jade...”

“Kristòs.” I interrupt him. “I’m going to the bathroom because I can’t resist. Can I or am I forbidden to do that too?”

“Why are you suddenly so annoying?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. If it bothers you to stay here, you can safely go back to the room and wait there for dinner time.” Now his attention is on stupid ideograms. He pokes at them as if they were the most important thing right now. “That is, if I don’t change my mind about going with you to the dance.”

“I just asked a question I was interested in the answer to. I don’t see where the problem is,” I attack him.

“The problem is in making me think you wanted to ask something else. You played me.”

I shake my head finding this situation absurd. We’re fighting over something stupid.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom, I’ll meet you in front of the restaurant.” And I leave him there, wallowing in his pathetic anger.

I stride down the hall to the corridor. I am aware that I have received stares from the men present and I honestly don’t care. I turn left and bump into someone. I apologise immediately, hoping that I haven’t caused any irrecoverable trouble. Kristòs would never forgive me.

“It’s OK, are you OK?” The voice of the gentleman I bumped into is amused, thoughtful and with a familiar something.

“Yeah,” I chuckle with him. I run my hands over my dress trying to fix it. “I was overthinking,” I reveal as I look up. My breath catches in my throat, and I almost pass out. It’s not possible. Raffaele is here!

I turn serious and look away. If he recognizes me, I’m screwed. I bring my hand up to cover my mouth in an attempt to reduce the chances and a sharp twinge in my stomach hits me.

“Are you okay?” I nod and take a step back, moving away from him as fast as I can. I run to the bathroom scared.

Was he able to find me? Did my dad send him?

I close the door behind me, my breathing laboured by the terror invading my every cell. I try to calm myself down by taking deep breaths, thinking back to his eyes and his expression. I just feel like bursting into tears though. I run my hands through my hair a few times, hoping to gather my ideas, to create a coherent thought. It might not be him; it might be someone who looks like him. He might not have recognised

me. After all, I have changed my hair colour, lost a few pounds.

With a shaky step I sit down on the toilet and do what I had to do. I take the opportunity to rinse my face in some way, hoping that it will help to reduce the adrenaline. It takes me a few minutes longer than it should before I have the courage to get out. I cross my fingers, hoping that he has disappeared, that he didn't think to wait for me.

When I come out of the bathroom, I intercept the magnificent figure of Kristòs. I smile instinctively and move towards him. I freeze in place when I see that Raffaele is standing next to him.

They smile, exchange business cards, shake hands, then the man turns and walks away, leaving Kristòs alone. I take a big breath and join him, convinced that I have averted the worst.

As soon as Kris notices me, he doesn't hesitate to wrap his arm around my waist, pulls me to him and places a gentle kiss on my lips.

"Sorry about before," he whispers. For the umpteenth time he has changed his attitude. I let him, let him change his mood as he sees fit and continue to apologise.

"Shall we go to the room?" I attempt, maybe I can convince him to get us away from all the convention attendees. "Maybe we could eat there," I ask as he scans my face. I hope he doesn't catch a glimpse of my concern. "Maybe we can pick up where we left off this morning."

"Are you okay? You're being weird. If it's for before..."

"No, it's not for first, don't worry. I'm the one who's not feeling well." Kristòs embraces me, letting my head rest on his

chest. He leaves us a tender kiss, a cuddle that regenerates me.

“We have the table booked, are you sure you don’t want to stay here?” he asks rubbing his nose in my hair.

“Sure you don’t want to opt for the second option? It might be interesting.”

“Get in if you want. I’ll have them bring you something light to eat.” It’s sweet how thoughtful he is, but it’s the fear that I’m having trouble with.

“How about after lunch we go for a walk away from everyone?”

With a groan he lets me know that he is not happy with my proposal, yet, after some thought, he agrees.

A few steps separate us from the buffet. We walk them in total silence. He takes the tray and hands it to me.

“Could you go and change, though? This fucking dress has been giving me hell since this morning,” he explains, laying the plate unceremoniously on my tray. I look at him in amazement. I’m forced to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“I didn’t think an almost austere outfit could do that to you.” I reach for the plate with the salad and hear him cough slightly.

“It’s not the dress itself, Jade, it’s how you wear it and how you act in it.” Still reaching for the plate of salad on the top shelf of the buffet I freeze, glancing down at my body, finding nothing amiss. The skirt is in place and so is the neckline. Nothing is in plain sight. I smile, thinking that his reaction might be tantamount to a statement.

I pretend not to notice and instead of grabbing the first plate, I reach even further for the one furthest away. I giggle

when Kristòs sighs in exasperation and, in order not to comment on my gesture, grabs a glass and walks away towards the table. I shake my head in amusement. It's nice to discover him day by day. He never opens up, he doesn't tell me anything about himself, or how he feels. He just kisses me back or slips away.

My gaze is caught by the magnificent view from the window. It takes my breath away to watch the clear sky mingle with the buildings and I don't notice that Kristòs is taking the tray out of my hands to help me.

"Do you like it?" he asks positioning himself behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder. I nod because I have no words to describe what I'm seeing. "I'm glad." He leaves a kiss on my cheek and then pulls away from the chair in front of me. We sit facing each other, the view to my left.

"Now eat, we're running out of time."

We remain silent for a while, him busy eating, I am admiring the two wonders in front of me. Athens and Kristòs.

"I was thinking: what if we didn't go to the second part of the conference?" I murmured, bringing my glass to my lips.

"Why?"

Is he serious?

Even if my intent isn't quite what I want to make it out to be, I throw it at him as an indecent proposal. It's not like I can tell him I'm afraid I'll be recognised by the man he's exchanged a few small talks and a business card with.

"Like this." I squeeze in my shoulders. "The first part was the most interesting, the second is bound to be more boring." With my foot I reach for him and, like a perpetually eager

woman, climb up his leg. His eyes lock into mine. Attentive and expectant. As soon as I reach his knee Kristòs bites his lip. He looks around and, making sure no one is noticing us, slides a hand under the table until it brushes against the skin of my ankle. Then he grips it tightly, blocking it. His fiery eyes penetrate mine, ready to flog me for what I've just done.

"Don't be such a baby," he scolds me. I pout instead, just like a brat. Maybe that's just what I am since I can't handle his rejections.

He shakes his head and lets me go.

"I'm going to the bathroom," he informs me in a detached tone.

"Okay, I'm going to the balcony."

"Jade..."

"Kristòs." I interrupt him again using the same tone with which he said my name. I know I'm as stubborn as he is, and I don't care. He walks over to me, leans over and, with his face close to mine, whispers the most beautiful words in the world.

"After the conference, you'll have me all to yourself. I'll join you as soon as it's over. Then we'll go for a walk, if you still want to." I'm forced to squeeze his shoulders because of the chills his breath is creating on my skin. He kisses my neck and pulls away making me miss him.

I get up as quickly as he leaves the break room and takes the trays away.

A few months ago, I would never have thought of clearing the table for others, in fact I didn't even think of moving my own plate.

I step out onto the balcony where a light breeze ruffles my hair. I reach the parapet and lean against it. I want to fully admire this beautiful view.

“Excuse me miss.” The voice, that recognisable voice makes me hold my breath. What the hell does he want from me again?

I turn around to find him, the man I bumped into earlier, the man I’ve been in a clandestine relationship with for almost two years.

“I wanted to know if you’re okay. You ran to the bathroom earlier holding your hand over your mouth.”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I was careless,” I defend myself. I hope he leaves me alone, that he leaves before Kristòs is back otherwise the worst of my nightmares might come true.

“Don’t worry. I just wanted to ask you something. I’ve had a bug in my head ever since we met. I’ve seen you somewhere before, but I don’t know where. Could you help me by revealing your name?”

“I’d rather not,” I answer dryly. I go back to enjoying the view, ignoring it.

“Whatever you say, Giade.” He leans his elbow on the balustrade and, with an immense smile on his lips, waits for my answer.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. I’m sorry.” I sustain his gaze. I mustn’t give in, I just can’t right now. Everything I felt for him seems to resurface and having him just inches from me makes my heart race. I want to hug him, hold him, and let him hold me as he whispers to me that everything will be alright.

I spent two years with him, two years in which I knew full well that he was married, but that he was in the process of getting a divorce. He kept telling me that, but then I found out his wife was expecting his child.

I would love to say goodbye to him forever, but I can't do that. No way.

“Yet the resemblance is uncanny.” He shakes his head slightly in disbelief. My heart is pounding and if he doesn't leave, I'm going to be sick. “I miss you. You left without explaining yourself to me, without saying anything to anyone and not being able to hear you, feel your flesh around me...”

“How dare you?”

“I realised I want you. Don't say no to me.”

“I'm telling you again, I'm not Giade. So please leave me alone.” I move steps away from him. He manages to pin me by the wrist, holding me back. His grip burns like never before, it hurts, but it satisfies me in a way. It feels like home, and I feel lost.

“Then I'm so sorry.” He leaves me alone after tugging on my arm. He's the one leaving, not me. I look at him fearfully as he reaches the sliding door, which opens to reveal Kristòs watching us. His straight back, serious face and hands in his pockets make him look bigger and angrier than he is. Although Raffaele pauses and addresses a few words to him, he ignores it because his eyes are on me as he approaches.

“Do you know that man?”

“No.”

“And what did he want from you?” Now the tone is suspicious. His face doesn't betray it though.

“He thought I was an old acquaintance, when I told him I wasn’t who he thought, he apologized and left.” He nods and looks away. He inhales heavily and smiles, turning to me. Without touching me, he motions for us to go for that famous walk.

We stretch our legs walking side by side without saying a word and I think it’s all Raffaele’s fault. I try to take him by the hand, but the hold is short-lived. He seems to be fed up. Resigned, I grab my mobile phone and send a message to Electre. Maybe she’ll keep me company more than this grumpy guy by my side.

“What’s up?”

I would like to know what happened to you;
you keep ignoring me. I’m getting bored here.”

I LOOK AROUND STILL FINDING the beauty of the moment. Even if the company isn’t the best.

“EXCUSE ME, but Athos and I are at the sea, or rather on his yacht.

We decided to go out for a few days, and I haven’t had a minute to spare.

I’m glad you’re not slaughtering each other.”

CAN I ENVY YOU? Of course I can. I'd love to go for a ride myself. Basking in the sun like a lizard and just waiting for my skin to turn golden.

“Did you know Athos has a yacht?” I try to interact with the man at my side who, as soon as he hears the sound of my voice, recoils. He stops and wrinkles his forehead.

“Yes. Of course. Nice and big too.”

“Do you have one too?”

“I'm not rich enough to afford it. Athos lends his to me sometimes, though, if you're interested.”

“So you're not like Onassis,” I poked him in a sad little voice.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all, quite the contrary.”

Let's leave it at that because it's time to get back to the conference. But I don't want to take the tension that has been created with us. Whether it's because of Raffaele or my words about Athos, it doesn't matter. I want the smile to return to his face, I want this lump he's locked himself in again to vanish and become my Kristòs again.

“Is your place far from here?” Kristòs looked up, pointing it straight ahead and took a big sigh and then huffed irritably and stopped in front of the hotel doors.

In total silence we arrived at our destination. I would like to keep him out here for a few more moments, at least until the men crowding the lobby return to take their seats in the lounge.

“Ten minutes by taxi in that direction.” He gestures with his head using a neutral tone. It seems even my interest in his

new place doesn't move him.

“Would it be possible to pop in or are you going to keep it under wraps until the opening?” I want a reaction, I don't like this way of his, isolating himself, keeping me out of what upsets him. I know I'm nothing to him, I don't deserve his outburst, but I want him to know I'm there in case he wants to open up.

He takes a few moments to answer, seeming not to have heard my question because he's overthinking.

I want to get his attention, for him to talk to me and reveal what's going through his thick skull, but right now I can't think of anything outside of a tug. Too bad this is neither the time nor the place.

I look around for an idea and, fortunately for me, I find something unusual but that will make him smile, I can feel it.

I pass him, marching briskly towards the huge vase of flowers that adorns the entrance to the hotel. I pick one and go back to Kristòs, who doesn't seem to have noticed my impetus. I place myself in front of him and only now his eyes are really in mine.

Without saying a word, I hand him the little flower and he doesn't react. Apparently, he's not even going to discuss what I've just done.

“Jade,” he huffs, “we're short on time.”

“If it's any trouble for you to get in, we could get a taxi and have it take us in that direction for about ten minutes.” I use his own words to refer to his place. I bring the flower to my nose and smile as I look up at him from under my lashes. I don't care where we are or what our schedule is, I want to receive a smile from him. “If going in is a problem for you...”

“It’s not. I’m just lost in thought.”

“Then can you give me a little smile? I don’t like this long face.” I hand him the flower again and only now does he seem to notice. “For you. Only if you give me one of your magnificent smiles, otherwise I’m keeping it.” I might have said the magic words as a slight curvature of the lips is painted on his face.

“A little more?” I attempt, but he shakes his head listlessly. I’m just hoping that as time goes on he’ll perk up. “Okay, I’ll settle for that. I want you to know, though, that you can count on me for anything. Don’t think of me as someone you can just hang out with, but the one you can tell everything that ails you.”

He doesn’t answer, he strokes my face gently and slides his hand to the back of my neck, threading his fingers through my hair to draw me to him and leave a tender kiss on my lips. He brings our foreheads together and whispers a word of thanks that tastes like liberation and then pulls me into an embrace that seems to hurt more than it should.

His heavy breathing warms my skin, causing a myriad of shivers and feelings that are not at all positive.

Now we have another four hours of speeches about business, the economy and something I still don’t understand.



A STRONG JOLT makes me open my eyes, catapulting me directly into the dark room where the conference is taking place. I look around and find Kristòs looking at me. He

doesn't look angry or disappointed, just concerned. I settle back in my chair.

I try to pay attention, but the words are like a Greek lullaby, incomprehensible but so soothing that I lower my eyelids. I rest my elbows on the table and support my head with my hand.

“Will you be careful this time?” whispers Kristòs.

“You're the one who needs the conference. I studied these things at university and, if I wanted to, I could take their place on the stage,” I retort, crossing my arms over my chest. I slowly close my eyes and, as if by magic, I go back to sleep. Or so I think.

I hear everything. I can hear the speakers going on and on, talking, discussing, competing to see who has the most creative slides. I feel someone, I hope it's Kristòs, pulling my hair out of my face and covering my shoulders with something soft and woody-smelling, which I mock.

“Thank you all, see you tonight.” The speaker's ringing voice makes me open my eyes again. I don't move, I stay looking at Kristòs. He looks carefully at the sheets of paper filled with diagrams and writing scribbled in all directions. He is without his jacket, a sign that the one that is covering my shoulders is indeed his. He groups the sheets of paper in an orderly fashion, seeming to have numbered them so as not to lose the thread. He settles back into his chair to put everything into the folder provided. It is magnificent.

“Who knows what kind of surprise they've prepared,” he mumbles, his mouth watering. Only now does Kristòs turn around and give me a sweet smile.

“Maybe a prize for those who managed not to fall asleep,” he chuckles at the joke he just threw at me.

“Are you telling me I’m disqualified?”

“Probably.” He strokes my face, and I close my eyes to bask in the gesture. He gets so close I can feel his breath on my skin. “Whatever it is we’ll find out later. Now, if you want, we can go upstairs.” I’m happy about this and smile. He rubs his nose against my cheek smiling back. “You promised me something if I’m not mistaken.”

“You remember that one,” I snort pushing him away. He doesn’t resist, returns to his seat, grabs the clipboard, and turns to me, waiting for me.

“Can I keep the jacket?” I mumble, brushing my cheek against my shoulder. I want to soak in his magnificent scent, I want my skin to smell like him. He nods, biting his lip, probably finding it funny.

With the slowness of a sloth I stretch, stand up and join him, positioning myself right in front of him. His relaxed face is so beautiful that it makes me want to caress it and fill it with kisses. I go along with my feelings and place my hand on his cheek. He is surprised when I rub my thumb over his lips and kiss them softly. I savour the moment as if it were our first real kiss. At least for me.

“To what do I owe this?” he whispers into my lips. He doesn’t embrace me, doesn’t melt into a gentle squeeze that could unite us even more. I don’t answer, backing away a few steps to start towards the lobby. “Has anyone ever told you you’re awful?”

“Yeah, but I like to hear it.” He shakes his head and follows me into total normality.

Once in the suite, I resign myself to the idea of spending the few hours until dinner and its associated dance, segregated in my part of the room. I could continue my nap or try zapping and find some vaguely interesting films.

The sound of the door slamming behind me makes me jump. When I turn around, I see nothing but Kristòs' face quickly approaching mine. He brings his hands up to frame it and closes the distance. An impetuous and pleasant assault. Everything about him is.

“Fuck,” he curses without parting his lips. I close my eyes savouring the moment. He advances until he crushes me against the wall making me feel his erection. With one hand he caresses my neck, while the other lingers on my shoulder where he widens my neckline to reveal my skin. He stops above my breasts, groping them as if he had never touched them before, moving down to my belly and then moving slightly to my thigh. He grabs the fabric and lifts it to creep between my legs. He rubs my privates through the thin fabric of my panties and my body is already on fire, already ready for him.

“Kristòs.” His name on my lips is like a plea that he does not grant. I'm at the mercy of so many emotions, frustrated because he doesn't make me his, excited even though he's only touching me through the fabric.

“Little Jade, you're so inviting.” As he says this, he strips my dress off, leaving me in my underwear. The fabric rubs against my skin, accentuating the shivers I'm already feeling. He doesn't give the dress time to hit the ground as he runs his hand under the underwire to bring out my breasts. “Look, little Jade. Look at your nipple how turgid it is.”

I comply with his wishes and point my eyes there, right at that little excrescence squeezed between his fingers. As soon as he moves them a jolt runs through my body until it drains into my lower belly; I clench my legs trapping his hand to demand what he's making me taste.

“Do you want more, little Jade?” he asks, eager to hear a positive response that isn't long in coming out of my mouth. Kristòs suddenly pulls away with a wicked light in his eyes. “Unfortunately for you, you will have nothing left.” While his face is tinged with amusement and mischief, mine is stunned. “Remember Jade, I always keep my promises. From now on I won't touch you until after the dance.” And he leaves for his room

Chapter 17



After a rejuvenating bath, during which I have tried to unravel the bundle of nerves that Kristòs and Raffaele have helped to create, I dry my hair. I don't think I'm late, also because if I were, the man with whom I share the suite would have already entered demanding me to hurry up.

I had a moment of terror; I won't deny it. I feared that Raffaele would not give in to my denials and would tell Kristòs who I really am.

The fear remains present, I cannot shake it off.

I carefully put on my make-up, trying not to overdo it with the usual smoky and combing my hair as best I can given the length of my bob. When I landed in Santorini, my hair was very long and completely black. Then, I decided to give it a rest and add a touch of colour, just to look different from what I was in Bari. As if a new hairstyle and a multicoloured dye on the nape of my neck would help me not to be recognised.

Surely, they were meant to represent a new beginning.

I close my eyes and sigh. When I open them again and look at my reflection in the mirror, I am horrified. My mascara is still dripping from my tears.

“Shit,” I curse. Why does everything seem to be going wrong?

Even as I try to calm myself down, the knowledge that Raffaele might be there tonight makes everything more difficult.

I close my eyes again and take a few deep breaths. I don't want certain thoughts to prevail over the situation I'm living with Kristòs. I cannot allow it. Raffaele is the past and Kris could be my future. Even if he doesn't want any ties.

With my bathrobe still on I leave the bathroom to reach the backpack I had thrown at the foot of the bed. I grab it and rummage through it looking for the underwear I'll be wearing under the wonderful dress Kristòs has bought for the occasion. I pull out a tiny thong that I had bought on a whim, just in case it might be useful for some occasion.

I grab the dress and stop to admire it. I sigh as if, all of a sudden, another kind of affliction assails me. Melancholy of a life spent wearing these wonders. Sadness caused by the desire to change, to become independent and make it on my own, only to find myself in front of a haute couture dress, adjusted to my measurements at will, paid for by the man for whom I will wear it for to a gala dinner among businessmen.

How pathetic I am. Even though I don't want to be Giada anymore, I find myself in her shoes again. In her life.

Man, I sound just like one of those little women who used to populate the clubhouse. One of those who chose to stay close to the richest entrepreneur of the moment just to take advantage of the benefits and privileges he offered. Expensive gifts, bordering on the impossible. Clothes, jewellery, cars, houses. Everything to secure their position, even at the cost of bowing to his will. Especially sexually.

I shake my head trying to regain lucidity, convincing myself that I am not one of those. Not least because I've received nothing in return for doing all this, other than the repayment of a debt I haven't even incurred.

I sigh and grab the hanger, removing it from my dress and throwing it on the bed.

I'm really curious to know if the boutique owner had the requested alterations made or if she just sent the dress out without tightening it, making it impossible to wear.

To my astonishment, I changed my mind. The dress fits perfectly, the only problem being that I can't get the zip to close because it's so tight. This is not the fault of the hag, unfortunately.

I bring my arm to cover my breasts just to support the dress and open the door of the room, just enough to stick my head out and shout the name of Kristòs. I'm surprised when I hear his voice coming from the sitting room.

"I HAVE A LITTLE PROBLEM. Can I ask for your help?" I don't get a verbal response, but the rustle of fabric makes me assume it's positive.

"Can I come in?" His voice accompanies a soft knock. He opens the door and, as soon as I see his reflection, my heart starts beating like never before.

He's gorgeous. He's wearing a dinner jacket with black shawl lapels, the sash is the same colour as my dress, as is the bow tie which must always match. The white shirt is slightly transparent, but impeccable and the cuffs are buttoned with

cufflinks. The patent leather lace-up shoes are the icing on the cake.

He seems to have chuckled at me.

“Hey...” I whisper in a greeting. He recovers and joins me. I don’t deny that his behaviour makes me smile.

“Sorry, but you look even more beautiful in that outfit.” He brings his hands to the flaps of my dress to zip it up, but before he does, he traces my tattoo with his index finger and then down my spine. Countless shivers run through my body, so intense that they make me throw my head back slightly. Kristòs places his open hand at the base of my neck, gently massaging my hairline.

“I see you did exactly the reverse of what was suggested,” he whispers in my ear. “I have to say that your version looks so good on you, it shows off a little piece of Jade that you always keep hidden. That Jade, you didn’t even let me see.” In fact, I never show anyone my rainbow hair or even my tattoo because they are the important signs of my inner change. Too difficult to explain for those who don’t know. For those who have never experienced it.

The free hand slides lightly over my belly to anchor itself on the opposite side, the one behind my neck instead, passes in front, in a sort of embrace. The mirror returns our image: him behind me looking at me, me with my hands on his.

“I’d kiss you, but every promise must be kept,” he says loosening his grip making me feel the emptiness. Quickly he prepares to zip up and pull away.

“Thanks,” I mutter pretending to be offended. Maybe then he’ll retrace his steps.

“How much more time do you need to get ready?”

“Not long.”

“Then I’ll wait for you in there.” And he leaves the room, closing the door behind him. I sigh, as if it will help chase away the tension that’s causing me to go through withdrawal from him.

I put on the shoes Kristòs’ friend has cleverly matched, put on the long-lasting lipstick in the same colour as my dress, and leave.

As soon as I close the door to my room, my prince charming turns around. His lips part in an o of astonishment. He barely manages to hold out his hand to accompany me in front of him.

“Dance with me.” He embraces me and holds me close, as if fearing my escape. He rests his lips on my shoulder and we start rocking, lulled by music only he can hear.

“We should get going. They’re waiting for us downstairs.” I nod and smile, enjoying the contact he’s giving me.

Kristòs stops suddenly and, with the same speed as a runner in a footrace, turns away to go to his room. When he returns, a naive smile has appeared on his face.

“This dress is missing something.”

“I like it this way, that’s why I chose it,” I reply a little irritated. He could have told me earlier that it didn’t fit him.

While I’m still thinking about his words, he shows me a square velvet box with Cartier printed on it. With a proud smile he opens the case, revealing a diamond and white gold necklace, perfectly matching his cufflinks.

“It’s not on loan. I bought it for you, it’s yours.” He grabs it and puts it around my neck.

What was the little story about you getting nothing in return? Tell me again, I didn't understand it.

The cold of this wonder burns on my warm skin. The pendant falls perfectly between my breasts. I brush it with my fingers, incredulous that he could spend so much money on me. Although he doesn't know me, he dares to trust me.

I shake my head slightly. Maybe Giade would have accepted the gift without qualms, but Jade is different.

“Tell me something.”

“You didn't have to,” I reply with difficulty.

“For my woman this and more,” he counters, kissing my neck. My woman? My breath catches in my throat and my heart stops beating. “But now let's go, otherwise I'll forget my promises.” Without pausing on my face, he tosses the little box onto the couch and intertwines his fingers with mine, urging me to get going. I don't move. I can't do it, I can't. I have to tell him everything also because, with Raffaele around, I don't want him to hear it from someone else.

“What's wrong with you?” He walks over and places his hands on my hips, leaning down to meet my eyes.

“It's too much. I can't take it.”

“Jade...” he starts, but I bring a finger to his lips to shut him up.

“I don't care if you shower me with gifts or spend money just out of fear that I might run away from you. I'm not that kind of woman and I don't want to be. If you want me, I'm yours, no need to buy me.”

“Should I take it back?” He asks in a voice crippled by my finger on his lips.

“I have no idea how things work. I want you to know I don’t need them.”

“Tell you what, keep it for tonight. Then I’ll talk to the manager.” He chuckles over the last sentence. I’m relieved he didn’t resent my refusal. “Now though, let’s go.” And he kisses my finger, still firm on his lips. He grabs my hand and, quite naturally, we make our way to the room where dinner will be served.

In the lift, neither of us speaks. We continue to hold hands like boyfriend and girlfriend. I stare at Kris to imprint his image on my brain. I want to remember this moment for the rest of my life.

“Doesn’t it seem a little megalomaniacal to have cufflinks with the initials of your name?” I whisper with an innocent smirk on my face. I thought that was the prerogative of the elders of the family and not the young entrepreneurs.

“My mother gave them to me when I opened my first club. Let’s just say they have always brought me good luck,” he reveals. He has never talked about his mother or the business. I don’t know how many clubs he owns; I don’t know anything about him.

“Then your mother is the megalomaniac.”

“You could say that. She could be crowned queen of the megalomaniacs,” he chuckles emphatically, rolling his eyes at the words.

“Who are you, Kristòs Princekaris?” I ask without giving him time to recover from the giggle.

“What does knowing that change for you?”

“Absolutely nothing.” I bow my head, feeling a sense of unease at having ventured such a question. Legitimate or not.

“I’m a bricklayer.” I wrinkle my forehead trying to process this. “All the premises I said I owned; I just built them. Brick by brick. The cars I drive around in are all rentals.” Now I understand why the car from the accident is nowhere to be seen. “The cufflinks I found second-hand, everything I bought you; I did with Athos’ gambling money.” I raise my face and stare at the steel door in front of me. Everything is clearer now. I remain silent longer than I should, until a shoulder bump moves me slightly. When I turn back to him, I see him smile.

“Do you like me as a bricklayer too?” The lift doors open, cutting off speech, my thoughts, and what I want to say to him.

“Of course,” I reply, hinting at a shy smile. Of course, I do, what questions does he ask? Kristòs smiles and moves some steps. I’m not sure why, but this revelation surprised me slightly.

As we walk down the long corridor leading to the reception, he stops. With a slight tug he places me in front of him.

“And who are you, my sweet little Jade?” He runs his fingertips along my bare arm until he reaches the top hem of my dress. He slips one between the fabric and my heated skin, tracing its entire contour.

“We could be seen,” I mumble with my mouth slurred with excitement mixed with fear of being caught.

“Who are you, Jade Kastis?” he repeats, bringing his lips closer to mine. He touches them, craves them with the simple contact.

“A runaway heiress.” I gave in. I told him the truth, now what?

His slow torture ends abruptly with his finger wedged right between my breasts. He frowns, pulling away slightly and my heart races.

“An heiress?” I don’t move, I don’t breathe, I don’t blink. I’m simply afraid of his reaction. Maybe since I didn’t freak out at his revelation, he won’t freak out at mine. “I thought you were more imaginative. But if you like being one, then be an heiress who introduces her bricklayer lover to all the people who matter,” he continues with an amused smirk.

What?

“You know, at these dinners, I always pretend to be someone else. At least in my head. It usually helps to take my mind off where I am.”

“You’re awful, has anyone ever told you that?” I sigh, chasing away the tension. It’s made me take a hit.

“I know.” He pulls me to him through the neckline of his dress. “I just like hearing it.” Then he places his lips on mine.

Savouring it, even if briefly, gives me the strength to keep going. I hush my lips as he doesn’t hint at pulling away, demanding more. He gives himself only for a few moments. Sweet, intense, eager for contact.

“Yes, I fully agree.” A man’s voice surprises us, causing us to pull away abruptly. Kris bows his head and brushes against my shoulder. He’s hiding. “Yeah, he’s right. You can’t go on like this, you should oppose it.”

The owner of the voice passes us without stopping and checking to see who these two brazen people are, exchanging effusions in the corridor. As soon as the man vanishes, Kristòs bursts out laughing.

“Maybe we should calm down,” I suggest, barely holding back a laugh. He nods and slowly becomes serious again. He leaves me a kiss on my cheek and moves away just enough to take my hand and encourage me to follow him towards the hall.

When the doors open, the enormous pomp and circumstance in front of me attracts me like a magnet. People in evening dress, chatting, and giggling. Tables decorated to perfection, strong, warm colours adorned with bright details and flowers everywhere make everything very harmonious. White, black, and silver balloons, scattered around the room and also under the ceiling, tied with ribbons of the same colour hanging down, make everything sparkle.

“It’s beautiful. How did they do it in such a short time?”

“So much staff?” replies Kristòs in an obvious tone. I don’t know if he’s serious or not, mine was a rhetorical question.

“Unpleasant.” In Bari, my family attended a lot of events but never had anyone decorated a venue like this. “Do you think it would be possible to compliment the people who took care of everything?” Just as I finish my sentence, I see the hotel manager come over to our side.

“Mr. and Mrs. Princekaris.” The man’s voice is warm and honeyed as he approaches us. He extends a hand towards Kristós which he does not hesitate to shake. Then he turns to me.

“Mrs. Princekaris.” He repeats the same gesture and, smiling affably, I accept. He kisses the back in a gallant gesture. “She is beautiful,” he begins, then recomposes himself and, keeping his eyes in mine, continues with his praise. “I hope you are enjoying the suite I assigned you.”

“Thank you for the compliments and yes, the suite is truly magnificent. Thank you for resolving the issue so impeccably.” What should I say? In the end, I got the room I wanted. “You managed to make our peace.”

The director smiles and bows his head.

“Kristós, let me tell you, your wife is a real fighter.”

“I agree with you completely.” Kristós turns to point his eyes into mine. “If it wasn’t for her combativeness, I can’t imagine where I would be now.” I smile at his words, finding them true and right. If it wasn’t for me, he would never have taken the first step. I bow my head, hiding my cheeks, which I feel warming. I must be blushing. It’s only when my companion reaches behind my back and draws me to him that I manage to calm the embarrassment that has hit me and turn towards him. He looks at me with a smile on his face that conveys confidence making me forget everything around me.

“Please excuse me.” The manager reaches back for my hand to kiss the back of it, bringing me back down to earth. “It’s a real pleasure to have you among us, but I must say goodbye to the other guests as well.” And he leaves, leaving us alone.

“What a strange guy,” I whisper to myself. I’ve never met the managers of the hotels I’ve stayed in, but this is the first one and he didn’t make much of an impression.

“He is a businessman. His motto is ‘time is money’, but he also knows how to have a good time,” Kristós replies.

“Like all businessmen. No exceptions,” I add, giving him a knowing look.

“Any reference is purely coincidental, right?” he chuckles and invites me to walk towards the centre of the hall without

breaking our embrace.

At the end of the hall, where the stage is, they have set up a counter with a console for the DJ, while on the opposite side there is a long table where drinks and finger food of various kinds are served.

“Shall we have a drink?” Kris suggests, moving away from me. I nod thoughtlessly. I’m still in awe of how gorgeous this previously drab room has become. “Jade.” His voice calls me back. I turn and stare at him expectantly. “What would you like?”

“A prosecco, please,” I reply, hoping they have it. I don’t even look at what’s on the table.

The waiter nods and, in a few gestures, hands us our drinks. As usual, Kristòs has taken an Ouzo spritz.

I waste some time looking around. The background music, the atmosphere, the company of Kristòs, who is wonderful in this light, make this evening and this place magical. I have never met anyone so sweet and caring, able to make me feel protected and wanted. I love these feelings. I love him.

I bring the flute to my lips to take a sip of the sparkling liquid while Kristòs scans the room with his eyes, looking, perhaps, for an empty table.

“Let’s go.” He places his hand on the small of my back, urging me to follow his will. As he walks, he takes a generous sip of his drink not losing sight of the table. “Are you okay here?”

“Sure.” Without much preamble, he pulls my chair out of the way to help me sit, then sits down beside me. “After dinner, do you have plans, my mason?”

“I think I have a date with an heiress. She’s waiting for me eagerly in her room,” he replies mischievously. I widen my smile and, settling in better, pull my skirt up to above the knee and cross my legs. I see him swallow and immediately bring the glass to his lips, taking another sip of his drink.

Gradually, all the guests take their seats, and the waiters start to fill the tables with the most varied dishes. Everything is delicious and the company of a couple who sat with us made the evening even more enjoyable. We talked about everything from them congratulating us on being just perfect together to how they met, loved, and married, combining their empires to create something new.

Everything is going well, no interruptions, no unwelcome presence wandering around the room that could ruin this magnificent dinner that has come to an end.

“What do you say we go upstairs?” I mutter to Kristòs who is finishing his dessert. He is the only one who is still eating, as they have served his favourite, of which he is on his second portion.

“I’ll finish and then we’ll do whatever you want.”

But the background music stops, and a distinguished man dressed in a suit and tie and accompanied by two beautiful women comes on stage. He sets up the microphone stand and attracts the attention of us all with a few coughs.

“I’d like to take just a minute of your time. First of all, good evening to you all. Before we start the dancing, we would like to honour the man who has done the most for himself this year. From nothing, he has created an empire that continues to grow, given the forthcoming opening of a new club right here in Athens. I invite on stage, Kristòs Princekaris.”

A proud smile appears on my face. Proud of the achievements of the man sitting next to me, I turn around and begin to applaud. I am also happy that he has finished eating.

All the dinner guests follow my gesture and Kristòs bows his head.

“Go on, go” I urge him. He wipes his mouth and humours me. He walks towards the stage and shakes the man’s hand.

“We would like to reward this young entrepreneur,” he begins, patting Kristòs on the shoulder, “for his great business sense and for the wonderful way he has run his nightclubs in Santorini and Athens.”

“How many clubs does he run?” The voice of the blonde valet, who has intruded on the award ceremony, rings out sweet and irritating. She looks at my man in complete adoration, which makes me uncomfortable.

“Five, excluding the new one which will be opened shortly,” he reveals with the biggest possible smile and bright eyes.

As Kris enjoys the applause, the blonde woman extends a small acknowledgement towards him, he doesn’t hesitate to thank her with a kiss on the cheek. Then, the three of them step back and let my companion take the microphone.

“Our small businessman has received an award.” Raffaele’s deep voice gives me chills. He speaks in Italian to corner me. The tone is annoying.

I pretend not to understand. I turn to him and stare at him strangely.

“My little Giada, aren’t you happy?”

“I have already explained to you that I am not Giada D’Agostino,” I answer between my teeth, strictly in Greek. Immediately I turn to look in Kristòs’ direction finding his eyes on us.

“I never said your last name, my sweet little Giada. I wouldn’t have even fallen for it if you hadn’t spoiled it yourself, though... this...” He dares to touch my tattoo. I blink, incredulous that he’s going this far. “I’d know it in a million for its uniqueness. Everyone in the circle talks about how you stained your white skin after what happened to you in high school.”

“Then, if you know who I am, you’ll also remember what you did to me, so get your filthy, social-climbing hands off me,” I say in Italian, giving him a gentle nudge on the arm to push him away from me. “Otherwise, I’ll have you thrown out for harassment.”

“What a fierce kitten you’ve become, you weren’t this determined when you were with me. You know that young man... what’s his name?” He pretends to think about it, the asshole. “Ah yes, Kristòs Princekaris, who are you really? Does he know who he has in his hands? Does he know you used to jump on my cock? What about the photographers? How come they’re not around?” I clench my jaw at his words. I know they’re aimed at getting me to react, but Kristòs is on stage accepting an award and I want to hear his voice.

“Don’t you dare. I won’t let you bring him into this. You’re not even half as good as him.”

“Giada, Giada, Giada, I bet no one knows you’re here in Greece. What if someone tipped off the reporters? Maybe your Greek dream could vanish as it came.”

“What if your wife received an anonymous message with burning revelations, like the video of you banging your co-worker? Do you seriously think I didn’t know that while you were promising to be with me, you were also banging her? Then you’d be saying goodbye to her estate and business with my dad.” Kris’s gaze pierces my heart. I can feel it, he wants to run over here, pull Raffaele away from me, and punch him in the nose. Because of the man at my side, I didn’t follow what he said. “I’ll give you a piece of advice, forget me, leave me alone and go back to your wife and child.”

“I want you; can’t you understand that?” Raffaele places his hand on my leg, a little too high for what he has now become. A flood of shivers shakes me, making me relive the moments we spent together. Every inch of my skin seems to respond to this gesture, except my stomach, which prefers to clench so tightly that my abdomen contracts.

“Look at you, you had to get all dolled up for him, I want you for who you are.”

“Stop stalking me. I’m not going back. If you even come near him or me, I swear I’ll call security and have you thrown out of every hotel in this chain.” I turn to him with anger painted on my face hoping he’s figured out I’m not joking. “Am I clear or do you want a little drawing?” I swat his hand away from my leg with a slap sensing emptiness and an unparalleled sense of inner peace.

A round of applause breaks loose in the room and I’m no different. I ignore the man at my side to support what interests me.

As soon as Kristòs turns to leave the stage, I stand up.

“Make sure you’re not here when I get back or you’ll meet the real Jade,” I threaten and walk out of the hall. I can’t stay

here a minute longer. I almost run towards the terrace and as soon as I close the door behind me and move a few steps away, I let out a scream. One of those that release anxiety, fear, anger. I run my hands through my hair, not caring about my hairstyle. I'm exasperated, I'm starting not to take the tension Raffaele has created anymore. I stamp my feet on the ground and quickly shake my head.

“What the fuck happened in there? This time I want the truth, Jade. Who is that man? Is he an ex-boyfriend of yours?” Kristòs' anger shines through his voice and I stop instantly. A shiver runs down my spine. It shakes me and upsets me, so much that I want to tell him the truth, to tell him that Jade doesn't exist, but I can't.

“I'll tell you again,” I begin in a broken voice, but I freeze. My throat burns and the words don't want to come out. The only thing I find logical to do is to cover my face in shame.

“Jade, talk to me.” I sob without meaning to, and that's what brings Kristòs closer, he hugs me from behind. He rests his chin on my shoulder and leans his head against mine. He waits patiently for me to calm down and decide to speak. But it's really difficult.

“You have to believe me,” I begin after a few minutes. “I don't know who that man is, but he was back to claiming that I was a girl he knows. When he touched my tattoo, I felt violated, so I threatened to call security.” On his part there is only a deafening silence. It can't be, he can't not believe me.

What if he knows the truth?

“You don't believe me?”

“If you were in my place, you wouldn't believe it either. You don't get it, do you Jade?” I try to break free from his

grip, but he prevents me.

“What am I supposed to understand?”

“That I... that you...” He doesn’t finish his sentence because he’s busier holding me down. Suddenly, I don’t know if it’s because of my own strength or because he’s left me, I manage to break free. I advance a few steps and turn around furiously. He doesn’t believe me.

“When I saw him touching you and you let him...” He freezes and looks away from me.

“You thought I liked him,” I conclude instead. His is jealousy. Jealousy that shouldn’t exist since we’ve only spent one night together and there’s nothing between us but sex. Because that’s all he wants from me, isn’t it?

“Yeah,” he says pointing his eyes into mine. His voice is harsh, guttural, aimed at reiterating and emphasizing the point.

Kristòs seems to be out of breath. His chest rises and falls at a frantic pace.

“I stayed put so I wouldn’t make a scene. I didn’t want to ruin your moment,” I whisper, no reason to shout. He doesn’t answer, doesn’t comment on my explanation. Maybe his isn’t jealousy, but just an excuse to get me away from him with a fight. Come to think of it, tomorrow we have to go back to Santorini and what better occasion than this to break it off?

I take a deep breath and walk away from him. I hope the whole thing is painless and he doesn’t come down hard on me with words.

“Jade.” His call is a whisper. I ignore it going straight for the metal railing. I grab it and squeeze hard feeling my knuckles sharply hurt. I bow my head trying to hold back the tears. I am not strong; I have never been. I tried to change

when I got here, to shape the new Giada, but I'm still me. I've always given weight to other people's words, even when I didn't want to, and even though my social position would allow me to, I can't tell people to go to hell without remorse.

It's strange how my body feels his presence just a few centimetres away. When I feel his arms brush against mine, I gasp. He has rested his hands on the railing like me. His forehead on my shoulder.

“Forgive me.”

“Why? Why do I have to apologize every time?” I know I'll never get an answer to that question, that his change in position should be enough for me. But the failure to find common ground drives me out of my mind. He releases his grip and wraps himself around me. His chest against my back, his arms around my body, the beats of our hearts inexplicably synchronised.

“Wouldn't it be easier not to go that far? Make it clear what we want and stop fighting over every single bit of nonsense?”

“You're right. You're absolutely right. I snapped, I have no excuse, it's just that he... He touched you and I couldn't push him away.”

He reaches down and goes under my arm to stand in front of me. He holds me close as he managed to get a hug.

“You are mine and mine alone.” And he says it with such intensity that it fills my heart, and a tear slides down my cheek. Unexpected, involuntary and I try to hide it by bowing my head.

“Hey.” His hand caresses my skin, taking away the anger, the tension, and even that stupid tear. “Don't cry for me. I've

been perfectly selfish, and I don't deserve your tears."

"Please, let's not fight anymore, I don't want to."

"Never again, I promise." I look up and lose myself in his shimmering irises. With his thumb he strokes my chin, reaching up to tickle my lips, which he pulls gently. He moves closer and lays a gentle kiss on my cheekbone, where a tear had just fallen. He leaves a trail of tender kisses that I love to receive, all the way to the corner of my mouth.

"Do you forgive me?"

"I don't. Try rephrasing the question." He doesn't get off that easy this time. He inhales sharply and goes back to kissing my skin all the way down my neck. I tilt my head towards his to restrict his movements. With my hands I try to stop him.

"Forgive me," he chuckles finding this all a joke.

This man is absurd, the more I try to be serious and clarify, the more he throws in a laugh.

"Forgive me." He brings his hands to my bottom, squeezing it and bringing our kisses closer together. "Forgive me." He sinks his face into the crook of my neck, reaches down and lifts me up sharply. I let out a yelp in fright. "Forgive me," he says with his face turned upwards to find mine. "Forgive me." And he starts spinning around like an unholy spinning top. I try to hold on to him as best I can, so I don't fall or get thrown to the ground, however, it's hard for me.

"I won't stop until you tell me you forgive me" he adds.

"Okay, okay" I gasp. "I forgive you" I giggle, but he doesn't hint at stopping. "Kristòs, stop it! I said I forgive you." He finally listens to me. He stops his mad spin and instead of putting me down, he lets himself fall.

I scream in fright as he laughs. He lands on a small outdoor couch full of cushions.

“You are crazy.” I admonish him. My heart is in my throat.

“Forgive me,” he whispers as he rummages between my breasts with his face.

“No!” I exclaim trying to block him. We’re not going to end this discussion by making up between the sheets. I don’t like that solution. I attempt to get up, however he only allows me to position myself astride him.

“Forgive me.”

“If you keep being silly, I won’t.” I pout and cross my arms over my chest pretending to be offended. He mimics me triggering the fuse in me. He’s teasing me and I let him do it without any problem.

“You’re pretty when you’re angry,” he says copying my sullen look. I try to hold back a smile; I have to keep a straight face and win. Kristòs loosens his grip and brings his arms next to my thighs. With his fingers he caresses them, or at least that’s what I think he’s doing. In a moment he stands up straight and his hands grasp the bare skin of my bottom. He draws me to him and squeezes it hard causing me slight pain.

I can see his arousal through his eyes, feel it fully through the thin fabrics of our clothes.

“You are mine and no one else’s,” he whispers bringing his face closer to mine.

Only now do I let go. I lean into his lips, moving my pelvis over his erection as he continues to squeeze my buttocks facilitating my movements that are sending me over the edge. I try to sneak a hand between us and pay more attention to what’s going on in his trousers.

I quickly undo the buttons releasing his erection. He inhales heavily as I stroke his entire length.

His hand slides into my intimacy, teasing it as only he can.

“You’re a naughty little girl,” he says over my lips. I sense his mischievous smile on my mouth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I raise as I tighten my grip. He holds his breath enjoying my assault.

“You’re not wearing any panties,” he replies as he recovers. “You were by my side, ready to be taken and I didn’t...” He cuts the sentence off to catch his breath since I’m leaving him no way to reason. He keeps his mouth ajar and enjoys the moment.

“Yes, I’m without. For you,” I repeat, rubbing myself against him. I want to tease him, torment him. I want him with me and inside me.

He starts moving his magic fingers again to chastise me.

“Didn’t you say you weren’t going to touch me until the party was over?”

“I changed my mind.” He’s out of breath, too. “After this little surprise ...” he explains pushing a finger into me. I hold my breath in surprise. I let the pleasure wash through me. Here, on the hotel terrace, at the mercy of all the sensations that only he can give me. Everything else is outside, everything else does not exist.

“How much do you like it?” he whispers. I don’t answer, I move more against him because his touch, his teasing of my private parts, is no longer enough. Now I want him, I want to feel him inside me finishing the job he started with his fingers. I rise slightly, ready to welcome him and give free rein to what I feel, but someone opens the door to the terrace. Kristòs

curses and quickly removes his hands from me to adjust his trousers.

I turn around and, to my amazement, I can clearly see the man I have nicknamed Mr. Potato Head in love with another guy. They're kissing like they're in withdrawal from each other.

"Now what?" I whisper, turning to Kristòs who is staring in disbelief at the scene. Maybe he didn't expect this surprise either. He turns his gaze to me shaking his head.

"Oh, excuse us. We didn't think anyone was here." Mr. Potato Head's gravelly voice makes my eyes widen.

"Um, don't worry about it," Kristòs begins, tapping me on the thigh to encourage me to move. "We'll leave you to it." He stands up and grabs my hand pulling me to him. "This fair maiden still owes me a dance." He leaves a kiss on my temple. There's a lot of embarrassment in the air, mixed with fear of saying something unseemly. And I want to run out of here.

"Madam, congratulations on your hairstyle." He points to my head, where I'm sure to have an unmade tangle. "It was quite original earlier in the evening." He smiles uncomfortably, continuing to interject in the hope of softening the awkwardness. "Her dress is magnificent and that necklace... very tasteful. Mr. Princekaris, you are a very lucky man."

"Don't worry, I won't mention it to anyone." Kristòs cut off his flattery with a reassuring smile. "Can I also count on your discretion?"

"Oh, sure. I'll be as silent as a fish." He nods, extending his hand towards Kristòs, who seals the deal by shaking it tightly. They take their leave with a pat on the shoulder, and

we walk away from the two lovers, but Kristòs turns around and seems to want to rage at the two.

“We have not seen each other, understood?”

“Absolutely,” replies the other. With this last reassurance, we enter the room to find the situation quite different from how we left it. The notes of Michael Jackson’s *Are You Not Alone* resound and lull the people who are dancing.

“Will you grant me this dance, my sweet heiress?” Kristòs offers me his hand, bowing his head slightly.

“With great pleasure Mr. Princekaris,” I reply bowing. It’s obvious he’s taken up his personal game to extricate himself from all of this. Kind of like I’m doing.

We start dancing and, as if by magic, everything else disappears. There’s no one around us, no one to divide us or disturb us.

“What are you thinking about?” I smile at his curiosity, imagining his reaction if I told him the truth.

“That the deejay is great as well as handsome,” I reply teasing him. “You should hire him for your new club.” I’m aware that these words of mine might infuriate him, but I love provoking him and seeing his reaction. If he really cares about me or is he jealous.

“Why don’t you go talk to him? Maybe he has a legion of fans that would fill the whole club.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” he mutters irritated. He looks away from mine only to lower his gaze to the necklace I’m wearing. I want to retort, but I’ll shut up this time. “I have other things on my mind now.” And with his left hand he draws me closer to him, letting me feel his full erection. “He can’t stay like this much longer.”

“I thought the vision of Mr. Potato Head and his companion had destabilized you, but instead it’s even more turgid than before,” I giggle as we continue dancing. Even though we’re wrapped around each other, no one gives us a dirty look.

“You’re the one making it that way.”

“Interesting. We could discuss this further upstairs.”

“Bedroom?” he asks, leaving a kiss on my chin. “In the Jacuzzi?” I mumble in approval and pull him closer to me, basking in the pleasure his closeness gives me. “All night, just you and me,” he continues rubbing his lips against my chin.

“You had me at the very first words.”

He pulls away from me and holds out his hand. Mischief, wanting to have me with him, to spend the whole night with me who seem to be the only attraction for him. I read all this in his eyes. In those irises of an older man who doesn’t let me weigh or perceive our age difference.

I grab his hand and squeeze it, ready for anything. He pulls me back into his arms and kisses me greedily, heedless of being in the middle of people. His tongue dances in my mouth involving mine, struggling to keep up.

“I want you now.” He pulls away and heads for the door to leave the room. A few firm steps are enough to get to the lift. He hits the call button and goes back to kissing me. He looks like an eager little boy, determined not to waste a single second at our disposal.

“Kristòs Princekaris?” A female voice slows the voracity of the kiss. Kristòs inhales, pulls away from me and, with fiery eyes, looks ready to respond viciously to the unfortunate who dared to interrupt us.

“Your prize.” The woman stammers, surely frightened by his gaze. As soon as he turns towards her, his expression changes.

“Thanks, I was going to collect it tomorrow morning,” he replies dryly. She grabs the plaque and, before withdrawing her hand, tilts her head to the side. “Has what I ordered been done?”

The stewardess swallows and nods immediately afterwards.

“Good,” he whispers, handing me the box in which the plaque is stored. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. He grabs a hundred euro note and, quickly folding it, hands it to her. The girl shakes her head and declines the offer. He adds another note and, although she shakes her head again, he puts it in her hand and makes her clench it into a fist.

“Don’t mention this to anyone. I trust in your discretion. About everything. Are we agreed?” The young woman nods, and just as the sound of the lift breaks the silence, Kristòs turns and reaches out his arm towards me, wraps his arms around my waist and walks me towards the elevator.

“You were incredible. You terrified the girl like never before,” I chuckle as the doors close behind us. His mouth has already taken hold of my neck.

“I didn’t do anything that most of the dinner party attendees didn’t do” he reveals pushing me against the cold wall. He slips a leg between mine making me feel all his desire.

“Do you get a lot of tips when you have these events? I should think about it.” I shoot off my mouth just to see how far his jealousy can go.

“I don’t think you’d like to find yourself in her shoes, especially when you meet the entrepreneur you’ve spent fiery nights with going up with someone else.”

Now I’m the jealous and stymied one. I place my hands on his shoulders and push him away.

“Have you been with her?” His mischievous eyes anchor in mine. He smiles like a kid in front of a candy window. “Is that why she ran after you to give you the prize? Did you take her to bed?” I continue without receiving an answer. The more my curiosity rises, the more he seems to enjoy this third degree. “Kristòs!” I call back giving him a light slap on the shoulder.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re adorable when you’re jealous?”

Hell yes, I’m jealous. Jealous because I want him all to myself and to think that he has paid special attention to others infuriates me. What a funny situation I’ve put myself in, I wanted to see how far his jealousy went and instead he turned the tables on me.

I go back to slapping his shoulder inciting him to speak, but I only get a laugh.

“Be serious.”

“No.”

No, what? To not being with her or to being serious? How do I get out of this?

Kristòs bursts out laughing victoriously.

“Come here, jealous girl.” He surrounds my neck with one hand and draws me to him to kiss me. I resist because I want the truth.

“Answer me.”

“I haven’t been with her,” he whispers, tickling my lips. “Now can I have my kiss?” At that request I close the distance by kissing him fiercely. Kristòs lifts my dress to take me in his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck and cross my legs around his pelvis.

Once again it is the lift signal that tells us we have arrived at our destination, but he continues to kiss me. We get out, entwined in a kiss that has nothing chaste about it. Well, Kristòs goes out, as I am anchored to him like a koala bear. He leaves me alone when we arrive in the lounge of the suite.

“I want you naked,” he orders. My heart stops suddenly, preventing my brain from thinking clearly. I stand dumbfounded before him and his words. He turns me around and unzips my dress. He slides it down my body, taking it to the floor. With his fingers he caresses my hips, my thighs until he reaches my ankles.

“Step forward,” he whispers. I comply with his wishes and move. He tosses the dress away, as if it didn’t cost a fortune. He kisses my legs and slowly moves up. His touch causes me shivers of pleasure I didn’t think I could feel.

My thigh, my buttock, my hip, my shoulder, nothing is left alone by his mouth. He lingers on my neck, torturing it greedily. He grabs my hair, making me tilt my head for more space.

When we are facing each other, I can’t keep my hands still. I want to touch him, scratch him, grab him, and hold him to me to feel his warmth on my body, but as soon as I try to do that, he blocks me. He holds my wrist firmly, only allowing me to run my index finger over his abs, feeling the grooves even through his shirt.

“You’re beautiful. I want to fuck you in shoes and this,” he says as he brushes against the necklace he gave me. With my free hand I manage to caress his face, sensing the hint of beard scratching my fingertips. I brush his lips, run the outline of his chin, the pronounced Adam’s apple, and slip my fingers into the collar of his shirt.

“I want you,” I say. With dexterity I loosen his bow tie and open the first few buttons.

“I want you,” I repeat. This time I look up, staring into his eyes. A few seconds and he grabs me by the shoulders to slam me against the wall. I stretch my neck in an attempt to close the distance, but he moves his head, shaking it right back.

“Don’t...move,” he commands in an eager tone. He palms my breasts, pinches my nipples with his fingers and then descends to kiss my shoulder, suck on my breasts, torture them, reach my sternum, my belly, lingering on my navel where he swirls his tongue around and then descends further down arriving at his goal. He tortures my private parts as if that were his speciality.

He grabs my leg and places it on his shoulder to have more accessibility in giving me pleasure. Because he does it, with his tongue, with his breath, with his hand supporting me and pulling my pelvis towards his mouth. He does it with his finger massaging my perineum.

I move against him, pressing his face between my thighs, grabbing his hand and he crosses his fingers with mine. The other hand I thread through his hair, accompanying his every movement. I want to cum, I want to let the pleasure from his mouth erupt. He takes so much effort that it isn’t long before the orgasm invades my body and overwhelms me.

Exhausted, I let myself fall onto him who grabs me and holds me in his arms. It takes me a few seconds too long to become lucid again, and only then do I see his face, his lips moist with my humours.

I caress them and with my thumb try to remove it, to dry his skin, but he doesn't want to. He moves his face away, almost offended by my gesture.

“Did you enjoy the punishment?” he asks looking away. His tone sounds doubtful, or perhaps afraid because of the headbutt. I snuggle into his arms more, drinking in his magnificent scent that intoxicates my nostrils.

I find so much feeling in his gesture of resting his head against mine. A gift, all for me, that I desire more and more every minute.

“Are you okay?” he mumbles funny, surely because his cheek is resting against my forehead.

“No.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Absolutely not. It's just that you're still unsatisfied.”

“Sweet, thoughtful little Jade,” he chuckles. “If that's what's not making you feel good, then let me give you a chance to ease your discomfort.” With infinite gentleness he helps me up and, as soon as he does, walks over to the chair by the door. I look at him without understanding. He grabs a small bag, then turns and passes me, serious, heading towards the living room. As soon as he crosses the threshold, he throws what he has in his hand on the sofa, takes off his jacket dropping it on the floor and finally looks at me.

“Are you going to join me or not? We need to address your concern.” I smile and, without thinking further, run to him.

I don't speak, I just really want to tease him. I grab his shirt slipping it out of his trousers. I run my hands down his back, stroking and scratching it. I brush his hips and belly, enjoying feeling his sculpted abs. Including that huge scar I still don't know anything about.

Kristòs grabs my hands tightly and, in one motion, glues me to himself.

“How can I please you, Daddy?” I want his voice to command my every move. I want to enjoy the lustful tone that takes hold of him.

He falls silent instead.

He backs up to sit on the couch, dragging me with him. Naked and at the mercy of the new humours he is causing me, I sit astride his legs. With fingers intertwined, his eyes scan my breasts as if he's never seen them before. I feel his gaze burning my skin. I try to close the distance, but he prevents me from doing so by holding my hands firmly. I start to move slightly, almost exasperated with anticipation.

“Kristòs, please,” I huff, leaning towards him. “What, now you don't want to provide for my worry anymore?”

“I don't want to rush. We have the whole night ahead of us.”

“Only because you're old and couldn't handle a whole night of sex.” I tease him, bringing my face as close to his as I can. “You hide behind the ‘let's take it slow’ excuse, but I dare you to keep up the pace all night.”

“Really? You think I'm too old to bang you all night like you want?” he asks crudely. His tone drives me crazy. I shrug my shoulders pretending not to believe him. I want actions,

not words. I'm sick of talking, of having to tease him all the time.

“Prove it to me.”

“The only thing that could stop me is the pain in my wound. Nothing more.” A few seconds later he draws me into a rough kiss, full of want and desire. His tongue swirls around in my mouth, commanding me. His fingers crawl up my back, his nails scratching my skin, tearing at every inch they pass over.

With difficulty I manage to unbutton his shirt and take it off, revealing the perfection of his muscles that he selfishly kept hidden from my view. As soon as I try to unbutton his trousers, Kristòs rebels. He pulls my hand away and, with a deft move, rolls me over onto my stomach on his lap. I don't have time to figure out his intentions when he delivers a resounding slap to my buttock, really hurting me.

“Are you crazy?” I blurt out.

“That'll teach you to come to dinner without your panties on,” he justifies. “And that's for not telling me.” Another slap. This time I scream in pain. “I don't like the way you behaved with that Italian.” He strokes the affected part trying to give me relief.

“I don't think I did anything wrong,” I defend myself. Another slap hits my sore thigh.

“I'm talking,” he shushes me. I grit my teeth, convinced I'm getting yet another blow, but the only thing I feel is a strange sensation in my private parts. “You're so wet,” he whispers as he rubs his finger over the hot flesh. “Ready for me.”

He reverses the situation again and throws me on my back on the couch placing himself on top of me. In his gaze there is so much desire a desire to show me what he's made of.

He reaches behind him and grabs the little bag he had thrown on the couch earlier. He pulls out a box of condoms.

“Twenty-seven?”

“Did you want less? We can always pick up tomorrow if you're feeling tired.”

I smile cashing in on the cheap shot he just gave me and raise.

“Or if the wound hurts.” Kristòs tilts his head and chuckles. He resumes unwrapping the box to pull one out without speaking. He unbuttons his trousers and pulls them down just enough to ease his movements, but I anticipate him.

With my eyes glued on him I unwrap the condom and bring it close to his member. I put it on without further teasing, without looking.

Only then does he lean over me again, starting to torture my body with tempting kisses.

“You are magnificent,” he whispers through his lips. He slips his hand between us and, with a sweep of his hips, enters me. I'll never get used to him, the feeling of him inside me and the way my body reacts to his movements. I arch my back in pleasure as he moves slowly, making space between my tight flesh.

This time is different. It's not as magical as the first, as magnificent as the second or as surprising as just now. This feels like a real rush of pleasure. One that you rush through for fear of being caught. His movements are quick and rough, he

doesn't ask, he just takes and, stroke after stroke, he takes me to the stars. Rapid, fatal, and devastating.

So fast that we find ourselves embraced and exhausted in no time. His forehead on my shoulder, his quickened breath tickling my breasts.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"It's all over soon but..." He rises on his elbows, caressing my face, cuddling me. There's a strange frown on his that I can't decipher. He looks harried. "I got a craving for you as soon as you called me to zip."

"I drove you to exasperation." I giggle, lifting my chin to brag. Never has anyone said such beautiful words to me that fill me with joy and inflate my ego.

"You have no idea." I can feel deep inside how true this phrase is. Today he has never stopped showing his desire, his eagerness to have me, to possess me.

He comes out of me naturally. He gets up from the couch and starts to adjust his trousers, leaving me like this, uncovered and full of questions. I close my eyes and sigh, trying to hold my tongue and my thoughts in check. I can't think badly every time he stays silent.

When I lift my eyelids, I find Kristòs standing in front of me, his hands in his pockets and his head tilted to the side. On his face is a mischievous grin that drives me crazy.

"Are you tired already, Daddy?" I whisper moving as if impatient, provoking him again. I bring my hand to my breast and start fiddling with one nipple. He moistens his lips then bites down on them.

“I’m not tired,” he murmurs a few moments later. “I was just letting you catch your breath.” A sweet smile appears on his face, making a fist with his wrinkled face.

“Tell the truth, you’re the one who needs to catch his breath. But that’s understandable, you’re of a certain age. It’s hard to keep up with me.” I tease him with words but also with gestures when I decide to bring his hand between my legs.

“How dare you, you cheeky little girl,” he begins after swallowing conspicuously. He removes his trousers in a flash, followed by his boxers showing his majestic arousal.

“Now I’ll show you who’s tired.” He reaches for me, grabs my leg to regain his place from just now and quickly grabs another condom, slips it on and angrily chases my hand away to enter me again. Powerful, unbridled, as if what we did just now never happened or left me unsatisfied.



“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?” I whisper, stroking his hair. We’re stranded, hugging each other on this huge couch. He has his face resting on my chest. “Does it hurt?”

“Not much. It’s bearable,” he interrupts me abruptly. I don’t want him to suffer to make himself look good, to show that he can keep up with my pace even though he’s older than me. That scar is big and fresh.

“Do you want a painkiller?” I care about his health, and I want him to be well. I care about everything about him to be honest.

“Don’t worry about it. Just leave me here and I’ll be better in no time.” I don’t know if standing still like this, hugging me, is mild to him or he’s just doing it to not scare me. There’s too much I don’t know and it’s starting to take its toll. If I’m with him, if I’m his woman, as he said, I think it’s legitimate to know.

I would like him to understand that I am there, that I can provide for him, support him, wait for him to get better and not demand anything, not even these sex marathons he subjects me to. He has nothing to prove, he doesn’t have to compete with anyone.

“When I was little, I used to cuddle up in my mother’s embrace to feel better. Then I grew up and had to deal with the pain in my own way.” It’s not the same, I know, but right now it’s what I feel like saying.

“You’re perfect, what pain could you have had?”

“There have been occasions that have been truly devastating to the soul and not having anyone to hold on to made it worse.” Kristòs rises up on his elbows and points his eyes into mine waiting for the story to continue. “I just want to reiterate that if you need me, I’m here.” I stroke his cheek sensing his tension. “I don’t care about sex marathons, whether you sustain my pace or not, there’s no contest, you don’t have to compete with anyone. I’m there even if you just want to sit at a table and talk about this and that or tell me how you spent your day.” I want him to know how I feel and what I want. That’s all. If I don’t, I risk going crazy.

“You don’t want sex; you don’t want my money... What is it you want, my little Jade?” I brush his nose with the tip of mine in desperate contact.

“You.” That’s what I want, everything else is superfluous. I’ve told him time and time again, revealed on several occasions that I don’t care about anything outside of him, but it doesn’t seem to enter his head. He inhales and closes his eyes letting me know that he doesn’t like the answer.

“I can be yours here, in Athens. In Santorini things will go back to the way they were.” Now I’m the one closing my eyes and puffing tiredly. “Is that enough for you?” he pushes his nose against mine, drawing my attention. I try to work up the courage to look him in the eye and tell him I’m okay with it, even if inside I’m not at all. Erasing what we’re experiencing is a prospect I don’t like. I’m afraid I have no alternative though.

“If I can’t have more, I’ll make do with what you grant me.” God knows what it costs me to say these words, but I have no alternative, otherwise I might lose him for these few hours we have left before we return to Santorini. Tired, naked, rendered helpless by this magnificent man, I welcome his kiss before letting myself fall back onto the sofa.

I close my eyelids made heavy by sleep and try to empty my head.

“Shall we go sleep in the room?” I want to answer him given the sweet tone he used, but I can’t, I just mumble. “Jade.”

When his arms wrap around me, I come back to my senses.

“Your hurt, put me down” I mumble laying my head on his shoulder. I don’t understand the reason for my sudden drowsiness and loss of strength. Gently he lays me down on the bed, removes my shoes and necklace then covers me with the sheet.

“Does it hurt?”

“Don’t worry. Just sleep, you’re tired.”

“I’m not old,” I say before snuggling into the pillow. His gentle chuckle gladdens my heart and makes me fall asleep with a smile on my face.

Chapter 18



The big day has arrived. Too quickly, I might add. Everyone is dressed up, ready to celebrate the most important day of my life. Or, should I say, that of my parents and their companies.

I get out of the very luxurious car that brought me to the front of the church and wait for my father to arrive at my side.

“You look beautiful,” he whispers before handing me his arm which I grasp firmly. He leads me towards the entrance where the notes of the wedding march resound, and all the guests turn to look at me. In front of me, just him, the man I will have to live with for the rest of my life, the man I will have to support and endure. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health. Every step brings me closer to a future with a person I do not love.

I close my eyes, squeezing them hard, and when I open them again, the faces of the people are all the same. They all have Raffaele’s face.

I JOLT AWAKE, realising that it was all a dream. I am out of breath and my heart is pounding.

I turn around, hoping to find the man with whom I spent the best hours of my life at my side. Here he is, lying beside me, on his stomach, in the bed in my room. The sheet covers his bottom and one leg. His arms under the pillow accentuate his muscles and his back is a wonderful temptation I could run my tongue over.

If God had any resemblance to man, it would surely be his.

I get up slowly, trying not to wake up the magnificent specimen of man I have had all night. I don't know what time it is, since I have been with him, I have literally lost track of time.

I banish from my head all the bad memories presented in the form of dreams. I even shake it to eradicate them faster. I want to reach out to Kris, kiss him all over until he wakes up and make him help me forget, but I hold back. First, I have to go to the bathroom to freshen up.

I get out of bed in complete silence. I dodge the pillows that have flown to the floor and enter the toilet. I turn on the light and...

"Jesus Christ!" I cover my mouth in amazement as my name is spoken in Kristòs' sleepy voice. He reaches for me, leans against the doorframe, and reaches out to check the inside.

"What about this?" I ask in a low voice. Now that he's here there's no point in shouting. Kristòs closes his eyes, bangs his head against the wall and curses under his breath.

"That's what I forgot."

"How did you do that?" I point to everything in the bathroom. Worn out candles and a few gummy bears here and there.

“To forget or to make it?” he mumbles, torturing his forehead. I shake my head and out of the corner of my eye I notice something I never imagined.

“Jesus Christ!” I head for the Jacuzzi, my mouth wide open and my heart racing with amazement. No, I don’t believe it, did he really do that?

“Would you stop using that expletive? It irritates me,” he grumbles as if he has a headache. I don’t listen to him, because I know he’ll keep complaining and I’ll keep swearing like that.

“You filled the tub with gummy bears.”

“Yeah,” he whispers while continuing to keep his eyes closed. He’s definitely tired and I’m not helping him. “I wanted to apologize for the way I acted on the terrace and... holy hell.” He crumples his face and finally opens his eyes.

“You filled a Jacuzzi with gummy bears just because you’re jealous?” I move closer to him biting my lip.

“No. It’s not because of that. I wanted to...”

“You know what my second biggest wish is?” I interrupt him trying to have a sensual tone as I reach out to him and, with one hand, stroke the back of his head.

He turns his gaze doubtfully towards me, waits for a few moments and shakes his head slightly. “Having sex in there.” Kristòs widens his eyes and swallows slowly. “What?” I move closer until our bodies match.

“I’m not going to do it in the tub in the middle of all that coloured jelly,” he mutters. Although the idea appeals to me a lot, mine is just a tease. Unless...

Kristòs shakes his head, turns around, walks back to the bed, and throws himself on it.

“What the...” I reach for him, and even though he’s lying on his stomach, I straddle him and begin to caress his shoulders in a gentle massage.

“Go back to sleep, Jade.” I ignore him. I continue in my intention to tease him. I lean over him and kiss his warm, taut skin. “Jade.” Maybe he wanted to be at peace? Well, I’m not going to give him that. My lips crawl up his back, savouring the taste of him. I run my hands over his hips, stopping on the obliques before he turns things around. With a flick of his hips, he throws me down on the bed and intertwines our legs in a wrestling move. I smile as his big brown eyes scan me. He doesn’t speak, though I imagine he’d like to scold me, but he doesn’t, he just stares at me hard.

“Thank you.” The classic wrinkle from when he frowns appears on his forehead. “You fulfilled my biggest dream.” Sure, to him it might seem like a silly thing to wish for a bathtub full of gummy bears, but to me, who’s a sucker for them and has been cultivating this desire since childhood, it’s the most meaningful and sweet thing anyone’s ever done. I gently caress his cheek.

“No one has ever granted this wish of mine.” My thumb rubs against his lips and he doesn’t push me away. He accepts my gesture.

“Maybe you never found the right person.”

Kristòs continues to surprise me with gestures, thoughts, and words. The right person. He is the right person.

“Probably. Or maybe I’ve never come to trust someone enough to tell them.”

“Do you trust me?” he asks dumbfounded. I close my eyes and sigh realizing I said the most wrong thing in this world. If

I trusted him, I would tell him who I really am, that my name isn't Jade, that I'm not Greek and that I don't have to beg for work to live. I would tell him that I ran away from home because my father wanted to force me to marry someone who doesn't even know my wishes just to hide a scandal called Raffaele.

“Sweet little Jade,” he whispers caressing my face. He sneaks his hand through my hair and pulls me closer until his nose brushes against mine. “You're so tender when you open up and talk about yourself. These days you've been a breath of fresh air. You've given me the peace of mind I'd long since lost. Too bad I didn't kiss you sooner.”

“Is that why you were so grumpy when we fought?” Now he's the one closing his eyes and sighing. Silence is something I can't stand when asking questions like that.

“Can I ask you something?” The heavy snort with which he answers me makes me realize that he doesn't really want to talk. I don't care and move on. “How come you have such a big scar on your torso?” More moments of deafening silence. He doesn't want to reveal anything about his past to me.

“If I tell you then will you go to sleep?” I mumble in affirmation. “Liver transplant.” The blood freezes in my veins. A thousand questions swirl in my head. “I'm not proud of it, but it's there to remind me that I'm not invincible,” he continues as the lump in my throat tightens more and more.

“Are you okay now?” I ask with the lump tightening in my throat. How can such a handsome and intelligent man... be... A sob comes out of my mouth and, while my eyes are clouded with sorrow, he caresses my face wiping away the tears.

“It was a year ago and...”

“Are you okay? You’re not going to make me live a fairy tale and then reveal that you’re dying of some disease?” The words come out of me as my brain has gone into complete confusion imagining him on a hospital bed.

“There is no illness, it is just the consequence of the worst period of my life. I have Athos to thank for helping me get through it and out of it. Not every friend would give you a piece of their liver.” The gloom explodes into a huge sob. Even though it sounds silly, I hide my face in the pillow, so it doesn’t show that I’m crying.

“Jade, what’s wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I whine for no apparent reason, at least to him. “I don’t know what’s happening to me but knowing that you’ve suffered so much that you’re in danger of losing your life destabilizes me. I’m growing fond of you, Kris, I feel something that goes way beyond... and knowing that you’ve been hurt, risking your life... I care about you, and I don’t think you’re that indifferent to me anymore.” I may be foolish to reveal my feelings to him, but I think it’s also only fair that he should know before I continue. A kiss, a simple and tender kiss on the cheek is what I have in response.

“Don’t worry. Now go to sleep, we have another eventful day ahead of us in a few hours.” I nod, disappointed by his reaction. I try to curl up on myself to take in this new feeling hoping he will help me, but he doesn’t. He sighs and goes back to lying next to me, his face inches from my head.

“You shouldn’t drink alcohol,” I speak back instead of shutting up.

“Did you see me do that?” he replies in a neutral tone, not at all aimed at offending me or reiterating the boredom in continuing to rage.

“Odin keeps bringing you the Ouzo spritz and you always drink it.”

“I haven’t had them for years even though he keeps bringing them to me. Maybe, for the sake of my finances, I should tell him to stop, but it amuses me that he thinks he can compel me with a simple drink.”

“So, you never even drank the ones I made you?” Like a fool, I run my finger along the scar, imprinting every last overlap in my mind.

“All you see is plain water with ice and squeezed lemon, nothing more.” He places his hand over mine, blocking its stroke. He squeezes it and brings it to his lips, kissing it. Then he places it on my cheek to be caressed.

I’m glad he confided in me, that he chose to be vulnerable instead of invincible.

“Kristòs.” I wait for his verse or gesture to continue talking. When it comes, I understand that he is falling asleep. “Can we take the gummy bears away?”

Chapter 19



A ray of sunlight pinches my eyes and wakes me up, interrupting my sweet sleep. I hadn't slept so well in months. Very soft sheets with a sweet relaxing scent lulled me to sleep all night long. A cuddle I would never want to give up.

I stretch lazily and turn on my stomach, stretching my arm across the mattress. The place beside me is empty and cold. The man with whom I shared the bed is no longer there.

Maybe he wasn't ever there and everything that happened was just a stupid dream.

I kick off the sheet and sit up. I look around the room trying to find the slightest trace of last night's activity, but there's nothing, not even a speck of dust out of place or some clothes or a tie, or the second crumpled pillow.

It really does look like I slept on it by myself.

"The gummy bears," I exclaim as the memory resurfaces. I get out of bed and run to the bathroom, but nothing. No sign of the bathtub filled to the brim with teddy bears and adorned with scented candles. Nothing lets me know that everything I've been through has been real. "I can't have dreamt it. It's not possible."

Resigned to the idea that I've gone insane I return to the room to get dressed and go to the living room for breakfast, but something on the bedside table catches my eye. A piece of paper with writing on it and a gummy bear as a paperweight. I smile and quickly reach the note, grabbing first the bear and then the piece of paper.

Like a little girl, I sniff the jelly, intoxicated by its scent. I close my eyes and shrug my shoulders. As soon as I realise, I am no longer a child, I pull myself together and read what is written.

GOOD MORNING, Jade,

You were sleeping so well that I didn't have the courage to wake you up.

I had to run some errands, but I'll be back soon.

P.S. A sweet souvenir of the evening. I hope you haven't already eaten it.

I READ and re-read the note, imagining Kristòs writing it. How his long fingers grip the pen, how he bites the inside of his cheek when he's concentrating, how his full lips curl up as he reads again after he's finished.

I keep smiling and sniffing the gummy bear as I leave the room to head for the shared lounge. In the hallway Kris's trolley is ready and the smell of coffee overpowers the smell of jelly.

I take a step forward and in a flash I'm in front of a table laden with every sweet in Athens. I smile and grab a biscuit.

Honestly, I would have preferred to find Kristòs waiting for me so we could have breakfast together, but maybe waking me up and taking me with him was not one of his priorities.

Or maybe he didn't want to wake me up to drag me between offices and errands where he knew I'd be bored. But for him I would have gritted my teeth, endured it.

I sit down in front of the only set place and try to choose what to start with when a piece of paper placed under the saucer with the croissants catches my attention. I pick it up and a small smile appears on my face as soon as I recognise the handwriting of Kristòs.

JADE,

our flight is scheduled for this afternoon at 4pm.

Pack your bags so on my return we can leave the hotel and take a tour of Athens, just you and me.

AWARE OF BEING EARLY, I enjoy this wonderful moment alone. I think and rethink about what has happened to me in these few weeks, about how I met Kristòs, so cold and unreachable. So different from the men I have known. Maybe that's why my brain insisted on behaving arrogantly, challenging him, wanting to subdue him and prove that I could get what I wanted. Kris, however, resisted, stood up to me and showed no interest in me whatsoever. He managed to reject me in a way that no one had ever done before.

I guess that's what drove me to try, to try hard, to follow him into the shower.

I put the last piece of biscuit in my mouth and get up from the table to go back to the room and pack my suitcase. Although I have plenty of time, I prefer to take advantage because I would like to take a bath in the small pool on the terrace.

At least I can still take advantage of all this luxury. I'm sure Kristòs won't hold it against me.

I gather up everything I've brought with me, put it in my rucksack without bothering to fold my clothes and run towards the terrace.

On the way I take off my shirt and get into my underwear. I plunge in, holding my breath while a shiver runs down my back. I didn't think the water would be so cold in this heat. As soon as I get used to it, I enjoy the sweet warmth of the sun's rays.

I close my eyes and turn off my brain, shutting out every single noise.



A VOICE in the distance calls out to me. I hear it but ignore it. Too muffled, too distant to care.

“Jade, wake up.” I open my eyes only because I can no longer feel the sun kissing my face and the water around me is revealed for what it is, icy. What I catch a glimpse of, though, is even more beautiful than the sun itself and it overshadows everything. I sit up and crinkle my eyes.

“Hello, sleeping beauty.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” I retort, pretending to be offended by his presence. But how could I be? He’s the most handsome man in the world. Dressed in a black T-shirt that wraps around his torso and shows off his muscles. Jeans that give him that youthful touch that, coupled with his jaunty hairdo, make him divine.

“I took longer than I thought. I had to...”

“What time is it?” I interrupt his apology.

“Noon.” Kristòs shifts to the side, moving away from the pool almost annoyed by my tone.

“But what time did you wake up?”

“Seven o’clock. Why?”

“That should be illegal,” I mumble, making him smile. “Kind of like you dressed like that.” He bows his head and looks away, surely embarrassed. “Sorry, but someone has to tell you that you’re illegal dressed like that. I bet they all turned to look at you when you walked by.”

“You’re very exciting when you make those assumptions,” he says mischievously without giving me a glance. It seems that something inside is more important than me. He goes back to the terrace, grabs the bathrobe that is in the locker next to the door and joins me. “Could you come out of there and join me?” He shakes that absorbent piece of cloth as if that gesture alone will serve to hasten my exit from the pool “Please, I have a lot of work to do and...”

“I can wait for you here. I’m not good company while we’re talking business,” I mutter dipping down to cover my mouth with water. He shakes the garment again in an unspoken peremptory order.

“Okay, but only because I’m starting to get the chills, otherwise you’d have to come and take me by force.”

“Believe me, I would have preferred that.” I slowly get up and catch up with him.

“What, come get me or take me by force?” I giggle slipping my hands into my dressing gown backwards to hug him. Our faces are so close, so close that a deep breath would be enough to bring us together.

“Your puns...” he whispers leaving a chaste kiss on my lips.

“You fall for it all the time” I retort returning the kiss.

“Maybe, or maybe I’ll let you think that” he continues trying to save himself at the last. I close my eyes and smile because I see no alternative. If I retort, he will continue to want the last word. He won’t give it to me, I know him well by now.

“Kiss me.” If just now I wanted to kill him for disturbing me while I was at peace, now I feel like I want him more than ever.

“Jade, you’re an icicle.”

“A proper kiss. I don’t think I’m asking for much.” This time Kristòs snorts and pulls me away from him as if I’m bothering him.

“I get it,” I relent. I put on my dressing gown properly and follow him inside the room. “Could it be that these papers are so important that you don’t want this?” I exclaim pointing to my body. Even though I’m at his side, I feel him distant.

He gives me a dirty look that freezes the blood in my veins.

“Yes! I asked you to be ready to go out,” he continues, concentrating on putting the papers in the special clear plastic bags, not forgetting to attach a post-it note stopped with a paper clip.

I shake my head at the manic way he arranges things and turn away from him to go to my room to get dressed.

“Stop right there.” The tone is so rough that I obey only because I really want to hear what he has to say to me. “Sit down and make yourself comfortable I’m coming.”

I smile and lie down on the couch letting the dressing gown open in all the right places. Just enough to provoke him to the point where he falls completely at my feet.

He moves away from the table to join me, head bowed, and eyes glued to the envelope he holds in his hands. I get irritated, unable to understand how he can ignore me like this. It’s only when he gets to my side that he looks up at me and the irritation vanishes into thin air. His tense shoulders, which at first gave him a stiff posture, are now relaxing. The envelope slips from his fingers. I smile, proud of myself.

He curses under his breath and swallows.

“Jade, you’re a constant temptation, but...” He bends down to pick up the envelope and sits at my side. He runs his index finger along my leg in a sensual and provocative caress that points straight to my hip, peels back the fabric and continues until he draws imaginary circles on my lower abdomen. It goes up again, reaching my sternum where, apparently, there are still a few drops of water. It runs along the knurled features of my underboob tattoo as if it were extremely interesting. My body moves under his gentle touch, demanding something more each time. I bite my lip and close

my eyes when he grabs my breast, squeezing it firmly. It may be small, but in his hand it's perfect.

He spreads my legs and positions himself in the middle. I hold my breath when his lips land on my belly. He kisses every inch of skin before lying on top of me and cupping my lips. He's greedy, demanding space in my mouth as if it were his due, as if he feeds off this contact. He caresses my leg with his hand, running down it until he reaches my ass and squeezes it hard. Instinctively I entwine my legs around his waist and....

"Jade." He levers his hands together and stands up to move away, but I hold him back. He whispers my name again and I groan. I don't want him to move away from me, to break away. At yet another call from him and yet another guttural cry in response, I loosen my grip.

"I want to show you something important, before I..."

"Are you sure? You don't want to take advantage of it now?" I get just enough of a glare from him to know I have to give in. I let him get up and show me what is more important to him than having sex with me.

As soon as Kristòs sits down, he hands me the envelope he was holding when he reached me.

"What is it?" I ask irritated. I know, I'm a spoiled brat and if I don't get what I want I get bitter, but what can I do? I've been used to it; I've been allowed to do it.

Besides, let's face it, who wouldn't be if they were forbidden to have sex with a Greek god?

"Open." I can tell from the tone of his voice that he's curious to see my reaction.

I do as he wants and pull out the slip of paper. The first thing I see printed out makes me nervous. I try to hold back and pull out the paper completely to understand.

I am stunned, I can't speak, I can't express myself. My eyes are locked on the embossed symbol printed in gold.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Maybe he's hoping for compliments or a smile or something. I just don't think I can.

"Do you really want an answer?"

"What do you say?" he replies annoyed, more for not getting a positive reaction than for what he did. What he did to me. I shake my head, hoping it's just a nightmare. "I thought it was a good idea, that you'd like it. I took a cue..."

"No! I don't like it! You used my tattoo for the logo of your club! How do you expect me to like it? This symbol means something to me, I didn't do it lightly. You, on the other hand, find it cute and original and thought it would be cool to use it!" I shout.

His eyes are wide as I demolish his plans by being the insensitive one. But what am I supposed to do, accept, and shut up? "You should have asked what I thought before you put me in front of a *fait accompli*."

"You don't have a monopoly on the symbol," he retorts. He snatches the envelope from my hands and walks away, heading for the table. Really? He thinks he's right?

"Of course not, but you only did that after you saw it on me!"

"Fine, then ask yourself some questions."

“Why don’t you enlighten me instead?” He turns around causing me to gasp. He leaves everything he was doing to, at least I hope, explain himself to me.

“I’ve liked your tattoo ever since that day at the beach when I first saw it. I’ve been looking for a logo for my club that would encapsulate the last period of my life for a long time so, when I was having lunch with Costa, it made me close my eyes and guess who showed up in my mind? You. And you were pointing at that tattoo. With the help of Costa’s daughter, I managed to figure out what it was.” In his eyes I read sincerity and astonishment at my exaggerated reaction. He cannot understand that this symbol means a lot. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, resigned. I try to say something, but nothing seems adequate. I raise my hands in surrender and back away. He’s made up his mind by now, he’s chosen that Samsara will be the name of his club and he’ll use his symbol as the logo.

“Jade listen...”

“What should I tell you?”

“It’s not what you think, I...” he starts but I raise my hands to shush him.

“We’re just having fun, right? My tattoo has become your club’s logo, though. I’d ask myself two questions.” He seems to be absorbing my every word, my every consideration that he, perhaps, didn’t consider. “It will haunt you.”

“I won’t associate you with my club if that’s your fear.”

“I’m saying this for you.”

“The name of the club has nothing to do with you. Do you understand that? You’re two completely different things. Even

to me that damn doodle means something,” he reveals, and I roll my eyes and turn to lock myself in my room.

Pathetic. It really is pathetic.

I close the door to the room and, without thinking any further about how he behaved and what he did, I go and take a shower to get rid of the smell of chlorine. Then I put on a simple white cotton dress with black flowers and sneakers. I have no intention of looking perfect in his eyes like I did last night.

I leave the room and head for the common area, finding Kristòs on the terrace talking on the phone. He seems quiet, unlike he was about ten minutes ago. I don't understand who he's interacting with, maybe it's business and it certainly doesn't concern me.

“I understand, but did you sign?” Now his voice is loud enough to hear what he's saying. “For fuck's sake Athos, you can't tell me to stay calm. You assured me that the matter would be resolved! Do you realise that? We're still here discussing this.” He runs his hand over his forehead to sneak his fingers through his hair and pull it. “No, you deal with it. You're my lawyer, I don't want anything more to do with it.” He hangs up. I watch him as he lowers his shoulders and loses his proud manly air as he returns to the circle of the vulnerable.

For a moment I think that I've met a different Kristòs every day, and this one in front of me is the one I like the least. Sadness does not suit him, I prefer to see him happy, to see the dimples on the sides of his mouth, the wrinkles around his eyes as he does the most beautiful thing in the world, that of showing off his magnificent smile. Kristòs is someone who

doesn't let anything, or anyone get him down, someone who fights for his ideals, like the name of his club.

I lower my gaze, feeling guilty for treating him badly, for shouting my disappointment at him. I could have just sucked it up and been happy for him, for his successes, for who he is. But no, I went off the deep end and demolished his achievements over something stupid.

The envelope with the invitation is still on the table in front of me. I want to take another look at it and convince myself that he didn't do it lightly.

I do what I should have done before: read everything carefully.

NEW OPENING IN ATHENS

Saturday 30 august at 9 p.m.

AT THE BOTTOM right is the address of the club.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I overlook the fact that the opening is on the same day as my birthday and continue. He can't know that, so I can't get angry about it. I stare at the logo, finding a few details that link it to my tattoo. It's not as detailed as the symbol representing Samsara, this one is very stylised.

"If it really bothers you, I'll change it. I just have to redo all the paperwork, the sign, the invitations and the gadgets." Kristòs' voice is soft and reassuring as he comes over to me. He would be willing to change everything, to spend more money on my whim. Which I can't allow. I didn't hear him

come back in, but surely, he did because I'm going through his things.

"It's okay," I whisper, shrugging my shoulders. I lift my eyes pointing them into his.

"You sure?" I nod and sigh. I have to resign myself to the idea that thousands of people might be using the same symbol and I can't rage at everyone.

"My senior year of high school I almost died. Not because of a bad illness or something that could be 'forgiven'. Because of an accident. I was in the back seat and the guardrail barely grazed me. A crazy drunk guy cut us off and we couldn't avoid him. I felt like I was in one of the Final Destination movies because it was so crazy. It seems like nothing, but when you see the metal coming at you and you can't move, your whole life flashes before your eyes. "The top tore the flesh of my chest." I point to the spot with my index finger. "The lower one came from behind sticking up my neck and pushing me towards the first one, causing a deep scar under my breast." It doesn't hurt to tell it anymore.

"Why did you say it shouldn't be forgivable?"

"The driver was taking me home after a party. He'd been drinking too," I reveal, lowering my gaze. "Kristòs, I overreacted, you couldn't have known how important the symbol of Samsara is to me. I'm sorry. Your scar reveals that you are also part of the circle. I should have thought about it before I spoke."

Kristòs reaches out a hand towards me to grab me, and when he does, he pulls me into his arms. He places his lips on my forehead and sighs, nothing more. Then, suddenly he pulls away and turns to gather all the papers on the table. Just like that, as if our moment of sharing had never existed. I close my

eyes trying to make myself fit this emptiness I feel between us. As if, because of my outburst, the harmony we had has been irreparably ruined.

“Now we’d better get going, I’d like to take you out for something to eat before we leave.” I open my eyes and play dumb.

“Can I choose where to eat?” I give him a languid look with the hope of winning, at least on that.

“Fine.” He smiles finally revealing his magnificent dimples. “Now let’s go though.” He puts the papers into the leather briefcase. I nod understanding that we are now in the home stretch. We’ve spent two magnificent days in the throes of total desire and now we’re going to go back to fighting each other like we always have. Or we’ll go our separate ways.

I hope not, because it would kill me.

I chase away these thoughts and walk towards the backpack that I grab and carry on my shoulder, waiting for Kristòs to join me.

“Are you alright?”

“A wonder,” I reply with a tense smile.

“Are you sure?” His words are a whisper, a slight shift of air that as soon as it hits my ear makes me shiver. His hands grab my backpack, slipping it off and dropping it to the ground. He wraps his shoulders around me in a hug that hurts.

“What’s wrong?” He places his lips in the crook of my neck. He has no idea that the thought of it all being over wears me down. Out of here, everything will go back to the way it was.

His body pushes me towards the wall, trapping me. He sucks on my lip, biting it, pulling it, taking my breath away as he reaches down and grabs my ass, lifting me up to wedge us in.

“Take me,” I sigh, as I wrap my legs around his waist and bring my arms behind his neck.

“I can’t. We have a plane to catch. If I’m going to have you, I want to do it right and not with a quickie.”

“Sure,” I giggle. He smiles and sets me down but doesn’t let me go. He tightens his grip on my hips and adheres me to the wall.

“Don’t mess with me, you know very well I could make you mine all night” he says through his teeth, but I know he’s not angry, he just feels challenged.

“As soon as we get back to Santorini, I’m going to demand you.”

“As soon as we get back to Santorini,” he repeats inches from my ear. “When I’m done, you won’t even be able to walk, and you’ll regret your words.” He places his lips on my cheek and curls them, leaving us with a kiss.

But why do we have to go back to the island?

“That is, if we don’t end up like last night, Daddy,” I chuckle amused before getting a bite as an answer.

“Let’s go, naughty girl.”

In the lift Kristòs is not quiet at all. All he does is tease me all the time. His hands are constantly on me. He pinches my bottom and sneaks under my skirt until, tired of being patted on the hand, he grabs me forcefully by the wrist, stands in front of me and traps me in the corner.

“Don’t ever resist my touch again,” he orders, and kisses me to shut me up.

As he squeezes my bottom so hard it hurts, I attempt to push him away from me. I’m saved by the sound of the lift alerting us to our arrival on the ground floor.

“Be thankful we’re here, otherwise...” The lift doors open to reveal a man waiting. I greet him cordially, recognising him by his nose.

Kristòs turns around, grabs the handle of the trolley and my hand, intertwining our fingers. He smiles complicitly at the man in front of him, still embarrassed by what happened last night.

We leave the lift and head straight out of the hotel, without checking out, to the car waiting for us.

Kristòs leaves the trolley with the driver and gets ready to open the door for me, waits for me to get in and then closes it. Before he turns around and reaches me, I see him talking to the driver and leaving him a note as a tip.

“Did something happen?” I try to ask, but he smiles and shakes his head.

“Where do you want to go?” He grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth. He kisses it and rests it on his chest, right at heart level.

“Fast food,” I reveal, the only meal I could afford to pay for. Kristòs’ head bangs on the headrest before he turns to me.

“I don’t set foot in those things,” he replies almost disgusted.

“I’ll pay, and I want to take you to eat in one of those things, as you call them.”

“You’re not paying for anything.”

“Please, I’m for gender equality and I’d like to treat you to a meal like ordinary people,” I smile as I approach him.

“Gender equality or not, you’re not paying, and I won’t compromise on that.”

“But we’re going to eat at one of those things.” My smile widens and the distance shortens.

“But we’re going to eat at one of those things,” he mocks me. I nod and pin my lips to his, leaving him a wet kiss that he reciprocates without fail. He pulls me to him, placing his hand on my neck, as eager for this kiss as I am.

The driver gives a cough and I pull away slightly, just enough to let him give orders to the driver.

“Let’s please Mrs. Princekaris. Take us to a fast-food restaurant that is in the immediate vicinity of the airport,” he orders with his eyes locked on mine. The mischievous smirk that appears on his face makes him really adorable. “Just this once.”

Mrs. Princekaris.

In no time at all, the driver starts the engine, and we head for our destination. It’s not long before he announces that we had already arrived.

“Take care, be good. Don’t use the cutlery,” I warn him. I’m really curious to see how he will behave. At the grimace of disgust at my words, I burst into a thunderous laugh. “Come on, a bit of junk food doesn’t hurt, you can even choose salad and fruit if you want it.”

“That doesn’t excite me at all.” He gets out of the car and comes to open the door for me, waiting for me to decide to get

out. I catch up with him but as we get to the door, he stops me. “Let me be clear, don’t mention this to anyone. I don’t like the idea of Athos or your friend finding out we went here. And I’m paying.” I roll my eyes at his stubbornness. I move his arm and enter first. Kristòs follows close behind.

Everyone turns to look at us. The mouths of many of the ladies half-close and I bet that Kristòs’ beauty is solely to blame. Although he is dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved T-shirt, his elegance still stands out.

Without paying any more attention to the prying eyes and his constant snorting, we order lunch.

“Do you usually eat at these places?” He asks as we sit at a small table, facing each other.

“When I was at school, I didn’t have time to waste. Fast food kept me alive until now.” I rest my elbows on the table and support my head with my hands, directing my gaze exclusively at him. Even though he’s embarrassed, I find him adorable.

“What about you? Tell me something about you that I don’t know yet.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” He reaches out a hand towards me and strokes my forearm. “I’ve never been into these clubs. I was more inclined to splurge on gym exercises than... stuffing myself with fat,” he reveals on the verge of a nervous breakdown. At least that’s what his eyes suggest.

“Do you want to eat outside?”

“Does it change?”

“Maybe not, but...” The waitress brings us the tray with what we have ordered and gives Kristòs a mischievous look,

who thanks her coldly. He looks resignedly at his plate while I grab my Veggie Burger in complete adoration.

“Jade, could we go eat somewhere else?” he pleads with his gaze focused on the salad with chunks of chicken breast and feta. I shake my head and bite into my veggie sandwich, heedless of what he might think of me.

“I’d eat it every day,” I say with my mouth full. Kristòs, on the other hand, hasn’t touched anything yet. “Tell me the truth, if I got fat, you wouldn’t like me anymore. Would you?”

“No, I mean yes. Oh, hell Jade.” Kristòs is fully uncomfortable, and I burst out laughing. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Love, if you eat these things once in a while, they won’t make you fat.” Kristòs’ eyes widen and then settle on me. Serious, he opens his lips. I grab a chip and hand it to him. “Besides, you burned so many calories last night, you can afford a chip.”

“What did you call me?”

“What did I call you?”

“Love,” he whispers. The frost. Everything seems to stop suddenly. Only the two of us exist.

Here, sitting in front of me like a shy kid on his first day of school, me with my hand in mid-air holding out a chip to him.

I can’t have called him that, I can’t have given him that nickname.

“Sorry. I... I didn’t...it wasn’t meant as...but as, honey... dear...” I stammer, trying to get out of my embarrassment. Even though Kristòs smiles understanding the gaffe, everything around us doesn’t start moving again.

“Love as in dear, not as a nickname you give to your boyfriend, right?” He asks with so much tension in his voice it scares me. I nod softly with my heart in my throat. “Okay,” he whispers, perhaps as scared as I am.

There, I knew it, now he’s going to get a thousand ideas about how I feel about him.

I’m stunned and almost don’t notice that Kristòs reaches out to me and bites my chip, caressing my fingers with his lips. Soon afterwards he steals a few more from the container. I blink at what he’s just done and, instead of asking him why he’s doing it, I do it with my hands.

“I’m helping you,” he explains, “and then you know I like chips, or did you forget last night?” he whispers allusively.

Now I’m shocked. He has gone from sheer terror to brazenness in the space of a few seconds.

I snort an amused laugh and very elegantly bring to my lips what’s left of the fry that Kristòs has seen fit to bite instead of taking and, to add to the dose, I suck the index finger that was just between his lips.

“You see, if we had gone to a restaurant, we wouldn’t have been able to do this.” I bring the straw to my mouth and take a sip of Coke.

“In fact,” he turns to look around, “I could lure you into the bathroom and bang you without anyone noticing.”

“Tempting proposition, but I’m hungry and...”

“How silly of you.” Even though he’s uncomfortable he doesn’t show it. “Come on, finish eating, or they won’t let us on the plane.”

With happiness in my heart, I finish my sandwich under the incredulous gaze of Kristòs. He, on the other hand, leaves everything, apart from the handful of chips he hasn't even touched a leaf of salad.

Having finished stuffing myself we put the tray away and leave the place.

We get into the car and race to the airport.

We grab our luggage, check in and, not surprisingly, hear our flight called. Kristòs gives me a dirty look as if I'm to blame for the delay and not the traffic.

“Why no ferry back?”

“I don't have time. I need to get back to Santorini as soon as possible. I'm sorry. I hope you'll forgive me, but I have a lot to do, and time is running out.”

“Will you have a little bit for me before the opening or will you abandon me?” Kristòs imitates me, fixing his eyes on mine, but he doesn't answer.

Who knows what will happen when we get there.

Chapter 20



“Jade.” Kristòs wakes me up from my nap. Due to his surprise, I hadn’t slept much and had dozed off. I mumble in response and crinkle my eyes. “We’re here.”

I look around imagining I’ve made a bad impression.

“I’m the old woman,” I mutter as the plane is making its way down the last few feet of runway. “I can’t stand the wee hours anymore.”

“Blame it on all the physical activity you did before you left,” he interjects making me blush at the mere memory of his hands on my body. I miss them already.

“It’s never had that effect on me. In my opinion it’s the coach who managed to wear me out.” I play along with him, hoping to maintain a relaxed atmosphere between us. Kristòs smiles, letting his amusement show, but doesn’t answer.

“Do we have plans for today?”

“I don’t think so. It’s Sunday.”

And why all this hurry to get home? Couldn’t we have stayed in that wonderful hotel?

He finally turns to me. His brown eyes are a wonder when a ray of sunlight hits them. It seems strange, but they change colour to blue.

“I’ll take you home and…” He freezes and my heart starts to deflate. He bites his bottom lip and smiles mischievously. Slowly, he brings his face closer to mine trapping me between himself and the sheet metal of the plane. “I’ll tie you to that wrought iron bed you have in your room making you tired again.” I swallow swallowing down the sudden excess of saliva. “Do you know how many things you can do?”

“I have a vague idea, but I think I should review.”

Let’s face it, who wouldn’t want to go over every position of the Kamasutra with a Greek god like him?

“One?” He runs his tongue over those perfect lips I’d love to devour.

“More than one?” He nods slowly, damn sexy managing to get everything inside of me moving.

When he pulls away, my body collapses from his absence. Even though he’s only a few steps away he’s too far away to quell the discombobulation he’s created in me and continues to fuel.

I am glad that he waits in his seat for all the passengers to move outside and let us off without having to queue.

Once we have retrieved our luggage, we make our way to the car that Kristòs was driving in Athens.

He opens the boot and puts his trolley and my backpack in it. He gives me a shy smile before closing the door and stopping in front of me. He doesn’t touch me, just bends his head to whisper something in my ear.

“Thanks for a lovely weekend. Would you like me to make a reservation for tonight at a little restaurant overlooking the caldera? Just you and me.”

“One of those with the candles on the tables?”

“And that at the stroke of midnight, offers a magnificent view for the fireworks display,” he concludes in an enthusiastic tone as if he had personally organised it just for us.

He doesn't want anything, he doesn't promise me anything, but he keeps acting as if he wants me in his life even here in Santorini. This is strange because in Athens he said the opposite, but I don't care. Everything he gives me I accept, and I continue to hope that he has changed his mind.



“So?” he asks astonished after I express my bewilderment at his ignorance about an internationally famous song we just heard on the radio.

“But how old are you?” It seems the old one is me since I know songs from his era. “How can you say you've never heard it?”

“Thirty-three” he reveals, and an amused smile draws itself on my face.

“And your name is Kristòs,” I whisper without stopping laughing.

“Why does that make you laugh?” he asks stopping in front of the bar of the complex where I live. He reaches into the glove compartment and grabs a remote control. He presses the button, and the bar rises letting us through.

“Because it's the famous Christ years, when everything ended and began at the same time,” I reveal, widening my

smile more.

“I don’t know if you’re wishing me dead or...”

“None of the above.” He stops the car in the car park and turns it off. “I wish you all the best and more.” Maybe my tone is different now from the joking one a moment ago as he sighs, unbuckles his belt, and reaches out to me. His hand reaches up to my neck. He holds me still as he reaches up and gives me a tender peck on the lips that sends me into confusion. Will he have accepted the joke even if it is sleazy?

“Are you ready to revise?” he whispers teasing the skin at the corner of my mouth. I nod, ecstatic at the very thought.

Like two awkward kids, we get out of the car and head for the flat. Side by side as if I’m accompanying the client to have fun with my body.

“Keys,” I exclaim stopping suddenly. I think back and don’t even remember taking them when I left. “Ele is with Athos on the yacht.” Now he too stops, raises his face to the sky and snorts, exasperated by my forgetfulness.

“Is there a spare key?”

“Only if Athos is there, otherwise he takes it with him.” He turns around and a smirk presents itself on his face.

“It means I’ll introduce you to my house.” I choke on my own saliva.

He reaches me and, grabbing me by the wrist, drags me back to the car. I had no idea he was in such a hurry.

In silence we get into the car and head towards a destination unknown to me. I watch him drive the sports car like an expert driver. He doesn’t miss a gear, doesn’t rev the engine, doesn’t run.

I close my eyes, enjoying these moments where he lets me into his life even more. “Is there a problem?” he asks a few moments later.

I shake my head in denial. He’s giving me the chance to stay with him a little longer. And for that I thank him.

I sigh deeply to get rid of the tension and start fantasizing about his house. I wonder how he decorated the bedroom, if he has a coffee machine in the kitchen and if the bathroom has two sinks. If there is a guest room like in Athos’, or if he has designed it to be the hideout of a bachelor with no thoughts of the future or the family.

Because he must have thought about having children, or does he not want to know?

What kind of thoughts do I have? Family? Children?

“We’re here.” I snort just to chase away the inappropriate thought I had, instead he seems to take it as a whine. I know, I could tell by that mumbling he makes instead of replying.

He gets out of the car without a word, an annoyed expression planted on his face. I would like to tell him that this is an important step for me, that the matter seems really serious, more than he promised, since he is taking me to his house where his whole life is. But he goes on without waiting for me so, as soon as I close the door, I cover my face with my hands and let out a guttural moan before joining him.

Together we walk down the flowery driveway that leads us up a small slope to the door. It doesn’t look like a typical house at all, in fact everything is modern. He opens the door and, instead of entering and guiding me through the rooms, he turns to me, bends down and takes me in his arms as one does with brides. I am speechless.

He is sending me out of phase as he is trying his best not to let me understand his thoughts. I know for sure that this will all go away in a few hours, but why does he continue to be so sweet, to act like he wants me in his life forever?

This makes me feel uncomfortable and I would like to tell him so. To broach the subject with him and clarify our intentions, even though mine are obvious by now.

As I'm in his arms I try to muster up all the strength I have to start this argument, but a gentle push on the door is all it takes for him to shut it before he puts me down and wipes out every ounce of willpower. He spreads his hands and stares at me in ecstasy, waiting for a reaction. I'm still shocked by what he's done, but I try not to let him notice.

"This is your house? Really?" I begin, looking around. The minimalist style setting makes the room we're in really cold. I spin around myself, amazed that he could live in such a bare environment given his personality and office. Few furnishings, few pieces of furniture with elegant finishes. Not even a frame with a family photo. Nothing at all. There is no way this is his home.

He wraps his arms around my waist and when I try to turn around, he stops me. He hugs me and kisses my neck, sucking it softly.

"I want to see the bedroom," I whisper mischievously, increasingly convinced that he has nothing to do with this minimal environment, to say the least.

"What a rush. I wonder if you'll ever have enough." He pulls away from my neck as if annoyed by my words.

"That never, you should have figured that out. But I hope it's slightly more colourful than... what is it? A living room? I

understand the Greek style clashing with the outside, but a touch of colour you could afford.” Kristòs shrugs his shoulders, pulling away slightly.

Damn, I just told him I don’t like his house and what does he do? Shrugs his shoulders? I would have fought long and hard for my shelter. Just like he did when I objected to the club’s logo.

Or he just doesn’t feel like arguing.

He offers me his hand, which I grasp fearlessly, and leads me through the corridor on the right. Here the situation changes completely. The shape is reminiscent of a pentagon, and I am drawn to the four arched doors. Not to mention the ceiling studded with small tiles with various shades of blue alternating with tiny LED light dots that remind me of a starry sky. Simply stunning.

Kristòs opens the second door on the right and drags me with him. I am startled to see a new change of furniture. All the furniture is lacquered black. The imposing bed is placed right in the middle of the room. The sheets seem to be made of silk. They are also black. With a gentle tug, he calls me back and, as soon as I focus my eyes on him, I see him pointing up at something. I follow his finger and...

“Jesus Christ.” I let go of his hand and head to the middle of the room, continuing to look at the ceiling. Mirrors, mirrors everywhere. “It looks like a brothel,” I blurt out, increasingly convinced he’s pulling my leg. I’ve never seen a room like this. “All that’s missing is the cabinet with the S&M stuff and we’re good” I giggle unabashedly.

“Maybe there’s that too” he mutters under his breath looking around. He seems more amazed by what he sees than by my words.

“Are you sure this is your house?” I look at him seriously crossing my arms over my chest and tilting my head to the side.

“Of course, why do you ask?” He’s defensive, too much so.

“You’re too amazed. It’s not Athos’, is it?” I throw it out there even though I believe in what I’m saying. This place doesn’t represent him at all. “What do I know, maybe you swapped residences, or you don’t want to take me to your place so he lent you his. Or maybe you really are a bricklayer.” If one could rate the shock, on his face it would be that of ten with honours.

“I changed my furniture by relying on an interior designer who furnished it based on his impression of me.” He grasps at straws, little doubt.

“Let me tell you, he can’t do his job if you gave him that impression, but okay, I believe you.”

“Really?”

“No. We could try them out right now though,” I propose, turning to face him. With a strange frown on his face, he looks at me waiting for me to continue talking. He’s not very convinced by my proposal, maybe he doesn’t think I’m adequate for such things. He doesn’t remember that he doesn’t know much about me, so I chime in.

“What do you say, Daddy?” I walk over to him and stroke his neck. With my fingers I play with his hair while he keeps his hands in his pockets instead.

“Really?” He arches an eyebrow. His expression incredulous. I nod, leaving a kiss under his chin and nibbling

at his taut skin. Even though the hint of a beard pinches my lips I don't stop. "Are you that much of an exhibitionist?"

"If I can watch you do certain things to me, then yes. I am." I move to torture his neck. "Look up and tell me if you like what you see." Kristòs goes along with my words and points his eyes into the reflection of us. He stares at the scene of me teasing him.

"I don't know, I'm not so sure." I know he's doing it on purpose because he wants to push me further, but he doesn't know that the mirrored ceiling is one of my erotic dreams. I've always dreamed of being in a room like this and I'm definitely not going to let it slip away. Especially if I have the most handsome man in the world to help me realise it. "If you convince me I'll go along with you."

I pull away from him and look at him contritely. Too bad his attention is on the mirror above our heads.

If you want to play, then let's play.

I lift my head and take the same position as him. We look at each other through the mirror and it turns me on in a way he can't imagine.

I place my hand on his chest and slowly reach down to fiddle with the buttons on his trousers. I unbutton them and pull them down just enough to free his member. He doesn't move. I can't read anything in his eyes. Maybe the mirror is misleading or maybe he wants to see how far I'll go. I smile and continue.

I grasp his penis firmly and begin to move my hand in a steady rhythm. I keep staring at him, but he doesn't flinch. I kneel down and take him between my lips. I suck and lick him shamelessly, intent only on making him come.

I tilt my head to the side to catch a glimpse, out of the corner of my eye, of his expression reflected in the mirror. Although he continues to stare at the ceiling, his eyes are small, and his face is more relaxed than ever.

With my tongue I draw small circles on the tip and only now do I hear him swear under his breath. “Did I ever tell you you’re impossible?” I mumble in response as my mouth is occupied by a magnificent piece of his body.

“If we keep going like this, you’ll wear me out” he chuckles in a vain attempt to chase away the tension he’s keeping trapped inside himself. He finally relents and brings a hand to the back of my head, accompanying me in the movement. He tries to push me even deeper, demanding to take it all in. Suddenly he squeezes my hair between his fingers and pulls me away almost violently.

“Stop it,” he growls through his teeth. He lifts me up and, as soon as we’re at the same level, he pounces on me, kissing me greedily. With his tongue he explores my mouth as if trying to take away his taste. I love the way he kisses, the way he can carry me, the way he lets me know he wants me.

He starts walking towards the bed without breaking away from me. As soon as my legs touch the mattress, I jerk. Kristòs doesn’t hesitate and pushes me onto it. I let out a little cry that amuses my Greek god. He smiles at my naivety as he reaches towards the bedside table and rummages in the drawer. I point to the ceiling and smile at my reflection.

Suddenly Kristòs appears in my view with an amused face. I look at him in fascination and, when I see that he is holding the drawer, I am slightly startled.

He holds it above his head and my breath catches in my throat. When the worst-case scenario comes to mind, he

empties the entire contents onto me.

What the hell?

“Which one do you want? There seems to be all kinds. Fruity, ultra-sensitive, retardant.” He drops the drawer and waits for my answer. I look down at my body to find it covered in sachets of condoms. My goodness, how many are there?

I laugh and cover my eyes with my hands. This is funny, although I don't want to imagine how many times a day, he's used to doing this. And with how many different women.

I shake my head to banish these thoughts.

“Hey, babe,” he whispers grabbing my wrists. He tries to push my hands away, but I resist. “What's going on? It's not like we have to use them all today.”

I uncover my face only to give him a gentle nudge to admonish him. Does he really think that's the problem? So, he didn't learn anything from last night?

“Silly girl. There must be more than a thousand and...” Between his fingers he holds a sachet, and on his face a strange frown. “Luminescent? Really?” He looks at me hoping I'll know more. “Will it glow in the dark or will it take effect in disc with UV light?”

“If you don't know. They're yours and...”

“Oh, no. This is Athos' work, I had nothing to do with it. I didn't even know this existed.” He points to all the condoms strewn about me and on the bed. “Louis Vuitton got into making condoms?” He waves it in the air. I shake my head and grab him by the collar of his shirt pulling him to me. I kiss him fiercely in hopes that we can get back to focusing on

something else instead of arguing about who filled the drawer with condoms.

He humours me by starting to feel me up everywhere. He lowers my dress to reveal my breasts, frees them from the bra and immediately rushes to delight me with kisses, bites, and licks. I love his assaults, I love his mouth on mine, on my body. I love everything about him.

He pulls away and points his eyes into mine as if to savour the moment. He smiles in such a sweet way that it makes me tender.

“You’re wonderful,” he whispers suddenly. With a small smile on my lips, I place my hand on his face and caress him.

He slips a hand between us, slides my panties to the side and directs his member right there, where I want it. He enters slowly, so slowly that I want to moan. Each time I feel like I’m touching heaven with my finger, being catapulted into paradise where the only obligation is to feel pleasure. I sigh as he retreats and then enters me again. He does it slowly, slow and exasperating, so much so that he enhances every little sensation. Slowly he increases the pace demanding more and more, wanting to feel inside me that I don’t pull back.

“Look in the mirror while I make you come.” I take his advice pointing his eyes into mine as he drops to his knees between my legs showing where our bodies come together. I watch him lift his face and delight in the same scene.

He holds me by my thighs as he thrusts into me so hard, I can feel it all the way to my stomach.

I arch my back because I know that in a little while the pleasure will invade me. He moves like he never has, as if he

wants to dominate me, to show me my body at the mercy of the spasms of orgasm he causes me.

Then he stops, gets out and turns me on all fours. He lifts my dress from my bottom and pulls down my panties. He enters me and, with force, makes me sit on him. I lean my back against his chest and throw my head back right onto his shoulder. This time he wants me to make us come. I open my eyes finding our bodies in motion really exciting. His powerful arms anchor me to him. Mine are on top of his.

“Kristòs,” I cry out clutching his hands.

“Come, baby, come for me” he replies in a guttural voice. He teases my clit even more, helping me reach an orgasm I’ve never experienced. All my muscles contract and then relax, leaving me drained of strength.

Like every damn time I have sex with him.

Kristòs stops just to let me catch my breath.

“Just be patient one more second,” he whispers, but I don’t have the strength to reply. I close my eyes letting him do what he wants with my body. He enters me for a few more thrusts and then comes out completely, urging me to lie back down and brings his member to my pubes. He holds it in his hand and continues to massage it quickly. I want to help him, to take his place, to grab him and be the one to give him pleasure. I reach out and wrap my hand around him, having his leading the way. I squeeze him and he throws his head back. As I continue my attempt to make him come, I look up at the ceiling and find his eyes in mine, fixed on what I’m doing. I pump all the way down and he lets go, coming on top of me.

Kristòs sits down on his legs, exhausted by the orgasm and I take the opportunity to compose myself. Although he lets me

do it for a while, as soon as I get up and take a few steps, he recovers and grabs me to pull me to him. He traps me in his arms, back against his chest. His calm breathing tickles the back of my neck causing me to shudder multiple times.

“What are you doing, trying to escape?” he whispers, placing his lips on my neck, right where the tattoo is. I can feel his heart racing and knowing it’s because of me gives me satisfaction.

“I just wanted to go to the bathroom.” He’s always so tender after sex that I’m amazed someone like him can change his attitude.

“Really?” He nuzzles his face into my neck, nibbling on it. Sweet, tender, affectionate, handsome, muscular and all mine. I nod and he kisses my shoulder.

“So, tell me, did you like what you saw?”

“Mmm, let me think,” I joke, but he takes offense. Or at least that’s what he’s implying. He lifts me up and throws me on the bed making me let out a little cry. He takes to tickling me and repeating the question until, exasperated, I give him confirmation.

“That was superb. Like every time.” He leaves a trail of kisses from my shoulder to the corner of my mouth.

“You are superb, sweet little Jade.” Then he presses his lips to mine. He gets out of bed and starts looking around, seemingly lost, and with a strange frown on his face. He buttons up his trousers, continuing to check the bed with his eyes.

“What’s going on? Did you lose something?” He shakes his head and, crawling across the mattress to join me, returns

to kissing me. He whispers flush lips a tender “Nothing” and brings our lips together in a kiss that’s greedier than usual.

“What do you want to do? Do you want to...”

“Stay home until dinnertime.” I point to the ceiling with my eyes. I stroke his mouth with my tongue to make him yield. He mumbles and complains about my proposal.

I don’t feel like going out, seeing people or being boyfriend and girlfriend around Santorini, I only want him. I’ve pleased him for two days, now I’d like him to please me.

“I should get back to the club. You know how it is, Odin will be magnificent in running it, but if I don’t control it he could take on half of Santorini.”

“What about me, can I go back to work for you tomorrow or have I lost my job?”

“In that case, we’d have to cease all non-work relationships,” he replies looking me straight in the eye. He doesn’t think much about it, doesn’t sugar-coat it.

It’s either the job or him.

“For me it is necessary to work, otherwise I don’t know how to support myself.” Kristòs sighs and drops his head forward. “Don’t ask me to choose. I couldn’t live without the work, nor without you.” At those words he points his eyes into mine trying to figure out if I’m lying or being sincere.

“We’ll see what to do, okay?” he whispers giving me a shy little smile. “Let’s enjoy these few hours we have.” Then he shushes me. He kisses my neck tickling me. I giggle trying to escape his unexpected assault. When he calms down, he opens his mouth to say something, but we are interrupted by the sound of Kristòs’ mobile phone, which, snorting, he moves away from me to answer it.

“Hey, Athos. What’s up?” He throws himself on the bed at my side. I turn around and remain staring at him, imprinting in my mind his angular features, his perfect nose, his slightly pronounced chin. “Yes, she’s here beside me.” I turn over on my stomach, demanding that he embrace me with his free hand. I rest my chin on his chest and wait for him to reveal the reason for the call.

An annoying frown appeared on his face, as if something was wrong and Athos had the bad job of having to tell him about it.

“Are you sure? And it’s serious?”

Now I’m the one who’s worried. Who are they talking about? Is Electre okay?

“What’s going on?” I whisper catching his attention. He tries to shush me by shaking his head.

“Yeah, come on over until things settle down. You know there’s room here.” I pinch him on the hip, and he jerks. I don’t like being ignored. Kristòs turns to me, glaring at me.

“What’s going on?” I’m annoyed and I don’t like that at all.

“Yeah, it’s fine. We’ll wait for you.” And he hangs up. “Ouch!” he exclaims bringing his hand down on the pinch. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s happened? Is Electre okay? Did you invite them to stay here? How are we going to do that?”

“Calm down, Electre’s fine. While we were in Athens, they noticed an infestation of I don’t know what, cockroaches?, in your house. They can’t sleep in the yacht because Electre is seasick. Time for the exterminators to give the go-ahead and they’ll be back home m... Athos,” he says as

if it were the most natural thing in the world. He smiles and strokes my cheek with his index finger, then reaches out to kiss me, but he can't do it unless I humour him.

“What about us? While they're here, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to behave? Be who you hate, or who you...”

“How should we behave? Like when we first met. In front of them nothing has changed between us,” he proposes, shrugging his shoulders. There's nothing on his face that could put him off, nothing that makes me think that everything he said was to test the waters and not to reiterate that there is absolutely nothing between him and me other than sex. I am taken aback by his blunt words.

“Why do you have that look on your face? Did you want to tell Electre that we're together? That we had sex or that... I don't know... you think we're engaged because we had sex?”

I look away from his face. Even though I knew it his words hurt. I've changed my mind so many times that I've lost count and now, instead of expecting it, I'm falling from the clouds. I'm still the same deluded girl.

“Engaged, of course not” I huff under my breath as if that word is worthless.

“Jade,” he begins in a tone laden with exasperation that I don't intend to listen to. I don't want to give him the chance to rage and destroy my feelings.

“You're absolutely right, there's nothing more to add so why don't we start now? That way we practice and get a head start.” I cross my arms over my chest as he sits up.

“I remind you we talked about this before we left, I don't understand this attitude of yours.” How could I forget? One

minute he's treating me like the queen of the world and the next he's crushing me with his ideas. The urge to hurt him is great. I turn my back on him to get out of here.

"Put everything back in the drawer before they notice. I'm out of here."

"Where do you want to go? Home is impassable and it's on the other side of the island." He speaks but doesn't move. I close my eyes and leave the room faster than ever. I want so badly to stir something inside him, for him to stand up and hold me close and promise not to say such mean things anymore, but I already know he won't.

"Jade, come on."

I head straight for the front door and walk out. That's it, I want to get away from him because being around him is starting to hurt.

"Jade." Kristós' scream makes me shudder. It's guttural, deep, and close. I turn to find him inches from me. Our eyes collide and I don't want to pull away, but I have to, pulling away is the only way if I want to get out of this alive.

"You know..." I smile at him, making him think everything is okay. We both know it's not. Or at least I hope so given the subject. "Maybe it's better as you say. Let's go back to before, so no one will know anything." Her expression is tinged with astonishment. "Start by not following me. I'll see you tomorrow night at your club. I'll be on duty at 7pm, as usual." With my gaze fixed in his eyes, I step back, ready to run away from here.

"Where do you think you are going? To Enea?"

"Maybe. I don't think it's any of your business. We're back in Santorini. Our bubble has burst, hasn't it?" I break eye

contact and turn away. It's not important. It's nothing, not even my name shouted in his voice.

A sudden braking and yet another scream from Kristòs makes me jump. I turn around just to invite him to stop yelling, but his posture stretched out towards me, and his terrified face disconcert me.

A slight pressure on my knee brings me back to reality, unlocking everything around me.

Kristòs grabs my elbow and pulls me to him. Only now do I notice that the pressure I feel is caused by Athos' car. Kris' heart beats fast against me, so fast that it scares me. His arms hold me until they take my breath away.

“Are you crazy?” This time it's Athos who shouts, getting out of the car and coming towards us. “I could have run you over! How could you not have seen me?”

Yes, how could I not have seen him? It seems like a scene we've already seen, but with a different ending.

“But you didn't,” I reply in a crippled voice. My face is pressed against Kristòs' chest and he doesn't seem to want to let me go.

“What the fuck has gotten into you?” Kristòs' voice trembles. Slowly he pulls away from me to grab me by the shoulders. “You wanted to die?”

“Exaggerated,” I blurt, sustaining his gaze. “I didn't die after you ran me over, let alone now.” Even as the lips of the man I gave myself to until a few minutes ago part in astonishment, he doesn't retort because Electre releases me from his grip with a push and hugs me.

“Are you okay?” she whispers in my ear in the sweetest tone and broken voice. I remain speechless. I have rarely seen

her scared and apprehensive. Not even when, as soon as I arrived in Santorini, I was locked in my room crying. “You disappeared without saying goodbye and that ambiguous note...” I pull away from her, trying to figure out where she saw the ambiguity in the message, I had left for her.

“We texted each other, remember that?”

“Did he do something to you?” She brings her forehead together with mine and looks into my eyes. “Because if he laid a finger on you, if he forced you...”

“Calm down Electre, nothing happened,” I reply softly. If she knew it was me who seduced him, forced him to give in. “Rather, tell me, what happened at home?”

Electre rolls her eyes.

“Athos claims to have seen cockroaches, so he called the exterminators who didn’t even let us take change and threw us out,” she replies in an irritated tone. She turns to her boyfriend giving him a dirty look.

“Hey, they were really there,” Athos interjects in his defence.

“There is no such thing as a cockroach with a name starting with the letter K!”

Athos sighs, approaches, and wraps his shoulders around her, drawing her to him.

“I’m sorry, agápi, think what you will, but until those beasts leave that house, you will not set foot in it,” he explains. He leans over her and kisses her hair. I smile at his words and find his thoughtful gestures sweet. Maybe he did it to end the argument, surely tested by Ele’s hard head. Nothing changes that they are beautiful to look at. He loves her, there’s no doubt about it.

“Same goes for you,” he continues, pointing at me.

“So, we’re out of clothes?” Athos smiles and shrugs, as if I need that.

“Exactly,” Electre replies slipping out of her boyfriend’s grasp. “You’re going to pay for this, because you could have at least let me get a change of clothes, but you didn’t. You wanted to bully me. Just hope they don’t touch my clothes.” She points her finger at him. “I’m mad at you,” she reveals. “And with you, too,” he blurts, pointing at Kristòs.

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You’re always involved. Wherever there’s a problem, you’re there,” she added. “I’m still angry about what you did on Thursday, Friday and yesterday.” Kristòs’ eyes are wide as they dart between me and her, searching for an explanation. I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“I remind you that you are guests in my house,” he raises his finger pointing at us before Athos blocks it by tapping his arm to call him back. He may have gone too far, but she wasn’t any less. Electre grabs my hand and, with a determined step, goes towards the entrance. She passes Kristòs as if nothing had happened, as if what he told her did not affect her in the slightest.

As soon as we cross the threshold, she drags me to the sofa.

“Now tell me everything without leaving anything out.” She sits across from me holding my hands tightly, waiting to be brought up to speed.

I smile at her and lower my gaze to our joined hands. This is the first time I don’t feel any shivering touching her. As if with Kris’s arrival, everything I felt for her has vanished to

pour solely on the Greek god who hesitates to come in and save me from the fourth degree.

That scares me.

“There’s nothing to tell. Travel, hotel with separate rooms, convention, dinner, and plane ride back. That’s all.” What am I gonna tell her? Tell her in full detail about how, when, and why we were very often and willingly in bed? I don’t think so. Besides, I can’t.

“Was he good? Did he treat you well?”

“Yes, don’t worry. He turned out to be a real gentleman.” Well, he was, after all. Other than the bickering, I could never say otherwise.

“Okay, I believe you.”

“I’m just asking you to go a little easier on him. He seems to hate you for no reason.” I shrug my shoulders trying to convince her to stop acting like that because it only continues to rile him up. Ele looks away and takes a big breath, perhaps finding my words unbecoming.

“For you I’ll do it, but on one condition: will you help me to get revenge on Athos? I don’t have any clothes and his little game of ‘don’t come in the house until those beasts are gone’ is getting on my nerves.” She rolled her eyes again. “Let’s drag them to Fira where there’s a performance of the volcano eruption. Market, music, party and, at the end of the night, fireworks commemorating the eruption. They hate that kind of festival. For them, it’s something exclusively for tourists and families.” I gladly accept her proposal. It’ll be a revenge with bells on, and I’m in the mood. Although I doubt that’s enough.

The two friends emerge from the entrance and Electre turns around.

“Since you wouldn’t let me go into the house to get our things,” she points to herself and me, “now you’re taking us to the party in Fira. And woe betide you if you object.”

“Hey, what’s my fault?” retorts Kristòs. If he thinks he’s saving himself, he’s sorely mistaken.

“Would you rather we set up in the master’s room?” I pinch my friend’s leg to remind her of what I just asked. Kristòs’ eyes widen and look at me. Surely, he must have remembered the mess we left and that, to someone like Electre, it would be hard to explain all those condoms scattered on the bed. Athos, on the other hand, has an indescribable look on his face. He stares at his girlfriend as if the devil had taken possession of her. He turns towards his friend who keeps staring at me.

“Sorry” he whispers at the end, maybe remembering our pact. “Athos and I will take the guest room.” She says it like it costs her all the gold in the world. “You could give yours to Jade, since you’re a gentleman, as she claimed.” The dig goes in, and Kristòs looks at me in amazement. I sigh because Ele just can’t help but tease him.

“She could sleep with you, I’ve already put up with her for two days,” he replies dryly, hurting me. None of this is real, right? We have to go back to bickering like before the Athens trip and this is a farce. “At worst, there’s the sofa.” Really? You want me to sleep on the couch?

“Couch it is. Also, because it’s nice and big, certainly much more comfortable, and less crowded than the master bed,” I reply and then turn to Electre, avoiding checking his reaction. I smile at her complicity.

Did she want indifference? Here it is.



“I DON’T WANT to hear no for an answer.” Electre’s voice rings harshly in the small living room. She moves swiftly between the room and the living area, intent on unpacking the backpack she had with her.

“It’s not a no, but it’s not a yes either. Come on Ele, you can’t be stubborn about this. You know very well I don’t like county fairs.” Athos’ voice, on the other hand, was pleading, a sign that she had got her revenge right. He follows her everywhere, until he closes up with her in the bathroom.

“Jade.” Kristòs draws my attention, leaning against the doorframe of the entrance door. After the two lovebirds arrived, I was stranded on the couch while he locked himself in his room, perhaps to tidy up the mess. Now he’s decided to bring his suitcases into the house, as if that’s enough to stop me from leaving.

“Kristòs.” I return the greeting without looking up from the mobile phone screen. I catch a glimpse of him taking steps towards me.

“I wanted to apologize for earlier,” he begins. He moistens his lips and casts a quick glance in the direction of the bathroom. “It’s just that girl manages to bring out a part of me that I don’t like,” he whispers shrugging his shoulders. I sigh but don’t retort. “Do you want to sleep with me? Maybe we could do it again...”

“Maybe I’ll sleep on the couch.” I interrupt him pretending to be indifferent. This is what he wanted after all; now why does he seem to be taking it all back?

Maybe because he's afraid of losing me?

"Jade." He kneels in front of me. He brings his hands to the sides of my thighs, stroking them with his thumbs. A shiver runs down my spine and makes my heart race. "I..."

"You what?" I look up at him and his mortified expression. "Now you want your toy back? Do you want me to sneak into your room without being heard and, after I've satisfied you, go back to sleeping on the couch like nothing happened?"

Why do I want to make him feel guilty? Why am I getting angry? That's what things were supposed to be between us, right? Just fun. Instead, I started to demand it, to want more and more, to put him first so much that I fell in love with him. Yes, that's it. I am in love with him.

I see astonishment in Kristòs' eyes. But he doesn't stop caressing my thighs. He doesn't speak, he doesn't move, he doesn't show any emotion.

"It was fine in Athens, now..."

"Now what do you want?" He tilts his head. "That was the deal, wasn't it?"

"Then don't come claiming me," I retort through clenched teeth, looking him straight in the eye. "You asked me to treat you like you did in the beginning and that's what I'm doing."

"I get it now. You want to show everyone that you succeeded. Especially your little friend over there," he attacks. I snort, shake my head, and go back to staring at my phone, avoiding giving any further weight to his words. "Jade, we talked about this." He places his hand on my cheek in a gentle gesture. The touch makes me close my eyes and hope it never comes off. He moves his thumb, caressing me. He teases me, provokes me with his oh-so-contradictory gestures.

“You’re the one begging me to be with you.” I push my head lightly towards his hand, raising my face to prompt him to caress my neck. I want this, what can I do? I want him to know it, to be aware of it, to give in completely, even in front of our friends.

He goes along with my gestures and brings his palm to my throat, stretching his index finger over my lips. I open my eyes and focus them on him. His brown irises are full of ardour, and I bet that if we were alone he would make me his at this very moment. Slowly I open my mouth and with my tongue I caress his finger and then wrap my lips around it.

I suck, lick, bite, do everything I can think of to drive him crazy.

“It’s not about anyone but us. I want you, full stop. Blame me if it helps, but I only want you. It’s not the first time I’ve told you that, but you don’t want to hear it. You think you’re just a trophy? You’re dead wrong. You’re not to me.” Now his eyes are in mine trying to figure out if what I’m saying is true or I’m lying to him. Still, this isn’t the first time I’ve opened my heart to him.

“I can’t.”

“I don’t care, you’re taking us shopping now.” Electre’s voice brings me back down to earth. I remove Kristós’ hand from my face and he, wide-eyed at my gesture, stands up and pretends to do something else.

“And you’re not exempt.” My friend appears in the living room looking at Kristòs who looks more embarrassed than a boy at his first kiss.

“Imagine that” he mutters, grabbing his trolley and heading for the master bedroom. He slams the door behind

him causing us to gasp. Part of me feels sick. He locks me outside, away from him.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“What do I know,” I reply to Athos who, as incredulous as Electre, looks at me waiting for answers.



AS WE WALK through the alleys of Fira, waiting for show time, Electre and I lose sight of the two men who, puffing, struggle to keep up. Athos is very attentive to my friend, so much so that I sense that their relationship has progressed into something more. Something she was hoping for with all her heart.

I am happy about this even though it seems like a fairy tale, given the speed at which everything has changed. I hope she never wakes up from this dream.

Kristòs, on the other hand, seems to have gone back to before we left, except for occasional glances which I could describe as mischievous. On several occasions we stopped in front of little shops, me admiring the umpteenth dress in the window and him trying to exchange a few words. Obviously, I didn’t give him any space and we didn’t go beyond “Do you like it?” followed by a mumbling.

“Jade and I will go in here, you guys are free to go have a drink at that club,” Electre began, taking me by the arm and pointing the two of them to a specific spot. While Athos nods, Kristòs is about to open his mouth and object, but my friend precedes him. “That one, yes. I want to find you right there.”

“Honestly, I was going to ask Jade if she needs money to buy something,” he replies, shrugging. He pulls out his wallet and hands it to me, just like that, not thinking that his papers or credit cards are inside. Does he really trust me to hand over everything?

“They can make it a single account, so they can save on commissions,” Athos interjects, placing his hand on Kristòs’s and lowering it. The two looked at each other questioningly, as if they were talking in a code of their own.

“While you keep staring at each other like that, we’ll be going.” Electre pulls me by the arm. “Let them figure it out for themselves. We have something more important to do than watch their fishy expressions.” I agree with her and set the incident aside, trying to relegate Kris’s strange gesture of selflessness to a corner. I really don’t know how to interpret it. Maybe she’s just trying to bribe me or make me understand that we don’t have to fight.

In the cute little shop, we find a little bit of everything. From T-shirts to crotch shorts that even the most confident girl wouldn’t wear. Of course, Ele checks and tries on every item, while I just get what I really need, even though I’m tempted to run out of here on the double. Although my life has changed, I struggle to get used to shopping in such places.

“This would look good on you,” Ele begins, handing me a skimpy little dress, not at all ordinary. Black with three horizontal Swarovski stripes that barely cover the back. “And your eyes tell me you like it.”

“Who wouldn’t?” I giggle charmed as I try to grab the hanger.

“What do you say? Shall we bill it to him? Maybe add some killer shoes.” She winks, pulling the dress closer to my

body and tilting his head, looking at me intently. “Maybe...” She bites her bottom lip. “Tonight, you meet someone to take it off since Kris looks like a piece of wood.” I smile at her comment. I snatch the dress from her hands and pretend to put it on. I do a pirouette to show her how happy I am, how beautiful this piece of black polyester makes me feel. Kristòs will go crazy for me in this dress, that’s for sure. I admire it like I’ve never seen one before, like it’s the only one. “Or maybe someone we know would more than willingly tear it off you.”

“What? What are you talking about? He didn’t even look at me. He was more focused on the paperwork for the new place,” I lie. Yeah, I lied to her. I did it because I was asked and because I’m afraid to say out loud how I feel about him.

“So, you tried?” she giggles with a mischievous expression on her face.

“No, what are you talking about?”

“Well, you did all the time today,” she reveals. Immediately I freeze, instead pulling away from her to find something comfortable to wear.

“Don’t talk nonsense. He...”

“He eats you with his eyes. Come on, tell me the truth.” She squares herself at my side, pretending to look for some other garment. “Something happened in Athens, I can feel it.” I can’t stand it when she does this, when she corners me and demands.

“Nothing happened,” I insist.

“Jade, you can tell me,” She hums happily. I shake my head, finding her truly ridiculous. Sure, I could do it, I could tell her every last detail and, if I had a shred of courage left

after all, I would even tell her about Raffaele. But I don't want to lose what little trust Kris has given me.

“What if we wore them now?” I change the subject with the hope that she'll drop the question. I extend the low-cut dress she showed me earlier towards her. “What do you say? We could get the two of them to carry our things to the car, so we can enjoy a drink alone,” I propose. Maybe that way she'll leave me alone. At least for now.

“Let's go with the first part.” She turns around continuing to rummage through the clothes on display. I've always enjoyed shopping with her, it's fun and relaxing. She knows perfectly what I like without even making too much effort.

“Any idea how long we'll be staying at Kristòs' house?” I ask as I look for something casual to use for work. Maybe he heard Athos talking to the exterminators.

“I'm guessing two or three days. I don't know how long these things last. Besides, I don't know where he saw the cockroaches.” She shrugs and shakes her head. “That house is a mirror. I've never left the kitchen dirty or leftover food lying around. I never ate in my room or in the living room in front of the TV. Not a single crumb. I can't get over it, really.”

My attention is caught by a white top, not flashy at all, which is resting on the mannequin under a shirt.

I walk over and unbutton the blouse to get a better look at it. When the writing printed on it is revealed, a mischievous smile appears on my lips. I'm going to drive Kristòs crazy with this, I can tell. I close my eyes and imagine his astonished face, eager to take off that little piece of cloth.

“If you want, I have matching briefs too.” I gasp when I hear the salesman's voice. I didn't think I had caught his

attention. He stands next to me and, with a sly smile, leans over to pick up a transparent package with underwear inside. He hands it to me, convinced that I'm interested. "Here, this should fit you."

"Um..." With my gaze I search for Electre, not wanting her to see me in front of this outfit. "Could you hide it? It's for a joke and the girl," I point to my friend, "shouldn't find it."

"Sure," he murmurs with a mischievous look. He squares me off biting his lip, folds the package in half, turns and walks away.

"You're only taking that?" my friend exclaims obliviously.

"Yes."

"Well, I think you'd better get some more clothes. At the very least you'll be able to use it at home," she proposes, placing her choices on the counter. "Like this." She points to a short sundress, with floral patterns and buttons that are supposed to diminish the cleavage.

"If you like it..." I retort defeated.

"And this." By now I'm not even listening to her. "That too." There you go. "This is a must-have for your wardrobe." She grabs a top with matching shorts. Then she goes back between the aisles and grabs two or three more suits, a couple of t-shirts, two skirts and some leggings. "That should be enough."

"I hope so. You're maxing out Athos' credit card." It's easy to go on a spending spree with other people's money.

"I might ask him if he'll buy me a little shop like this," she exaggerates.

"Hey, it's forbidden to make fun of me," I chuckle at her.

“What’s the harm? He’d gladly do it.” She shrugs and looks around. “You know, I don’t understand why you’d want to give this up if you’re going to hang out with people who are part of the same world.” She lays the rest of her clothes on the counter and waits for the clerk to unravel the mess she’s made.

“You’re the one who introduced me to Kristòs.” I lean my hand against the glass of the counter and stare at her annoyed.

“Sure, but I didn’t invite you to think about sleeping with him.”

What?

I open my mouth, incredulous at her words.

“You think I didn’t notice? No one comes back from a trip together without consummating. Or at least, no one hands out their wallet like that unless there’s something behind it.” I close my eyes and let my head fall forward, resigned to the idea Electre has formed. Then I snap it up and fix my gaze on her.

“Nothing happened between Kristòs and me. Full stop,” I repeat. I’m serious, lying but serious.

“Why do you insist on not telling me what happened? I won’t tell anyone.”

My phone rings and when I grab it and notice who’s looking for me, a small smile appears on my face. I turn away from Electre so she can’t hear the conversation and answer it.

“Hi Jade, sorry to bother you. Are you free for lunch tomorrow? I could use a hand.” Enea’ voice cheers me up for some strange reason. I suppose because I see in him a friend as well as my boss.

“Sure, usual time?” This call is like a bolt out of the blue so I can talk to him and apologise for the bike. I’ll also have to thank him and repay him for settling the bill.

“*Usual time.*” I smile and sigh bringing my phone to my chest.

“Was that your lover?” Electre comes up behind me, in her hands the bags with our purchases. She hands me one, maybe the one with my stuff. Her eyes sparkle with curiosity.

“Enea.” She widens her eyes upon hearing her cousin’s name.

“Jade, I don’t...”

“You finally got out!” Athos with his friend in tow interrupts our conversation. Their faces are more relaxed, more beautiful than when we had left. As soon as Kristòs’ eyes are on me, a warmth spreads in my lower abdomen in memory of the nights spent together.

“Can I pay for your dinner, or have you exceeded your daily limit?”

Mostly I wonder how she could pay for it when usually the merchant requires the owner’s signature.

“You’re no fun,” chuckles Ele throwing herself into his arms. “I used the other one, the usual one seems stuck.”

“What?” Athos’ face turns serious, a clear sign that something is wrong.

“The gold one behind the license.”

“Okay, forget it, no problem.” He smiles at her, but it’s obvious he’s lying. Electre kisses him passionately in tacit thanks for giving her freedom in shopping. She likes it, I know. She loves having someone to pay for her whims, her

desires, and who, even if she overspends, she can compensate with a few kisses or effusions.

I avert my eyes from the happy couple so as not to look like a voyeur and give my full attention to Kristòs. I am surprised to see that he has had the same idea.

He smiles sweetly at me as soon as our eyes meet and, without showing it, my heart fills with joy. I immediately lower my head, staring at my shoes so as not to give him false hope, so as not to tempt his ego into thinking I've given in.

“What do you say we take the bags to the car and then head for the terrace?” Kristòs tries to interrupt the flirtations of the two lovebirds who seem locked in a bubble of their own. “Okay,” he mutters. He reaches out his hand towards me to grab me, but I barely dodge.

“When you get off of there, I'll meet you at the restaurant,” he explains to his friend. Then, without waiting for an answer, he motions me to follow him. This time I comply with his wishes and, as soon as I reach him, he reaches for my hand.

We walk quickly, dodging people, trying not to stumble because of the cobblestones.

“Kristòs, stop,” I beg him, wishing he would listen to me. Of course, he doesn't. Only when we get to Athos' car does he slow down, lean against it, and pull me in front of him. He grabs me by the nape of my neck and kisses me without giving me time to react.

He places his lips on mine and gently caresses them with his tongue.

I bring my hands to his chest pushing myself away.

“Kiss me, please,” he pleads, increasing his grip on my neck. The pressure is so strong that, in pain, I part my lips allowing him to take advantage of it. Even as I try to fight him off, his tongue teases mine, chasing it as if he’s wanted nothing else all his life. I give in, because his assault is everything I crave. I surrender to his will, to his wanting me.

“I couldn’t take it anymore,” he speaks over my lips continuing to leave little kisses on me. I smile at this gesture and when he moves on to torture my neck, I burst out laughing like a little girl. “You’ve been avoiding me the whole time and challenging me all the time. I swear, it was really hard to handle. You’ve been mine for three days and now, seeing how easy it is for you to ignore me is hard.”

“It was hard,” I tease him.

“What are you doing, you don’t believe me?” I nod instinctively. It was for me too, especially not giving in to his bewitching gaze. “We could continue by keeping this to ourselves.”

“We could just tell them, don’t you think?” Kristòs doesn’t stop sucking and nibbling on my neck, a sign that my suggestion doesn’t faze him. “Although I think they’ve noticed.” He instantly freezes and turns back to look at me. His brown eyes are on me, waiting for an explanation. “First Ele gave me the third-degree and...” He wrinkles his forehead and I lower my gaze. “I lied to her, Kris. I denied every ‘accusation’ made.” I can’t look at him, I might burst into tears just for that.

“What accusations? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know.” Except for going out of my way to get into his bed.

“Jade, it’s not like you forced me, I came with you because I wanted to. I’m trying to make it up to you because I want to and because you make me feel good. I’m sorry I’m just now realising this and treating you badly. If we don’t want to tell them, that’s our business, not theirs. They don’t have to blame you. Everyone handles their private life differently. I do it without parading my feelings around. I go about it with caution and respect.” His words reassure me. At the end of the day, he’s right, why rush? “I’m not like Athos who flaunts his every new conquest.” Now I’m the one wrinkling my forehead. “I met Electre two seconds after he did, and he was already talking about her as the love of his life even though he was afraid she would count him out.”

“Happy for him.”

“Jade,” he huffs again. Too many times my name has been preceded by a snort and honestly, I’m sick of it, especially coming from him.

“Okay, let’s do it your way. Let’s continue but keep it under wraps.” I turn around and close the distance. I kiss him just to get him to stop huffing.

Kristòs doesn’t reply and accepts the assault by strengthening his grip on the back of my neck, he sneaks his other hand under my dress and caresses my bare thigh until he reaches my ass, which he squeezes hard. He rubs his bulge against me to give me proof of how much he missed me.

Of course, feeling his erection on my belly and having the knowledge that he misses me for that alone isn’t the best, but I don’t care. Not right now.

I give in to the contact he’s giving me after hours of tugging and pulling, not caring that someone might see us or come along and surprise us in this unambiguous attitude.

As his tongue chases mine his intoxicating scent sends me out of phase every time. He pulls away from me eventually, even as I moan, even as I remain with my face in mid-air, waiting for him to return and place his lips on mine. “Maybe we’d better catch up with the two lovebirds.” He strokes my face, moving an invisible strand behind my ear. “Otherwise, they might come in suddenly.”

I want to tell him that I wouldn’t care that I have nothing to hide, me, but I don’t feel like arguing about that subject again. I print a fake smirk on my face, move my hand away from his thigh, and step back.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asks holding me by the arm.

“Couldn’t be better,” I lie. I’m not surprised when he releases his grip and slips his hand into his pocket to pull out his keys and open the car.

“Anyway, that little dress is too short and billowy. On more than one occasion it’s stood up showing off those amazing panties.” I reply with a shrug. If he thinks I’m not wearing it anymore because it annoys him, he’s sadly mistaken.

“You’re going to wear it anyway, right?” I leave the bags in the boot and close the tailgate.

“I see you’re getting to know me,” I tease him, and he sighs. He hugs me from behind making me lean against the boot of the car. He places his lips on my shoulder and leaves a trail of bites down to my earlobe. I throw my head back hoping this assault will end with him satisfying me. Here, on this car park, in this position, heedless of passers-by.

It’s dark anyway and people don’t see well in the dark.

“Then pray you’re not alone with me tonight or your daddy might spank you.” All of me quivers as his voice, his sweet threat, enters my ear, passes through my brain, and ends up immediately down there.

“Just in case, I’ll pray for the opposite.” I push my buttocks towards him, rubbing myself provocatively. It’s inevitable, he has this effect on me. His mere presence reminds me of things I’ve never done and never thought I’d want to do.

Kristòs kisses my cheek and whispers a tender invitation to go to the restaurant, so as not to risk missing the fireworks display. He intertwines his hand with mine and moves away from the car. With a tug, he forces me to do a pirouette.

“This little dress goes up even if you walk,” he says in a resigned tone. Then he presses his lips to mine before we set off. All this attention is getting to me. He can make me feel special even with a simple kiss.

On the way Kristòs tracks down Athos who informs him that he’s in the bar next to the restaurant where we’re to have dinner.

“So, is it alright? Shall we continue what we started in Athens without revealing it? Shall we keep it to ourselves?” Our hands are clasped together, the only gesture he can perhaps grant me until the end of the evening. I watch as he strokes the skin on the back with his thumbs.

I know that what he’s asking is something I’ve already been over and taken a colossal swerve over.

But it will be different with him. With him it’s only temporary, in a few days we could tell everyone.

“Yes.” I give him a smile, happy that he’s changed his mind about us.

He reaches out to me and brings our lips together to enshrine the confidentiality agreement. When we reach them, I am relieved to see that our friends have decided to break away and take their seats. As we take our seats Kristòs freezes.

“Do you see them?” he asks looking around pretending not to notice the two sitting in front of him. “Ah, there they are. Sorry, I didn’t recognise you when you aren’t wrapped around each other.”

“That’s an old joke, besides being sleazy. Catch up,” Electre scolded him while he mimicked her words. I don’t know why Kristòs continues to be so hostile towards their relationship, he could give it a rest and get over it instead of continuing to tease them.

“Let’s have a drink and then head for that restaurant overlooking the island. If we’re going to watch the fireworks, let’s at least do it from a good spot,” proposes Athos. No one replies, perhaps because we all agree with him. In silence, just as we have consumed our order, we leave the restaurant.

While Athos and Electre walk the few metres that separate us from the venue, hand in hand, Kristòs and I continue to ignore each other, even if we are more serene than before.

Does all this hurt? Yes, but I am certain that as soon as we are alone, he will be mine.

As soon as we sit down, I begin to admire everything around me. I haven’t set foot in a restaurant like this for I don’t know how long and it’s really exciting. I look around like a kid in a candy shop.

“You should be able to see the fireworks display very well from here,” Athos explains.

“Thank you, my love.” Electre reaches out to him, leaving a kiss on his cheek.

“For you, this and more” he murmurs, accepting the gesture with pleasure. Kristòs opens his mouth to say something, but I kick him lightly to block any desire he might have to ruin the moment.

“We’ll deal with this later,” he whispers.

“Alright, Daddy,” I reply teasingly.

“Don’t call me that” he smiles tensely to disguise his irritation. “At least not in front of them.”

With tacit assent, I grab the menu and take a quick look at what’s on the list. Obviously, the prices are commensurate with the service and location, not to mention the view. Too bad all of this is momentarily out of my reach.

What if he asks for Roman style? What if I have to pay my share?

“Electre, would you accompany me to powder my nose?” I don’t know if I’ve said it right or if she will catch what I mean on the fly. It’s only when my friend’s eyes turn to me that I understand that she has understood it but that she doesn’t understand why she should accompany me. She frowns as I slightly widen my eyes, urging her to follow me. It makes me look stupid in their eyes.

Perfect.

I snort, swipe back my chair and stand up. If she doesn’t want to follow me, I won’t make a big deal out of it. Even though the two men ask me if I’m okay, I continue on my way, hoping to be joined by my friend. I take a few steps towards the bathroom, and someone grabs my wrist. When I turn around, I am surprised to find Athos looking at me,

bewildered. We keep walking until we no longer see the table assigned to us.

“What’s going on with you?” he asks in a tone that sounds angry. “Why did you say those words to Electre?”

“I just wanted him to follow me to the bathroom, nothing more.” I don’t know what they understood, but that’s all I wanted.

“Why did you say it in Italian?” I bite my lip, resigned that I’ve made a fool of myself, and smile in an attempt to play it down.

“Look, I... I can’t afford to have dinner here. I haven’t been working these days and...”

“Really? That’s the problem?” To Athos it seems like a small thing, but to me it’s much more than that.

“Yeah.” He looks at me like I’ve said something stupid. “First Electre said there was a problem with the credit card, and you got mad, and I didn’t...”

“You don’t have to care about my credit card.” The furrowed brow and low tone scare me. I’ve never seen him like this. I whisper an apology and he, in his usual manner, frames my face with his hands and brings our foreheads together. “Don’t worry about money, don’t mind if we’re out to dinner. You should know the woman never pays,” he winks at the last sentence.

“I know, but I want to earn things and show that besides the bank account and the last name I bear, there’s more.” I’m exhausted from explaining this desire of mine. It’s so hard to get across.

“Jade, I’m well aware that you are so much more than what you think you show, but don’t make it an issue every

time. There's nothing wrong with accepting an invitation to dinner or having someone remodel your wardrobe."

"It was Electre who filled my part. I just wanted a shirt."

"Okay, but now could you smile like you always do so we can go back that way? Could you just enjoy the evening and not think about who's going to pay?" Athos seems to believe it more than me and I know that if I don't accept, he won't let me go. I nod giving him one of my most sincere smiles. Somehow, he managed to calm me down and make me put aside the thoughts that are ruining my evening. He pulls away and hugs me tightly, so much so that I'm out of breath.

"Besides, it happens more often than you think that one dines or lunches out and chivalry teaches that it is the man who offers. So, resign yourself, my sweet maiden. That's the way it is here." After leaving a kiss on the top of my head, he lets me go. "Ah, one last thing," he begins. He slips his hands into the pockets of his cotton trousers and winces. "Did you tell him before it's too late?"

I shake my head.

"But..." I begin and he tilts his head, wrinkling his forehead. "Raffaele was at the conference," I reveal. He shakes his head. Of course, he doesn't know who he is. "He's the one I was having an affair with before my father found out. That's why he decided I should marry Nicola. When Raffaele came forward, I threatened him by touching on subjects dear to him and he let it go. Only he approached Kristòs, and they exchanged business cards." She closes her eyes and inhales. "He shouldn't..."

"We'll deal with him in due course. Hopefully, I won't reveal everything to him before you do." Now my mood is

back under my shoes. “Jade, take it easy. Kris has had a rough past and...”

“I know, he told me about the operation. I don’t know what or how, but I think I feel something.” To have admitted this to him and not Electre upsets me. Athos nods and takes a deep breath. Yet another one.

“It’s complicated, but if you really believe in it, I support you. More I can’t do but remember that I will always stand up for you.”

“As you should.”

He places his hand on my back and urges me back to the table.

“Here we go. Have you ordered yet?” asks Athos as he moves my chair to help me sit down. All under the eyes of Kristòs who looks calm.

“We thought we’d get a mix of appetizers,” Electre replies. Athos goes around the table and sits next to my friend; he grabs her hand and brings it to his mouth to leave a resounding kiss on its back.

“Did you do what you were ranting about in Italian?” whispers Kristòs as he reaches for the bottle of wine. He moves it towards my glass and waits for my response.

“Yes, thank you,” I reply haughtily. To which of the two questions, I let him choose. He fills my glass and then his friend’s. For himself he seems to have poured still water.

The dinner, or as Electre called it, aperitif, goes smoothly. No one cares about anything, no one is making heavy jokes or insinuating nonsense. I might say we seem like long-time friends, at least until a bang, followed by a play of lights, interrupts our chatter.

“The waiter said we can go down to the terrace below. We’ll have a better view from there,” Kristòs explains. The first to spring to her feet is Electre, who grabs her beloved by the hand and drags him towards the steps. They vanish in an instant over the white walls. The man at my side turns to me and, with a mischievous grin, says the two magic words: “Do you want to come down?”

“Of course.” I get up and head towards the two lovebirds without waiting for Kristòs to follow or accompany me, because there’s no risk of getting lost. The terraces overlooking the caldera are almost all the same. As soon as I get downstairs and place my hands on the masonry parapet, the lights in the room go out, leaving room for the soft light of the full moon. I don’t know where Athos and Electre have gone, but I certainly don’t intend to go looking for them and miss the fireworks display.

Someone puts his hands on the railing next to mine and presses his body against mine.

“I know it would be too much to ask what you and my best friend said to each other, but just know that I’d like to know,” he says against my skin, made damp by his kisses. I throw my head back resting it on his shoulder. Another bang rips through the silence that surrounds us. The light created by the dust slightly illuminates the surroundings, revealing that our friends are even further down. We are hidden from prying eyes.

“That’s our business and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t interfere” I whisper under the influence of pleasure. I’m glad there is no one around us but the dark, otherwise they would hear my moans. My unspoken plea to be spanked by my daddy.

“Your business, huh?” He places his hand on my belly and then moves down to stop between my thighs. He moves my panties down and plays with my privates as if it’s the easiest, most natural thing in the world. “If it’s you, it’s my business too.” And with a gentle kick he makes me spread my legs wider to stick a finger inside me. Just like that, as if doing such things in public was the order of the day. Even though there must be four or five people scattered around the terrace, and none of them are close enough to know what’s going on, it’s really weird. And exciting.

The unexpected gesture makes me hold my breath. Impetuous yet gentle and delicate, he delights me as only he can.

“Then you join me next time,” I whisper with difficulty. I move my pelvis towards his, fully sensing his desire for me.

“You have a strange habit of not telling me what’s on your mind, but with him...” I try to place my hand on the one between my thighs, but he pushes me forward until my belly is pressed against the railing.

“Are you going to throw me over?” I giggle to downplay his gesture. He jerks his hand away and turns me around. In the chaos and light of the fireworks, his tense face unsettles me. I don’t know if he is angry or offended. While he continues to look at me, I stroke the hint of his beard, then raise myself up on my toes so that my face is at the same level as his. I lean in and leave a gentle kiss on the corner of his mouth, then on his lips. I nibble at him, teasing him, urging him to give in and kiss me.

“Kristòs.” I pull my face away from his only when I notice his closed eyes. I don’t know why they scare me. Maybe he’s

right, maybe I really should tell him more, talk to him as I would to Athos.

“Did you give to him what you’re giving to me?” As he lifts his eyelids I freeze, shocked by his implication.

“No!” I blurt out, trying to keep myself from smacking him for his stupid idea. “Athos is my best friend’s man, I would never do something like that! I hate people who get in the way of a couple and destroy them with no problem.” Eye to eye, I want him to read my determination. “First...” I begin, “first I was embarrassed. I don’t have any money and I couldn’t have paid for my share of the dinner.”

“Are you kidding?” I shake my head.

“I left home, reiterating to my parents that I would never ask them for anything again. When I set foot in Santorini I had enough to live on for a few months, or at least it should have been enough until I found a job. Thanks to Electre’s pressure I started working at Enea and then... well, you know the story. There’s nothing between me and Athos, I never even had a thought about him. It’s just that he knows my situation, it’s not for nothing that he leveraged you to hire me.” I spit out the truth, or at least most of it. He keeps looking at me like everything I just told him isn’t true in the slightest, like I made it all up or worse, he doesn’t believe me at all. “Kristòs,” I start, but he turns away looking away from me.

“Are you kidding?” he repeats, and I want to die. I didn’t think he’d react like that over nothing. “Did you get up from the table because you were afraid, I was going to ask you to pay the bill?”

“I wanted to talk to Electre about it, but...”

“You’re such a little girl,” he huffs, shaking his head. “Look, let’s just leave it at that.”

“No!” Now I’m the angry one. He may look at me wrong, but I don’t want to let it go. I want there to be complicity between us and not anger or doubt.

He raises his hands in surrender and bows his head. I’m breathing hard, my heart is pounding and I’m afraid that in a few moments it might break my ribcage and spurt away.

“Believe me, it’s best if we leave it alone. It can’t work. Let’s forget what happened and leave what happened in Athens to Athens.” When he takes a step back, I try to grab him, but he ducks, and I feel like I’m going to die.

“Don’t try to change my mind because my mind is made up.” As I look at him in disbelief, he lets his arms fall down his body. “It’s over, the fairy-tale of the prince taking care of you is over.” He turns to the steps and climbs them back upstairs.

Kristòs left me here, alone. Kristòs left me. Full stop.

I close my eyes and swallow my sorrow. The silence around me is deafening. At least until a loud bang scares me so much that I jump. My heart is beating wildly and even if I concentrate on breathing, I can’t calm it down.

I turn around and another rocket is fired, maybe the first or the last, I have no idea. I have no idea anymore. My heart is in pieces and cannot comprehend what has just happened. He wanted to try, he asked me to keep our story a secret, and now, he chooses to change his mind over a silly thing.

It hurts so much I feel like I’m dying.



I GET OUT OF ATHOS' car pretending that nothing has happened. Kristòs and I haven't had a fight and we haven't crossed the line. But inside me it's all a mixture of feelings that I didn't want to feel anymore.

Neither of us opens our mouths or tries to get the two sweethearts to stop talking and smooching with offensive banter. There is no desire to ruin their night as well to dull my pain. As for him, I can't be sure.

It's late when we enter the house and Kristòs doesn't even say hello before holing up in his room. I might as well go up to him and force him to talk, to clarify... I don't know. I'm tired. Tired of chasing him, of having to justify my every thought or gesture. Tired of wanting him so badly while he doesn't seem to care how I am.

"Do you want to come sleep with me? Let's leave Athos on the couch" proposes Electre who has joined me. She caresses my face in a caring gesture full of compassion. Although I haven't told her anything, she has assumed something, I can feel it.

"For me there is no problem. I've slept several times there, I'm used to it," he explains. Electre thins her eyes and turns to her boyfriend waiting for some explanation. "What? Haven't you ever been too drunk to drive? I have, so I was sleeping there since I couldn't get to the room." I smile at the sight of him crawling across the living room.

"At Kris's house?"

“Yes. Before I bought the house you’re staying at.” Electre shakes her head and looks back at me, incredulous at the words that came out of Athos’ mouth.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay here. Tomorrow, I have to wake up early to go to... to pick up the bike, I’d risk waking everyone up,” I lie, again. I can’t say my destination is any different given how Kris behaved last time.

Between several huffs and as many complaints, I manage to convince my friend to let me stay on the couch.

I thank Athos when, upon returning from their room, he brings me a blanket and pillow.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sleep with Ele? I won’t be offended if you give up the couch.”

“Thanks for the thoughtfulness, but I’m dead sure. I don’t like splitting up a couple.” I give him a small smile that should calm him down and make him accept my decision.

His caress on my cheek is sweet, and so is the kiss he leaves on my forehead before saying goodnight and joining his beloved.

When I’m alone, I settle in as best I can. Heartbroken, my face turned to the door of Kristòs’ room, hoping that he will open it and come to get me, that he will take me with him and make me his again as he hoped.

But he doesn’t.

It doesn’t even open when, tired of waiting, I get up and lean my hand and forehead against the wood of the door. I try knocking and calling out to him, I even try lowering the handle and sneaking in without permission, but I’m stunned to find it locked.

I don't know what got into him, why he reacted the way he did. I sigh and pull away to throw myself back on the couch. This time I turn my back on the damn room. Sad, offended, humiliated, mortified to the bone. So much so that if that door opened, I wouldn't move for anything in the world.

I stare at the wall trying to figure out where I went wrong, what I said or did to set it off like that. I close my eyes and try to fall asleep and not think, however I can't.

I could call him; I could text him apologizing for whatever I did to make him angry. I don't accept that there is no confrontation, no explanation, and not being able to understand what the hell is wrong with him. Determined, I grab my phone and compose the simplest, most basic message I've ever written to him.

“Can you open the door?”

I'd like to clarify, if possible.”

IMMEDIATELY I HEAR the ringtone of his cell phone and, like the silly little girl I am, I stare hopefully at those damn ticks that don't seem to want to turn blue.

Just so I don't miss anything, I add:

“Please.”

I WAIT. I cross my fingers and hope that the stubborn man locked in his room opens the door, because my eyes are closing.

I wait, but Morpheus is faster than Kris.

Chapter 21



I jolt awake. Breathlessness and a pounding heart tell me that I've had a nightmare. I don't remember anything. I don't know what caused this abrupt awakening.

I run a hand over my forehead and find it damp with sweat.

I instinctively check my mobile phone to see if Kristòs has answered and I discover, to my amazement, that I've only slept an hour. Not a single message.

He didn't even open the application. He didn't deign to give me another chance.

I get up with a fatigue that doesn't belong to me and go to the kitchen to have a glass of water in the hope of calming myself down. I try not to make any noise because I don't want to wake anyone up. By now I have resigned myself to the idea that it has ended like this, in the worst possible way.

Now I understand how it feels to be dumped with no chance of replying. I've done it myself when I didn't like someone and didn't care about their feelings. I never imagined it would hurt so much.

I rest my hands on the kitchen counter and take a deep breath.

Thanks to light fixtures under the cabinets, I can do what I need to do without turning on too many lights. I take a glass and fill it with water. I drink it almost all in one go, trying to swallow even this damned mood that doesn't let me sleep in peace.

I go back to the small living room like a man condemned to death and as soon as I arrive in front of the door of Kristòs' room I stop. I put my hand on the cold wood trying to perceive every little noise. I wonder if he is sleeping or awake, if he is well or suffering like me. If tomorrow, when we wake up, he will talk to me, treat me badly or worse, ignore me. I slide my hand across the rough surface of the door to the handle. I squeeze it but don't lower it. I don't have the strength to do it again and find that it's still locked. I huff and puff and walk away back to the couch.

I can't lie down, rest my head on the pillow and close my eyes. I can't just lie here as if nothing happened. I grab my phone and do something I never thought I'd do. I search for his number, and when I find it, I move as far away from the door of that damn room as I can.

"Hello?" His sleepy voice makes me close my eyes and a tear chooses to line my cheek.

"Hi," I whisper almost in a whimper. "Sorry about the hour, but..."

"Jade, don't worry about it. Did something happen?"

"No, no. I wanted to know if you have a free room." If Kristòs really wants to end this, it's best if I'm not here when he wakes up.

"Sure," he replies quickly.

"Thanks, Enea."

“Jade, did something happen with Electre?” My breath catches in my throat. I swallow hard and try to come up with a plausible excuse. The one who gets in the way is him.

“Can I come over now?”

“Of course, you can. Do you need a ride?”

“No, it’s fine.” My voice is now little less than a whisper, reflecting my state of mind perfectly. Silence falls. Neither of us speak. “Enea?”

“Tell me, Jade,” he replies sleepily. A sense of guilt assails me.

“Thank you.”

“Come on, I’ll wait for you.” Then he hangs up.

I never thought I’d ask him for help and leave Electre. Running away again. Running away from a disappointment to seek comfort from those who showed me affection.

I return to the sofa where I fold the blanket and place it on the cushion. I quickly write a note of reassurance for Electre and Athos but... No, I can’t leave it anywhere. If Kristòs wakes up first, he’ll read it and find out where I’ve gone. Better to put it where only my friends can read it.

With my heart in my throat, I walk down the corridor under the starry ceiling and stop in front of their room. I bend down and slide the note under the door, then go back to the living room, grab my backpack, and slip out of this house without being heard.

It hurts to do that, to run away and take refuge elsewhere. Ele will take it out on me, I can feel it, but I don’t see any alternative. I can’t stay in the house of someone who tore out my heart and trampled on it without a problem.

It takes me almost an hour before arriving at Enea little restaurant. The sun is peeking out beyond the little white houses and, step by step, I feel more and more destroyed.

“I thought you had forgotten where I live,” he chuckles as soon as he sees me. He jumps down from the little wall he was sitting on and comes towards me. I can see the worry on his face even though he tries to mask it.

“Unfortunately, I’m on foot.” He nods giving me a tense and tired smile.

“I can see that.” He hugs me without a second thought. “Do you want to eat breakfast or jump into bed?”

“I’d opt for the latter. I haven’t had much sleep. I’m fresh from the re-enactment party.” I close my eyes letting him know my condition. He chuckles inviting me towards the restaurant.

Enea house is right next door. He told me that this solution is very comfortable, and he wouldn’t change it for anything in the world. Often, he would offer me the possibility of staying over at his place, in the extra room, so I could work a double shift without having to tire myself out on the road and each time I declined the invitation.

“Nice fires, aren’t they? I love them.” I only nod, noticing that his face is also veiled in tiredness. “I think it’s pointless to ask you again, but I’d like to make sure you didn’t get into any weird trouble and come here to hide... How should I know, from the police? From Kristòs?” As soon as he says that name my heart stops. He’s got it right, but if I tell him the truth, he might not help me, and I can’t afford that.

“No trouble.” I lie with the knowledge that I have, that I’ve resorted to lying again to save myself.

“I’m asking because I’d like to be prepared in case, I see someone coming who might make a big scene.” His doubt is legitimate, but the way he left me, I doubt he would. He doesn’t want anything to do with me, so he’s unlikely to show up. I shake my head and chuckle. “Okay then.”

“I’d also like to apologise for the bike,” I start, but he quickly stops me.

“Punctures happen. The important thing is that you’re okay.”

He finally makes my way to his flat.

“Usually, the noise from the restaurant isn’t heard, but since I’m at the restaurant when there’s noise...”

“I get it.” I smile at his little joke, and he strokes my arm, whispering the sweetest words I’ve ever heard him say that seem to be warming my soul right now.

“I like it when you smile.” Then he pinches my chin and points to the room. “My room is that one over there. Over there is the bathroom and over there is the kitchen. Make yourself at home. I’ll see you for the lunch shift, okay?” I nod and watch him walk away.

Proud posture, sleepy gait, he rubs the back of his neck in a clear sign of fatigue. I can’t thank him enough for the hospitality he’s giving me.

I am more than sure that Electre and Athos will not miss me. And Kristòs... well, he’s got his new club to think about.

I wonder if he’ll keep the name he chose or change it.

I enter the room and throw my backpack on the floor, at the foot of the bed. I close the door behind me and with a

single step I abandon myself on the mattress hoping that all this is just a nightmare.



“JADE, the chips go on the table by the window.” Enea waves the plate in front of my nose. “They asked for them ten minutes ago.”

“Sorry. It slipped my mind.” I grab the plate and, with the biggest smile I’ve ever had, set it down in front of the customers and apologise for being late. I am happy, so to speak, that they have accepted my apology. The lack of sleep is affecting me and making me less reactive. I’m running wherever I need to, because today there are so many people, but also understanding. I just hope that Enea will be too when I finish the round.

“Table ten, on the other hand, has just got up,” he informs me. I nod, arm myself with a tray, cloth and sprayer and go to clean.

“Excuse me, can we sit here?” I wince in fright when a voice, identical to Kris’s, suddenly arrives. When I look up, I find a small couple staring at me hopefully. I try to recover quickly, finding my reaction stupid.

“I’ll tell you right now,” I reply hoping they haven’t noticed anything. I nod to Enea who immediately replies in the affirmative. “Please, it’s all yours.” I take the dirty dishes to the kitchen and, in a flash, bring them the menus. It doesn’t take them long to order and be served. Without me noticing, they finish their meal and leave, leaving a generous tip. Everything is so hectic that two o’clock in the afternoon

comes quickly. Usually, at that time, people move to the central part of the island where the hotels are located or head to the beaches.

“Good job,” compliments Enea when the last customer finally leaves the restaurant. I smile and continue to clear the table trying not to think about anything other than work. I need to keep my mind occupied.

A braking sound resounds in the car park and makes me turn towards my boss who is helping me clear the last tables. Even his eyes are bewildered. Then my gaze is drawn to a presence on the threshold of the restaurant.

He looks shocked, shocked to see me here after he expressed his wish never to set foot in this place again. He only moves two steps and seems drunk.

“Do you need anything?” Enea’ tone is harsh as he turns to Kristòs.

He catches up to him and stands in front of him, blocking him.

“I want to talk to Jade, not you,” he hisses through his teeth. Our eyes are glued together even though Enea towers over Kristòs’ rehearsed figure.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you. But I can.” Enea points him to the outside of the club, inviting him to address any talk outside.

“Jade,” he calls to me as he strides forward a step, completely ignoring his former friend. I back away instinctively, afraid of what he might do. Enea spreads his hands wide preventing him from continuing. “Get your filthy hands away from me.” Then I hear him mumble some words

that I don't understand and Kristòs goes back to pushing Enea who holds him back.

“Okay,” I exclaim, afraid of what he might do. “I'm coming, but you stop, we'll talk about this outside.”

“Jade, no!” Now thundering at me is Enea, incredulous at my surrender. So am I, but we're still in a club and I don't want any more trouble.

“Don't worry.” I try to reassure him and then reach for the one who merely left me with a pathetic apology. I place a hand on his chest and direct him outside. He staggers, barely able to stand, and I don't understand. He doesn't drink, he can't do that. Has he come to his senses? His eyes show the fear he has of me, but he's not afraid to go along with my every gesture. I pity him. How did he manage to become like this? For what? For his own decision?

I get as far as the car, hoping to pick him up and send him away, but my will vanishes once we are alone. I try to open my mouth to say something sensible that might calm him down, but he beats me to it.

“Get in the car,” he whispers in a drunken stupor. Or at least I think so since he doesn't smell like a drunk.

“To be treated like yesterday? No, thank you.”

“Thanks, my ass!” He closes his eyes from the difficulty in speaking. But how the hell did he manage to come here in this condition?

“Do they know you're here? I'm going to call Athos to...”

“Now get in.”

A car comes barrelling into the car park and I am surprised to see Athos with Electre in tow. He gets out of the car and

joins us urging me to be quiet and leave.

“What are you doing?” he whispers, and I shake my head seeing Athos approaching. “Jade, get in the car I’ll take you home.” He keeps walking backwards not noticing anything. “Get the fuck in!” But Athos blocks him grabbing him by the arms. “Jade!” He gets off balance and falls down on his knees. He tries to escape from his friend and doesn’t stop staring. “Jade!” Yet another scream. The blood freezes in my veins.

“Come.” Enea grabs me by the arm and drags me away from the vision of a man annihilated in a single night.

“What happened? Why is he here and claiming you in that condition?” He starts asking questions I don’t know and don’t want to answer. My attention is all on Kris who is calmed by his friend’s grip and Electre’s voice. Enea shakes me off by drawing my gaze. “I asked you if there was a risk that...”

“I don’t know, okay? I don’t know why he’s here,” I lie. “I don’t know why he’s in that condition.” I squeeze my eyelids shut, trying to banish the images that keep presenting themselves before my eyes. Someone is hugging me and, from what I can sense, it can’t be anyone else but Electre.

“What happened?” she whispers without being heard by Enea. Her embrace is full of compassion and fear. “Why are you here?”

“Are you all right?” Athos’ low but terrified voice makes me shake even more. He leaves a caress on my head. “Did he do any damage?” Besides ripping out my heart?

“Hell, I haven’t seen him this drunk since his father died. What happened?” Enea looks worried about him too.

“He’s not drunk,” Electre retorts. Seeing her defend Kris throws me off.

“I’ve seen a lot of them, and I’ve known him my whole life. I know how much he drinks and if he’s not drunk, then he’s high. As usual,” Enea raises. “Now it explains why she ran away.”

“How dare you? You don’t know what he’s going through, how can you say such things? You stopped seeing him so you can’t afford to open your mouth!” Ele attacks him without thinking of compromising their relationship. I would have expected this fury from Athos and not from her, who until last night was teasing him.

“Ele...” her boyfriend rebukes her. She runs her hands through her thick light hair and raises her face to the sky, trying to regroup her ideas.

“You’ll need these.” Kristòs’ voice makes my eyes widen. He’s standing in front of me again. In his hand he holds a paper bag, which he tosses at my feet with little delicacy. He looks more and more broken, his eyes full of hate and pain. “I never want to see you again.”

What?

“Kristòs, get back in the damn car!” Athos’ angry shout scares me as much as the behaviour of Kristòs in these moments. I try not to get emotionally involved, not to show my pain for his refusal, for the way he is treating me, but it is useless. It’s painful to see him like this, destroyed after realising he’s really lost me. Seeing him come back to me, trying to take me back even if it’s in his own way, stirs something inside of me.

I feel my cheeks getting wet and, even though I don’t want to, the tears fall copiously, blurring the scene of him backing up to his car and, instead of getting into it, putting his hand on

the door. His head falls forward and his shoulders rise and fall slowly, far too much for my liking.

“Don’t you dare.”

Kristòs ignores his friend’s shouts and climbs into his car.

“Fuck!” he curses. As soon as he realizes his intentions, he tries to catch up with him, but Kristòs speeds off regardless.



IT’S NOT easy to sit here, in the room of Enea’s house, and have the eternal need in my head to understand what Kristòs has done, to know if he’s safe and sound.

“Jade.” God, how many times have I heard that name called! It should have given me peace, but instead it has brought me only torment. I direct my eyes to my friend who is sitting next to me. “Do you want to come home with us?” Her hands clasping mine try to give me some comfort, but it doesn’t come where it should. I shake my head because everything in that house reminds me of him. And I don’t want to.

“How are you?” I shrug and that’s it. I don’t know and I’m not going to ask because I’m afraid of the answer.

“El.” Enea calls her back. We look up at the same time finding him standing still in the doorway of the room. “Athos called. He managed to convince him to go to the hospital.”

My heart stops. To the hospital? Why?

“He found him halfway there complaining of excruciating pain in his head and chest.”

The wound. Maybe that's why he was in that condition.

"You owe him an apology." Electre stares at him hostilely. She seems determined to side with Kris. "When he woke up this morning he was already in pain. Kristòs has been under stress for months about the new opening and the constant financial problems are not good for him. To have accused him of being drunk, or even stoned was a really bad thing for you who were his best friend."

"You're forgetting Karen," he mutters in response, as if her cousin's reasoning is nothing compared to what he just said.

"No, I don't forget. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't either, since you're to blame as well."

"If you don't know things, 'shut up'," she retorts. Then she seems to change her mind. "Are you staying until Athos comes back or shall I take you back to his house?" Electre looks at me and rests her lips on my bare shoulder. Maybe she's waiting for my reaction or a nod to decide what to do. But she doesn't.

"Can you tell why he was mad at you?" asks Enea again.

"Why do you think? She's his employee, you know how he thinks about these things," Ele answers for me. She seems on the verge of war.

"I don't have a problem if she works for him, why is the opposite not good? Explain it to me because I really don't understand." This conversation is going way beyond what concerns me. "Also, because whichever of us hires her doesn't change the state of affairs. She can still work in both places since this place is also his."

What? So, he's the second partner?

“You’re his best friend, not me. Or at least, you were. Some things you should know instead of asking me.” She rolls her eyes and snorts. “Now, please, leave us alone.”

Enea shakes his head, annoyed, but then takes his leave, closing the door behind him.

“Why did you come to the one place you didn’t have to? He... He, he cares about you, more than any other employee. It can’t be that...”

“Stop it. You’re talking about an employee when it’s obvious there’s more to it than that. You don’t take one of your employees to a conference, buy her gifts, make her jealous, make her feel important and put her in all positions.” I let myself fall on the mattress and cover my eyes with my arm. I never thought I would get this far.

Chapter 22



Seven days later

DAYS PASS by without me noticing. I haven't even had time to think about my life and put my ideas in order.

Electre slept with me for a few days, then Athos came back to get her. His cold attitude towards me hurt, but he was clear: between the two, he would choose him.

He didn't reveal much, only that Kris was back in Athens to handle the opening on the spot instead of by phone. Otherwise, nothing more.

Enea offered to put me up and, though reluctantly, Athos and Electre accepted my choice to stay here, in the house of Kris' enemy.

I asked him nothing about their friendship or supposed friendship. Firstly, it's none of my business, and secondly, it seems to be completely over.

"Today is your day off, what are you going to do?" Enea speaks with his mouth full. By now we have breakfast together, then he goes downstairs to get the restaurant ready

for opening and I go back to locking myself in my room until the start of lunch service arrives.

“I’ll stay home.” What else could I do? I can’t call Electre every day and ask her to stay out late or come over. I know she would, but she has her own life, and Athos.

“You could ask Ele out, have fun together, meet someone,” he proposes, staring at the biscuit he’s dipping in his coffee. I look at him, enchanted by his gestures. I think back to how everything that happened didn’t affect him and how he never touched the subject again. I stayed here and we found our routine.

“Or I could watch a marathon of that telenovela they advertise so much on TV.”

“Again.” He rolls his eyes, annoyed by my new lifestyle. Or, more precisely, my new attitude to life. “My aunt doesn’t even look at that, and she’s old,” he chuckles, getting up from the table. He drags his feet to the sink to set the cup down inside it. “Okay, I’m not insisting. I’m just saying you shouldn’t lock yourself in. Santorini offers many attractions besides the TV in your room.” He crosses his arms and leans his butt against the counter.

“I know, but I don’t feel like it. Besides, I don’t have enough money to have a proper night out.” I get up and join him, taking my cup with me. I flank him and take the same position as him.

He chuckles giving me a gentle shove.

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you half a day off tomorrow as well, so you can happily lose yourself in multiple clubs and try them all.”

“Alone, wandering around Santorini, with no means of getting around. No, thanks. I prefer the soap opera.” With a gentle push I stand up and try to finish tidying the table, but Enea stops me. He grabs my arm and turns me around.

“Go have fun,” he whispers, and from his trouser pocket he pulls out the keys to his car and hands them to me.

“I hope this doesn’t end up like the bike,” I mutter perhaps too loudly as his face wrinkles slightly.

“Hey, it’s a loan, not a gift.” He smiles, perhaps hoping to convince me to accept. But I shake my head. I don’t want to. “Should I call Electre?” he threatens.

“Okay,” I huff, grabbing his keys. “But don’t expect much.”

“All I need is for you to get out of that room after hours. Otherwise, I’ll call.” He gives me a genuine smile, one made from the heart.

“Even if I don’t know where to go,” I brood as he leaves me. He slips his hands into his pockets and, without losing his beautiful smile, says something that stuns me.

“Why don’t you go to him?” I point my eyes to his and wait for him to continue. “You haven’t spoken to each other since that day and, frankly, I don’t understand why you didn’t run to the hospital.”

“All I know is that he was in Athens, nothing more.” I bow my head feeling guilty for not showing him that I’m there for him, even though all we did was spend two intense, passion-filled nights. Well, maybe it’s because these things are done by a couple and not two people bound by a working relationship.

“He won’t want to see me.”

“That’s not true. At worst you’ll clear things up once and for all and then you can come back to me with that joy you had the first few days.”

“Slim consolation,” I retort, resetting his smile. I’m pleased to find that he doesn’t take it the wrong way and, at my provocation, pretends to be offended. “What if there isn’t?”

“Then you’ll pretend you were never there and come back to me. I will accept you without batting an eyelid.”

Accept. Why do you have to accept the people, the things, the situations that others put in front of you?

I smile in response, trying not to appear childish and desperate. Enea reaches out his hand towards me and caresses my face.

“If you’re scared, I’ll go with you.”

“So, he can take a hit? No thanks. I had enough the other day.” My tone resembles a desperate chant.

“Answer truthfully. Was or is there something between you?” Here’s the question I never wanted to hear and answer. I lower my eyes, hoping for sensible words to form in my head and come out of my mouth. What exactly is there between Kristòs and me? It can’t be called love or feelings. Maybe attraction.

“Okay, I understand. The only thing I can tell you is to be careful. All that glitters is not gold and...”

“And I’m old enough to handle his fury, as you’ve noticed. You don’t need to warn me,” I interrupt, pulling away from him. I don’t like it when someone talks bad about other people or tries to discredit them.

“If you’re old enough to handle it, how come you’re here hiding?”

Yeah, why am I hiding?

Without letting it get me down I head to my room to lock myself in. Enea might be right; in fact, he definitely is. Fed up, I throw myself on the bed, determined more than ever to do absolutely nothing.



I’VE BEEN in my pyjamas all day watching TV, zapping, and humming the latest hits of the season just as I had planned, and there is nothing more relaxing, nothing more different from what I was used to doing. At least until my mobile phone allows itself to ring.

Why should I answer it? Surely, it’s Electre who wants to go out and I don’t want to. I watch it from a distance until it stops. I focus on the TV and a little later it lights up again. I reach out and grab the phone just to see who it is, but my finger crawls across the screen accepting the call.

Damn.

A ringing voice invokes my name over and over, but I can’t make it out.

“Jade.” Electre whispers my name. I haven’t heard from her since she left. “How are you?” I’m glad to hear her voice. Maybe I would have preferred to hear it sooner, but I can’t argue with her for that.

“Good. You?”

“Good.” Then total silence. I know she’d like to talk to me but she’s afraid to do so.

“What’s the word?”

“That I miss you. I miss your presence and your wandering around the house,” she reveals. I close my eyes and sigh. She is not to blame; she is my friend.

“If you want, you can come here whenever you want. Right now, they’re showing your favourite film.”

“Really? Then, if you feel like it, you could make popcorn and wait for me.” Her voice is definitely more relaxed.

“Of course, I want to,” I whisper, and she goes back to saying to wait for her she’ll be here in no time before she hangs up.

Before she arrives, I give the room a quick tidy up and run to the bathroom to rinse my face. In the kitchen I find everything I need to spend the evening in the company of my friend.

In order not to stay in the house, I go downstairs and wait for her arrival sitting at a table outside the bar. I see Enea talking to a beautiful woman with shoulder-length blond hair. They embrace, share a few kisses and some sweet gestures. He caresses her back while she shows him some papers that don’t seem to interest him much. He seems to be more interested in her.

“You know it’s not elegant to spy?” Electre’s laughter reaches my ears without arousing any interest.

“Do you know who that is?” I point to the woman at her cousin’s side. She now seems to have surrendered to the man’s disinterest in the papers in her hand.

“A representative of something?” she shoots, shrugging her shoulders.

“Are you interested in Enea?” she tries again. This time I turn to her, glowering at her. Why does she have to see romance everywhere?

“Are we going to see the movie?” I nod and lead the way for her to the flat.

“Do you think it’s Karen?” My thought takes voice just as I close the door to the room. We’re alone and can talk freely.

“I don’t know her; I can’t tell if it’s her or not.” I nod and look away and then point to the bed we’re sitting on.

We didn’t open our mouths for the whole film and, honestly, I was really grateful for that, not least because I was just mulling over the woman’s identity. At least until the end credits.

“I wanted to ask you if you felt like coming back to me.” Here’s the question I’m most afraid of ever.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. “I wouldn’t want to...”

“He doesn’t frequent my house. Athos is only there in the evenings.”

“Ele...”

“Jade. After I left here, I forced Athos to explain everything, and I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me about what happened in Athens and Raffaele.” I shake my head trying to find a valid reason. Instead, I realize that I may have made her think that I don’t trust her, that I don’t consider her such an important friend that I have to reveal everything to her.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t start with excuses,” she rebukes me. She’s right, but it’s not easy for me to tell every little detail of my life like she does. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What should I tell you? That it’s my fault? Well, yes. He kept pushing me away, but I kept getting closer. At the umpteenth refusal I snapped because he kept letting me know he wanted more, but when that more came, he backed off. I confronted him,” I began, and she didn’t seem to bat an eye. She whispers a little word of approval encouraging me to continue. “I did it when he was in the shower. I followed him and locked myself in with him.”

“In true Jade style,” she chuckles amused. “Did he cave in?”

“Oh, yes. Those were wonderful times until the revelation of the name of his new club. That’s when the decline began.” I still get chills just remembering the first squabble. “And then this. If he was having second thoughts, he could have told me without making that scene.”

Electre’s eyes move quickly trying to understand, to comprehend Kris’s attitude that seems truly without motivation.

“I wouldn’t want his hatred for me to have affected how he feels about you,” she whispers sadly. I know that they tease each other, that heavy words have flown between them, aimed at offending each other, but I don’t think that’s the problem. I think there’s more to it than that.

“What do you want to do?” I shake my head not even knowing whether to go back to work at the club. “If it’s important to you, don’t waste your time.”

“Important. I’ve known him for a few weeks, like...”

“I went flailing for Athos the very day I saw him. I took the opportunity my job afforded me and invited him to the event I was organising. I didn’t think he’d come, and when I saw him approach me after he’d witnessed the rant with my father, I wanted to sink. Instead, he offered me help. It’s not about how long you’ve known each other, it’s about what you felt the first time you had him in front of you.” She grabs my hands, squeezing them warmly, trying to convey to me all her confidence, friendship, wisdom, determination, help, compassion. Everything that I am lacking at the moment and that I absolutely need to be able to move forward, to react and understand what I really want.

“The first time I saw him my brain melted, then he left me stranded after running me over.” There, now she knows. She widens her eyes, parting her lips.

“Was that him in the club?” she asks incredulously. She holds her breath for a few moments. “And me forcing you to work right there.”

“You didn’t know. No one did. Don’t blame yourself.” I bow my head thinking back that it all seems so far away, but instead it happened a few weeks ago. Kris and I went from hatred to unbridled desire in the snap of a finger.

“So, what are your intentions?”

“Can’t I just leave everything as it is? Ele, I don’t have the strength to fight for both of us. If he doesn’t want to continue, if he doesn’t trust me...”

“Have you told him? Does he know who you really are? That your name isn’t Jade, it’s Giada?” She asks interrupting me. She seems to be fighting for him, hoping for our return to... what?

“Then how can you ask for trust if you’re the first one not to give any?” Good question. How do I do that?

“What made you follow him to Athens?” A slight smirk appears on my face remembering his quirky way of inviting me.

“How did you feel when you realised you’d be spending days alone with him?” My smile widens filling my heart with hope and desire to see him again.

“If you went back, would you do it again? Would you go with him to Athens? Would you sneak back into the shower to reiterate that what you want is him and him alone?” I bite my lip, retracing every moment of that magnificent moment.

“I’m not saying you should run to him, but I’m not saying you should give up either. You’ve spent days courting him, letting him know you want him, but if you give up now, you’re making the biggest mistake of all. He may be insecure and feel threatened by... I don’t know, Enea? Maybe he’d rather give you time to figure out what you want.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. He has nothing to envy in anyone. He is magnificent. Outside and inside.” Otherwise, I wouldn’t have stuck my neck out.

“Then I’d say let him meet Giada because maybe Jade has given him some weird inferiority complex.” Her giggle makes me smile. Giade is possessive and not at all shy or afraid of a man older than her. Not for nothing was she with Raffaele who is even older than Kris.

She gets up on her knees without warning and hugs me tightly.

“Giada would have ripped his balls off for the way he behaved on the day of the re-enactment. She’d never let that

happen,” she whispers in my ear in an inciting manner. “Go back to him, but don’t you dare grovel at his feet. You’re not the one who has to do it.”

“What if he rejects me again?”

“He’s an asshole because he doesn’t understand that you’re the best thing that ever happened to him.”

“I don’t know, Electre. I don’t feel like seeing him again just yet. His words, his accusations hurt me. Even Giada wouldn’t get over such disrespect.” Her gaze is disappointed but apprehensive. For now, I just want to clear my head and hope he does too. If we ever realise we want to try again, we’ll be the ones to seek each other out and not let others influence us.

“Maybe in time. For now, it’s too much.”

My friend smiles and desists from continuing to talk about Kris.

Chapter 23



Two days later

“HELLO?” I move the phone from one ear to the other trying to understand the reason for the noise I hear. Music and background noise disrupt the call.

“*Jade?*” Odin’s voice finally comes through crisply. “*Sorry to disturb you, but I’m in trouble.*”

“Hello, Odin. What’s up?”

“*I know you took two weeks off due to personal issues,*” he replies in a harried manner. A clink of glasses pulls the phone away from my ear.

“Honestly, Kristós...”

“*He’s still in Athens and we’re in trouble. Would you be able to come and help us out? Just a few hours, no need to stay until closing. Please, if it wasn’t important I wouldn’t be calling you. We’re in deep shit and I don’t know how to get out of it.*” The little I know him; I know he wouldn’t call me out of a simple moment of boredom. I could easily tell him no, that it

was Kristòs who made up the excuse of two weeks, so I'd come back, and he wouldn't be there.

What if I met Kris?

“Odin, I don't...”

“Please. I wouldn't ask if we weren't understaffed and with Kris not here to help us.”

“Fine. Time to change and I'll be there,” I say without a second thought. Odin thanks me and hangs up without waiting for me to say anything more.

I close my eyes and try to muster up the courage to get out of bed and get ready. My colleague has asked me a favour and I can't not go.

I still haven't decided what to do, whether to talk to Kris and confront him. Attempt to clarify like two normal people discussing the future of their friendship without taking into account what happened in Athens or stay here and pretend to think.

As soon as I cross the threshold of the flat, I head towards Enea' restaurant to ask him for the car to make it faster. He seems happy, although his voice betrays him. He keeps glancing towards a spot in the room with the obvious fear of being seen.

“You've finally decided to come out. Here, and woe betide you if you return before tomorrow morning.” I grab the keys he hands me and say goodbye, apologising again for not giving him a warning in time.

I jump into the car and reach the club. With tension on my face, I walk towards the bouncer who seems to thank me for arriving in time because Odin really seems to be in trouble. He also adds that he has never seen him so agitated. He lets me

through and as I enter, I see my friend running around the room with trays full of drinks in his hands.

He wasn't lying when he said he was in deep shit.

I walk down the stairs and don't even go to change. I reach towards the back of the bar and grab an apron.

"Thank goodness." Odin catches up to me looking devastated. "You're the only one who answered me, and if there wasn't an unexpected party, I wouldn't have bothered you." He grabs yet another tray and, instead of telling me what to do or where to stand, goes off to serve customers. As soon as he returns, he remembers me and points to the table of men.

"There are only two of you with all these people? But did the bouncers let them in anyway?" I ask trying to figure out what's going on.

"They showed up at the door without a reservation. One at a time. They pretended not to, then magically found themselves at the same table." He emphasises the tale by gesturing and rolling his eyes. "If they'd all arrived at the same time, they wouldn't have been able to get in. And those assholes knew it," he continues, as Margarita puts yet another tray full of drinks on the counter. She too is exhausted.

"They've been here for hours, and they scare the other customers away," she reveals in a friendly tone. She's never spoken to me like this before, I could get emotional.

"For the time being, she arranges the glasses, then if they don't leave, we'll see what to do," Odin explains, pointing at the pile of dishes next to the sink.

Washing after washing, time goes by fast. When I finally manage to dispose of everything, Odin returns with yet

another order and his face is angrier than before. He slams the pad on the counter and vanishes towards the changing rooms.

Margarita starts to prepare what's marked and asks me for two simple Ouzo spritzers, just to give her a hand a little.

“But where are the others?”

“All sick,” she reveals. “After all he's done for them, this is the thanks he gets.” Margarita seems to be infuriated, but as soon as I attempt to ask for more, Odin returns with a new shirt and his anger increasingly evident.

“Follow me with the second tray so we'll be quicker.” I nod and join him.

It's not hard to see why he's full of anger. The group of men, visibly tipsy, are behaving decidedly badly. They could be having fun without overdoing it in this obscene way, but it seems that without getting drunk they can't do it. It's a pity this is a club for good people and not for drunks.

I set the tray down on the table and leave the full glasses to collect the empty ones without interacting more than I have to.

“Can I get a smile?” The voice of the guy at my side makes me turn towards him. I don't look at his face because his breath seems to override my curiosity. What I don't like, about men in general, is when their breath smells like alcohol. It makes me lose interest completely. I smile tensely before returning to clear the table. “Will you stay and keep us company?”

“No thanks, I have to work,” I decline the invitation, but he doesn't seem to like my answer. He brings his hand to my side and pulls me to him making me sit on his lap.

“Really, thanks for the invitation, but I'm not interested.” I try to break free, but he manages to hold me back.

I don't like it when these things happen, when a man, if he can be called a man, uses bullying to get what he wants. Even though I beg him to leave me, he pretends not to hear. When he puts his lips on my shoulder to kiss me, my patience falters.

With my eyes I look for Odin who has vanished into thin air. I struggle, trying not to be offensive to the customer, but it doesn't seem to do much good. I only manage to get up for a moment before he drags me back onto his lap.

"I should probably get back to work, I wouldn't want my colleague to be forced to call someone," I say pointing to the exit.

"Why would that be? Sitting on my lap looks great, as it should." He smiles and only now does my brain metabolize his features. Brown hair with big blue eyes. He seems to be proud of his sedentary build. I've seen him somewhere before, but I couldn't say where.

"You wouldn't happen to have a room where we could hang out? That's what you do here, right?" This is the straw that breaks the camel's back. With all the strength in my body I break free from his grasp moving a few steps away. "Or does that only work for the owner?"

I grab the tray and move away from the table before the urge to shove it in his face gets the better of me, but he grabs my arm causing me to lose my balance and spill all the glasses on the floor. While he's laughing at my carelessness, I just want to hit him in the teeth with the tray.

"Good girl, now you're going to have to wash my shirt." Pointing to the wet garment.

"If you can't drink out of your mouth and you're drooling like a baby, it's not my fault," I retort. I know, I shouldn't have

blurted it out, but on top of the damage he's done to me, he's giving me the run-around, and I'm not having it.

"You know," he reaches out his hand towards me, managing to touch my face, "you could hand wash it dressed in your Sunday best, or why not," he probes my body as if enjoying the view, "even naked."

"No one's washing anyone's clothes." Kristòs' voice makes me lose my pulse. What is he doing here? Wasn't he supposed to be in Athens? "What happened?"

"She spilled glasses on me," the man replies.

"And how come?" His tone is listless but equally harsh, aimed at standing up to the imbecile in front of him and not at hurting me. "My employees would never do such a thing."

"Except for this little tramp here." Kristòs steps forward positioning himself at my side. "I saw how that man in Athens hit on her. But only now do I understand why she rejected him. She prefers to bed the boss."

"Mind your words. No one is offending anyone here," he interjects in my defence. Hands in his trouser pockets, white shirt slightly unbuttoned, hair perpetually mussed and face tense. The man takes a step forward, placing himself a few inches away from Kris. No one in his company seems to want to help him, either by dragging him away or giving him a hand.

"Guys, please. Let's stop this," I interject, positioning myself between them. My chest is against Kris's, and he doesn't want to look at me. I place my hands on his belly and push, but he doesn't seem to want to budge.

"Just telling the truth," Chuckles the idiot behind me. "I'd do her too," he whispers in my ear causing a disgust that I

can't hide.

“Please, let's go over there,” I say to Kristòs.

“Why are you picking on my staff? There are places set aside to vent your frustration and this isn't one of them.” Kris doesn't seem to want to give in. With my eyes I look for help from Odin or someone who could sedate the two. I find him in the lobby ordering the bouncer to intervene. In a few strides he comes down the stairs and stands at our side. He slips his hand between me and the customer dragging me to his side.

“Are you okay?” I sigh, and before I can close my eyes to relax for a second, someone grabs me by the hair and sends me crashing into Kris's head. The sharp pain in my forehead makes my knees buckle, but I manage not to fall only because I'm clinging to my boss' body.

I try to catch my breath, to connect, but when I can no longer feel his presence under my hands, I realise what has happened. Kris is bent over with his hand over his nose. The customer is trapped in the arms of the bouncer who is laughing with amusement. He has provoked him with the clear intention of being hit.

“It's easy to swagger with the big guy defending you,” the unrestrained idiot yells at him. “Come here and show me how tough you are.”

Kris pulls his hand away from his nose. He watches it, full of blood, as he yells at the bouncer to kick him out without giving him a chance to be allowed to set foot again either here or in any of his other clubs. Only now does the rest of the company intervene, grabbing the man and preventing him from doing any more damage.

I struggle to grab Kris by the arm in an attempt to help him, but he pushes me away. I don't give up and push him as hard as I can, guiding him towards the counter and sitting him on a stool. I don't care if he keeps pushing me away, I stay in front of him.

"Stop moving" I kiss him pulling his head back. He rolls his eyes with a grimace of pain. I reach out to grab a tea towel and stick some ice in it. I position myself between his legs and place the cloth on his nose. He doesn't reply, he doesn't look at me, he doesn't pay attention to me but at least he lets me treat him without arguing.

"He pushed my head against your nose," I whisper, my hands shaking from the adrenaline. I try to wipe it off but again he pushes my hand away. "Be quiet." He finally places his hands on his legs and lets me do it. With one edge of the cloth, I wipe his lips and chin. I venture to check if he is still dripping blood. Gently I pass under his nose and all around.

Something tickles my thighs and when I glance up, I find his thumbs caressing me. I smile at this small gesture of affection. It may sound strange, but I've missed him.

"Why are you here?" Those are the only words he addresses to me. They're not aimed at offending or arguing, not least because he keeps twiddling his thumbs over my legs.

"Odin was in trouble because of those idiots." I look at his nose, hoping it's not broken. He sighs and gives me a half-smile and then places his open hand on my thigh. The one that lies hidden between the counter and us. "If not now, I should have come back at the end of my holiday." It's only at this point that he lowers his head, points his eyes into mine and I feel myself getting out of breath. I knew this day would come, but I never imagined it would be so full of emotion.

He scrutinizes me, trying to figure out if I'm telling the truth or if I'm pulling his leg.

“Would you have come back? After all the hurtful words and the times, I treated you badly, you would have come back?”

“I did come back.” I only realise I've used an edge in my voice after I've spoken. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Does it hurt?”

“The sight of you at Enea'? Too much,” he reveals seriously. “The nose is bearable.” I want to feel guilty for taking refuge with Enea, but I can't, not after everything he's insinuated and said about me.

“Kris.” Odin's breathy voice distracts him. He turns to him and looks at him. The exhaustion is evident on his face. I've seen him exhaust himself following those rubes, serving, and revering them as best he could. He has heard the worst adjectives, but he has never lost his temper. “Benny managed to kick them all out. No one objected, except that...”

“Quietly, as soon as you've recovered, lock up,” Kris replied. “Join me in the office later.” Then he turns to me. “Would you stay and help him out?” I nod feeling a myriad of feelings I can't explain. “Offer drinks to those who stayed and give the club's apology.” He closes his eyes and pulls me away, pressing his hand to my thigh. Even though I know it's a harmless gesture, I still feel it as a stab.

As soon as I take a step back, he stands up, placing himself a few inches from me. His face is very close to mine. “Thank you,” he says and leaves without waiting for a response from me.

Even though not being able to follow him is eating away at my soul, I try to hurry through my chores and help Odin and Margarita as much as possible. I feel guilty about the headbutt I threw at them, even though it wasn't voluntary. In fact, if I hadn't been there, none of this would have happened.

"Jade." Margarita reaches over and places her hand on my shoulder, squeezing it and then drawing me into a hug. "I wouldn't have been able to. You kept your cool by placing yourself between them to divide them."

"But it did little good," I reply. Today seems to be a strange day indeed. Maybe it's one of my usual nightmares from which I can't wake up.

"Does it hurt?" she asks, loosening her embrace to brush her fingers across my forehead. "He pushed you so hard you broke his nose."

I close my eyes and breathe deeply, feeling guilty for not feeling pain.

"Go to him we're done here." I only shake my head because I'm afraid of Kris' reaction. Even though I know what it might entail to reach him, I wouldn't hold up again if his fury was unleashed on me. Margarita returns to cheering me on under Odin's watchful eye.

Facing Kris frightens me. I haven't thought enough about how and what to say to him. I wanted to let a few more days go by, but here I am, trying to put my mind in order to talk to him and clarify things.

I walk the short distance that separates me from the office with small and uncertain steps. I knock on the door before entering, and when I hear his hoarse voice, my breath catches.

How is it possible that a man can mess with my brain as if I were a little girl?

He's sitting in his swivel chair with his head resting on the edge of the seat.

Part of me wants to run to him, hug him and nurse him back to health, the other part is more inclined to run away and never come back. I can't take my eyes off his perpetually overshadowed face, his slightly square jaw, his wild but soft and fragrant hair that drives me crazy just to smell it.

Smell? I sound like Enea sniffing his hair.

His chest rises and falls in a hypnotic rhythm, even his hazel eyes are staring at me in disbelief.

There, if you hadn't gotten lost looking at him, you would have managed to escape without being seen by him.

He straightens up and does nothing but keep looking at me. He doesn't speak, he doesn't express himself, he doesn't insult me. He doesn't do anything at all and that gets on my nerves.

"Hi," I whisper. "We're done in there." I catch my breath. "They just need to turn off the lights and leave."

"Have you come to collect your pay?" He reaches for his phone and checks the screen.

What, but he told me to come. I thought he was asking if the guy had hurt me or extended his hands.

"I'd like to resign." There, I said it and I'm sure of it. Now more than ever. His indifference weighs on me and I know that if I keep working here this will kill me.

Kristòs looks up at me, incredulous. He looks lost, or he's just shocked by my presence and my will.

“Okay.” He takes his eyes off my body, and I suddenly feel lighter. He places his hands on the desk and, with a push, reaches for the printer where he grabs a blank sheet of paper. When he stands up and reaches for me, I feel my heart beating fast in my chest, but when he is at my side and hands me the paper, my heart rises in my throat making me feel sick. I feel like I might throw up at any moment.

“What do you mean?” I look at the paper not understanding what I should do.

“Write two lines saying you’re quitting,” he explains shrugging his shoulders. Without hesitation, I grab the paper and walk over to the desk. I write down what he told me and sign it. I didn’t realise he had come so close that he was just inches away from me.

It’s all so damn difficult. If I quit my job, I have a better chance of being with him, yet I have a strange feeling that weighs on me. Will he want to try again now?

He grabs the piece of paper and leans over to sign it. His body is so close to me that I can detect his intoxicating scent. The one that tickled my nostrils every time I stood close to his skin, his body.

“You’re free,” he whispers, and my eyes settle on his thin lips that are so inviting. God, if I just think back to what he can do with those.

“I’m not your employee anymore,” I say more to convince myself than anything else.

“Are you really sure about that?” I nod, lowering my gaze. I wish I was but I’m not. He might not even show up again and I’d feel dumber than before.

“We need to talk and clear up a lot of stuff.”

“Are you still staying at Enea’?” He looks at my lips lusting after them in a way only he is capable of, diverting the conversation to his former friend. I nod again and it seems to irritate him. “Have you been good?” I assume his question is referring to our relationship. I wrinkle my forehead and he goes back to talking. “You don’t prefer him to me, do you?”

“Tell me how I could.” I have to calm my urge to close the distance and ruin all the work of the past few weeks, but he does something I wasn’t prepared for. He raises his hand and brushes a strand of hair from my forehead, then with his index finger he brushes the bump that broke his nose. I’m still surprised that I don’t feel any pain.

He reaches down to my cheek, caressing it. A touch that burns, that causes pain but soothes my torment. I follow his touch, moving my head towards his warm palm. I lift my face, sliding his thumb over my chin, enjoying the contact.

“I’m not your employee anymore,” I repeat. I place my hand on his chest, sneaking my fingers into the crevice of his shirt. I brush against his taut, warm skin. I close my eyes, trying to memorise it, to remember what it’s like to feel him breathing under my fingers.

“No, you’re not anymore,” he replies, and his chest shakes from his voice. There is nothing more divine.

“So, you’re not my boss anymore?” Why do I keep talking, why do I keep prolonging my agony? I have far more talking to do than ask rhetorical questions.

“No.”

“So...” I stand up on my tiptoes. It’s my body asking for it, demanding it, wanting to feel it around and hell, even inside.

“So...” Now he’s getting closer too, until he’s laying his lips on mine.

I’d honestly imagined this moment completely differently. Him kicking me out of the office screaming at me not to set foot in any of his clubs. But instead...

“Tell me you’re not a vision. Tell me you’re here, in front of me, and you’re humouring me. Tell me you came back to me even after I was an asshole.”

“I’m here. If you want me, I’m here for you.” Everything else is irrelevant. He pounces on my lips as if I’ve uttered a magic formula. He demands to enter, to play with my tongue, to show him who is the strongest. Slowly he advances until he has me cornered. He kisses me, no, he demands me, desperate to make up for the time we were apart.

When we pull away to catch our breath, he rests his forehead on mine and smiles softly.

“Jesus Christ how I’ve missed you.”

“What are you doing, stealing my expletives?”

“I want everything about you, even this expletive. I want you; I want you back in my life and...” He takes a deep breath then smiles. “I missed you and now you seem like a mirage. I was wrong to treat you that way and I have no valid excuse other than to say that jealousy clouded my brain.”

A soft knock knocks him away, leaving me to sag into myself. He heads for the chair and the door opens revealing my colleagues. Worry etched on my face. The two bouncers also enter the office and seem to be preoccupied. They cast a quick glance towards me standing in a corner with my arms folded.

“What happened?” None of the people present speak, no one seems to want to relive the commotion. “Well? I got head-butted for nothing?”

“It’s my fault,” I begin, and Kristòs’ eyes are on me. “I responded to provocation and...”

“Shut up,” he orders. “You weren’t even supposed to be here.” His voice is harsh and admonitory. “Were they booked?” He watches them all waiting for an answer. “Odin?”

“No. Tourists who came in at the drop of a hat and then gathered inside,” he replies in a submissive tone. “The guys had to stop the entrances because we couldn’t keep up.”

“Okay. The police?”

“No, they left quietly,” one of the two bouncers reports. Kris nods and bows her head.

“The rest of the guys? Why were we so understaffed that we had to call Jade?” Although his is a simple question aimed at understanding the situation, putting me in the middle suggests he didn’t want to have me here.

“They called in sick. They didn’t make themselves available. Since the club is closing, they preferred not to come. Except for Jade. But she doesn’t know...”

“Let’s see that it doesn’t happen again. I don’t care if they left us with the salary. I don’t want my employees in danger. If it happens again, I want promptness, I want you to try to avoid sending the girls or bringing drinks. This time it was me, but what if it had happened to you?”

Kris’s lecture makes me think back to the man’s hands holding me sitting on his lap, his insinuations and how safe he felt as he challenged him.

“Are you done in there?”

“Yes.” Odin steps forward and hands him a notebook and a purse that should contain the takings.

“Good. I had hoped to end the service in a less conspicuous manner and say a proper goodbye to you all. I thank you for the last effort you have made on my behalf, and I assure you that it will be adequately rewarded. I renew my invitation to come to Athens to participate in the opening of the new bar and to be part of the staff. I would like to have you all by my side, without exception. As long as you are not angry with me for this decision.”

“None of us are angry with you. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here, despite everything. We appreciate your invitation, and we’d like you not to be upset if you don’t see us at the opening.” Speaking is Odin who seems firm in his words.

What’s going on?

“Absolutely.” Now his voice sounds tired compared to just now. Tired of everything that’s happened both today and in the last few days and it’s all my fault. When I notice my colleagues standing still, arms behind their backs and looking down I get a twinge in my stomach that makes my belly muscles contract and my forehead start throbbing. I can’t stay in here. With a snap I leave the room holding my hand over my mouth. I run straight to the bathroom and the only thing I do is squat down in front of the toilet to put back everything I’ve eaten. I don’t understand what’s happening to me, maybe it’s because of the tension I’ve accumulated.

Exhausted, I let myself fall to the floor hoping that everything will pass without having to go to the doctor. I get up and reach the sink to freshen up with the hope that it will be enough.

“Jade.” Kristós’ voice makes me squint. When he lays a hand on my shoulder I stiffen and pull away, slamming against the wall.

I don’t know what’s happening to me, why I’m having this reaction to his touch, since I had no intention of staying away from him before. Everything is spinning around me, and my head is so heavy that I let it fall backwards, knocking it against the wall.

“It’s me, Kristós.” He speaks as if he’s dealing with a madwoman, and I don’t understand why. I want to get back into his arms, let him cuddle me, comfort me, and make me feel safe again, but it’s like I can’t. “I’m not going to hurt you. Come to me.” He tickles my arm with his fingers, urging me to join him. “Come.” My mind goes blank, and I feel so light I can’t feel the floor under my feet. And then the darkness.

“IT COULD BE. I don’t know Athos. She’s here now, lying on the sofa and I’m waiting for her to wake up.” Athos? Athos called for what? I open my eyes and the figure of his statuesque body reassures me. He’s sitting on the coffee table in front of me and apparently, I’m not in the bathroom anymore.

“Hey,” he whispers, stroking my face. “She’s awake. I’ll talk to you later.” He closes the call and moves closer to me.

“What?”

“You passed out in my arms.” That’s not possible. I close my eyes covering them with my forearm in shame. Only now do I notice a cold rag on my forehead. “Apparently you had a panic attack. Slightly later than what happened to you, but within the normal range. You need to rehydrate, otherwise

your headache will break out.” As if the blow I’d taken wasn’t bad enough.

“Can I go home?” I don’t know why I asked, maybe because I’m tired. Kristòs snorts in response and strokes my forearm with one finger and then intertwines our fingers and pulls my arm away from my eyes. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, if that’s what you want.” I know he might object, and since he doesn’t, I’m grateful. “Or you could come over and let your private nurse serve and revere you.”

I giggle at the sight of Kristòs dressed in his classic uniform.

“I can see you’re enjoying this.” What amazes me most is how carefree this moment is. “Come on, I’ll take you home, even if it involves going to the port.”

He accepts that I may choose to return to Enea without replying, perhaps because he has finally realised that I only see him. The others do not exist.



SAYING goodbye to Kristòs after making peace is something that makes me feel bad, but I could not stay with him. I don’t know if there will finally be peace between us if everything will be rosy.

After my illness he tried to convince me to spend the night with him on the pretext of keeping me under control, but I wouldn’t listen to reason. I had to promise him that if I felt sick, I would not hesitate to call him, even though Enea was only a few steps away.

After several tender moments, promises to let him know as soon as I got home and to drive slowly, he let me go.

I park Enea' car and sigh. I'm not at my best, my strength hasn't come back yet, and I think that only after a healthy sleep it will get better.

When I go out and reach the door of the flat, I notice the kitchen light still on. It's not late, but Enea is usually already asleep.

"I repeat, I don't care. It's your business although I would tell you to sign and stop what you're doing. You're crossing the line." I hear Enea' voice over the door. As soon as I enter though, the scene in front of me is quite different from what I had imagined. With him is the same blonde woman who was all over him a few hours ago. She has her back to me, while he could see me. I try to sneak away unnoticed. "I know, but I don't..." He freezes and points his admonishing gaze at me. I wave at him, and he shakes his head, letting me know not to make a sound as I head to my room.

He could have warned me that there would be a guest, I would have let him have the flat free without any problems.

Now that I remember, he had told me to come back in the morning; instead, it will now be around two in the morning.

I can't even take a step when my mobile phone rings with an incoming message. When I grab it, a sweet smile appears on my face. It's Kristòs.

"HOW ARE YOU? ARE YOU OKAY?"

“Never better. You?”

“I COULD SAY THE SAME THING.”

AM I HAPPY? Yeah, I am now. Now that I’ve got the man I’ve been longing for back, I’m damn happy.

“ARE YOU IN BED YET?”

“Not yet. I’m going now.”

“YOU WERE SUPPOSED to call me when you got home.

Did you forget?”

I IGNORE the message and undress, slipping into my nightgown. I want to take a shower, but I can’t disturb the landlord.

“JADE!”

ONLY NOW DO I realise that I’ve been holding my breath for the time between the last message and this one. Kristòs makes

me feel like a little girl struggling with her first crush. Even though I'm tired I feel euphoric.

I throw myself on the bed exhausted. Come to think of it, I haven't slept much for a week and the fight with Kris is definitely to blame.

“Finally in bed.”

I TEXT and place my phone on my chest to feel it vibrate. I close my eyes and go over everything that happened this evening. How that man, albeit subconsciously, helped us make up. How he cared for me, rescued me, held me, and quenched my thirst in the hope that the headache would not come.

The mobile phone vibrates. It's not a message, but a call. I try to pull myself together so as not to let on that my heart has risen in my throat and that I was letting go into the arms of Morpheus.

“Hello?” I whisper. I can't speak normally; I wouldn't want anyone to hear me.

“*What a sensual voice,*” he whispers in turn. It's his voice that's really sensual. One of those that cause shivers that shake your body as you feel the desire to have him next to you. Watching him sleep, sighing, opening his eyes, saying good morning, and making love again just because the desire to feel each other always assails us.

“Yours is more so,” I whisper, smiling.

“*Are you already under the covers?*” he asks, and, at my affirmative answer, he lowers his tone of voice even more.

“Naked?” I squeeze my thighs together because that’s the reaction my body has.

“I don’t sleep naked.”

“*Allow me to disagree. In Athens you did,*” he chuckles. His warm, quiet voice warms my soul. I’ve known his worst side, the side where anger spilled out of every pore of his magnificent body, and the sweet side.

“*Are you there?*” A shiver runs down my spine, one of those magnificent ones, the kind that makes you wish you had him on top of you.

“Yes. What about you? Are you naked?” There, I said it.

“*You want me naked?*” He sounds stunned. Maybe he didn’t expect me to raise my voice in the same way.

“I’d honestly like to have you here with me, naked.” I hear him chuckle and a strange rustling in the background alerts my senses. “But you’re still in the office?”

“*Just finishing up the paperwork for tomorrow,*” he snorts.

Tomorrow, in fact, he is scheduled to leave for Athens to finalise the last details for the opening of his new club. The one that will bear the name of my tattoo.

“Do you miss him much?”

“*No.*”

“Are you going to go to sleep before departure or are you going to show up to work like a zombie?”

“*I’m going to sleep, Mommy. A little, but I will.*”

“Daddy,” I whisper as I snuggle into the pillows thinking back to his reactions to that nickname. He obviously didn’t

hear me because the tone was barely audible to me, let alone him.

“*Jade?*” I mumble, opening my eyes again. Damn, I had closed them. “*If I were there, what would you do to me?*”

What would I do to him? Anything and everything, of course.

“Are you seriously asking me that? If you came here, I’d show you.”

“*If I came there, I’d never leave,*” he whispers, and a mischievous smirk appears on my face. Is that really the effect I have on him? Is this really what I arouse in him?

I sigh and comply with his wishes, his strange way of claiming me even from afar.

“Where are you?”

“*I’m sitting in the chair in my office. The door is closed, and the only one still wandering the corridors of the warehouse is you,*” he explains. My mind starts to wander, thinking about what and how to do.

‘I need to talk to you, of course, so I walk into your office without knocking because I don’t like formalities. I’m not afraid of you, and if you yell at me for not knocking, I don’t care. I join you at your desk and sit on it, of course. You drop everything you were doing because you want me. Gently you grab my leg and spread them apart just enough so you can get in the way.’ I’m being brazen, I know, but my mind is picturing everything, even his touch, his breath. “You unbutton my blouse and lunge at my breasts, just like you do every time.”

“*Am I that predictable?*” he chuckles in a gravelly voice.

“I love your predictability,” I reveal shushing him. What I really don’t like is that he underestimates himself in my eyes. “I love it when, after devoting yourself to my breasts, you move on to torturing my nipples. First one, then the other. I love how you draw me to you as you bite down on it.” I breathe slow and deep. The desire for him soars. “Your breath tickles my damp skin and fills me with shivers.”

“Touch yourself like I’m doing it,” he urges. How could I? His touch is unique and unrepeatable. *“Now Jade. Touch your breasts, pinch that wonderful nipple as if my teeth were there instead of your fingers.”* He wants my death, that’s for sure.

Silently, I go along with his wishes, starting to pleasure myself. I have to settle for his voice, for the thought of him being with me.

“Touch yourself thinking about how I get you off the desk and lay you on my lap. As you bring one arm on the backrest past my head and the other hand slips it between us to unbutton my trousers.”

“Kristòs,” I mutter moving my hand to my intimacy.

“More.” I’d be surprised to know that he’s touching himself too and wants to take pleasure in our memories.

“Like you...” I swallow when my touch reaches the most sensitive part of my body. “How you squeeze my bottom and, when I release your member, support me as I stand up. How your eyes narrow as I rub your glans against my opening. Your eyes close and your head falls back because of the pleasure you feel as I stroke the length of it. Then I position myself to receive it and you help me.”

“I enter you with a thrust of my pelvis, filling you, and letting you envelop me in that magnificent full embrace that

only you can give me. You are so tight and ready to receive me. Now your eyes close too, but your head falls forward, onto my shoulder.”

He takes control. I love it when he does that, when he leads me into something that will lead to absolute enjoyment.

“I can smell it, you know, the scent of your skin. I still have it on me and it’s so damn hot.” Even though we’re on the phone, he manages to tease my mind and make me lose my mind.

“I want you here. My hand isn’t a worthy substitute,” I moan. My fingers can’t match his. He’s something I can’t explain, something that manages to transport me to my peak, and I would never want to associate his voice with my poor performance.

“You don’t know how much I want to, baby, but I can’t. I’d risk falling asleep there and you’re at Enea’s house.”

“Then imagine me on top of you, rising and falling in a steady rhythm, tightening my pelvic muscles the way you like...”

“Fuck baby.”

“Squeeze. Let me feel how much you like it,” I urge him. Kristòs gasps, repeats a few words we’ve said to each other, and the more he does it, the closer I am to climax. The faster he gasps, the more I realise he is about to come. We hold our breath in unison and the orgasm explodes. My head spins, all my muscles contract for what seems like an immense amount of time. Little by little I manage to regain possession of my body. Touching the sky with one finger using his voice, our thoughts and my hands is something I have been missing.

Silence hovers between us. Only laboured breaths fully encapsulate our state of mind. I am almost afraid to speak, to ask how he is, to share my experience with him. Maybe it's the same for him.

"It's always so amazing doing it with you. Both with your body and your mind," he murmurs exhausted. I imagine him sitting unsteadily in that swivel chair. One hand holding his phone, the other holding his erection tightly and his mind completely with me.

"You're my first," I reply revealing what he may not have imagined. I've always shown him things he didn't know and now he's the one teaching me something. "I've never had phone sex."

"Neither have I." Amazed is putting it mildly. "You're my first time."

"So, for a first time we did pretty well," I chuckle.

"Of course, if it had been you instead of my hand..."

"Kristòs," I interrupt him. "You could have come to me and taken what you wanted, but you didn't want to."

"Jade," he sighs. *"Enea isn't my friend, not anymore."*

"From what I understand, this place is yours too," I inform him, holding my breath immediately after. Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

"I can't go into his house and have sex with his roommate while he's in the other room though," he retorts.

"I don't think he'd notice. Not in the least because there's a blonde-haired woman with him" I mutter hoping to make him understand that he wouldn't notice his presence.

“I’d like you to go back to Electre so that by the opening we can reveal everything.” A chill runs through my shoulders freezing me. *“I’d like you to accompany me, to be by my side like you were in Athens.”* I smile with joy. *“I wish you wouldn’t come in with the invitation, but with me.”*

“Would you introduce me to your guests as your date?”

“As mine. My woman only.” I close my eyes relieved by these words. This all happened so fast it feels like a dream. *“Do you want to?”*

“I’d go to hell with you,” I whisper, enraptured by his invitation. “If you want me, I’m there.” And I say it with my heart on my sleeve and a sense of peace so deep I didn’t even imagine it could exist. “It’s close though. You’re not going to change your mind like last time? I don’t think I can handle another crisis from you.”

“No. This time, no. I had a chance to think, Athos made me open my eyes and reason. Do you know what I discovered? That I can’t live without you. We’ve only known each other for such a short time, and yet you’ve entered me.” His voice trembles for a moment, as if he is afraid of losing me. *“I’m not asking for anything other than your transfer from there to... to me. After that we can tell whoever, you want. If you see fit, we’ll even do a press release.”*

What? What do you mean? Shot sitting down with eyes shooting out in every direction. Press release?

“Jade? It’s a figure of speech.”

“Talk to you tomorrow before you leave? Are you taking the ferry or the plane?” I cut in. My mood has suddenly changed. What if he knows everything? What if he knows who I am?

“Baby, what’s wrong?” There, I’ve got him worried, and he obviously wants an explanation for this attitude light years away from post-orgasm.

“Nothing. I just got sleepy. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

“No. What’s going on? Did I say something that didn’t…” I don’t let him finish because I end the call. He’s gone from wanting to hide it from the whole world to shouting it from the rooftops and it’s terrifying me. Still, it’s what I wanted.

I shake my head and lie back down, hoping to fall asleep. Again, however, Enea awakens my senses. He argues with the woman about something I don’t understand and, frankly, don’t even want to. His private life is not my business. We’re friends, but not the kind who confides in each other about what he’s up to in bed or anything else.

A door is slammed, and I wince, then someone knocks on my door. I hold my breath because a whole host of situations are unfolding before my eyes. And I wouldn’t know how to handle any of them

Slowly, I get out of bed and open the door. Enea stares at me with a grim look. Still, he seems to be waiting for something.

“May I?” He points to the inside of the room and, automatically, I move to let him pass.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you had a visitor,” I begin.

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you. I thought you’d be back in the morning, and you wouldn’t cross paths. She doesn’t know you’re here.” Okay, maybe the angry expression isn’t because of me.

“Did she get angry because of me?” I ask in a hushed voice, but he immediately shakes his head. I’m afraid there’s a bigger problem. Enea stays like that, motionless, in front of me with an exasperated look. Could it be that he wants to let off steam and is holding back so as not to involve me?

My mobile phone rings. My beloved’s name flashes on the screen. Enea’s eyes are also on my phone.

“Is he giving you grief?”

“No, not at all,” I answer. It stops ringing and a message appears in the preview. “We made up.”

“Does he respect you?” he continues as I read the message.

“GET UP, PLEASE.”

I LOOK up at Enea and, with a snap, go to the window. He is there, leaning against his car, his face turned towards me. If that’s not romance, then I don’t know what is.

“More than you, look,” I reveal, flashing a wide smile.

“What about you? Do you respect him?” The joy fades to give way to a sense of inadequacy. “Maybe you don’t know that I’ve known him since we were kids. We grew up together, shared things I’m not going to tell you. Even though we’ve gone our separate ways, he’s still one of the best friends I’ve ever had and knowing he’s happy after everything that’s happened to him makes my heart glad,” he explains. “Go to him. Just tell him he’s here.” I nod and, without thinking about whether it’s right or wrong, thank Enea with a hug and run down the stairs to join Kristòs.

As soon as I come out, that intoxicating scent that reminds me of his skin welcomes me. I run the few steps that separate us.

“You’ve recovered.” He smiles, grabbing me by the side. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and hug him tightly. “Why is Enea watching us from your bedroom window?”

“Because he saw fit to warn me.” As soon as I move away, I notice his gaze fixed on the man watching us from above. “He told me not to hurt you because otherwise I’d have to deal with him.” Only now does Kris turn to me and give me an amused smirk. “He told me to tell you he’s here.” At these words instead, he turns serious again. He turns to his former friend and bows his head as if to thank him.

“Are you up for me taking you somewhere?” he whispers and I, like a little girl in love with her prince charming, nod. Before he takes a few steps, he gives me a mischievous look, so irresistible that I have to kiss him. And that’s what I do, even if Enea keeps looking at us. I grab my wild-haired prince by the neck and kiss him.

“Shall we go?”

Kristòs intertwines our fingers and guides me towards his car. When we get in, he immediately starts the car and drives off without revealing where he wants to take me.

“So... what time do you have on the flight?”

“Why do you think I’m flying?”

“You’d need too much time on the ferry if you’re going to be back before the opening,” I explain, and he looks uncomfortable. “Because that’s how it is, right? You’ll be back before the opening?”

“Should I?”

Should you? Of course, I am here.

“For me,” I whisper in a sad tone I didn’t expect. For a moment I think that if Odin hadn’t called me, I wouldn’t have seen him again. “Okay, never mind. You’re here now and it’s wonderful.”

“Everyone talks about the amazing sunset in Fira and Oia, but no one mentions the sunrise in Perissa,” he explains, perhaps giving me a clue as to our destination. “I love it when a new day dawns.”

A few moments later he parks the car and in front of us is the sea. Neither of us speaks. I’m not sure what time it is, if we’re close to seeing the sunrise or if he’s brought me here to spend time with me.

“Why did you hang up on me?” I shake my head and then bow it. I don’t know what came over me. Ever since he came into my life, I’ve dreamed of hanging around with him, of shouting to the world that such a man likes me enough to fight for me. I’ve wanted to kiss him in front of Ele and Athos, not caring about their reaction. But before that, when he revealed his desire to come out of the closet, I panicked. Now I don’t feel like telling everyone about it.

“I was joking when I said to make a press release. It was to say that after the inauguration we could think about plan B,” he reports. “For example,” he extends a hand towards me. “All your stuff could end up in another wardrobe in my house.”

“Are you proposing that I move in with you?” I turn around only now realising how close he is. His magnetic eyes are digging into mine. How can anyone resist him? To stay away from such an attractive man? I have no idea, and honestly, I have no desire to.

He places his lips on mine in a gesture as delicate as it is sweet.

“Yes, if you want to.” I feel his lips move over mine tickling me.

“Get on the plane and come back to me as soon as possible,” I reply. “Then we could leave with Ele and Athos.” With his tongue he caresses the edges of my lips sending me out of my mind and reviving the butterflies in my stomach. I’m smitten with him, literally hanging on his every word.

“Okay, boss,” he chuckles tightening his grip on my neck to pull me closer to him. He deepens the kiss and I finally let go. I chase his tongue, caressing it, brushing it, and urging him to keep moving. As soon as he pulls away to catch his breath, he grabs his mobile phone and starts the search engine. I guess it’s pointless to ask what he’s doing, since he’s on an airline website. “Done,” he begins, placing the phone in the glove compartment next to the gearstick. “Seven fifty and twenty-three. I think that’ll do.”

“Did you really book a plane?”

“The ferry was the backup option if, after I asked you to come over, you said no.” He would have taken it to reflect, have some time to himself and think about us or how to continue his life. “What have you done to me, little Jade,” he whispers, banging his head against the seat. He puffs up her cheeks and snorts all out.

“I could say the same thing.”

“You’re constantly in my head. I imagine you walking towards me taking off your dress and being naked. I imagine how you sit astride my legs, how you suck my cock. How you grab it, stroke it and direct it right there, where I can enter you

and make you come like never before.” I’m amazed at his words. I can sense that they are sincere.

“I got inside you,” I suggest. I smile because, though strange, it feels like a genuine declaration of love.

“Worse. It’s not normal that while I’m working, while I have to stay focused, I only have these thoughts.” He turns to me, and his eyes scan my face. I feel his heart beating at the same pace as mine.

“Do you love me?”

He sighs chasing out any tension that is building.

“Wanting you, desiring you, demanding you every moment of the day. I crave you so much I’m going out of my mind, and even though I know you’ll be mine; I can’t seem to give myself peace. This isn’t love, it’s obsession.” I close my eyes and smile. A feeling of lightness pervades me, and I can admit that I feel the same way about him.

Kristòs stares at me, perhaps waiting for any response from me. I don’t open my mouth just because I’m processing it. I caress his face and reach out to him to leave a tender kiss on his lips.

“A thousand synonyms for one word, one desire, one feeling.”

“Am I the only one?” I shake my head and return to join our lips in a light, gentle, not at all intrusive kiss. “I should ask you why you’re using a dress like that as your pyjamas since you’re sleeping at Enea’s house,” he chuckles. He’s amused by this, but as soon as I pull him away from me and adjust the fabric of my skirt, I do something that could kick-start the night. I remove the panties and slip them into his pocket.

“Now you see something Enea didn’t see,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss his neck. I know talking about his former friend isn’t the best, but this seems to turn him on more. “And you know what he won’t have too?” I nuzzle my face into his neck and inebriate myself with his magnificent scent that seems like an aphrodisiac.

I take Kristòs’ hand and place it on my thigh. I spread my legs and bring it further up, straight towards my intimacy. His fingers move gently to make space between my burning flesh, in need of him. He indulges my craving, teasing me inside, and as I devote myself to his neck, he works his way inside me.

“Top or bottom?” He rubs his head against mine intimidating me to answer.

“Or?” I ask stretching towards him to climb on top of him. He has the quickness to adjust the seat to be comfortable. I grab his hands and bring them behind his head. I don’t want him to move.

“I didn’t think I’d end this shitty day so beautifully,” he reveals, closing his eyes. Well, if this day has been hell, he should get something to fulfil him, something to make him feel good.

“So, you’re not prepared?”

“You underestimate Athos?” he whispers opening his eyes again to stare at me mischievously. He reaches for the glove compartment and opens it, revealing its contents. I giggle as dozens of condoms fall onto the mat.

“Fluo seems to be his thing.” He laughs as he hands me a few. One, two, three. I swallow as he reaches back. Four, five, six, seven and my mind seems to stop connecting. “We’ve got

some catching up to do,” he exclaims. “That’ll do for now,” he whispers in my ear before returning to his previous position.

“If you put it that way, tilt the seat all the way, otherwise it’s too uncomfortable” I reply haughtily, aware of what I’m doing. He obeys without batting an eye.

I unbutton his shirt and pull it out of his trousers. I run my hands over his chest, taking care to caress every inch. When I bend over him, my tongue quivers to taste him. I travel over every inch of his chest, stopping only to torture his nipples.

My hands slowly descend to his trousers. I unbutton them and fiddle with the fabric of his boxers to free him. He moves to help me lower them just enough for our purpose. As soon as he’s in my hands his chest starts to move faster. When I squeeze him, he holds his breath. I stroke him, slowly, along his entire length as I rub my nose against the taut skin of his abdomen.

He’s panting, his stomach muscles contracting, his legs trembling with every movement I make. To have him in my grasp, to feel him feel pleasure from me is so damn satisfying. I just don’t want to sit back and watch. With my free hand I grab one of the condoms and unroll it over his erection. I close my eyes and position myself on top of him, waiting a few moments before letting him in.

We stare at each other, and as I let go, lowering myself onto him, our breaths come short. Each time is wonderful, it’s breath-taking.

I try to pull myself together because I can’t be fooled by this gesture alone. I sit up and my hands caress his closing eyes. I thread them through his hair and pull them tight.

Kristòs brings his hands to my hips, keeping the rhythm of my movements and giving me the stability I was looking for so I could ride him as if I alone should feel pleasure and not share it. He helps me, squeezes my bottom before pressing a lever to the side of his thigh and sitting up. Only now does he wrap his muscular arms around my waist and sink his face into my small breasts.

I throw my head back as far as the sunroof will let me and increase my speed because I feel that I am so close and that I will explode around him in a little while. The caresses, the kisses he leaves me with help to shorten the distance that separates me from the orgasm that explodes more powerful than ever.

I knew that my hand was nowhere near this, that the image I have of him is not like having him for real.

With a guttural cry he hides his face in my chest pushing me one last time towards the union of our bodies.

It's all so magical, fast, and powerful. I have no words to describe how I feel. Perhaps 'free' comes closest to my state.

"It always feels like the first time," he whispers lifting his face. Heavy breathing and half-closed eyes emphasise his state of bliss. I hold him to me, cuddling him as much as I can, enjoying every moment. I rest my face in his wild hair and smell that magnificent perfume that keeps blowing my mind.

Kristòs is mine, mine alone.

"Are you okay?"

"This isn't a dream, right?" I hold him a little tighter to me, hoping he'll reciprocate. "Because if it is, don't anyone dare wake me up." He lifts his face to mine and lets me have a

tender kiss. When he pulls away, there is another light on his face.

“Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?” I shake my head slightly and smile. I could say they are tears of joy, the kind that come when you least expect it, the kind that represent liberation.

I don't have the strength to answer, I just want to hold him and fall asleep in his arms.

“Can we just stay like this? Just cuddle?” I ask in a tired tone dictated by the turbulent evening we've had.

“If we pull ourselves together for a second, sure. You know, as long as they might catch us cuddling is one thing, but if we fall asleep like this...” he chuckles trying to make me laugh, but I just smile.

It takes him a short while to settle down and find a blanket between the back seats that he wraps me with as I get back on his lap. He lowers the seat, and we lie like that, on top of each other in an embrace that I wish would never end. Even if the plans were different, if the desire to have us was so great, we're here cuddling.

“Do you still want to be by my side on opening day?”

“If you want me, I'll be there.” I'm telling the truth. Also, because I really want to be there since it will be a really important day for him.

“Your new life,” I whisper before feeling my eyelids get heavy.

Chapter 24



“Jade.” Kristòs’ whisper echoes in my head. His voice soothes me. “Open your eyes and look outside.” With difficulty I manage to lift my eyelids and what I see is something truly magnificent.

“Rose-fingered Aurora,” I whisper, remembering how Homer describes the goddess Eos.

“Rododáktylos Éos” he interjects in his perfect Greek. “I love that word,” he says, stroking my shoulder.

“The new beginning?” I ask clutching at him as if never wanting to let him go.

“Maybe.” Eventually, we fell asleep cuddled in the seat of his, or rather no, Athos’ car. I know, these weren’t the plans, but tiredness took over and we drifted off.

“Jade?” he calls back. Maybe he thinks I’ve gone back to sleep, but instead I’m just taking advantage of having him as a pillow. “Shall we go for breakfast? I only have an hour before I have to leave.” I mumble in disapproval because I wouldn’t want to tear myself away from him for anything in the world.

“Only if I can eat it like this,” I reply in a groan. I rub my face against his chest mocking the contact I’m stealing from him.

“Interesting, I can’t satisfy this craving of yours right now though. If you’d like, I’d be happy to do so when I return.” The mischievous tone and the idea of him lying on the table with food on him makes me flush and clench my legs. He notices and it seems to amuse him, as well as inflate his ego.

“I’ve only got an hour before I have to catch my plane. Shall we go for breakfast so I can take you home afterwards?”

“Only if you make me a promise.” I stand up and look at him. His half-closed eyes are adorable. Only now does he reach his hands towards my face, sneaking his fingers through my hair blocking it. He rises slightly leaving me a tender kiss on my lips.

“Good morning,” he whispers, drawing me to him. He gives me a sweet little smile, one of those that you get when you see something or someone that makes you feel good.

“Good morning,” I reply the same way. “I want you to come back to me and never leave again. If there is any problem, you discuss it and you don’t decide on your own. If you’re not willing to do that, then...”

“Like a couple?” He squares my face trying to figure out my reaction. Obviously hearing those words come out of his mouth is something I didn’t think possible.

“Why not. If you want me to move in with you.” A large breath fills his lungs causing me to pull away from his face for a few moments. “You didn’t mean it, did you?”

“I am serious, I want you in my life. How do I prove it to you?” he asks, tightening his grip on my head slightly. “Believe me. If I find you at Electre’s when I return, you’ll come back to Athens with me.”

“Why does that sound like blackmail?” His hard stare is something I’m used to, and it doesn’t scare me at all.

“Because I don’t like that you’re living at Enea’ and that to see you or be with you I have to wait outside the house. It feels like dealing with suffocating parents and believe me, I’ve been through that,” he blurts out, just as I asked him to do. I nod because he is right. I accept his proposal and, to seal the deal, he draws me to himself kissing me with his usual enthusiasm. When we part, we pull ourselves together and Kristòs gives me his jacket. This little dress I use as pyjamas is too light to go out.

“Are we going back to Xeni’s?” I ask, crinkling my eyes. “That coffee and those delicious croissants have stayed with me.” His sly smile makes me feel like a happy child. He nods and starts the car without complaining about the uncomfortable position he slept in.

I smile and think how lucky I am. He indulges all my wishes, like the story of the gummy bears, or the more absurd one of us. I would like to surprise him, to do the same for some of his whims but, so far, he doesn’t seem to have any. At the end of the day, he’s a grown man who just needs to snap his fingers to win everyone over and get what he wants.

“You know, I think I’ll take a coffee away,” I giggle, trying to get his attention when we stop in front of his friend’s café. It’s too bad I can only get a distracted grumble since he seems to have gotten caught up in reading something on his phone. I could ask him to set it aside at least until after breakfast, but I know it could be something important, inherent to the new place.

It’s only when he whispers expletives and brings his hand up to cover his mouth that I become alarmed.

“Nothing serious. Just an email from Athos with some new documents to sign.” I assume he’s going to let me go now because that paperwork is more important than me; instead, he blocks the screen and slips his phone into his pocket. He turns to me with a dazzling smile.

“Shall we go?”

“And the documents?” Kristòs shrugged as if there was no problem. “Really?”

“I’ll ask Xeni to make two printouts and...”

“If you want, I can deliver them to Athos,” I propose, but he shakes his head again. He reaches out his hand to my face and pulls me to him to kiss me.

“Thanks anyway.” In a flash he is out of the car and walking towards my side. He opens the door and holds out his hand to help me out. “Remind me to get rid of that dress.”

“I use it as pyjamas for just that reason. I didn’t think you’d want to walk me around Santorini, otherwise I would have dressed appropriately.” I sneer at him since it’s his fault I’m in this state. He laughs and my heart fills with joy.

In the club, Xeni is beautiful and beaming behind the bar. She greets my man like the previous time and when she sees me, she smiles blushing.

“Good morning,” she says in a strange tone.

“Hey, she’s mine,” Kristòs interjects, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me close to him.

“You figured out our Casanova,” she smiles happily. “The usual?” I nod for both of us, but he intervenes asking for permission to use her PC. She agrees, accompanying him to

the office. I'm surprised when she returns and stands in front of me, intent on eating me with her eyes.

"So, you and our Kris."

"Um..." I'm searching for the words when a customer walks into the bar. Xeni turns and then freezes as if a ghost is in front of her. I don't turn around just because it doesn't seem polite to do so. Xeni grabs her mobile phone and types a quick message then places the phone back on the counter.

"Good morning, dear," the woman who just walked in greets her. Xeni shoots me a quick glance and then devotes herself fully to the lady at my side.

"What brings you here? Are you leaving?" They seem to know each other and that doesn't surprise me.

"Yes, I'm going to Naxos to visit my parents." Only after drinking my coffee do I turn towards the woman, finding her at my side. She smiles and greets me politely. I return the kindness even though she is checking me out and her face has changed expression.

Granted, my attire isn't appropriate for leaving the house, but I hadn't counted on Kris's head turn. Her long blonde hair falls fluidly over her shoulders. Blue eyes and pale complexion make me doubt she's originally from around here.

"What can I make you?"

"A small coffee, please."

"Right away." As Xeni prepares her order, the woman chooses to sit at a small table far enough away to isolate herself from the rest of the place.

"She's the one with Enea," I whisper, imagining she might be interested in the news. I know she knows him, or at least I

think she does. Since she's friends with Kris, she should know him.

Xeni turns her head, giving me a look that I can't decipher. She casts a glance towards the blonde and then back at me signalling me to shut up.

She serves her, exchanging a few quick words that I don't hear due to the distance and then stands by my side, grabbing Kris' breakfast and placing it on the tray.

"Come with me. Looks like it's a bit of a long story," she explains.

I could object and say I don't want to go to the back of a diner and have breakfast because his business is urgent but as I think this, she calls me back. I jump off the stool and join her without objection.

Kristòs is sitting at the desk in the small office as if he were the boss of this establishment too. He moves deftly between the PC and the printer in the corner.

"Can you tell me why breakfast moved to the office?" I mutter as soon as Xeni leaves us alone. "You are served and revered everywhere. What, you own this place too?"

"No. I just need to print out some important documents, scan them and send them back to Athos as quickly as possible." He extends his hand towards me, urging me to join him. I listlessly comply and as soon as I'm at his side, he pulls me to sit on top of him as if nothing happened.

"You ate without me?"

"Of course, everything was getting cold," I mutter still offended, but my attitude doesn't seem to shake him. He reaches over to the computer and, with simple taps on the mouse, starts yet another printout.

“How time-consuming these documents are,” I say to myself. Paper, ink, time, patience.

“But the benefit outweighs it all.” He turns and leaves a sweet kiss on my lips. A kiss that immediately goes from chaste to eager. It’s so hypnotic that I give in to his assault, hoping he never stops desiring me like this.

“Kris.” I try to stop him, but he doesn’t seem to want to. “Eat breakfast you have a plane.” Magical little words that help block him out and listen to me. He nods and then bites into his brioche voraciously, never turning me away from him.

“Tired?” he mumbles with his mouth full. He sounds like a child who is more curious than polite. I shake my head in denial.

“You?”

“If you give me one of those special kisses of yours, I won’t be.” He stares at me with the expression of someone waiting for his favourite gift. On his face the marks of last night that make him even more adorable.

“Finish your breakfast, we’ll do the kiss later,” I order, hoping he doesn’t swallow. He has a flight to catch and can’t be late.

“But I want it now,” he explains in a flippant tone. “I can eat on the way too, kissing you can’t.” I smile at his sweet words and puppy dog look. “Just the thought of going all day without touching you and feeling you, without being able to talk to you and tease you whenever I feel like it drives me crazy.”

“You’ll only be gone a day. When you come back you can make up for it.” I don’t kiss him because I like to keep him on

his toes. He replies with a disapproving grimace, then signs more paperwork and scans it.

As soon as he manages to finish his task we leave the club, thanking Xenia for letting him use the PC and leaving her some extra money for her trouble. We get into the car and, after starting it, Kris brings his hand up to my thigh, sticking it a little too high for a simple gesture of possession. We don't talk about anything but are fully at ease.

“Will I get my panties back?” I ask just to break the silence. He mumbles a moan and then moves his hand further up, as if he's only just remembered they're missing. He touches my privates with his finger to check for their absence.

“You're right,” he smiles amused.

He removes his hand and parks slightly further away from Enea's flat. He opens the door and helps me out. When I'm out of the car, he shrugs me off, closes the door and returns to demanding the kiss.

“The one that only you can give me, that will help me face the day ahead.”

This makes me blush in a way I never imagined possible, especially since I feel so wanted by him.

I frame his face with my hands and draw him to me, giving him the kiss he so desired. One of those breath-taking ones that makes you hold the other person to you and wish for more and more. The only thing pulling us apart is the alarm clock on his phone reminding us that he has to go.

“Can I count on that little thing?” he starts before completely pulling away from me.

“I'll call Ele and as soon as I get off work...”

“You don’t need to take the shift; I’ll send Athos to collect your things and...”

“No. Let me work, please. I promise I’ll always be there, but don’t take away my ability to support myself. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone.” He sighs, raising his face to the sky. “Please.”

“Fine. Do whatever you think is best,” he lowers his head and shrugs me off. He walks around the car to open the door on the driver’s side.

“What?” I whisper and chase after him to place myself in front of him. He looks surprised by my gesture and with his eyes asks for an explanation. “You’re just leaving like that?”

“Why?” he asks astonished wrinkling his forehead. “Suit yourself, but when I get back, I want you waiting for me on the couch at Ele’s,” he orders, reaching out to blow me a kiss. I don’t give it to him this time. “Otherwise, you’ll never see your lovely panties again.” He smiles inches from my face.

“I’ll give them to you, so you’ll have a distraction in a long day among all that paperwork.”

“Fair enough.” He lets me have another kiss. “See you tonight, babe. Keep the jacket. Maybe it’ll have the same effect on you as your panties will on me.” And he kisses me again before getting into the car and speeding off towards the airport.

“Have a safe trip and conquer the world, my love,” I mumble, looking at the cloud of dust he left behind after he took off in a skid.



“YOU FINALLY DECIDED to come back to me,” Electre began, looking at the road ahead. We remained silent until now. “Or did someone threaten you?” I smile under my hand denying any involvement from Kris.

Right away she seemed enthusiastic when I asked her if there would be a vague possibility of being able to return home to her. I’m not convinced Athos is as happy about that.

“Are you sure Athos didn’t object?” I ask slightly afraid of receiving an affirmative answer.

“Sure.” Dry and concise.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not, Jade. He didn’t have a problem with it. Besides, if it doesn’t go well for him, he’ll have to deal with it,” she snaps in my defence. I nod and think of something to say, since I would never want her to be forced to choose between me and him.

“A week,” she blurts out suddenly. “We spent a week arguing about what happened. If Kris was wrong to treat you that way, you were wrong to run away.” Her tone isn’t offensive, but tired. “I know how you are and that his behaviour, his turnabout, has annoyed you and made you think, but...”

“But? Really? I should have stayed on the couch like I was serving a punishment? Keep hoping that that door would open and welcome me after being told I was fucking Athos? Or wait until the next morning when he wanted to even look me in the

face? Sorry, but no thanks.” I don’t want to sound annoyed or childish, but he really can’t think that I could have acted any differently. A thousand scenarios crowd in my mind, imagining what they said to each other. “If Athos doesn’t like having me around, I’ll go back to Enea’.”

There, he instead, had something to say about my umpteenth move. He didn’t threaten me with the usual phrase: if you leave, don’t dare to come back, or with a more elaborate one like: if you leave, you won’t work here anymore. He just warned me about his former friend and said to take it easy because the higher the peak, the more painful the fall. He didn’t want to specify the reason for his words, since it wasn’t up to him to tell me about Kristòs’ life. Even if they were no longer friends, he would never put him in a bad light.

He also did not spare himself in relation to his cousin. Apparently, after a week, he remembered the complicity that existed that day between her and Athos. He gave her an earful and she could hardly stand up to him.

“Don’t talk nonsense. Athos may turn his nose up at it, but he’ll get over it. More than anything, I’d like to understand if and how you’ve solved it.”

“We sorted it out thanks to a tourist who felt like fighting. We talked and made up. We spent the night together and, before he left, he promised me something I hope he’ll be able to keep.” By now, it’s silly to keep hiding it. Electre doesn’t reply, doesn’t act curious by asking for more.

She parks the car and, as soon as we get back to the house, her mobile phone rings. The caller is her lover, who informs her that they are about to embark and will be back in an hour. The idea launched is for the four of us to have dinner together.

Before accepting, Electre turns to me and waits for my confirmation.

“Let’s have you come back and then we’ll see, okay?” My friend holds my hand and for that I’m grateful. “Yeah, love. I’ll see you later. Have a safe trip.” As soon as she closes the call my phone rings revealing a text message has arrived. “Did my message get through?”

“YOU DON’T WANT to go out to dinner?”

“You’re at Electre’s, aren’t you?”

MY FRIEND REACHES for me and cranes her neck towards the message previews. I don’t want to open them; I want him to think I haven’t read them.

“Don’t push it. We know he’s touchy.”

“I know you’re looking at the previews.”

I leave my phone in the armrest and play it cool.

“What are your plans?”

“I have no idea but having dinner all together is terrifying me right now.” I don’t want to repeat what happened last time. Just thinking about it gives me the creeps.

“Dinner delivery? All four of us or...” She taps me on the shoulder. “One thing just the two of you?” I really don’t know what to do. Maybe the best option would be to wait for them to arrive, discuss what to do and then decide.

“I’d opt for the latter,” Ele whispers, hugging me from behind. She rests her chin on my shoulder and waits for my

answer, which is late in coming. “Or spend a little evening just the two of you at his place,” she continues.

“You think I’m repeating the same mistake? That the story with Kris is a copy of the one with Raffaele?” Maybe I’m replacing Raffaele with Kris. Electre’s arms tighten even more around my body to support me.

“It isn’t. Raffaele came into your life because he was your father’s partner. He charmed you, lied about the divorce and child. He only wanted you for one purpose and you fell for it because you were young and inexperienced. Kristòs is different. You found each other by chance, and you demanded it and continue to do so. Although now, finally, it seems he’s doing the same thing.” She points to my mobile phone, which doesn’t stop lighting up. Kris hasn’t given up; he keeps texting me to be reassured of my presence in his life. Of course, he’s not Raffaele, but...

“Giada, how do you feel now that Kris has started demanding you too?” She pulls himself in front of me. Her hands on my shoulders help give me strength.

“I’m fine. He makes me feel good, loved, and wanted,” I say without shame. “It was different with Raffaele.”

“See, you can’t choose who you fall in love with. Whether he’s your age, whether he’s smaller or older or comes from the other side of the world, you just fall in love.” His words help to dispel the doubts that arose when, in Athens, I met Raffaele. I sigh to chase away the tension that hit me full force and close my eyes.

“Did you tell him who you are?” I shake my head. How and when could I have told him? “Jade, the further you go, the worse it will be.”

“I’ll tell him tonight.” That statement of mine seems to be enough for her to let me go and continue preparing for her man’s arrival.

Instead, I go to my room to check if she hasn’t rented it out to someone while I was gone. I sit on the bed and close my eyes, letting myself fall onto the mattress. It may be strange, but I’ve missed this bed so much. I sigh and give in to the tiredness.

A gentle caress makes me open my eyes. In front of me is him, the most beautiful man in the world. I smile at him, thinking myself a fool for falling asleep instead of waiting for him on the couch like he asked.

“Sorry,” I whisper, closing my eyes again.

“For what? For not responding to messages? For making me think I was...”

“For not showing up on the couch.” Now I’m apologizing for that, for the other stuff I’ll see what to do. Kristòs sighs and shifts on the bed approaching me.

“Have you eaten?”

“I had a late lunch,” he explains. His arm wraps around my shoulders managing to bring me even closer. “Should I be worried? The bags are still at the front door.”

“No,” I lift my face to look at him. He looks tired, frazzled, not at all reassuring.

“Has something happened? You’re weird.” I reach my hand up to his face to touch his forehead and check for a fever.

“Bad day,” he grumbles, rubbing his face in the sheet. I’ve never seen him so exhausted; he looks like a puppy to me. He enjoys my touch which seems to regenerate him. Finally, he

reaches out towards me to give me a tender kiss. I admit that I have missed him.

“In the end, though, I got some good results.” He smiles as he looks into my eyes letting every feeling shine through. He is happy, happy to be here, happy to have found me here, in a place that is like home.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper rubbing my nose against his. “A magnificent Greek god.”

“The other day I was a prince with the same name as my planet and now a Greek god. I don’t know if that’s a quantum leap or a downgrade all right.” He pouts, pretending to be offended. He’s bloody adorable when he does that. His eyes narrow, his lips pucker in that divine way. There is nothing flawed about this man. Nothing except when he freaks out and you can’t reason with him.

“You are my goddess.” I love these intimate moments where one contemplates the other and tries to convince himself it’s all real.

“I need to tell you something.” Our voices overlap launching us into a whirlwind of amusement. His laughter fills my heart. As we’re trying to get serious again, there’s a knock on the door and we walk in without permission.

“Kris.” Athos calls back to his friend. “Jade,” he mumbles, raising his head slightly in greeting. “Do you guys want to go out to dinner or get something to eat here?” He doesn’t look at me, doesn’t even accidentally meet my eyes. He definitely doesn’t like that I’m back.

“Order a pizza,” Kris replies quickly. Then he turns back to me. “You okay with that?” I shrug my shoulders to let him

know that I'm okay with anything. I just want to be with him and, for one day, not fight with anyone.

"Pizza it is," Athos mutters as he leaves the room.



THERE IS nothing more annoying than this: the four of us, sitting at the kitchen table eating a maxi pizza, in a silence so deafening that it drives us crazy. Athos doesn't speak, doesn't look at me, doesn't interact even if Ele asks him a few questions, and that's all my fault. I can feel it.

"Last week you reprimanded me for something I said that created double entendres or misunderstandings that I certainly didn't mean to cause. So," I begin, trying to gather the strength to deal with all three of them. "I don't want to jeopardise your friendship and I'm sorry for what happened that night."

"Sorry, but I'd like to finish dinner in a decent way since the day wasn't" Athos replies but he gets a slap on the arm from Kris and Ele.

"Alright, Jade" he stomps on my name as if to reiterate that that's the problem now. "What did you guys do today?" He wipes his mouth, laying the paper towel down ever so slightly.

"Let's see, nothing, nothing and nothing," Electre explains. "At least until my best friend called me and..." She holds her breath, smiles, and launches herself at me, hugging me tightly. "She came back to me." She chuckles while leaving a kiss on my cheek to reaffirm her happiness. Only now Athos points his eyes at me. Empty, completely devoid of any feeling.

“You? Have you arranged everything for the opening? I already have in mind what to wear.” Athos’s gaze goes blank despite Ele’s electrified tone.

“Good, I’m glad,” he mumbles and stands up moving away from us.

“It’s my fault,” I whisper as Ele catches up to him leaving me alone with Kris.

“The day didn’t go as we hoped. Even though I told him it doesn’t matter, he,” he points in the direction where his friend disappeared, “doesn’t think so. He can’t get over it.”

“I hope it’s not about the club.”

“What is it they say? Big people, big problems.” He turns to me and hints at a small smile. “Don’t worry about him, he’ll get over it.” He reaches out to me and leaves a kiss on my temple. I close my eyes and hold my breath. I can’t bear to let it go, to wait for things to settle down. “Do you want to go that way? Just you and me to...”

“No,” I blurt, blocking him on the spot. “I can’t if...” I point to the two’s room. I put my hands on the table and get up to join them. Even if Kristòs tries to block me, I dodge and ignore him until I reach the door of Athos and Electre’s room. I knock insistently and freeze when he opens the door.

“Now you and I are going to talk” I exclaim pointing my finger at him.

Athos opens the door of the room wide and lets me in.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Are you serious?” he laughs amused. “Not everything is about you. I just had a shitty day because a client didn’t get

what he wanted. Am I allowed to feel bad about it or do I have to ask your permission?"

"Absolutely."

"Then what do you want?" he asks raising his voice. "Actually no, let's talk tomorrow, shall we? I'm sleepy now and I don't want to argue with you too." He bows his head and extends his arm to indicate that he's leaving. No, this is not Athos.

"Jade, come on." Kris is behind me, trying to drag me out of there.

"Are you mad at me?" My damn mouth can't shut up. I only realise this after asking yet another question. Athos looks up, stares at me for a second and then snaps at me. He hugs me and puts his lips on my forehead.

"No but let me cool off. It's been a really, really rough day. I'll be over it tomorrow," he whispers rubbing his lips over my skin. "Now go to Kris and stop worrying." He pushes me into his friend's arms who, almost by weight, drags me into my room. He closes the door behind him, and I feel sick.

"Baby." His worried eyes are searching mine. "This isn't about you, okay? Get it through your thick skull." He holds me tightly to him, determined to comfort and cuddle me. I return the hug I need to stay afloat.

"Are you sure it's not my fault?" I sob.

"He had an argument with his mother and now he just needs to work off the built-up anger," he whispers into my hair. I don't know why I'm getting upset about this.

"Shall we go to bed? Tomorrow, we have to choose the dress for the opening." Maybe he says that because he thinks a

little shopping will lift my spirits. Too bad it's not the right time.

"Don't use shopping to try to cheer me up," I grumble with my face pressed to his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I forget that you're different from everyone else. You're unique." He barely pulls away to look at my face. "But...what happened to you? With me you ran away, while with him you fought."

"Don't remind me." I roll my eyes feeling uncomfortable. "I don't know. All I know is that everything made me think he had it in for me and it freaked me out."

"I'm jealous you know?"

"Why? We sleep together, he's my friend. The first friend I had here. That's different," I reveal stepping back to sit on the bed. Fed up with this day that brought few good things, I start to undress to slip into my pyjamas.

"So, I wasn't worthy of such a scene?" He spreads his arms wide for emphasis.

"Of course, you were, but everything was different between us. Until a week ago you didn't even want your friends to know about us," I remind him. "How could I have explained a scene like that?" Maybe he had forgotten his words?

His eyes are on my naked body, covered only by my underwear. He smiles mischievously, dropping his arms theatrically.

When did he get like this?

"Fuck, you're tempting me though." He walks over, kneels in front of me and spreads my legs. "You're so tempting," he

says before pouncing on my belly. He covers it with tender, little kisses that make my imagination fly, setting aside everything that doesn't concern us. It's magical, he always manages to amaze me.

“I want you, and your panties have had the opposite effect.” He strokes my cheek, moving a strand of hair behind my ear. “May I?”

I don't know what he's referring to, but I nod anyway. I trust him and I know he would never hurt me.

A slight smile appears on his face, and, with an unexpected gesture, he pushes me onto the mattress, making me lie down.

“Close your eyes and clear your mind.” I obey and a slight tickle on my hips makes me jolt. He grabs my panties and pulls them off. He spreads my legs even wider and sneaks between them. He licks, bites, sucks, does what he wants with me. He makes me touch the sky with his finger when he enters me with his tongue and, to add to the dose, helps himself with a finger.

My eyes roll back, my back arches with the frantic, alternating rhythm with which he uses his tongue and fingers. My muscles twitch until they hurt. He increases the speed, and everything seems more magical, more beautiful, lighter.

I want to scream, to shout his name as everything around me fades away. The orgasm is just around the corner, just a few moments away from reaching it when he brings my legs over his shoulders and straightens up making me change position. I trap him instinctively demanding more, just enough to reach pleasure.

I extend my hand to the mattress and slip the fabric of the sheet into my mouth, which will help muffle the screams of

pleasure. And then he does, choosing not to stop and finish what he started while I melt under his touch. The orgasm comes and takes it all away. Tensions, fears, misunderstandings.

Kris makes me comfortable again and, slowly, lets me go. I'm so finished I don't even have the strength to open my eyes.

I hear Kris undress and throw his clothes on the floor. He doesn't lie down next to me; he makes sure the only point of contact is our hips.

"That doesn't count. I had a problem and you made me put it aside thanks to your tongue," I mutter in a moan.

"And with yours you're ruining everything," he replies dryly. Maybe I should accept his apology and believe that Athos is not really angry with me.

"Are you still thinking about Athos' pissed off?" I close my eyes and shake my head lying shamelessly to him as I fear he might leave. "Send him out of your head and spend the night with me." He leans down only to bring our lips together for a full-on kiss.

With my hand I brush against his muscular chest, his scar barely visible, his belly flat and taut from the position. I no longer hesitate to touch what belongs to me. I reach for the elastic band of his boxers, making room to sneak under the fabric. I want what's underneath, but I can't get there because of the position. I mumble and he chuckles with amusement. Only then does he move to give me more access. As I grab him, he holds his breath to inhale slowly as I start to move my hand stroking him at his preferred speed.

I know he likes it because his half-open mouth is still on mine, his breathing is deep, and every now and then a moan

makes his vocal cords vibrate. Until the famous one, the one that moves him, makes him contract all his muscles and precedes my favourite, that of the orgasm.

Only now does Kristòs collapse on top of me, exhausted by pleasure. It takes him a few moments to recover, but I don't mind, I can take advantage of it to cuddle him, to enjoy his warmth, his presence.

I look at him, bewitched by his post-coital charm that seems to make him even more beautiful. Wild hair, relaxed face, eyes closed and thin lips slightly open.

“You're magnificent,” he whispers with difficulty. “You know perfectly well how to sweep me off my feet. In every way.” He kisses my shoulder and, to my disappointment, stands up leaving me alone and exposed.

“Get back here immediately,” I order, but all he does is chuckle. He doesn't intend to humour me, preferring to hand me my panties and leave the room without caring if Electre is around.

I snort, putting on my underwear and pyjamas which this time consists of a size XL shirt. I slide under the sheet and wait for his return.

As soon as he crosses the threshold of the room, Kris is no longer wearing boxers, but a towel. He closes the door and reaches into the bed, dropping the towel. He settles in beside me and, after a few moments, begins with something I never imagined he would say.

“If you wake up first, will you get me the boxers I left drying outside the bathroom window?”

What?

I don't answer because I don't think there's any point in doing so. I turn to him, passing an arm around his waist, and he seems to flinch. Maybe he was deep in thought.

“Sorry, you don't need to do that. It just came to me,” he mutters grabbing my hand and intertwining our fingers. He brings it closer to his mouth and kisses it. This gesture makes me peaceful and knowing that when I open my eyes, he'll still be here, I fall asleep happier than ever.



I OPEN my eyes wide after a nightmare I can't remember. I blink over and over trying to focus again. A little light from the kitchen comes in from under the door.

I stretch out my hand towards Kristòs lying beside me. When I turn around, my vision becomes clear again, allowing me to see him in full. He is sleeping on his stomach, his arms hidden under the pillow. The sheet barely covers his firm, bare bottom. I shudder at the idea of being allowed to touch him, grope him, and do the simplest thing in the world, lift the sheet, and admire him in all his beauty.

I do so, peek under the fabric and a warmth pervades my body. It's incredible that such a handsome man has decided to indulge me, to drive me mad with pleasure and despair, that he has decided not to stand in the way of what I feel and even to reciprocate. I pull the sheet down and, instead of going back to sleep, I go to the bathroom.

I slip out of bed and out of the room unnoticed as I cross the corridor. Just outside, my attention is caught by someone

sitting at the kitchen table. In front of him he holds a tub of honey ice cream which he eats by large spoonfuls.

“This is going to hurt,” I whisper, hoping to scare Athos, but it doesn’t work. I lean against the doorframe so as not to invade his personal space. He is shirtless and shameless. He signals me to join him and sit by his side. I understand this because he moves his chair with his foot.

Classic behaviour of evolved men.

I comply and sit down.

“Technically it’s tomorrow already,” he mutters with a mouth full of ice cream. I didn’t think he was using the “I’m stuffing my face with ice cream because I’ve had a disappointment, and this is the only way I can cope with it technique.” I nod, continuing to look at the tub. Not that I want any, but right now it seems like the only thing I can look at without the risk of him throwing a fit.

“It’s not your fault my nerves are on edge,” he begins in a warm voice, aimed at comforting and reassuring me. “In Athens I met my mother who...” He freezes and leans out into the hallway to check he’s not being overheard and then pops another spoonful of ice cream into his mouth. “You never get used to their lectures.” I nod knowing the feeling perfectly well. “You see Jade, by now I was supposed to be married and celebrating my first year of marriage,” he whispers moving closer to me. “But I blew it because...” He freezes, looking away. On his face the expression that makes me believe the reason wasn’t important enough to do what he did. “I’m with Ele now and it’s the best thing in the world, but my mother doesn’t think so.” I don’t know whether to be shocked by what he’s revealing to me or think he’s way more fucked up than I

am. “The good thing is, we were in Athens for Kris, and, like magic, my mom crossed paths with us.”

“I’m sorry.” At this point, Athos grabs a spoon from the drawer nearby and hands it to me. “Thank you. If you want to talk, to reveal what made you desist from taking the plunge, I’m here.”

“I thought at thirty-five you were immune to lectures.” He deflects my offer completely. He digs his spoon into the ice cream. “And most of all not to feel this way anymore about choices that made me happy.” He rolls his eyes, stuffing yet another spoonful into his mouth.

“You’ve hit some sore buttons,” I reply mimicking him. “Maybe that’s what’s infuriating you.”

The wonderful taste of Greek ice cream variegated with honey is something magnificent.

“I don’t regret what I did, if that’s what you mean,” he speaks with his mouth full.

“Of course not, I know you and I know you weigh your choices well before making the first move. Maybe screwing up is something that not everyone fully understands. Maybe not explaining has allowed others to judge your choices. If you see them as right because they make you feel good, they don’t see them that way because they don’t know, or don’t want to understand, what’s behind them.” I say this from my heart because I want him to realise that I care about him and because I see myself again, my problems with my parents, with Raffaele and with Nicola.

“Wow,” he replies after a few moments. “You’re not as stupid as you’re making yourself out to be.” There, now it’s time to look him straight in the face. “I’m kidding,” he smiles.

One of those wide smiles that let you know everything will be alright.

“I appreciated your gesture tonight. Wanting to talk to me to clarify. It showed me that you care about our friendship.” I smile because I’ve run out of words.

He digs back into the jar and pulls out the spoon he extends towards me.

“Peace?” he incites, extending the jar. I copy his gesture and make the two cutlery clash.

“Peace,” I agree before sticking the spoon in my mouth. The ice cream freezes my brain for a moment, preventing me from saying one more really important thing. I swallow and wait a few moments.

“You’re like a brother to me. It’s normal for me to get into a scene.” Athos smiles at my words. With his lips he mimes a thank you. “But, how come you didn’t get married?”

“Don’t dig into the past. The important thing is the present” and he moves away from the table to get up. As soon as he does, my eyes fall on the scar on his chest, remembering the heroic gesture he made towards his friend.

Could it have been that choice that ended Athos’ love affair?

Then they suddenly gape. “Christ, you’re naked!” I blurt, covering my face.

“So what?” I’m not looking at him, I don’t know where he is or what he’s doing. All I hear is footsteps around me. “Now you’re going to be thinking about my cock while Kris does stuff to you” he chuckles evilly.

“You’re a pervert,” I growl through clenched teeth. I bow my head so far that I can only see my feet. “Get treatment,” I rage, leaving the kitchen to run to my room. I hear him chuckling from behind the door.

As soon as I get under the sheets I curse under my breath. “But why did he do that? It was going so well.”

“Did he?” Kris’s guttural voice freezes my blood. “Was he naked in the kitchen?” Pardon. Now comes the part of jealous Kris that will give me the fourth degree. “Now we’re even.”

“What do you mean?” I ask turning to look at him.

“A few months ago, I had done that to Ele, and he has now reciprocated. We’re even,” he reveals. I don’t know what’s bothering me more. The fact that he let my friend see him naked or that he’s taking it as a game.

“You guys aren’t well,” I say with my back to him. I’m not going to go along with their stupid games.

Kris’s hand touches my back caressing it and inviting me to join him, but I don’t want to. Then he does. He closes the distance by moving me against his chest. With his face he rummages in the crook of my neck leaving tender kisses there.

“Are you offended?”

“I don’t like your games. I just wanted to clear the air with him and...”

“Jade, he must not have done it with that intent. He must have sat down at the table without thinking of meeting you. Then he jumped at the chance,” he giggles as if it’s funny. But it isn’t. “Don’t be a goody-two-shoes, it doesn’t suit you.” He caresses my body, slipping his hand under my shirt. He’s not vulgar in his gestures, but eager to have me, to feel me around him. Again. He kisses my neck in such a slow way that I lose

my mind. He melts my nerves making me forget whatever is on my mind. “Your daddy demands you.”

“Did my daddy provide birth control?” I ask imagining he didn’t go and get it. I can tell by his sudden freeze, his snorting and moaning.

“Remind me why you’re not on the pill?” he bites my shoulder in a gesture of admonition. A guttural cry makes me laugh. “You’re going to the doctor tomorrow,” he orders, and I burst out laughing out loud. “You think that’s funny?”

“You have no idea.” I laugh out loud as, with a tug, he drags me on top of him. I laugh because he’s ordering me to do something that would allow him to enter me whenever he feels like it without restraint, feeling us all the way down.

“You know what I do with your laughter?” he asks tightening his grip on my chest. With his free hand he sneaks between my thighs.

“Stop it it’s late.”

“I want you to scream my name as you come for me.” I close my eyes as he bursts into my flesh without waiting. He kisses my hot skin right in the middle of my neck, releasing a myriad of shocks.

“Kris, please.” I try to stop him, but he kicks it up a notch by inserting another finger. I gasp because, while I don’t want to, I love what he’s doing to me.

“Let yourself go,” he whispers. “You’re going to the doctor tomorrow and this will just be foreplay.” He increases the speed and I squint harder to suppress the urge to scream in pleasure. “Come, my love. Come on my fingers.” I hold my breath as that magnificent thrill shakes me. Though he doesn’t

remove his hand, he doesn't loosen his embrace and doesn't stop leaving kisses on my neck.

Kristòs turns to the side dragging me with him, removes his hand from my private parts and hugs me tightly. This time he doesn't ask anything in return, he doesn't demand his turn, rather he arranges the sheet around my body and tells me to rest.

Chapter 25



I open my eyes and realise it's morning by the light coming in through the window. I would continue to sleep if I could, in the arms of Kristòs it feels really good.

I try to figure out how to loosen up from the embrace of the most beautiful man in the world and go and make him breakfast. I'm happy to take it to bed and cuddle him as much as possible.

Luckily, I manage to sneak out of the covers and out of the room and into the kitchen. I quickly prepare the mocha and a tray with biscuits and whatever sweets are in the house, leaving something for the two lovebirds.

While waiting for the coffee I decide to go to the bathroom. A tidy up of my hair, a freshening up of my face to give me a tidier look, nothing more.

I look in the mirror and smile at my reflection. I am convinced that I have found my place next to the most charming, sweet, and affectionate man in the world. I smile at my red cheeks as I think back to his hands caressing my body.

“Give me a moment.” Athos' voice brings me back down to earth. I turn around and, like a fool, hide in the shower pulling the curtain.

Athos enters the bathroom and curses.

“I’m listening.”

Who is he talking to?

“*I’d like to get some clarification on the books.*” The voice I hear seems to be coming from his mobile phone. The audio must be on full blast.

“Why are you asking me? Kris owns the companies, and he keeps the books,” he defends himself.

“Not during that gap year, you were telling his mother about. What happened? Why is there that shortfall?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Athos looked increasingly terrified.

“Athos, I’ve known you since you lost your first tooth, you’ve been around Kris’ house more than Kris himself. You know he asked me to check the accounts because he couldn’t find the problem. Now, either you tell him or..”

“It’s not what you think. I thought I could get back in before he noticed, but...” I cover my mouth with my hand to hold back any noise.

“Are you kidding? You sent him to the gallows. Do you know what the prize he received entails? Being in the spotlight, both him and his clubs that are facing bankruptcy! For what?”

“I can’t do it.”

“Then I’ll do it and I don’t think I can sweeten the pot.”

But what’s going on? What has Athos done that is so serious?

“I’ll give you until tomorrow. Then I’ll tell him everything, and because of you he’ll lose the prize he won.” The caller hangs up the call and Athos curses. I have no idea what he is doing, the curtain prevents me from seeing where he is.

“You need to pay back the debt now. Do whatever the fuck you want, sell a kidney, go into prostitution, but you have to give me back the money I lent you and settle everything.”

Anger, pure anger is directed at someone I don’t know.

“You know I don’t have it.”

“Fucking Enea. We’ve been friends all our lives and when you turned to me, I always helped you. Now...”

“That money was my money too you can’t ask me to give it back.”

This thing seems to be bigger than me. If before I had a secret to keep, now I have a boulder on my back to carry.

“What the fuck are you talking about? You’re partners, even if he’s gone for a while you can’t retaliate by not paying your suppliers and putting him out of business. I covered for you as much as I could, but now it’s too much.”

“He could have avoided acting like that and disappearing.” Athos curses again and a metallic noise makes me jump. I close my eyes, trying not to burst and come out of the shower to the one I thought was Kris’ friend.

Only when I hear the sound of the door closing do I start breathing again. A thousand doubts crowd my mind making my knees buckle. I slide back in the shower trying to think back to what I heard.

I try to calm my racing heart with deep breaths, but the strong smell of coffee brings me back to the present. I get out

of the shower and then the bathroom, making sure to check if Athos is still around. As soon as the coast is clear, I dash into the kitchen to turn off the cooker.

Arms wrap around my waist and a kiss is pressed on my shoulder as my heart pounds in my ears.

“What are you doing up? Come back to bed with me.” Kristòs turns me around to press a kiss to my lips as a whirlwind of conflicting feelings swirl inside me that I didn’t want to feel. He doesn’t deserve this.

“I wanted to prepare a surprise for you, but you caught me,” I whisper, stretching my hands over his shoulders. I have to play it cool, talk to Athos and tell him what I heard, face him and...

Kris looks around to see what I was doing. He smiles and brings our lips together again before heading back into the room. I cover my face with my hands and take a few moments to calm down. I pour the coffee into the cups, grab the tray, and walk back into the room pretending nothing happened. I smile and forget everything when I find Kristòs lying in bed exactly as I had left him. He seems never to have got up, his arms under the pillow and his back exposed. I put the tray on the bedside table and reach out to him to wake him up if you can call it that. He doesn’t make me beg, opening his eyes after receiving a lot of kisses on the cheek. He moves between the sheets, stretches, and sits up. Only now do I present him with the breakfast tray.

“It’s not like the one you gave me in Athens, but...”

“It’s made from the heart.” When he turns to look at me, I feel myself flaming. “Thank you,” he whispers, reaching out to me. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.” He

gives me a simple kiss, nothing too much, but it warms my heart.

He drinks his coffee, eats his biscuits, enjoying them as if they were haute patisserie, and doesn't stop caressing me whenever he can.

“Are you ready to go shopping for your dress?” He asks resting his head on the pillow. “You have free choice. I'll dress accordingly.”

“Really? If I wear pink, you'll be in pink?”

“Silly, like in Athens,” he says giving me a sweet smile, not at all irritated. “As well as Athos and Electre. Have you forgotten?” I shake my head and smile at him. Athos' phone calls have upset me.

In a bad mood I get up and grab a change of clothes before heading to the bathroom. A nice, refreshing shower will help me get back on my feet given the few hours of sleep. I just hope Kris doesn't follow me and leaves me alone for a few minutes. I need to recharge, make myself presentable and hope the water washes away any bad thoughts.

When I leave and return to my room, Kris is still in bed, yet another biscuit in one hand and her mobile phone in the other. On his lap is his tablet.

He raises his eyes to me only for a moment and then places them back on the tablet.

“Good weather forecast,” he begins after a few moments of silence. “Don't talk nonsense. It's free,” he snorts. “No, it's the same suite as last time.” He nods and types something on the screen. “We're all going to take the flight to Athens and then crash at the hotel.”

“All right. Will you make reservations for dinner the night before?” Athos emerges into the hallway. He passes me and enters the bathroom. A sense of unease pervades me.

“Alright. Usual place?” replies Kris. He crushes the tablet screen to look for something. “Hold on.” He lifts his phone and initiates a call. What the hell is he doing?

“Hi, this is Kristòs Princekaris and I’d like to...”

I leave the room in disbelief.

I enter the kitchen where I find Electre delighting in the breakfast I had prepared.

“Yes, they are talking to each other,” she explains before taking a sip of coffee.

“Good morning,” I reply without asking any more questions.

“They do it every morning, but from one room to another is new to me,” she reveals putting down his cup. “And I find it creepy too.”

“You could say that.”



“THIS WOULD LOOK GOOD ON YOU.” Electre pulls out yet another dress of impractical colour and shape. She shakes her head and grabs another one to pull it closer to my body. “You’re not helping if you do that,” she berates me. I don’t understand her attitude, I’m not doing anything, I haven’t even replied for any of the clothes she’s extended to me. She’s treating me like I don’t know how to dress or have good taste.

“We’ve been here for hours and I’m hungry,” I complain. She snorts and, when she points her eyes into mine, gives me one of her most grim looks. “There’s nothing adequate here, Ele. You should have realised that a long time ago.”

“And tell me, where would you propose we go?” She crosses her arms over her chest, waiting for my proposal.

“There’s a boutique in Oia. Kris took me there for the dress I wore in Athens. I think she might have something better.” She ponders this before shaking her head.

“I know who you’re talking about, and I don’t like her. I met her once and she almost bit me for no reason. Good thing Athos was there to stop her. That crazy woman slapped him too.” A shiver runs down her spine, shaking her visibly. “Only because I reminded her of, I don’t know who.”

“Okay.” I look around more, hoping to spot something that will satisfy me. I reflect on Ele’s words and the memory of the bad impression that chick made on me comes back to my mind. That she was weird I could tell, but getting physical?

“You know, sometimes I feel like Athos is hiding something from me. He glosses over the topics he doesn’t want to talk about and makes excuses that don’t stand up to change the subject,” she explains, continuing to look around. I find myself thinking about her words. Athos seems to be hiding a secret so big that, if it were to burst out, it would make victims.

“Don’t say that it’s probably just the work stressing him out.” I try to defend him, but after what I heard this morning, it might be impossible. I should investigate, ask her a few questions to see how informed she is about her boyfriend and cousin’s affairs, but then I think about it and think I don’t want to give her any more thoughts.

Then I see them. Two beautiful hidden dresses. Long, elegant, and perfect. I run towards them and grab them to show them to Electre who, as soon as she sees them, seems to be reborn. She reaches for me and chooses the blue one, immediately putting it next to her body to see how it fits. She looks like a little girl who has been given the toy of the moment.

“Perfect” she whispers admiring her reflection. “It has to be mine!”

Electre is like that, when she falls in love with something she goes straight as a tank.

“Excuse me!” She raises her hand trying to get the attention of some clerk. The clerk runs over and, with a smile on her face, makes herself available to us. “Is there any way to try them on?”

The girl smiles and leads us towards the changing rooms. “Is there any way to get the pocket square in the same shade?” Ele shouts as she changes.

“Of course,” replies the saleswoman who, as soon as she sees us leave, smiles with satisfaction. Ele looks beautiful. The dress is perfect for her. From the ruffle over her breasts to the slit that starts at her thigh and goes all the way down to the floor, just like the fabric that wraps around her very long legs. Her loose hair falls over her shoulders framing her magnificent face.

“You look gorgeous,” I whisper. Only now does she turn towards me. She widens her eyes, amazed. She looks at me as if she has never seen me before.

My dress is very different from hers and, usually, not a genre I like, yet I find it perfect for the occasion. Pink, Greek-

style, with a plunging neckline.

“You too,” she replies, and a shiver runs down my exposed back. Unlike her, my breasts are much smaller, but there’s no leg envy. Instead of looking at each other in the mirror, our eyes remain glued to our bodies. It seems strange, yet we can’t tear ourselves away.

“I have...” she starts, but quickly freezes. She reaches for me and pulls me into an unprecedented embrace. I have no idea what’s going on with her, but I can’t help but reciprocate.

“Are you okay?” I ask in a hushed voice. She shakes her head making my blood run cold. With my eyes I look for the saleswoman who is looking at us strangely but as soon as I stare at her, she nods and leaves us alone. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Everything’s perfect, wonderful, but it’s happening so fast I don’t think I can keep up.” Her tone doesn’t convince me, though. “I love Athos, to death, but he’s talking about moving in together.” She moves away from me allowing me to look at her face. “I’m in my early twenties and going to him, getting a house in my name...”

“What would that change sorry? He eats with you, washes at your place, sleeps with you...what would be different?” I wait for her to answer but all she does is bite her lip. “Athos is magnificent and he loves you like crazy; he would never do anything to hurt you. Talk to him if you’re afraid, he might slow down and respect your time even if you can see that his greatest desire is to have you always by his side.”

She nods giving me a shy smile and I calm down a little. The love I have for her goes beyond friendship. It’s deep, intense, and knowing she’s happy makes me happy.

When we finally leave the shop, we catch up with our men who are discussing business, sitting at a small table in the bar. My eyes are on Athos's face, which seems calm, while Kris has his head in his hands. He looks desperate.

Has he told him what he has done?

While my friend sits down next to her man, who greets her with a kiss, I remain standing without knowing what to do because on the chair is the briefcase the two of them brought with them.

“Do you want to sit down?” they ask me.

“No. I should go,” I interrupt because I don't want to hurt Kris's condition. “Electre, would you give me a ride?”

“I'll take you,” Kristòs interjects, raising his face to me. His eyes are sad but full of anger.

What if he wants to go to Enea to confront him?

I cast a quick glance at the two of them, hoping to get a strong hand to stop him, but they are not looking at me, no one seems to want to take this responsibility.

I nod and wait for him to finish clearing the table of papers. He says goodbye to our friends with the promise to join them later and indicates that I should precede him. Having gone out in two cars just because I was supposed to be going to work puts me slightly on edge.

“What time do you start?”

“In an hour.”

“And you get off at?”

“It depends on how many people are there. If Markus hadn't returned the bike, I could have used that without having

to bother you.”

“Markus,” he mutters irritably, as if even that name bothers him. We get into the car and my question arises.

“You know him too?” A fake smile draws itself on his face.

“I paid for the bike. He called me because I am the co-owner of the place where you work. Your dear Enea changed all the numbers so that everything about the place, from suppliers to creditors and more, falls on my shoulders and not on those who owe them,” he reveals shocking me.

“I’m so sorry.” I didn’t think Enea had done such a thing and, apparently, Athos is complicit. “And yet he sent good words for you,” I continue more amazed than ever. He snorts as he looks out the window. We haven’t left yet.

“I don’t know what happened between you but believe me when I say he never tried to turn me against you.”

“It doesn’t change, Jade. I’m a few steps away from opening a new club and he sees fit to put the whole island in debt.” He punches the steering wheel making me feel guilty for what I said, thought, and what I found out this morning.

“Is that why...”

“I paid for the bike without batting an eyelid. It broke down because of me, and yes, I never contacted a body shop because the car was a rental, so it was covered by insurance. But didn’t you wonder why the price was higher than the quote Markus gave you? And no, trust me it’s not the transport’s fault.”

That’s why he’d told me he’d called the owner.

“It’s called unpaid work.” Now it’s my turn to cover my mouth with my hand.

“By any chance...” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Does he owe you money?”

I’m shocked to learn this. I had no idea that Enea could do something like this. I shake my head in denial.

“How long has it been going on?”

“Almost a year, but the creditors only showed up now that I found out everything. If Markus hadn’t been there, I would have had no idea. Athos is trying to draw up a repayment agreement but it’s not easy.” He runs his hand through his hair in exasperation. These are very strong revelations. Heavy accusations that I don’t think he would make if they weren’t true. I let my head fall back against the seat as the argument between Athos and Enea comes back to me. If only he hadn’t run me over, if I hadn’t taken the bike to the workshop, all this would still be hidden.

“I’ll take you to him if you want, but I think it’s only fair that you know what the situation is.”

“When did you hear from Markus?” I ask instinctively because I want to know, I want all the pieces in place.

“The night before we left. I had to send Athos for payment and figure out why it cost so much for such an old bike that would have been better off scrapped,” he replies. “He didn’t do that either, yet it was all paid for.”

“The down payment?”

“What down payment?”

“I had left a down payment for Markus and the rest to be paid when the job was done,” I inform him with the sole

purpose of discrediting his words and not Enea' reputation. Kris turns and grabs the briefcase behind him. He opens it and searches through the paperwork until he finds the receipt, which he hands to me. I immediately recognise my signature and the number I had left to be contacted, just below where it says 'deposit' the amount is what I left.

"Surely he must have taken it off the total." My eyes drop to read the note confirming what Kris just said. "As soon as they unfreeze my account, I'll give it back to you."

"They froze your account?" I swear I'm not understanding this anymore.

"The situation is not good. I thought I could handle it without getting Athos involved, but I can't." He goes on to reveal to me everything that, until a few days ago, I didn't think I was worthy of knowing. He is allowing me to enter his life full of light and shadows.

"Does Ele know? Does she know what he did to you?"

"What would that change?" He huffs, closing the briefcase. "Athos agrees with me about leaving her out of this. But you, you deserved to know who you're dating and choose."

You deserve to know who you're dating and choose... I need to reveal everything soon.

"I chose what to do the day I returned to your club. Nothing has changed since then." I wish I could say my words relieved him for a few moments, but his expression is elusive. "Will your new club be affected by this?"

"No. It just needs to get up and running. It's all paid for already. If the proceeds from the sale of the club in Santorini aren't enough, it will work to pay off the debts of a little

restaurant on the harbour that opened years ago with what used to be my best friend.”

He bangs his head on the steering wheel, making his agony more vivid. My heart tightens seeing him like this and not being able to do anything is tearing me apart.

“You put the place up for sale?”

“I can’t afford to let people know about the debt, they’d pull my premium, tank me and I’d go bankrupt. My dad would laugh his ass off.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Unless you have five hundred thousand euros on hand, I don’t see how.”

“What if you sold your shares? In the end, like you said, you’re not friends anymore; so, what’s the point of having to save his ass?” My father’s lessons on the subject are helping me with this puzzle even if I have to force myself to remember clearly.

“It’s not that easy,” he mumbles, getting back up. “Some time ago I offered him to take over everything, but he didn’t want to. Then I tried to sell him my share, but nothing, he didn’t have enough money to do it. Now it certainly won’t be worth much.”

“And to third parties?”

“It doesn’t make sense. Selling the shares of a...” He shuts up as if he’s had an epiphany. He pulls his mobile out of his jeans and dials a number. “Athos.” At the sound of that name, a pain in my chest makes me move in my seat. Why should Kristòs go crazy because of them? The others should be the ones to rack their brains and find a solution, because he’s just a victim of someone else’s subterfuge. “I have an idea. What if

we include the shares of Enea' club in the deal so we can get rid of both of them? Do you think it can be done? They become partners and I cut out."

They? Now who's he talking about?

He listens carefully to his friend's answers.

"Let's try it, maybe add the extenuating circumstance of family business or something." Then he hangs up and turns back to me, who have understood very little of his intentions. He smiles, and although it's not his usual sincere smile, it partly makes up for all this tension.

"Let's hope for a positive response."

"I don't know what to do," I reflect. "To go or not to go. I wouldn't want to wrong you."

"If he's always paid you there's no problem for me. If he starts not doing it then yes, because you would have to rely on me." I chuckle because the one who hasn't paid me yet is him and not his former friend. "Right now, I don't have much to offer you."

"You could pay me in kind," I tease him. "Your performance is very fulfilling."

"That's good to know. Too bad it doesn't work that way with suppliers, otherwise I'd be..."

"A dead man." I interrupt him by letting him know he's mine alone. "Cockless and dead." He smiles amused by my words. He looks at me as if I have solved the biggest problem of his life.



EVEN WITH THE urge under his shoes, Kris leaves me in front of Enea' club with the promise not to reveal anything and that, as soon as I finished, I would call him, and he would run to pick me up.

The shift, however, proceeds in an unexpected way. Enea seems to be angry with me. He doesn't look at me, he doesn't even speak to me to tell me which table the dishes go to, and all this is really absurd.

I call him back after the umpteenth course left on the pass. He looks up at me, glaring at me just for saying his name.

"Fifteen," he replies between his teeth, tapping the little paper on the side of the plate. I grab the china and run to bring the dish to the table. It's really hard to keep working like this. Not the least because I don't know what I've done to deserve this behaviour.

At the end of the service, Enea is behind the counter washing the glasses. He doesn't even turn to look at me when I sit on the stool.

"You don't need to come tomorrow." Those are the first words he addresses to me. "Also, for the days to come." I nod reluctantly.

"Is it because of Kris?" I ask as I get up from the stool. Sometimes I just can't keep quiet.

"Do you think I don't know you talk about me when you're together?"

“You’re wrong. Why would we ever talk about you?” I ask annoyed by his accusation. I don’t bother to mask a contrite expression.

“Do you know the reason why we’re no longer friends? Did your beloved tell you?” He approaches with an air of menace I’ve never seen in him. Between us only the counter.

“I took back what he stole from me years before. Go ahead and tell him and then let me know.” He turns and continues to dry his glasses.

“Like the money you owe him?” There you have it, even though I promised Kris I wouldn’t talk, this snub is irritating me, and I can’t help but defend it.

“Is that what he told you?” Eyes widened and tone enraged.

“I heard the call this morning with Athos. What did he say? Sell a kidney? Prostitute yourself?” If he thinks he’s playing hardball with me, he doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.

“Look Jade, Jade or whatever the hell your name is, do what you want. You want to be with him? Fine, but don’t come crying back to me if you find out some uncomfortable secret. He’s not who you think he is, and the sooner you deal with that and find out what a mean person you’re dealing with, the sooner you’ll realise what a mistake it was to meet him.” He doesn’t shout, but he says it in such a dismissive way that it makes me sick to my stomach.

At this point I ignore the fact that he knows my real name, surely, he has overheard some of my conversations with Electre and I don’t want to add fuel to the fire. At this point I don’t give a shit.

“Sure. There always has to be a secret, otherwise what’s the point of having a war with each other. You know what? See if you can make peace for the sake of those around you. For example, Athos and Electre. Or try not to get in each other’s way anymore, because no matter how great the rivalry, it doesn’t deserve the destruction of the other.” I walk towards the door, ready to get out of here and never set foot in it again.

“I don’t know what Kristòs told you, but he started it.”

“And you’ll finish it. Like you’re five years old.”



THE EVENING PASSED WITHOUT A HITCH. Kris and Electre seem to have found a harmony of their own that doesn’t faze me. Athos stayed to his own without interacting more than usual. While he manages to sleep after what happened, it’s impossible for me. I have constant remorse. I am privy to things about my man’s torment and not being able to tell him is wearing me down.

“You awake too?” The one who caused my torment entered the kitchen and, without waiting for permission, sat by my side. “What’s troubling you?”

I don’t know whether to tell him, speak openly and face him to consider what to do.

“Okay, I’ll do the talking. Enea called me.”

“Or was it you who called him?” I snap without holding back. “That wasn’t my intention, but...”

“You heard everything,” he concludes for me.

“I should have stayed put and let you see that the bathroom was occupied, but I don’t know why I got scared and hid in the shower listening to everything.” There, I said it and now I feel a little lighter. “Athos, if you haven’t, you need to talk to him or...”

“Do you talk at all?” We don’t look at each other, we don’t have the courage to do it, at least I don’t. “Stay out of it, live your life with him, devote yourself to entertaining him in bed, to being there for him but let the grown-ups deal with the serious stuff.”

He gets up and goes back to his room without waiting for a reaction from me.

Chapter 26



Day before the opening

I'm in the living room of the imperial suite, the same one Kristòs had booked for the conference. As I remember, the place is only ten minutes away.

I look around, remembering perfectly what I have spent in this place: good times, bad times, memorable times, all related to Kristòs.

While Electre continues to wander around the flat, marvelling at the endless amenities, I can't stop thinking about what Enea and Kristòs have told me about each other. Not to mention Athos' role.

After the altercation with Enea, I never set foot in his place again, just as he asked. Too bad I had to lie to Kris, saying I only asked for permission to be near him. I didn't have the courage to tell him about our exchange. Actually, nobody knows anything.

With Athos, on the other hand, things have changed. Even though we are in the same room, we avoid each other.

"Hey, there's a pool, too. Wow!" shouts Electre making me close my eyes. Everything seems to be a game to her. From the journey to the arrival in Athens, where two cars were waiting

for us. One for us, the other for Kris and Athos who had to go to the club. It was only then that her smile disappeared, followed by a mumble of disapproval as she was not allowed to see even a few details of the club live.

As soon as I entered the hotel, the manager recognised me and greeted me as Mrs. Princekaris. Obviously, this detail did not escape Electre who continued to ask me questions all the way to the suite.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier that there is a swimming pool on the terrace?” By now I don’t know how many times she changed her mind about which of the two rooms she’ll take.

“Ele, please,” I whine bringing my hand to my temple. I can’t take it anymore but as I plead with her, I realise she’s no longer in the living room. She’s on the terrace and undressing.

“What are you doing?” I ask leaning over the sofa.

“Can’t you tell?” she replies giving me a smile before taking off her shirt.

“Yes, I can see you’re getting naked, I want to know why.”

“I feel like taking a bath naked and you’re coming with me,” she explains as if it’s obvious I’m going to say yes. She comes back to me, grabs my hands, and tries to lift me up.

“Ele, do I need to remind you how last time ended?” I ask pulling away from her. I back away a few steps to avoid the risk of being dragged into the pool. I don’t think I want to indulge her.

“Maybe the one who should refresh her memory is you, since it seems that Kristòs doesn’t pay much attention to you. Do you feel like telling me what’s going on?” I shake my head and that seems to be enough for her as I have just enough time

to blink before she is all over me in her underwear. I'm shocked at myself for letting her do this.

“We had fun that night, remember?” She holds my hand, guiding me towards the pool, and as she pulls me underwater, the whole world disappears. She re-emerges a few inches from me, the jaunty, enchanting smile she had reserved for me that night as well.

“Tell me, did Kristòs make you reach for pleasure like I did?” she whispers in a sensual tone, caressing my cheek. “Do you trust me?” She brushes my hair away in a gesture that takes my memory back to the day it all began...

THE UMPTEENTH SPLASH makes me shudder. Electre insisted on taking a bath at midnight, dragging me into this circle of madness that has started since he's been in Bari. We're here because I just had a fight with Raffaele. Again. Always about the same thing.

“Giada.” She brings me back to reality and laughs when I return the touch. I want to distract myself and not think about him. I close my eyes and continue slapping the water directing it at her until she reaches out and grabs my hand blocking me.

“Do you trust me?”

“Always. But cut it short Ele, what do you want to do?” She asks too many questions and sometimes it annoys me, though I would never stop her initiatives.

She brings her face closer to mine and kisses me. A chaste kiss, as if she was probing the ground. A kiss that evolves and becomes demanding. I've never kissed a girl; I've never asked myself the question of whether or not doing so would please

me. With her it all seems natural and not at all forced. I follow her because I like doing it, because it feels good.

She only let's go of my wrist to hug me and hold me close. Her hands crawl over my body transmitting all her desire. Gently she moves steps forward, forcing me to follow her on the platform until she reaches the towel where she makes me lie down.

She brings our bodies together perfectly, as if they were made for this. Electre points her eyes into mine before caressing my face and closing the distance again. Our hands explore our skin, explore our pleasure. We are sighs, kisses, forbidden caresses.

She spreads my legs with an expert caress that warms my insides. Her body rubbing against mine makes me crave more and more until, with a quick gesture, she penetrates me, making me gasp. She moves her fingers inside me with mastery. She knows where to touch, how far to go, how to send me into a tailspin. When her mouth moves to kiss my neck, my mind thinks of nothing but her. The second she nibbles on my nipple; I feel like I'm going to faint. Everything is amplified, everything is perfect, but it's only when she descends to my private parts that I feel like I'm going to die instantly. Her tongue reaches her fingers and takes their place.

She enters me, biting and sucking me, soothing the heat that is flaring up. I want to hold on, to share this pleasure with her and give it to her in turn, but it's all so fast I fear I won't make it.

I grab her free hand and tug it to pull her towards me. As soon as I have her face in my sights, I kiss her and blend our moans. I weave my legs around her waist as Ele continues to torture me with her fingers. She increases the pace, the

amount, and rubs herself so frantically that she lifts just enough for her breasts to end up on my face. I take advantage of that and devote myself to them. I want to tease her like she did me, send her into the clouds. I pant faster and faster and, after yet another stroke, I reach a pleasure so intense and shattering that I forget how to even breathe.

I catch my breath as Ele continues to lavish my body with kisses and caresses. I act, moving her better on top of me and imitating her gestures.

“I want you to enjoy as much as you made me enjoy,” I whisper as she returns to position herself with her face level with mine. She smiles and lets me take the lead.

I COPY her gesture by bringing our lips together.

“My dear friend, tell me, does your Athos really make you enjoy yourself, or do you only pretend to satisfy his huge ego?” I ask her the same question partly in jest, and partly to bring back to her mind that she is now engaged. That she is planning a future together with Athos. She freezes, lets her arms fall to her sides and then crosses them over her chest. I can’t tell if I’ve offended her or if I’ve just broken a fun moment, she needed to escape the routine.

“What did you do to your boobs? They’re bigger,” I ask to shake her. And also, because they really are. I reach up and touch them with a finger finding them really plump.

“What are you thinking! I didn’t do them again, tsz! Those are the pros of being with Athos. You know when he touches them too much? There.” She spreads her arms to avoid highlighting her breasts again. She smiles and whispers to me. “Jade, I’m pregnant.” My eyes widen. I’m incredulous. Did

she really say what she said? “Athos and I are expecting a boy. Or a girl, we don’t know yet, when we get back to Santorini, I will have my first gynaecological examination.”

“You have?”

“We wanted to, but...”

Maybe now I can say I understand the speech from the other night.

“But?”

“I’m scared. We’re talking about having a child at twenty-two while I’m trying to create a career for myself. Okay, Athos is wonderful, we love each other but...”

“But you wanted him.” She nods and smiles, thinking she’s fooling me.

“It will be fine, Athos will help you and you will achieve your goals with the best of results, and it will be more magical to be able to share it with this little being growing inside you, the fruit of your love.” Sweetly, I brush her belly to make my words stronger. She sighs and changes her expression, painting a sincere smile on her face. She hugs me tightly whispering words of thanks.

“I’m happy for you.” I squeeze her, trying to make her understand that I am indeed happy. For her, for her story and for what they are building.

“Oh, Mom, my greatest sexual desire is coming true. Two girls in a tub about to have sex!”

I turn without detaching myself from my friend and find Athos and Kris’ eyes on us.

“Can I join in? He’s coming too.” Athos continues in his silliness.

“Jesus Christ, is that all you have in your head?”

“I’ve always wanted to be in an orgy, what can I do?” He spreads his arms to justify himself that then... there’s nothing to justify, he’s just a jerk.

Kristòs recovers from his catatonic state and elbows Athos who has already started to unbutton his shirt, ready to join us and carry out his wish. Only when they have both turned around does Electre let me go. She continues to laugh it off, amused by the little scene.

“I heard about the little joke Athos played on you. Kris did it to me a few days after you arrived. What do you say we reciprocate?” she whispers with a conspiratorial look on her face. I certainly wasn’t dying to remember, but since Ele brought it up, I might as well take my revenge.

We get out of the water in silence, and, on tiptoe, I approach Athos. I caress his back and then move to his chest. I cling to him, while my friend does the same with Kris who, unlike Athos, doesn’t seem very convinced. We bring our lips close to their ears and repay them in kind.

“Now you will think of me when you enter her.” They both turn to us with wide eyes. We don’t retort, we don’t give them time to say anything because, without a towel to cover us, we run to our rooms. As soon as I touch the bed, Kristòs bursts into the room, slamming the door violently. It’s a clear sign that he didn’t like the charade.

“What the fuck was that? Can you explain that?” he rants.

“Why? Does the rule about showing yourself naked only work for you?” I face him, crossing my arms over my chest. In fact, I release them and start walking across the room to clean up a mess that isn’t really there.

“Jade,” he exclaims, but I keep moving invisible things around so that I don’t stand still in front of him. As usual he uses two yardsticks and two measures.

I can’t understand why when he wants something, he treads his hand to the point of booking a doctor’s appointment to force me to take the pill just on his whim while I always get in trouble and deserve some reprimand.

He was also offended by the fact that I didn’t go even though I had explained to him that I was having my period so that I avoided even intimacy.

All because I couldn’t overlook Enea’s words and put my mind at rest.

Kris didn’t give me a chance to eliminate any of the doubts buzzing around in my head.

What lies behind their hatred for each other?

I could ask him instead of continuing to deflect and act this way, but I can’t. I’m too afraid I’ll infuriate him, and he’ll seriously decide to break up with me.

“Jade, stop now.” He hugs me from behind and wraps his arms around my waist. His breath tickles my skin, causing me to shiver in a way I can’t describe these days. I miss the intimacy I had with him; I miss him.

The Enea thing has split us apart, but what am I saying, it has pulled me away from him.

“Leave me, please. I have to settle down.”

“Stop it.” His hands make me turn around and his eyes search for mine, which just can’t bring themselves to go along with him. He’s not to blame, I’m the one with Enea’s words in my head.

“I have taken back what he stole from me years ago.”

Kristòs rummages through my blank stare, looking for anything that might help him understand me.

“What’s going on with you? You’ve been strange since I revealed the problem with Enea. Have you maybe changed your mind about us?” I knew it would come down to this. I close my eyes and shake my head. “So, what’s going on?”

“I just wish this damn migraine would give me a break. It’s been plaguing me for days,” I lie. I can’t bring myself to address it because I’m afraid of the answer he might give me.

“Can I kiss you? That’s all I want.” He rubs his nose against my temple trying to give me relief. I lift my face to his and he closes the distance. He kisses me slowly, softly, and gently. I relax my muscles when our tongues touch realizing that this is exactly what I need.

“I’ve missed you. You’ve been away from me ever since you left Enea’ club. I’ve been suppressing the desire to kiss you the whole trip so as not to risk irritating you and making things worse. But there wasn’t a moment when I didn’t imagine how to take off that fluttery dress and make you mine. Even on the plane, not giving a damn,” he reveals before kissing my neck. “Even when I was at the club, I thought of you and even on the way back here. Then, finding you in the pool with your friend and Athos’ perverted gaze on you... on you...” I close my eyes and throw my head back, letting him demonstrate the truth of his words.

He leans over, grabs my bottom, and takes me in his arms. He points his eyes into mine as he walks the few steps to the bed. Gently he makes me lie down as he settles in beside me. He strokes my wet hair.

“Where are you, my little Jade?”

“Here,” I answer without believing my words. Kris shakes his head.

“My little girl would have responded differently. You’re here physically, but not with your head. What’s going on?” His tone tugs at my heart.

“What did you steal from Enea who is now recovering using all this nastiness?”

There, I said it. He wants to know where I am? Here is his answer.

My question unsettles him so much that he stops stroking my hair. He clenches his jaw but doesn’t look away. At least until he rubs his eyes and lets out a big sigh.

“A girl,” he reveals. “When we were in high school, I got engaged to a chick he really liked. Now he seems to have won her over and wants a rematch.”

“Man called a grudge,” I mutter. Kris hints at a shy, almost adolescent smirk.

He can’t bring himself to look me in the eye, and that hurts because it suggests that maybe he still cares about her.

“We spent years together. We devoted our lives to our careers, but always together. Until almost a year ago when the decline began. My father died of a heart attack right in front of my eyes while we were discussing the purchase of one of my clubs, the one that made me the most money. That day I desperately needed her, and I looked for her everywhere because I was really sick, In the end I found her in the arms of Enea. I didn’t face them, I didn’t have the courage, I preferred to lock myself in one of my bars and drink all my alcohol. I kept drinking with the hope of erasing from my mind the face

of my father and that of my girlfriend kissing my best friend. Then, on the day of the funeral, I hit rock bottom.” He closes his eyes and runs his hands over his face a couple of times before continuing to tell his story. “I’d been drunk for days, I was sick, I had stomach and side pains that hadn’t let me sleep for nights and the anxiety of seeing them again didn’t help. Imagine, they showed up together with the excuse that she needed the support I didn’t bother to give her after the tragedy. She needed support.” He huffs out a bitter giggle as my heart tightens more and more.

How could this happen to him? How could such a good man receive so much evil?

I try to console him by stroking his cheek and he blocks my hand with his, holding it back.

“In front of everyone, my father’s associates, friends, acquaintances and relatives, I went up to the pulpit, drunk as a skunk, and said the worst things that could be said about a ruthless man, both in business and with his son. I managed to make a fool of myself in front of everyone by passing out. I recovered a few hours later in hospital with Athos watching over me. After years of silence, when I destroyed my body with alcohol, he was there. At my side. He underwent several check-ups and didn’t hesitate for a second in giving me a piece of his liver on the condition that I trust him, and he locks me up in the clinic. He didn’t tell anyone where I was. He managed my affairs and my life and made me deserve the award we received together in Athens. On my return to Santorini, I got yet another beating that threatened to turn me around, but instead of heading for the bar, I turned for the gym.”

“What happened?” I allow myself to ask after a few moments of silence. I do so in a whisper so as not to come across as too greedy for information.

“I went back to her place to clarify and found them in bed together.” There, maybe I didn’t expect that. I close my eyes as he squeezes my hand in a silent plea for help.

“Karen, right? Athos didn’t know, that’s why he put her name on the application form.” I might have said the most pathetic thing in the world, but I’m certain I wasn’t wrong when he nods. “She’s a beautiful woman. I met her that morning at Xen’s.” Yikes! “Is that why she invited me to join you in the little office at the bar?” I smile to play down and he nods. “You... You still have feelings for her?”

“I realised I haven’t felt anything for years. I don’t know why she insists on warring with me. Maybe she thinks I’ll get in her way, but I don’t. She’s the last person I care about.” I thought he was hiding something bigger from me, but instead it’s just old grudges. “Better?” he smiles looking up at me from under his lashes.

I sigh and move my thumb over his face. Then I draw him to me, kissing him softly at first and then giving vent to my withdrawal.

“We have to make up for the time we lost, and I want to leave my mark all over you,” I whisper into his mouth between kisses. He draws me on top of him revelling in my position. Even though the fabric divides us, the pleasure is still felt.

“I just wanted to kiss you and you went for it.” He smiles when I bring our foreheads together to catch my breath. “How do we do this?” he asks, and I mutter in exasperation when he brings his hands into my hair. He holds me back, not wanting

me to lower myself to kiss him. “You didn’t go to the doctor, did you?”

“You can’t make me. There are so many types of birth control! Besides, I don’t think it’s bad with condoms,” I explain, continuing to push my face towards him to kiss him.

“Like abstinence,” he proposes, startling me. “I think that’s the right punishment.”

I try to look into his eyes to see if he’s teasing me or something. Is he kicking the can down the road again by grounding me?

“Are you kidding?” He shakes his head with an amused smirk. “I don’t believe it,” I mutter offended and move away from him. Or at least I try to since he holds me back.

“You want abstinence? Okay. You’ll get it.” I pry with all the strength I have and get out of bed to lock myself in the bathroom. I hear him laughing, calling me, and teasing me for giving him the cold shoulder. But all that isn’t enough to calm me down.

The door opens and I lower my head, staring at the sink I’ve been leaning over.

“Hey.” He comes up behind me laying his hands on the sink too, next to mine, resting his face against mine. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Forget it,” I start, but he hugs me and pulls me close.

“You want me that bad?”

“Do you have a problem with that?” I want to cry, to scream from the frustration he’s managed to create in me these past few days. I try not to give in, but it’s not that easy.

“No, it’s just making my head spin.” He loosens his grip and turns me around demanding eye contact. I don’t give it to him because he’d only see exasperation and torment.

“Look at me.” He lifts my chin. “Jade, look at me.” He manages to get my surrender and as I meet his chariots, I find my doom. “I want you, my little Jade.” I lower my eyelids because I can’t bear to see him see me in pain. For days I’ve been holding back feelings I can’t explain.

“You were the one who asked me for something more, to get serious, and for me this is it. A form of trust. I would like to feel you without that piece of latex. I’d like to feel your flesh tighten around mine. It’s not a whim. If we did it without any precautions... Do you want to do it without any precautions? Do you want to tempt fate?”

“Never mind. As soon as I get back to Santorini I’ll do as you wish, though I don’t understand this fixation of yours now.”

“I won’t let it go. I...”

“I didn’t go to the doctor like you wanted and now I’m going to pay the consequences. That’s all.” I manage to break free and undress. Even though he keeps looking at me I try not to mind.

Kristòs is still here when I step into the shower, the same one where, a few weeks ago, I did my own thing and started it all.

“In half an hour we have to be at lunch with Athos and Electre in the little restaurant we went to last time.” I hear his voice, but I don’t listen to him. The nice thing about the shower is that it muffles everything superfluous.

I turn off the tap and, as soon as I turn around, Kristòs opens the box and stands in front of me. I dodge him and pass him, but he grabs me and slams me against the wall.

Our gazes are grim because of the missed words. For intentions not understood and silences misrepresented.

“That night it was you who came in here and relieved me. You eased the burden of my troubles. Now it’s my turn.” He grabs the soap, turns on the water again and turns me around. “I saw that you couldn’t wash yourself here.” He runs his hands over my back, massaging it as only he can. He grabs my arms and brings them up to his neck so that they encircle him. With circular movements he fills my belly and stomach with foam.

It’s all so relaxing, so magnificent that I forget all my worries. As I throw my head back, Kris starts to fill my neck with kisses.

“If you don’t want another fight about the condom issue stop now, because this time your hands won’t be enough for me.” As soon as I warn him, he does something unexpected: he reaches out his hand in front of me and shows me the condom.

“The desire to have you is stronger than the desire to feel your muscles envelop me.” These words are a real pass. Without waiting any longer, I turn around and pull myself close to him. I kiss him bluntly, without waiting or taking my time. I want him and now.

I push him against the other wall and, even though he doesn’t deserve it, I kneel down to take him between my lips and wash him well. I hear his curses, his moans of pleasure until he makes me get up. He closes the distance by kissing me voraciously, taking care not to leave me behind. Only when,

exasperated, I grab the sachet and unroll the condom on his erection, does he enter me, and I can consider myself fully satisfied. He lifts me up and helps me cross my legs behind his back so that he can come and go at his own pace.

I want him so bad that I feel like I'm going crazy with every thrust. I scream his name and the expletives of pleasure I can't hold back. At the umpteenth thrust my body feels lighter than ever. I let out a cry of pure pleasure as the orgasm takes me full force and pulls us both into that deep abyss that makes us more united.

“It's always a wonderful feeling. I'd never stop doing it.” He kisses my lips with gentleness and thoughtfulness worthy of a gentleman.



ARMANI JEANS, white shirt that hugs his torso beautifully. He sits on the sofa, the same one on which we have made interesting memories. This time he is simply waiting for me for dinner.

He stares at his mobile phone insistently, swiping his finger at the screen over and over again.

“Any news of the two lovebirds?” I exclaim, reaching for him. He grabs my hand and pulls me onto his lap.

“No, those two alone do nothing but have sex,” he explains mockingly. I smile at his words. We are like that too, no use denying it. “No, we're different. Besides giving each other pleasure, we talk, we fight, we compare.” Here, he should add the ability to respond to my unexpressed thoughts to the things

I adore about him. “Speaking of which, this skirt is too short for me.” He places his hand on my thigh and then sneaks it under the fabric.

“It’s a good thing we’re not just thinking about sex,” I laugh pulling his hand away. “Anyway, I think it’s the right length.” I grab the edges and pull them slightly.

“Whatever you say” he concludes managing to give me a kiss on the lips. He gets me up and positions himself at my side. “Remember though, you don’t play with me. You are mine and no one, and I repeat no one, can touch you. That skirt will only bring trouble.” Then he passes me and heads for the lift. With his usual muttering he warns me that the two lovebirds are waiting for us in the lobby. As soon as we get out of the lift Kristòs grabs my hand, intertwining our fingers firmly. He seems calm at first glance and yet, every time we meet a man, he clenches his jaw and squeezes my hand more.

When we turn the corner, we find the two lovers exchanging tender effusions. Athos caresses the belly of his beloved in such a tender way that I envy him.

Kristòs greets the two with a nod of his head. As soon as Electre notices our intertwined hands, she looks at us, studies us to see our reactions. It’s the first time she’s found us like this, and she’ll certainly want to see if Kris will keep his word. She stares at him without restraint but, even when he notices my friend’s insistent gaze, he doesn’t take his hand off mine.

He does so only when Athos approaches him to chat. They precede us by a few steps and Ele holds me back to leave some space between us and them.

“Hand in hand? You’ve taken many steps forward. I’m glad.” She smiles and squeezes my arm.

“I just hope he doesn’t freak out like he did at the last dinner,” I reply. If it happens again, I don’t know if I’ll be able to react the way I did.

“Look, did you happen to tell him anything about the pregnancy?” From her tone it sounds like she’s afraid of Kris’s judgement. I shake my head, not wanting to reveal that he might have figured it out from Athos’ gesture of stroking her belly as they kissed.

“We plan to make it public when I’m three months along. But we want to tell Kris tonight.” I nod, turning towards the two who are now outside. Kris seems to be relaxed and beaming. Venting, telling his past and the truth about his contentious relationship with Enea will have done him good. I’m the one still not revealing their identity.

“Do you think Kris is happy with me?” The more I look at him, the more I think we’re light years apart, that if there wasn’t great sex between us, we’d have nothing in common.

“Of course, I do. He’s changed dramatically since you’ve been in his life. He used to barely speak to me and now he’s relying on me for tomorrow’s event. He is calm, instead of always sulking,” she explains.

“But I didn’t want to change him,” I whisper, afraid of something I don’t understand. He smiles as carefree as a thirty-three-year-old man should. If Karen was able to destroy him with betrayal, I could give him the coup de grace with my non-disclosure.

“Athos says that what you see is the real Kris. He’s back to the person he was before the hospitalization. So no, you haven’t changed him, but you’ve managed to give him back the peace of mind he deserves.”

I nod, mentally praying that her words turn out to be true.

Sitting in the restaurant I am pleased to see how Kristòs remembers what I like and what makes me happy. Like being kind to Electre, putting aside the grudge he has against her cousin because she is not Enea. I'm happy when he takes the time to squeeze my hand and then bring it to his lips and kiss it in an attempt to calm me down.

Surely, he's noticed that I'm agitated, that I'm afraid of a repeat of what has happened at most of our dinners.

"I'm not running away this time," he says softly as he kisses my hand for the umpteenth time.

"May I suggest a rosé wine?" the sommelier interjects, bringing me back down to earth. Apparently, Kris has ordered for me as well.

"Yes, four glasses," he replies without giving us time to choose.

"No. Three and a carafe of water," I interject. I don't think he's remembered that he can't drink.

"Let's do no wine, just water," Athos interjects, correcting the order. The sommelier reluctantly notes the choice and leaves us.

"How come?"

"No one can drink except Jade, but it's not elegant to leave her alone." Athos smiles and gives me a knowing look, the first in days. Maybe he thinks my tension is due to the news they'll give Kris, but it's not.

I'm afraid he's going to run away from me under the usual stupid pretext.

“Are you taking an AA class?” asks Kristòs to Electre. It is not intended to offend her, to make heavy-handed fun of her, but just to defuse the tension that has built up.

Electre takes out a small white box from her handbag and hands it to Kristòs. When he takes it there is a moment of stalemate, one of those that if you even dare to breathe you could start World War III. Kris opens the little box and, inside, finds some really cute baby shoes.

“Ele and I are expecting a baby.” Athos interrupts the silence. I’m out of breath and the fear of finishing dinner alone with them is growing more and more. “And we would like you as godmother and godfather because you are the most important people we know and, if we had to choose who to entrust our little one to, you would always be the only option.” I instinctively wrinkle my forehead. I didn’t expect this detail. I remain silent, trying to process the fact that if it goes wrong between us, we will be forced to see each other anyway.

“I have to say, when I broke the news to Jade, she had your reaction too. So, when we were hugging before...” interjects Electre perhaps in an attempt to dampen any crazy reaction from Kris.

When he shifts his eyes to them, I don’t know what to expect.

“I’m sorry for what I’ve always told you, for the sleazy little jokes I’ve reserved for you.” He takes a breath, shakes his head, and snorts a laugh. “I’m happy for you even though you wouldn’t know it.” Then he stands up, making Athos stand up as well, embracing him in a very touching way. I have never seen them so close as now. “I will be happy to be the godfather of Kristòs Jr.”

“What? You’re out of your mind,” my friend taunts him, reiterating the fact that he will never call him that. As soon as the embrace with his friend was over, Kris walked towards Electre and grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it. He pulls her to him and smiles tenderly at her.

“I apologise for all the horrible things I’ve done to you. I’m glad that in here,” he touches my friend’s belly, “is my nephew.” He hugs her, for the first time since I’ve been here.

“He won’t be named after you anyway.” They are really tender. Even though a few moments ago they almost couldn’t stand each other, now they seem to love each other.

“Uncle Kristòs is one of them, and we want him to think about settling down.” Athos’s eyes are on me, the only one sitting among them. I didn’t want to spoil a moment of theirs, the kind of moment that is typical of lifelong friends.

As soon as I get up, Athos stands in front of me and doesn’t even leave me time to congratulate him on the happy news. He embraces me in one of his powerful hugs, forgetting that there is still something between us that needs to be clarified.

“Thank you,” he whispers, poking his face into the crook of my neck. “Now I’m really happy.”

The only thing that separates Athos from me is Electre who sneaks in between us. To her I dedicate a different embrace, full of promises and unconditional affection.

The waiter suddenly interrupts us to tell us that lunch is ready to be served. Everyone goes back to their seats, except Kris, who seems to be glaring at me. Maybe the dress has ridden up and he’s admonishing me with his eyes, but when I place my hands on the fabric to fix it, he reaches over, brings

his hand to the back of my neck, and draws me to him, kissing me with passion. In front of his friends, in front of everyone, without worrying about being judged.

“See how I didn’t run away?” he asks when he pulls away as his thumb strokes the back of my neck.

“The day’s not over.”

“It won’t happen this time, I won’t do it again.” And he brings our lips together again in a quiet kiss, not at all demanding, reaffirming the sense of belonging. “This time I want to be as happy as they are.”

Lunch continues in complete tranquillity. Kristòs and Athos steal our chips, so we bicker and chat.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” I ask bringing my teaspoon to my mouth. This honey frozen yoghurt is really delicious.

“Yeah, tomorrow’s the big day,” Electre repeats. “I’m finally going to see the club I’ve been working my ass off for.”

“Speaking of which,” Kris begins. She wipes her mouth with her napkin and then sets it down on the side of her saucer. “I was thinking you could come with me tomorrow to check it out. Make sure everything is as you wanted.” Electre’s amazement at Kris’s request was matched by mine and Athos’s. “Well, are you the P.R. of Samsara yes, or no? Jade and Athos will join us later.”

“Really?” And she voices our astonishment. Kris nods strangely. “Of course, I’d be delighted!” she exclaims victoriously. This is more than an achievement, it’s a real victory.

My date turns to me giving me a genuine smile and then leans in and kisses me.

“Two kisses in a few hours, you’re magically romantic, Kris, what’s wrong with you?” Electre’s curiosity kicks in again.

“I’m happy, may I? I’m happy that things are finally going well, that...” he points at the two of them, “you guys have found your way, your balance. And, I admit, seeing my friend start a family ...” He turns to me. “It gives me hope that something like that might happen to me.” His eyes are in mine and they’re screaming at me to love me. I smile at him and then throw myself on him and hug him tight. “You want to be with me, really?” How could I say no to him? I nod and he kisses me, again, in front of his friends who still can’t believe everything that’s going on.

And I don’t care if they’re stunned by these gestures, I’ve never been happier than this.



“SHALL WE TAKE A WALK? If not, my digestion gets stuck,” Ele asks as we leave the restaurant. Relaxed and happy, we set off with no specific destination. We wander through the streets of Athens with a light-heartedness we have never felt before. In the end, everyone got what they wanted. Athos has Electre and, in a few months, an heir, and I have my Greek god, prince of all princes, with raven hair perpetually dishevelled, brown eyes that bewitch whenever you look at them with that wonderful detail that makes them look blue when a ray of sun hits them.

“What’s going on?” whispers my man. I shake my head giving him a happy smile. There’s really nothing wrong this

time.

“Guys, could we head back towards the hotel? I’m not feeling very well.” Electre’s plea puts us on alert.

“Shall I stop a taxi for you?” proposes Kristòs and, even though Ele keeps saying it’s no use, he doesn’t want to hear excuses. He stops a taxi and helps Athos pick up Electre, recommending that she return to the hotel and get some rest and that, if her illness persists, she should not hesitate to call a doctor.

As soon as the car turns the corner, Kristòs draws me to him and hugs me with concern in his eyes. I’ve never seen him so tense, so scared, so obsessive about something that doesn’t concern him.

“What do you want to do?” he asks with difficulty.

“If you don’t calm down, I’ll call one for you too.” He’s too worked up and I don’t think he’ll get over it easily. Sure, he’s just found out about Ele’s pregnancy, lowered his defences with me and revealed our history to everyone, but a simple worry can’t reduce him like this.

He nods and breathes deeply two or three times before asking me if I’d like to visit the new place that just happens to be right behind. I squeeze his hand in mine and let myself be drawn in.

“It was looking at it from here that made me fall in love with the place. It was a ruin that had been for sale for years. No one wanted it, no one had stopped to look at it and choose it to give it a new life. And now, after almost a year, it is finally ready to start again,” he whispers close to my ear. He seems to be seeing himself again in that club. That the modern clothes he wears, the class, prestige, and respect he has earned

over time, seem to him to be the result of a huge effort that only a few can sustain. Just like this abandoned place.

“Do you want to come in?” A key with a round pendant bearing the name of the place is waving in front of my nose. I smile at the pairing and nod.

“Ele thought of making these as gadgets. Obviously without a key.” With a slow pace we approach what from tomorrow will be a nightclub with thousands of customers a week. At least that’s what I wish them because it’s what they deserve.

Once inside, we find a few employees who are finishing cleaning. They smile at us and don’t ask questions.

“It’s wet in there, come on, let’s go around.” He takes me up the stairs and, from the balcony, he shows me the part below where the sign with the name stands majestically, the same one on the key ring. Below the sign is a large stage with a DJ station. On the right, on the other hand, there is a long counter full of glasses still to be placed in the appropriate spaces. On the left are the tables, ready for tomorrow’s opening. All in bright pink and black.

“And this is the private room.” Behind us, in fact, are black faux leather sofas with a small table in the middle, ideal for private parties or for those who want to be in peace.

“Do you like it?” I can’t say no, tell him it’s not what I expected because, despite the choice of colours, it’s not.

“It’s wonderful. Like you.” As I frame his face with my hands, he wraps his arms around my waist. “Now I understand why you fought for the name. Death, rebirth, the spinning wheel of life. It may be strange, but I see you in here. It totally represents you.”

“You know Ele has a hand in it?” he reveals. “The pink, for example.” I smile and kiss him because even though he couldn’t stand Electre, he believed in her by allowing her space in his club. “Even though a P.R. doesn’t do interiors and lighting, I’m glad I took her advice. I’m really curious to see her pretty face when she finds out.”

Kris away from Santorini is completely different. He’s sweet and more sociable.

“Come, let’s sit down.” He stretches his arm out towards the sofas, urging me to humour him. “Are you ready for tomorrow?” he asks as I settle in beside him. His arm on the back makes me feel protected while he strokes my back with his hand.

“The old me would tell you so.”

“What about the new one?”

“She’s scared,” I reply looking in front of me. “I want it to be okay, I want to have something with you that I’ve never had, but I’m really really scared.”

“I meant in accompanying me, but I’m glad you brought that up.” He settles back better on the small sofa. “Are you really that scared to be with me?”

“No, I mean yes. I’m terrified of repeating the experience of the performance party.” I feel uncomfortable opening up so much, but it’s only fair that I know.

“It won’t happen again.” He shifts and takes the same position as me. “Baby, I’m sorry about that outburst. I don’t mean to make excuses, but I was under a lot of pressure with the whole Enea thing and the launching of this place. I couldn’t think straight. Now, however, something seems to have worked itself out and I feel freer.” Of course, he’s right.

“If I do it again, I give you permission to cut off my cock.” I laugh finding this really inappropriate. I turn back to him.

“If you do it again there won’t be an us. I don’t have the strength to fight a war alone that needs to be fought together. I came back for you once. There won’t be a second.”



“SHE HAD a severe attack of nausea and, as she became agitated, she felt it more. The doctor said it’s normal to be afraid, but it’s all gone,” Athos explained as he left the room.

“Can I go to her?” I ask in a whisper, afraid to receive a negative answer. Athos turns towards me, stunned to see me still in front of the lift.

“Of course, honey, she’s not sick. She just took an antacid and has to stay in bed. She’ll be with us tomorrow night.” He smiles and I run over to her closing the door behind me to leave everything else outside.

“Jade.” As soon as she sees me, Ele crinkles her eyes and settles in better. “But what happened to Kris? I’ve never seen him so agitated.”

“I’m not here for him, I’m here for you. How are you feeling?” I join her and sit on the bed beside her. She reaches out her hand towards me and I grab it without missing a second.

“Never been better. It was a way to get you alone and let you talk. Because you did talk, didn’t you?” Even though I bow my head and look at her crookedly, she doesn’t flinch. “Do you know why he had that reaction? Did he say

something to you?” Her endless curiosity makes me uncomfortable.

“I have no idea. We talked a bit about us and my fears, nothing more. We mostly contemplated the new place.” Her wide eyes make me laugh. Did she think he wouldn’t take me to see it?

“Did it reassure you or make it worse?” she glosses over changing the subject.

I sigh before parting my lips and starting to speak, but she takes this pause as a sign of some doubt.

“He promised you. He promised in front of us that it won’t happen again. Give him faith.” She squeezes my hand and widens her smile. I know she’s trying to comfort me, and in my heart, I hope she’s not wrong.

“I don’t really know his situation before he came into my life but believe me when I say that he has changed. And then you managed to get yourself into the new club. It means you’re important and who knows, maybe he’ll hit the jackpot tomorrow,” she chuckles winking. I know what she means, but it’s never going to happen. Kris can’t even remember what tomorrow is.

“Come on, now get some rest we need to be on top tomorrow.” I muss her hair and place a kiss on her cheek which she gladly accepts. I want her to rest, because tomorrow will be her day too.

In the communal lounge I find Athos zapping.

“Are you OK?” he asks without turning to look at me. He looks bored, tired of waiting, tired of everything.

“For the joke? Yes.” I approach him hoping to exchange a few words with him, but he seems more interested in doing

nothing.

“A small price to pay for giving you your space in the hope of getting some revelations out,” he mutters. He doesn’t really want to talk to me again. But this time I’m not going to ask him why. As I told Kristòs, there won’t be a second time, and the same thing applies to Athos. “Are you hungry?”

“No, thanks. I binged at lunch and the fright closed my stomach,” I explain trying to remain as calm as possible. The only thing I want is a lot of sleep. I haven’t slept as much as I’d like for days, which makes me feel every sensation in an amplified way.

“Was the salad filling?” He wrinkles his forehead, trying to understand. “Meat is, but not salad with bits of cheese.” He finally turns to me, looking me straight in the eye. I don’t think he’s yelling at me, but he’s questioning my vegetarianism.

“Kris isn’t here,” he then explains.

“Is that why you’re like this?”

“Like what?”

“You treat me like I killed your dog,” I explain spreading my arms wide. Even though I just promised myself I wouldn’t chase him again, I’m doing it anyway.

“You think so?” He seems to mock me. He dismisses it by shrugging his shoulders demanding that this is okay with me. “If you want, there’s the menu there. We’ll have dinner brought to our room, just to be on the safe side. We have a busy day tomorrow.” I nod finding myself agreeing with his suggestion. “Or wait for Kris and go out to dinner.”

As tempting as it is to go out with my man, I accept the first option.

“Did you tell him?” I voice my thoughts. In the end, we don’t get to revisit the subject.

“Did you tell him?” he turns the question around.

“May I?” I point to the couch he’s sitting on. As soon as he nods, I sit down beside him. Athos settles in better and brings an arm around my shoulders. “We did it on this couch too,” I whisper after he’s changed the channel ten more times. I smile in satisfaction at the low blow I’ve given him. He doesn’t seem to care, so I decide to add to my dose. “In both rooms,” I continue, snuggling into him and finding as comfortable a position as I can. “On the kitchen table.”

“No, please.” He jerks up without thinking that I’m leaning against him. “Why did you tell me that? Now...”

“Now you’re going to eat on that table, sleep in that bed and sit comfortably on this couch thinking about me and your best friend having wild sex,” I giggle contentedly as he looks at me interdicted. “This is my payback for the other night.”

Can I be any meaner than that? Sure, but for the moment I don’t want to be. Athos’s gaze immediately becomes amused, chasing away the angry air that was there before.

After a few moments, Athos sits back down and tells me about his plans for tomorrow. He counts that Electre will have recovered and that she will go with Kristòs to the club well before the opening to check that everything is in order. Then, he and I will join them through the front door like two famous people. There we will meet people who are very important to them, and we will have to be careful about the words we use.

“But that’s not your case,” he concludes, giving me a shove. He knows I could give a business speech with my eyes closed. As for the rest, he’ll take Electre away as soon as he

sees her tired and, if she resists, I'll have to back him up. I, on the other hand, should stay with Kristòs until the end. Or at least until he decides to slip away.

“Is he at the club now?” I ask, since he's not returning.

“Down. He had to meet someone and then to the gym. It's his routine before any big event. He wears himself out with weights.” I didn't think there was one in this hotel. “I know he told you about the situation with Enea and the bill.” Maybe he changes the subject to see if I understand his friend's situation, make sure I'm not with him just for the money. I'd love to say otherwise, but Kris doesn't know who I am.

“I've talked to him about it. We're working on it. It's really complicated and...”

“Absurd. Carrying a grudge for so long and, instead of closure, preferring to ruin it. I knew Enea before Kris and I always thought of him as the good guy in the situation because he never had any bad words for his former friend. But when he accused me of talking bad about him to Kris, even though I knew Kris would never do that, I couldn't believe it. Even now that he's told me how their altercation started, I can't believe he's so vindictive.”

“Still water ruins bridges. Kristòs just ma... got engaged to the wrong person and Enea is destroying him because of it.” Athos confirms Kris' version of events and that really hurts me.

“I'm regretting running away to take refuge from him,” I reveal staring into space. Only now can I imagine the pain Kris felt at seeing me from him.

“Don't say that. Enea isn't a monster. He just saw fit to retaliate in this way even though Kris doesn't deserve

everything he's doing to him. He's always helped him, given him the funds to open that little restaurant on the harbour and, when he was in trouble, he didn't hesitate to buy half the shares to stop it sinking. I tried to talk to him when I brought him back your bike but, apparently, revenge is more important."

I could say I have him pegged, but I don't.

"You knew Ele was his cousin?"

"I found out after I fell in love with her and you know how it is, you can't help love."

"But if you had known before, would you be here?" I know these might be inappropriate questions, but I want to know. Or maybe I want to understand what he would do if he found out my secret. The trouble is that Kristòs isn't Athos and that makes me paranoid.

"I've never thought about it, but I think I would. It's not her fault, so..." He shrugs, getting darker than he should. "I also know you gave him an ultimatum. That you won't come back for him if he runs away like he did in Santorini." I nod even though I already know where this is going. "He doesn't know, does he? You haven't told him your real name." There.

"There were no opportunities."

"There have been plenty. Even today we provided you with one. Giada don't do this tomorrow. Don't ruin his day or even your birthday. You are important to him now." As important as he is to me. That's why I'm afraid he'll run away and never want to see me again. "I'll risk it, too," he adds, and my misty eyes close, causing a tear to fall that I was unaware existed.

“He’ll get angry, and it’ll be normal, I would too, but you don’t give up on him.”



“I LIKE THESE IGNORANT DINNERS,” Athos says biting into the slice of pizza. All three of us are sitting on the floor around the coffee table in the living room. Kris called and said to start eating without him, that he’s going to delay because the last appointment is taking longer than expected. Clearly, he didn’t call me, but Athos. Maybe he doesn’t want to deal with me anymore given my words.

“They are so simple,” Electre mumbles with her mouth full. After her afternoon nap she felt reborn and decided to eat with us. I teased Athos by reiterating my thoughts on why he doesn’t want to eat at the table, but he keeps telling me it’s not because I revealed to him that we used him as a base for sex games. Still, he avoids it like the other parts of this room we’ve done it on.

“I could get used to it. Pizza, TV, the loves of my life, free burping,” Athos continues. The sound of the lift makes my heart stop. I turn my head towards the corridor and wait to see him. I’m sure Kris has arrived. When he appears our eyes meet immediately, as if attracted to each other.

He flashes a slight smile, tired but still present and impressive.

“Oh, our entrepreneur of the year,” Athos praised him. Kristòs brings his hand to his chest and gives a little bow, taking the compliment.

“Guess who managed to get a yes from the hottest DJ of the moment at a bargain price?” He raises both arms in exultation, does a pirouette on himself, and when his eyes return to us, Athos extends his hand, high fiving him. Kris leans over to Ele to muss her hair and then walks around the couch to sit next to me.

“I’m so happy,” he whispers, encircling my shoulders with an arm and drawing me to him. He leaves a kiss first in my hair, then traps my chin between his fingers and turns me towards him.

“I love you,” he whispers, and he does it so softly I can barely hear him. My heart heard it loud and clear though, as if he had shouted it and it can’t help but beat happily. He kisses me in a completely different way than usual. His tongue dances with mine and the push he gives me with his hand, makes my head fall back. He bites my lip making me giggle at his assault. “I love you,” he repeats through his lips and with his eyes glued into mine.

“Me too” I reply stealing yet another kiss from him. I’m happy for him, for his umpteenth success, for the joy he’s finally achieving, and I can see it in his eyes. He deserves it all.

“So, tomorrow there’s going to be this really famous DJ you said his name was...” Ele bites into a chip.

“That is going to be a surprise. I can’t tell you everything, otherwise I might not see you tomorrow,” he giggles, stealing a chip. The second one he hands to me inviting me to eat it.

“You see that the hook-up was useful?” says Athos absent-mindedly, who doesn’t want to look at his friend anymore. The TV is his main attraction.

“Sure, you owe him dinner,” he reveals. Then Kris shifts his attention too. He prefers pizza though.

“But why aren’t we sitting at the table?” Kris’s curiosity is matched by Athos’s bewilderment as he widens his eyes and then turns to me, glowering at me. I smile and burst out laughing heartily.

“You’re wicked, you know that?” He points his finger at me, then looks up at his friend. “Your girlfriend is mean to the core.” Both Kris and Electre don’t really understand Athos’ words, but I keep laughing because my intuition is right. “She saw fit to list for me all the places you’ve been busy while you were here.” Electre chokes on her orangeade. Then she bursts out laughing with me, between coughs, while Kris watches his friend from under his lashes without uttering a word. Will he get angry because he wants to keep his sex life private, or will he burst out laughing making Athos uncomfortable?

“So, you forgot what we did on this coffee table?” Unexpectedly he plays along with me, showing off a knowing smile. Electre, on the other hand, stretches her hand towards me to high-five me.

“But what have I done wrong?” mutters Athos, bringing his hands to his eyes. Exasperated, that’s what he is, we’ve driven him to exasperation.

The evening continues in the total tranquillity of the suite’s lounge. Nobody feels like going to their room to sleep. Not even Kristòs, who has seen fit to go to the gym before dinner. We have abandoned elegance and good manners by placing our feet on the table like teenagers. Electre is as close to Athos as I am to Kris. Every now and then he caresses my shoulder, kisses my head, tickles my side, just because I often keep my eyes closed.

The trouble is that the film we're watching is mostly boring, it only becomes interesting when someone feels compelled to imitate the characters in their passionate kisses.

So far, he has kissed me five times and it has always been magical.

"We don't have to watch it until the end," he whispers into my hair so the others can't hear him. "Pretend you're asleep so I can take you to our room and..."

"It's about to end," Athos mutters scowling at his friend.

Kris sighs heavily in response and runs a hand over his face. You can tell he's not enjoying it and would like to slip away, but we're at the end now, might as well stay.

"Next time, horror," my man says as soon as the film is over. He gets up and casually walks over to the fridge to get something.

"You," he points at me, "go to sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow and I want you fit. Same goes for you two." He orders from behind the fridge door.

"See if you can tame him, because I don't like him so churlish," Electre interjects as she gets up from the couch to join her newfound friend. With a glance she rummages through the fridge and then grabs something as she passes Kris who ignores her. "Excuse me, but your nephew is thirsty." I smile at the amused expression on the two of them, despite the jibe.

I wish everyone a good night and retreat to my room. I'm very tired but at least I don't have that terrible headache anymore. I hope to be able to sleep.

I go to the suitcase and look for clean underwear before taking a relaxing shower. I find the package, the one with the

pink glitter top that I bought the day of the performance.

Kris enters the room just as I lock myself in the bathroom. I undress and run into the shower. As soon as I'm done, I dry off and put on the outfit with the bizarre writing. I leave the bathroom with the towel around my body.

I want to surprise Kris.

"Hey," he exclaims as soon as he sees me. He's lying on the bed with his arms behind his head and his legs crossed. A treat for the eyes. "Did you take a shower without me?" I ignore him and, in a few steps, close the distance between us. I climb onto the mattress and crawl towards my target and then position myself astride him.

He looks at me with mischievous eyes, wanting to see what I'm up to.

"Give me your hands." He immediately executes and I marvel at the naturalness with which he complies with my orders. My hands give way to his on the towel.

"I have a surprise for you. Since tomorrow is your big day, I wanted to surprise you with a thought from me," I explain looking him straight in the eyes.

"I hope you don't intend to run away" he replies continuing to hold the towel at breast level. I shrug my shoulders and his eyes narrow. Divine to have him in my grasp like this.

"Stop it and open up." A single word with a thousand meanings and just as many shivers. When he does, he lets the towel run down my body and as soon as he notices the writing on my chest, he snorts an amused giggle.

"Daddy," he recites in a tone I can't decipher. I don't want to have offended him or anything.

“Although you’re more of a Zaddy” I say with a thoughtful expression. If earlier his gaze was fixed on the writing, now it’s in my eyes. His brow furrows as he repeats the last word I said. “It describes a smart, handsome, sexy man who makes you smile every time you meet him. Who knows how to handle business in and out of the bedroom. Who knows how to excite every part of you, including your mind. He smells good, looks good, has a wonderful ass and is as good as bread.” I smile at last, satisfied that I’ve managed to describe him the way I see him. “You’re even more beautiful than the statues with all those sculpted muscles you find in museums.”

“Those are the most beautiful things anyone has ever said to me,” he whispers, stroking the writing on my chest. “If you hadn’t studied it, I’d think it was a declaration of love.” His fingers caress the elastic band of my top and, with every inch he travels, sneak more and more under the fabric. “All these compliments,” he continues, teasing me. “Do I excite your mind?”

“Every cell in my body,” I whisper throwing my head back at the pleasure his touch is giving me. Even his gaze turns me on like never before.

“I want you, Jade. Be mine.”

Chapter 27



I roll over in bed, between these warm cotton sheets, finding myself alone. I sigh because I wish Kris would have woken me up, kissed me good morning, cuddled me in his own way and made me feel important as only he can.

I don't know exactly what time it is, how much and if I slept because I feel tired. I open my eyes and the darkness of the room oppresses me, makes me go back to when the dark was my refuge.

I kick off the sheets noticing that I am completely naked. Last night I didn't have time to dress. Kristòs demanded my body again and again. He couldn't seem to get enough. With a jolt of my hips, I get up and turn on the light just to see the mess we have created. I love finding the room in disarray, it means that there has been so much passion that I don't care about anything but us.

My thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of a message on my phone.

“GOOD MORNING SLEEPYHEAD, when you read this message call me. I didn't want to disturb you; you were sleeping too

well when I left. Unfortunately, I had to run to the club to sort out the last few things before tonight.

I can't wait until I can hold you in my arms and make you mine again.

See you later, love."

AS ORDERED by my private Greek god, I dial his number even though I am afraid to disturb him.

"*Good morning.*" His guttural voice rings in my ears making me dream.

"Good morning," I answer with difficulty. He can make me miss him with just his voice and that scares me. "I wish you would have woken me up. You took so much last night and a kiss with a cuddle I deserved." I let myself fall onto the mattress letting the memories fly.

"I know and I would have gladly stayed, but I remembered one last appointment before opening and I had to run," he explains with sadness in his voice. *"Look babe, I don't know if I'll be able to make it back in time, but at 4pm the girl will be there to take care of you. And while you're at it, can you warn Electre to be ready by 6pm? I'll try to come by and get settled in by 5:30."*

"What about me?" I mutter in a whine.

"You, my life, will arrive with Athos at the right time. No need to come early." No need, you're not needed. Okay, I can accept that. *"Baby"* he whispers, urging me on.

"Hey" I mumble only because I don't feel like explaining how silly I am in continuing to think I'm nothing to him. "You

asked me to be your lady and that involves showing up together.”

“*You’ll be by my side all night; I won’t leave you alone for a moment. I promise you that. Also, because...*” He pauses for a second and I hear him confirm something to someone and then thank them. His silence, though dictated by what he’s doing, makes me hope he’s remembered what it is today. “I have a surprise for you, so, you’ll have to stick with me if you want to have it.”

“Is this a joke?”

“*Jade, s’agapò.*” He doesn’t whisper or lower his voice as he says he loves me.

“*Pará polý?*” I tease him. I can’t help myself.

“*Pará parápolý, Jade. Pará parápolý,*” he reveals and my heart bursts with joy.

On this very day, my birthday, he is telling me that he loves me very much. Not a lot, but very much and this is the best gift of my life.

“*See you later.*” And he hangs up while I want to spend hours listening to his voice, hearing the various intonations he takes when he speaks, he gets angry. I calmly get out of bed and give myself a restorative rinse. Though I don’t want to get his scent off my skin. I’m smitten like a teenager. I put on one of the fluttering dresses that Kristòs is so crazy about, the panties and leave the room.

In the living room I still find the pizza boxes on the table as a souvenir of the wonderful evening spent in company. On the table instead, every good thing. Kristòs never fails, even though I told him not to exaggerate, he did it anyway.

“Good morning, Giada.” Electre’s voice jolts me. “There are four of us, but it feels like a regiment,” she chuckles amusedly. “At this rate I’m going to be huge before my belly even grows.”

“I don’t know who ordered it. Kris left at dawn. Maybe Athos was hungry. Or maybe it’s included in the price of the room.” She takes a jam croissant, bites into it, and walks around the table, then heads outside, leaving me alone to decide what to eat.

“The make-up girl is coming at 4pm and Kris is picking you up at 6pm,” I report. Even though this doesn’t sit well with me, I try to accept their plan.

Listlessly, I grab a croissant and sit down, hoping that 4pm will come soon. Maybe I could go back to bed and wait there. Even if the girl arrives anyway, the first one to be styled and made up will be Electre.

“Oh, you’re awake.” Athos drags his feet down the hall. He reaches the kitchen and hugs me from behind. “Happy birthday, agápi” he whispers leaving me a tender kiss in my hair. He seems to be the only one who remembered. I clasp my hands on his arms and thank him. “Here.” He hands me a box with a huge red bow. “It’s Kris’s. He asked me to give it to you and would like you to wear it.”

“Why didn’t he give it to me?”

“I don’t know. This is Kristòs we’re talking about, there’s no logical sense in what’s going on in his head,” he mutters, sitting down beside me. With sleepy eyes, he waits for me to unwrap the gift.

I open the box and my breath catches. I can’t believe he really did it.

I cast a glance at Athos who reaches out to me to peek inside.

“Holy shit,” he whispers in amazement as I pull out the lingerie. A black lace bodysuit with the star neckline of the dress I’m wearing tonight.

“He sure has good taste” exclaims Electre who has leaned against the doorframe out of curiosity. She looks at that outfit as if she wanted to receive it herself.

“Well, are you loaded for tonight? I know it’s morning, but I assure you the day will fly by.” Athos pours himself some orange juice, chooses two biscuits with jam in the middle and gets up heading towards his beloved. He leaves a chaste kiss on her lips and then bends down to kiss her stomach.

I wonder if Kristòs would do the same thing, if he would be as happy as Athos if it happened to us.

But what are my thoughts? I can’t think about these things, about having a child with him if there is still that huge secret between us.

I shake my head hoping to chase away the thoughts. I take the box and go to my room leaving the two lovebirds alone.

I sigh and, for a moment, let the guilt take over. It’s not fair to keep hiding who I am. It’s not right to go on with this charade. Athos is right, I’ve gone too far and the longer I stall, the more unforgivable it’ll be.

What if, after I reveal who I am, he kicks me out of his life? Will he shout all his repressed hatred at me, cursing the day he met me?

I’m scared. A damned fear of losing him.

I sit on the bed and the only thing I can do is cry until I'm exhausted. It won't change things, but right now that's all I can do.

I crawl over to the side of the bed where Kris slept, inhale his scent and cry. I cry until I have no more tears, until I can't let anything else out and wear myself out so I can't think about anything else.

I was wrong to continue this, to not tell Kristòs who I am before we went further, and now that we've crossed the line, I feel like I'm on the edge of a precipice.

I squint as hard as I can hoping to go back, to figure out how to tell him the truth without screwing it up. Because if it's not today, it could be tomorrow.

"Baby." Kris's voice whispered in my ear rouses me from oblivion. I'm dreaming, I'm sure of it. "You need to get ready." I reach out my hand towards the voice trying to shoo it away but find someone blocking my gesture. I open my eyes to check and, amazed, find him standing here in front of me. "The make-up girl is over there waiting for you."

"I don't want to" I grumble like a spoiled child, because in the end that's what I am. Only they make epic disasters and then claim to be forgiven without batting an eye.

"Are you kidding?" I shake my head, rummaging further into the pillow. I want to sink, to disappear, to magically evaporate from here. "Jade," he sighs in exasperation. I managed to irritate him on the most important day of his life, and I call myself a woman? For goodness sake, a child, that's what I am. "May I know what happened to you? You weren't like that this morning."

“Make the girl go away. I’ll do my own make-up. When I’m ready I’ll come to the club,” I mumble through my pillow. Kristòs sighs again and then strokes my head, mussing my hair.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

“Why would you be?”

“For ruining your special day” I reply lifting my head from the pillow. I look at the man who stole my heart and find him magnificent. “You’re beautiful” I add hoping to lighten my current position. Kris doesn’t respond, just stares at me for a few moments before leaning over and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m ready for you.” I wince at what he’s just told me. “Will you be for me?” I close my eyes and feel like shit.

“What’s going on with you? You’ve been weird since we got to Athens,” he asks worriedly. “What happened to my Jade?”

“I don’t know,” I lie. I do it again because I know full well what’s gripping me, and I certainly can’t tell him now.

“It’s not about Enea, is it?” I can’t believe he has these doubts. That if I’m hurting or different it’s because I’m thinking about Enea. I shake my head in an attempt to reassure him.

“Maybe I’m coming down with the flu.” Do I really try to justify this childish behaviour? “You go. I’ll have something brought and start getting ready. I’ll meet you at the club.”

“Not with this face, okay? I want you as confident as you were that night at the dance, where everyone turned to look at you entranced by your beauty, envying me being by your side.”

None of that happened, it's just him thinking people are turning to stare at me.

“Will you be my builder?” His mischievous smirk gives me hope for a positive response. He moves closer to my face and, with his eyes fixed in mine, whispers something that makes my heart freeze.

“And you the runaway heiress?” He doesn't kiss me, doesn't move any closer, doesn't give any hint that he's playing games.

“Kris, I...”

“Lovebirds, time to go.” Electre saves me. Kris, on the other hand, dismisses her with a wave of his hand without taking his eyes off mine.

“You?” he repeats as Ele is about to close the door.

His furrowed brow gives me a little fear because I can't figure out what he wants.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

“Kris, we're late. I don't want to reduce myself to the last one, you'll talk later,” whines Ele calling him back.

“Can you hold out for a few more hours? I'll be all yours as soon as this day is over. Alright?” I nod with terror gripping my throat. I smile. “See you later,” he whispers and reaches out some more to bring our lips together. He leaves me with a sweet, tender kiss, one of those that repairs a broken soul. “I love you.” Then he gets up and joins Electre to go to the club.

I'm in deep shit.

As soon as Kristòs and Electre enter the lift, the figure of Athos peeps out. He smiles at me and, with his hand, points to the living room where surely the girl is still waiting for me.

“I can get ready by myself; I don’t need any help” I mutter getting off the bed. Athos doesn’t answer, he just closes his eyes to let me know that what I said doesn’t suit him.

“I’ll shower and be right there.” I stop my tantrum and go to the bathroom. I would love to relax under the warm spray, but because of the tension I feel it would take me hours to achieve the desired result. Unfortunately, I’m running out of minutes, Athos seems to be on the warpath.

I cross the threshold of the lounge with my bathrobe on and sit down in front of the mirror that the girl has prepared. A few questions to find out what make-up I want and how I want to style my hair. Foolishly I let her do a light make-up that matches my dress but does not coincide with my being.

“May I propose to abound with the black pencil? Just like her mood,” Athos proposes. Only now do I notice his presence behind me. From the reflection I see that he has his head tilted, his face frowning, and his arms folded, everything I don’t like about him. It makes him serious, too serious.

I smile at his words, mentally thanking him for his intervention. While the girl changes tactics, he continues to stare at me.

“Jade, will you stop being such a prima donna?”

“It’s my birthday, I can do it.” I know I answered him wrongly, but it doesn’t matter.

“As soon as you set foot in the club, it won’t be your birthday at the top of the list of important things, it’ll be Kris’s party and woe betide you if you act like this again,” he threatens.

So many times, I’ve had the same lecture from my parents. The dates, the dinners, the business were more important than

their daughter.

“I’m asking you please.”

I close my eyes and lift my face, allowing the girl to do my makeup as she sees fit and without saying another word. When she switches to hair instead, I demand to do my own thing. Athos smiles and I feel confused: if I don’t reply I’m throwing a tantrum, but if I do I cooperate.

I order to the girl who is shocked by my words. She tries to convince me to tie it up in some strange way, but I don’t want to. The more I retort, the more Athos smiles and enjoys the bickering.

“But it would look good in a bun,” she ventures to say. I know, but I don’t want the guests to see my tattoo and link it to the club.

“Do what she said, she has to look good in the end” my friend says. This time he defended me! I really don’t understand his game.

The girl finishes the job and Athos accompanies her towards the lift.

“Fine. Need some help with the dress?”

“I’ll let you know,” I giggle and hop towards the room to change. Athos is already ready, perfect in his dark blue two-piece and white shirt. Both he and his friend look like they were born into it.

I’m wearing the black lace bodysuit that Kristòs took the trouble to get for me and then put on the dress. Fortunately, I don’t need any help. Just as expected, the dress is easy to put on and take off. I look in the mirror and see a copy of what I was in Bari. Parties, dances, evenings spent in trendy clubs and discos. Always perfect, always appropriate.

I had promised myself I would never go back to that life and yet, here I am again, wearing an elegant dress, underwear bought by the man I love, who is almost ten years older than me. Nothing has changed.

“Holy shit.” Athos interrupts my thoughts. I turn towards him to look at him and be admired. “May I?” He points to my dress. He doesn’t wait for an answer, he reaches out and moves the band over my breasts uncovering a piece of it. “I wanted to make sure you wore it. We walked around half of Athens to find the perfect one, one that doesn’t show beyond the dress and leaves this on display.” With his knuckle he caresses my tattoo under my breast.

“Thanks,” I whisper tensely. “I’m scared,” I reveal to the man who seems to have become entranced looking at the tattoo. I wonder if Kristòs has told him its story. “What if I’m not suitable?”

“For what?”

“To stand by him. If he finds out the truth and tells me to go to hell, will I survive?” I’m afraid I’ll start crying again soon. “I was going to tell him.” I feel myself choking. I lift my face to the sky hoping I don’t ruin my makeup.

“It will be inevitable. But I hope you don’t do it now,” he reiterates. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you today, I’ve never seen you like that. Nor in this one. It will be the weight of what you have to tell him, it will be his statement, it will be the tension of his not easy situation” he takes a deep breath. “But being like this is not good for you. For you to feel unfit and for him to think he’s done something wrong to you.” I try but I can’t get back to how I was before.

“Did you manage to talk to him about Enea?” The moment of silence makes me realise the question is unwelcome. “I just

want what's best for him and if..."

"He knows, we're dealing with it together and even though he was furious, he understood that I handled the business without thinking of ruining him, but that I acted in good faith."

"I know he put the club in Santorini up for sale." Suddenly the weight I feel on my chest is getting lighter. The fact that it is Athos who is lightening it and not my man makes me think.

"He managed to sell it yesterday. He disguised the news as the DJ for the new club so as not to scare you." I squint, calling myself stupid. If he hadn't run me over that day.

"Giada, he wanted to get rid of everything he has there and start over with Samsara. It was all planned. You had nothing to do with it."

"And the bill? Is everything in order now? Doesn't he risk bankruptcy and having his prize withdrawn?" He shakes his head and gives me a sweet smile that should warm me up, but it doesn't.

"The suppliers are about to be paid off and Enea will have the place to himself, so they won't have anything to bind them anymore."

Now I can see why he was so happy.

"Apart from his love for Karen." There, I've said it. She's the cause of my bad moods, too. "When we first got here, they mistook me for her. They kept calling me 'Mrs. Princekaris' because I was registered like that."

"My fault. When I sent the application I didn't know about the betrayal, otherwise I would have excluded her without batting an eye," he reveals, taking the blame for the misunderstanding. "As well as the honeymoon suite."

“Shall we go?” I shake my head because, apparently, the crisis isn’t over yet. His words of reassurance haven’t helped much. Athos doesn’t insist on the contrary. He adjusts my dress and grabs my hands guiding me towards the bed where he makes me sit. He reaches out his arms wrapping me gently.

“Take it easy.” He cuddles me, leaving a few comforting kisses in my hair. Everything he does helps to calm me down, to get me back on my feet and hope that I don’t relapse into such a moment. In spite of everything, this man manages to touch buttons inside me that calm me down and make me feel less wrong.

His mobile phone rings, but he doesn’t move to answer it. Not even to make it stop. We know who it is and what he wants anyway.

It took me an hour to calm down and get back to how I was, or almost. I promised Athos to put aside the gloom I’m carrying inside until tomorrow and to enjoy the opening party and be happy for Kris and his success.

When I feel ready, I ask Athos to join our loved ones. We have to go and support our partners on their special day.

I take my place at his side and let his warm hand wrap around mine and give me courage. I watch him in passing and think about what we are: two anonymous people, united only by friendship, who turn up hand in hand at the opening of a new nightclub. Two unlikely friends who draw courage from each other.

I wonder what they will think seeing us like this. I shudder.

I can already see the headlines.

“Will there be photographers?” My breath catches in my throat as I say these words. They might be there, stealing shots

of me, publishing them, and having my family find me.

“There will only be the official one. Once the night is over, we’ll go through the photos, and nothing will come out that we wouldn’t want. We thought of it on purpose,” he reveals, winking at me as if the credit is all his. “I know he showed you.” Maybe he says it to deflect the conversation, make me calm down, but I immediately smile.

“It’s magnificent. It represents him a lot.” Athos’ proud smirk drives me crazy. It’s great how happy he is for his friend, how he fights for him with no holds barred. It’s something that does him credit.

“You ready?” he whispers when the car stops right in front of the club. I shake my head in denial but answer him with a positive statement.

Athos gets out of the car, walks around, and opens the door for me. He holds out his hand towards me. I look at it, study it and convince myself that it is here just for me. That its owner will not let me go and will accompany me to yet another party.

I grab his hand and let him help me down. He tightens his grip for the short distance that separates us from the entrance and, as we approach, I bow my head to cover my face with my hair.

I’m blonde, not raven, no one will recognise me.

“Now I understand the determination to not want any elaborate hairstyles,” he whispers as he stands in front of the bouncer who doesn’t hesitate to lift the cord to let us pass.

“It’s either that or show where this club got its name from.”

“Athos.” A female voice catches his attention. Even as the big man in front of us moves to let us pass, he doesn’t move.

“Go in alone,” he says, smiling sweetly. “I’ll be right there.” He brings his hand to my back and gives me a gentle push, urging me to do what he wants. I only indulge him for a few steps before I turn around and see something that makes me wonder. Nina, the owner of the boutique where I had bought the dress for the conference, is talking to Athos. Nothing strange, they know each other, they must be friends, except that she tries to touch him several times, but he prevents her. Finally, the woman’s eyes turn to me. Sadness, anger, despair, wrath, all mixed up. Her lips move, but I don’t understand what she is saying until she comes a few steps closer. Athos tries to block her, but she manages to escape from him.

“I knew you were the one he was taking to bed.” She points her finger at me. “You’re just a profiteering whore,” she shouts. The two bouncers stand in front of me preventing her from going any further. Athos runs towards Nina, grabbing her arm and dragging her so far away that I can’t even read her lips. What the hell is going on?

One of the guys catches up with Athos who dismisses the woman, leaving her in the hands of the bouncer, and comes back to me. He grabs my arm and pushes me towards the inside of the club.

“Don’t mention this to anyone,” he orders seriously.

“Of course, she called me a profiteering whore and I need to shut up.”

“Giada, today is Kris’s day.”

“Well, happy birthday to me.” I tug my arm to break up. Even though he has to accompany me, it seems excessive to hold me by the elbow and squeeze it until it hurts. At this

point, Athos turns to me demanding my gaze. “You’re more messed up than my secret.”

“And you’d want to know, right?”

“At least mine doesn’t keep appearing every moment in front of the person I love. I know that woman attacked Ele and now she’s back at it. Athos, who the hell is she?” The peace I had barely managed to create for myself has gone out the window. He freezes and then turns towards me and pushes me in the direction of the bathroom which is near the entrance.

As soon as we pass the door, Athos blocks it and starts walking nervously.

“My ex. She was supposed to become my wife, but I left her at the altar. Are you okay with that?” He blows out the tension he’s been holding in. With a few steps he reaches the sink and rests his hands on it. “I chose Kris over us. I chose to help a friend, my best friend, my brother instead of marrying the woman I loved.”

“Athos, I...”

“No, I’ve been suffering your whining all afternoon, now you’re listening.” He waits a few moments, just long enough to steady his breathing. He runs his hand over his face trying to calm himself, trying to find the right words.

“I’ve known Kris for as long as I can remember. We always played together, went to the same school. Then I chose law school and our paths diverged. When I met Nina, I immediately introduced her to everyone, I was overjoyed. We set the wedding date in no time, and everything was ready until the fateful day. Kristòs’ mother called me and told me that her husband had died. A heart attack, just as he was arguing with his son over business differences.” His eyes scan

his reflection in the mirror. “I didn’t think I’d find him in that condition, so devastated and fed up with life. Imagine, he came up to the pulpit dead drunk and recited a monologue telling how wonderful and loving his father was and then spat the worst words about him.” Yet another deep breath fills the bathroom. “To make a long story short, he abandoned everyone and went to a bar to continue drinking. When I found him, he passed out in my arms and went into an alcoholic coma.” He goes back to running his hand over his face to wipe away the traces of tears. He risked losing his best friend. “Then everything unfolded with absurd speed. The rush to the hospital, the examination, the treatment, the devastating diagnosis. It seemed he didn’t want to live any more. He had demolished himself. But I didn’t hesitate for a moment. I stayed with him, treated him, and gave a piece of myself because the prick was drinking so much and for so long that he was...” He breathes slowly as inside I feel myself dying. “My wedding day coincided with my surgery day. Do you understand? I couldn’t back out.”

My legs carry me to him. I wrap him in a tight hug, full of gratitude. Thanks to his gesture, his sacrifice, I can have the man I love by my side.

“You are the only one who knows the facts. Everyone thinks I preferred someone else to Nina, but I didn’t, and going back is not possible.”

Athos returns the hug and bursts into tears. For the first time since I’ve known him, he opened up to me and let himself go.

“I only ask you not to mention this to Electre, I don’t want to alarm her, am I clear?”

Why does he keep certain things from her? I could shake my head and tell him no, to stop lying but... who am I to do that. After all, he did vent to me, he told me something about himself that no one, not even his best friend knows.

“I feel sorry for Nina, she certainly doesn’t deserve the treatment she got just now and if I were you, I’d tell her that. As for the rest, let her not come near me or Electre again because I might not be accountable for my actions.” Although I whisper, my tone does not allow for a reply. Athos nods and tries to pull himself together. He pulls away from me to try and rinse his face and erase all traces of this moment, but there is no more harmony on his face.

“This isn’t the first time she’s spoken to me like this, and I don’t like it.” He looks away, clenches his jaw, and closes his eyes. The deep breath should help him clear his mind.

“Now print the truest possible smile on that pretty face and let’s go celebrate. Pretend that nothing happened. That you haven’t dredged up the past and that the outburst has served to lighten you up.” Athos smiles at my colourful way of saying things.

He offers me his arm, which I grab to follow him out of here, towards the party that is waiting for us.

As soon as we leave, we are overwhelmed by the flood of people who have accepted the invitation. I am amazed by the number of waiters setting up the buffet and how well stocked the drinks department is. Simple but impressive decorations perfectly match the colours chosen for the décor.

“Welcome.” Electre’s ringing voice makes us turn around. I didn’t get a chance to see her before exiting the suite and for that, I regret. She’s glowing and I haven’t even wished her luck.

Her hair is gathered in a ponytail full of curls on one shoulder, her make-up is not excessive and highlights her beautiful eyes. The dress fits her wonderfully even if the vertiginous slit seems excessive in the eyes of her partner. She smiles at me in her special way and hugs me, sinking her face into the crook of my neck.

“Happy birthday my friend. Sorry I didn’t wish you well this morning, but it’s all so intense that...” I scan her and nod as I smile at her. It’s her day too. When she turns to her man, he doesn’t hesitate to place his hand on my friend’s belly.

“Here.” He hands us a small organza bag the same colour as the lights, inside that magnificent key ring Kristòs had shown me. “What took you so long?”

“Problem with the buttons,” he reveals, slipping the bag into his pocket without checking what’s inside. Maybe he’s already seen them or doesn’t care. “Kris?”

“I lost sight of him about half an hour ago. He was with two women in their forties,” he replies, shrugging. His revelation has a strange effect on me. I clench my jaw at the image of him with two women his age hanging around him.

“Are you thirsty? I am,” I ask as I search my eyes for my Kris.

“Giada, over there.” Electre points to a small group of women. “Are you jealous?”

“No, but for their safety, it’s best if they keep their hands off him” I reply with a tugged smile. Ele and Athos giggle with amusement while I don’t listen to them. I move some steps towards those geese who admire my man and smile at him as if they were ready to fall at his feet.

But their husbands? Where the hell are they?

Before I go and spoil their plans, I divert to the bar and have a drink prepared. Prosecco in one glass, plain water with ice and lemon in the other. I slip the glasses into one hand and head towards the ladies surrounding Kris. None of them have noticed me, not even him. With gallantry but indifference, I reach for his bottom, pinching it. He doesn't flinch, just turns his head, and when he meets my eyes, his smile grows even wider.

"I'm glad to see you," he whispers as the women continue to chat. I cast a quick glance around me to observe these merry hens. Maybe they're all exes or lovers, go figure, after what happened to me earlier, I'm not sure about anything anymore. I raise my hand and hand him the glass with the water. He bows his head, reaching out to kiss me, but I block him by placing the drink between our lips.

"Are you mad at me?" He doesn't look away, not caring if the ladies around him are shocked to see him flirting with me.

"Should I be?" Our eyes are glued together, and I miss the ground beneath my feet. He's beautiful even with this puppy dog look. He grabs his glass eventually and when he takes a sip of water my privates catch fire. Those lips wrapping around the glass, the look from under his lashes, his Adam's apple moving when he swallows, his tongue caressing those magnificent lips.

He reaches up to my face and strokes it gently. He slips his fingers into the hair at my temple and draws me to him, leaving me with a kiss that lasts indefinitely. He demands contact and he demands it now. Like this. He pulls away only for a deep breath. Perhaps to chase away all the tension that has built up until now. He points his eyes to mine and watches

me, as if he has to figure out if I'm real or a figment of his imagination.

"I'm here," I sigh.

"I know and I've been looking forward to you coming," he whispers against my lips just before he closes the distance again by giving me a proper kiss. He tickles my lips with his tongue to ask for access, which I grant him without batting an eyelash. Thus, in front of all his guests, he shows that he is with me, that he kisses me and that he wants me. In front of everyone his tongue dances with mine in a soothing way. "Did you get my present?" I nod. "Did you wear it?" I lift my head pretending to think about it. Why tell him everything, couldn't he guess or verify?

"Has anyone ever told you you're awful?"

"Yes, Mr. Princekaris, but I like to hear it." I bring my glass to my lips and smile at him in amusement. Only now does he wrap his arm around my waist and introduce me to his friends.

"My dears," he begins to attract the attention of the women around us who seem not to have noticed our performance. They all turn to look at him, interested in what he might have to offer. I bet if he sold vacuum cleaners, they would all buy every little gadget related to it. "I'd like to introduce you to someone very dear to me: my fiancée, Jade." And my heart stops. He's really done it; he's really introducing me as he promised. The ladies smile and start extending their hands to introduce themselves.

"I am the wife of... The sister of... The daughter of..." None of them seem to have an identity of their own, they absolutely have to specify who they belong to.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to show her around the club.” Kris intertwines his fingers with mine and pulls me along with him. We leave the women to confabulate amongst themselves as he guides me towards the buffet.

“Do you want to eat?” I shake my head because my stomach is tight right now. I’m still reeling from Nina’s appearance and I’m having a hard time keeping quiet.

“Kris!” A grizzled man appears at my side. “That’s so cool. I love it.” He ignores me and speaks only to him.

“It costs money.” He smiles and shakes his hand. “Meet Jade, my girlfriend.” Only then does he turn and check me out from head to toe.

“But aren’t you the one who works at Enea’? Yeah, that day we went to lunch, there was a waitress who looked just like you,” he explains. Kris’s jaw tightens and his relaxed features vanish behind a mask of tension.

“I don’t work there anymore,” I inform him with a smile on my face. My man turns to me, waiting for an explanation. I told him that I had asked for days off to devote myself to him; instead, I severed all relations with Enea.

“Did his girlfriend put pressure on him? I know she’s very jealous,” he continues to talk off the cuff about people who are not liked. Kris doesn’t answer, he stays focused on me. Maybe he can’t find the right words to end the conversation politely “No, just differences. How did you two meet?”

“Me and Enea? For years and...”

“Oh no, with Kristòs. We’re here for his club, it’s only fair to talk about him” I stop him. I hope he gets the hint.

“Honestly, we’ve known each other for so many years he calls me uncle.” He shrugs his shoulders as if, what he has

said, is the only answer he wants to give me.

“I should talk to you,” he exclaims then turns back to Kris. Even as he spreads his arms to encourage him, the man shakes his head. “We’d better sit down.” He casts a quick glance towards me then points the way to his friend.

Kris wraps his arms around my waist and leaves me with a kiss before pulling me with him. He wants me by his side even though...what could he possibly talk to Costa about? What does she do for him?

“Didn’t you take days off?” he whispers, squeezing my hand lightly in an attempt to get my attention and let me know that it irritated him.

“Little lie for the sake of peace and quiet.”

“Sometimes I wonder how many things you hide from me for the sake of the quiet life.”

I avoid answering and just follow him. Hand in hand we walk through the people until we reach the man who widens his eyes as soon as he sees me.

Kris sits on the stool next to his friend and pulls me between his legs. He rests his left elbow on the counter and his chin on my shoulder. It seems to serve as his shield for any bad news.

“You sure?” he ventures to say.

“What happened that was so important you had to talk to me today?” The man grows suddenly sad and gives me a fleeting look. “Speak,” Kris admonishes him.

“Athos financed Enea with your money. The shortfall is substantial. I swear that if I had imagined what he was up to...”

“I know. Athos and I are working to put things right, as I told you before. I don’t see why you should tell me about it now.”

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for days, but you’re always busy being a boyfriend. Things aren’t that simple.” Costa’s eyes are wide, pointed straight into Kristòs’, which holds their weight perfectly.

“I’m telling you, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not fine. You’re paying his debts and, as the icing on the cake, you’re giving him your first investment?” The tension is palpable, and he manages to make me feel guilty about what’s happening to him. Even though I have nothing to do with it.

“Uncle, I don’t know if you don’t understand or don’t want to understand. I don’t want anything more to do with them or that island. This is my life now. Samsara and Jade, everything else can go to hell.” He gives me a gentle push to get me to move.

“Kris, you need to change tactics because he seems to be determined to run you into the ground. Not everyone has agreed to Athos’ deal even if they have good guarantees.”

“Everything is already planned. I just sold the house and the club in Santorini. I’ll pay every penny and then I don’t want to know anything more about him.” It’s only now that I realise, I’m not fit to be here while he talks about these things. It’s none of my business, is it? I’m his girlfriend, I have a right, but what am I saying, a duty to support him.

“What?”

“Costa, thank you for taking the time to come here and talk about my financial problems instead of celebrating what will

get me out of the shit that moron threw me into. Now excuse me, I'm busy." With a shove he pushes his uncle away leaving me here. I try to follow him, but Costa grabs my arm.

"Jade, you talk some sense into him. That tactic won't work. I know Enea and I know he won't give up so easily. The creditors will devour him." His face is terrified. "He sold all his assets, but it won't be enough. The debt is too much..."

"He and Athos know what they are doing, you heard it with your own ears." I tug my arm to pull away from him. I don't need any more anxiety.

"If you really care about him, make him desist." I down everything in the glass to set it empty on the first free table. I need to find Kristòs, but I really don't know where to look. I've lost sight of him and with all these people it's really hard to notice him. I look in every direction but there's no sign of him.

"Jade, who are you looking for?" Electre comes to my rescue.

"Kris."

"He's up there with Athos." Instinctively I look up to the balcony. They seem to be arguing. As Kris gestures Athos notices my gaze on them.

"Would you give me a hand?"

"I have to go to him," I whisper moving towards the stairs.

"Jade, no. Let them talk alone. As soon as he calms down, he'll come to you." I look at Electre with really worried eyes. "Come with me." I don't have the courage to look up again, so I follow her. We head towards the warehouse, and as I think about what we're doing here, Ele freezes and grabs me by the shoulders.

“What happened? Who was that?”

“A friend, apparently. He started talking about...” Wait. Does she know? Does she have any idea what your cousin did to Kristòs? Has Athos told her? She shakes my shoulders, demanding an explanation. “Athos can explain better than I can.”

“What?”

“It’s their thing, I...”

“Jade, please. Athos is hermetic, he never tells me anything and this is devastating me. I can’t even talk to him without arguing,” she explains with a lump in her throat. I don’t know if I can do it, if I can tell her what I know. I could ruin the evening for her too. But the more I look at her, the more I realise it’s only fair that she should know. Secrets are ruining us.

“It seems that Enea wants to destroy Kristòs. He has filled their company with debts and Kristòs, to keep the creditors happy, has sold the house and the club in Santorini.” Whether I did the right thing by telling her or not, I don’t know, but now she knows about it too. Electre recoils until she slams her back against the wall. Shocked, she brings her hand to her mouth and, against all odds, lets herself slide to the floor.

Fuck.

I lean over her to comfort her.

“Now I understand why Athos kept paying Kris’s bills, because my cousin is ruining him,” she whines.

“Ele, I don’t know if Athos will be okay with me spilling the beans to you.” I take her hands in mine and squeeze them to comfort her. I know I’m going to get in trouble.

“Not if he doesn’t know.” She shakes her head slightly. “I won’t freak out. I’m going to play it cool because that’s what he wants. But, as soon as I set foot in the house, Enea is dead.” She slides her hands from mine and strokes her cheekbones, wiping away any tears that may have been. She stands up and her gaze returns determined.

“One thing I have learned from being with Athos: to put on a good face. There are so many secrets he keeps from me and, frankly, from now on I will play the same game as him.” He extends his hand towards me to help me up. “I’ll shut up if you will too.” I’m dealing with a monster, I’m more than sure. I just nod. That’s all it takes. She smiles like it’s nothing and urges me to do the same.

“Today is your birthday. Smile.” Then she turns and points towards the hall. I follow her, hoping to get back to normal. Her sentence left a deep sense of unease on me. It wasn’t a wish or even a warning. I don’t know what to think anymore. It was supposed to be a special day, instead too many things are happening that I don’t have time to digest. The evening has just begun, what else is going to happen?

As soon as we set foot in the room, we find everything as we left it. Athos and Kris are still arguing in the private room and the guests are enjoying themselves. I leave Electre with the excuse of wanting to get something strong to drink at the counter. I need to anesthetize myself for a few hours, or why not, I could steal a bottle and hide in Kris’s office.

I wait my turn to order a drink, and, in the meantime, I look around. I thought I’d run into Odin and the others, but it seems they haven’t come.

“Excuse me.” I call back to the girl who is far too busy to answer. She’s alone and everyone seems thirsty. “Where are

the others? Are you alone?” She hands two glasses to gentlemen and nods in my direction. “Like yes, what about the others?” She shrugs as she sets out more glasses.

Without a second thought, I walk around the counter and help her serve the customers. I don’t know if I can do it, but I don’t see any alternative. Alone, filling hundreds of flutes is unheard of and I wonder how this could have happened. Together we manage to fill all the trays, at least until her colleague comes back to help. I could have not cared, let her fend for herself, but... if I can lighten Kris’s load, I’m happy to do so. I grab yet another tray full of empty glasses and take them behind the counter where an attendant would be in charge of washing them and returning them to his colleague once they’re cooled down.

I’m happy to find two guys working hard to keep up the pace over here. Otherwise, I would have had to give them a hand too.

“Sorry, they only give cheap fizz at the table. Couldn’t you make me something stronger?” asks a middle-aged lady with blonde hair pulled back into an elaborate hairstyle. Sky-blue eyes and fair skin.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t...”

“Oh, come on. I’m fine with an ouzo, as long as it’s not that crap over there,” she continues undaunted. She might take a better look at me and notice that I’m not dressed like a waitress and maybe ask herself a few questions.

I look around for help from someone, but they all seem to be busy.

“Come on. Or do I have to call your superior and get you fired?” she mutters, irritated by my looking around. “Although

I'd really like to know why your dressed so inappropriately for the evening."

"Excuse me? What's wrong with my dress?" I ask intrigued by her mannerisms, gestures, and insinuations. I grab a chilled glass and fill it with ice and then go in search of the bottle of distillate.

"That outfit for a waitress is unrealistic. I don't know what you were thinking," she continues. Strangely, she fascinates me, I see in her the same attitudes as my mother. She judged everyone by how they were dressed, how their hair was combed, how their guests' wives wore their make-up. As if she was perfection itself.

I place a napkin and glass in front of her, hoping I haven't made a mistake, otherwise she'll vent more gratuitous insults. Although I'm indifferent to her judgement because, let's face it, someone her age in a skimpy gold dress covered in sequins and an organza stole covering her shoulders is not a very reliable stylist.

"You know, it would be a shame for a lack to cost you your job," she says looking me straight in the eye. "Your inadequacy in this place is obvious."

I would love to shut her up, but I can't. Athos's words about behaving with the guests were clear, but until proven otherwise, so am I. In fact, I'm the owner's fiancée, though he seems to be more with the others than with me.

"Jade." I lift my eyes from the lady's to point them at the man who called me. Kristòs. I muffle an amused smirk at his tone. He seems to be calm, blissful, and it's as if there's a light around him that draws me in.

A waiter holds out a tray full of glasses that need to be washed and I grab it without thinking of anything other than making myself useful in some way. As soon as I put the tray down next to the glass washer, I grab one of the already cold glasses and hand it to the waiter.

“Oh, who can see.” The lady turns as if drawn to my man’s presence, though it took her a few moments to do so. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“I didn’t send you any invitation,” he replies in a bored tone. Do they know each other? Of course, why else would the woman decide to reach out to him and kiss him on the cheek? Why, instead of doing like everyone else, would she kiss him with her lips?

“Exactly. What is wrong with you? I haven’t heard from you since your father died,” she mumbles, grabbing his arm. Now her gestures are bothering me, I hardly get to touch him, and the others seem to get to do it all the time.

“Absolutely nothing. I’m moving on.”

“Karen’s looking for you.” She casts a quick glance in my direction, since I haven’t taken my eyes off Kris the whole time. “It’s not polite to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations. But if you must stay here, could you make my son a drink too? Without disturbing him, of course.” Son? Is this old hag his mother?

I look away from him and to her. Does she know her son can’t drink? Maybe she missed something.

I calmly grab an empty glass, add ice, and pour water instead of spirits. I garnish it with a slice of lemon, as usual. As soon as I set it down on the bar, Kris grabs my hand, squeezing it lightly.

“You don’t belong there,” he whispers heedless of his mother’s presence. “Come on, go around,” and lets go of my hand. I don’t know what they’re saying to each other as I carry out her order, but as soon as I arrive, the two of them stop talking to look at me. While Kris’s eyes are devouring me, his mother’s want to maul me.

“Jade, this is my mother. Mum, this is Jade, my fiancée.” Now I’m officially in trouble. Instead of being happy I feel like dying. He is trying to label me as he wishes, so as to discredit me and eventually deem me inadequate.

The bigger the lie, the more it will hurt once it is exposed.

I reach out to shake her hand, but she looks at it in disgust.

“I suppose this is a joke. Because it’s in very bad taste.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Is it the mid-life crisis? The one that makes you do stupid things? Couldn’t you have bought a house or dyed your hair green instead of...” I squint in disgust. “God, Kristós she’s a little girl who thinks about...”

“Making me happy. Mum. You know, I’m sick of the crap around me and I want to get my life back. I want to live it to the fullest and not be influenced by what you all think. And if she wants to continue to stand by me, she will make me the happiest man in the world.” The proud expression on his face melts my heart. A little less so the increasingly shocked mother.

If you still want to stay by my side even after finding out everything. Then you will make me the happiest woman in the world.

“Kris, come to your senses. Did you...”

“What, mum? I don’t have anything anymore. Enea is taking everything I’ve worked for. The house, the club, the career, and excuse me for holding on to the one person who’s helping me keep from sinking. Now I’m sorry, but I’ve got better things to do than stand here and explain myself to those who have always conditioned my life. If you want to stay, it’s not a problem.” He grabs my hand and, without waiting any longer, drags me away from there. For the second time tonight, Kris has had to fight tooth and nail for his choices, for making an alternative decision on how to liquidate Enea and preferring me.

He continues to walk across the room dodging everything and everyone. He leads me towards the back until he exits the club completely. He slams the door, resting his head on the steel.

“A more pathetic opening couldn’t exist.”

“She’s your mother. It’s normal for her to be wary of those around her son.” I attempt to console him even though the urge to go back to her and maul her is strong. He snorts a wry laugh.

“Kris.” He stands up, turns to me and smiles.

“I apologize for how she treated you. You shouldn’t have been behind the counter, though.” He brings his hands to my hips drawing me to him.

“There was a shortage of waiters in the drinks area and instead of busting your chops or Electre’s, I acted. That’s what I’m here for too, isn’t it? To relieve your tension and avoid unnecessary worries,” I explain, shrugging my shoulders. His eyes fixed in mine scream the need to have me, to feel me, to possess me.

“Thank you for standing up for me with Costa.” He increases his grip letting me know the matter is serious.

“Is it really that serious?” Maybe he doesn’t feel like talking about it or being vulnerable in my eyes that always see him as perfect.

A kiss, a small kiss on the lips makes me forget what I just asked him, indeed the whole disastrous evening.

“I’ve already been arguing with Athos all evening instead of spending it bragging about having you by my side. I’d rather talk about something else.” He kisses my lips again. He encircles my body with one arm, while with his free hand he runs along the hem of my bodice. From my shoulder to my navel. Then he passes over the slit in my skirt. He wrinkles his nose, muttering something about the vertiginous neckline and the illegal slit. He doesn’t hesitate to slip his hand under the dress and run his index finger along the edge of the leotard he gave me. He smiles smugly as he reaches for my bottom.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers.

“You’re beautiful too,” I reply looking into his eyes. It’s true, he is beautiful, and I won’t miss a chance to tell him so even though he’s aware of it.

“I’m a mess” he hints with a smirk and then lowers his head and rests his forehead on my shoulder.

“A beautiful mess” I repeat leaving him a kiss on his cheek. I wrap my arms around him, holding him as tight as I can. I want to console him; I want this cuddle to give him the strength to continue. Make him stronger.

“I don’t want to go back in there,” he whispers before kissing my neck. “I just want you.”

“Here?” I gasp when he sucks in the skin sending my brain into a frenzy.

“Here and now,” he orders pulling away just enough to bring our lips together in a fiery kiss. His hand squeezes my ass to move between my thighs and unbutton my leotard. I’m dying to have him, to feel him inside me, to give him pleasure and be his release valve. He lifts me up and moves me against the low wall. I unbutton his trousers and he hands me a condom.

With trembling hands I grab it and unroll it over his throbbing erection, ready just for me, to send me into orbit with a single thrust.

He grabs my thigh bringing it to his side for more access, peels off his pants and positions himself right there where I want him, where I can’t wait for him to enter and make me forget all the bad words I’ve received, the innuendos, the revelations. I long for him to make me forget that it’s my birthday and he seems to have forgotten.

I have missed not feeling him physically inside me. I’ve missed the sense of belonging that making love to him brings.

Moan after moan, thrust after thrust, I feel like I’m going to pass out from the pleasure. Although this isn’t the first time, none has ever been like this. He moans as he places his lips on my mouth giving me thrusts that take my breath away.

“Be mine, through and through,” he gasps. I let my head fall back as I allow him to do what he wants with me. I moan louder and louder, so much so that Kris is forced to cover my mouth with his hand, demanding to be discreet so as not to attract attention. But the pleasure is too great, and I bite down on him, trying to resist reaching climax with him.

I remove his hand from my mouth only to replace it with his lips. I want to feel him completely, I want to feel his desire explode in me, move from him, and invade my body.

A guttural cry echoes in his chest as he enters straight into me. I follow him closely, letting myself go completely on top of him who grabs me without any problem. He holds me, kisses me, supports me, pampers me with caresses and sweet words. I love him for the way he takes care of me after each orgasm, after each time he satisfies me fully.

“I love you,” he declares while he is still inside me. “I wish I could stay like this for hours and never stop wanting you.” I could reciprocate by telling him that I want exactly the same things, that I have the same feelings, but I can’t. The last guy I granted this to turned out to be a lying cheater. I can’t tell him that I love him more than my own life, that I would give everything for him, that I would do anything to see him happy.

“We should go back inside,” I whisper. I don’t want to but it’s still his night. He watches me and strokes my cheek.

“Don’t be afraid, eventually, when everyone has gone home and we’re alone, you’ll stay here with me and we’ll have the best night of our lives, I promise,” he says rubbing his nose against my chin and I think I’ll never tire of his attention.

We recompose ourselves in silence and before we go back in he scans my face. “Are you okay?” I nod because it’s true. I want to be everything to him, even a simple outlet.

“If there was something, you’d tell me, right?” I nod again without a word. “Not like the lie for the sake of quiet life from before.” I reply with a grimace dedicating the sweetest expression I’m capable of making to him. “I don’t like it when you keep things about me secret. I’m aware that it’s because of

me that you clashed with Enea, you shouldn't have defended me." I should tell him that I've been lying to him all along, that I'm not who I said I was. "Are you sure everything's alright?"

"Sure." I kiss him before reaching down to his butt and pinching it.

In the club, the party goes on. No one seems to have noticed our absence. Or at least so I think.

From a first check it seems that both Costa and Kris's mother have left, which I'm delighted about considering how they undermined his happiness. The indefatigable Electre continues to converse with the customers and the staff, who seem to have swelled in number. Athos, on the other hand, is watching everyone from the balcony of the private room. He stares at the guests and watches over the place with an indecipherable expression.

"Athos is scary," I say looking at him.

Kris looks up at him. He watches him for a few moments before speaking.

"In fact, it looks like he's had as rough a day as I have."

Get in line honey. I'm afraid I'm first on the list.

"Maybe more." My mouth can't keep quiet. I bite my lip but it's too late now.

"Has something happened that I don't know about? Won't this be another secret for the quiet life?" Even as he talks to me, his hard eyes are on his friend who doesn't seem to have noticed us.

"Nina." Now his attention is all on me as I continue to gaffe. After all, I promised not to say anything to Ele, Kris

wasn't mentioned. "She was outside here when we got here. He pushed her away and called the bouncer to hold her back and give us a chance to get in. I don't know what they said to each other, but she wasn't very nice to me."



I WOULD HAVE EXPECTED anything but to be stranded on the sofas of the private room. Athos and Electre have already been gone for quite a while and we promised to join them as soon as the last customers crossed the exit.

Kristòs is downstairs saying goodbye to the caterers who have taken all their stuff with them. But my body moves when he closes the door, and before I know it, I see him coming up the stairs. He is without his jacket because he left it on me to cover me. According to him I was cold, I just wanted a hug.

The shirt seems to be transparent and too tight as he flexes his arms to mess up his hair. He throws himself down on the sofa beside me and blows all the air out of his lungs. I look at him entranced because it couldn't be otherwise.

"Are you all right?" I ask, hiding my nose under the collar of his jacket. His scent intoxicates my nostrils, sending me into high spirits.

"Exhausted, but happy. Even though we got off on the wrong foot, after I got into you everything changed. In my opinion I should do this more often. Getting into you I mean. I bet my days would be better." He comes dangerously close. "Would you feel like making my life better from here until the end?"

What? Until the end of what? The day? Of life?

“Come with me,” he says while my brain is still reeling. He stands up extending his hand to me. “Come on, I told you I had a surprise for you. It’s in the office, don’t you want to see it?” I snap to my feet and grab it. I really want to see what he has in store for me.

We walk down the stairs and into the warehouse. Behind the first door on the left hides his office. It is completely different from the one in Santorini, but impressive. I look around, finding the choice of furniture combinations excellent.

“I’m sure you thought I’d forgotten your birthday. But I haven’t,” he begins. He reaches across the desk and grabs a black box. It’s too big to hold a ring, but it could still be there. He plays with it for a few seconds and then hands it to me.

“Happy birthday.” I smile and accept my gift with trembling hands. “I hope it pleases you.” I untie the bow and open the lid. I open my mouth wide and am speechless. It’s my music box.

“You were desperate when it broke, and my behaviour wasn’t very nice that day. So, on impulse, I took it and contacted a friend of mine who has a workshop here in Athens that deals with these objects. She fixed it without changing the tune.” I lift the lid and lose myself in those notes that have lulled me and kept me company in the worst of times.

Am I happy? Yes. Am I angry? Yes, I am. He allowed himself to take something dear to me without my knowing it, but he managed to bring it back to life just to make me happy. It’s hard to hold back the tears that are threatening to come out. Also, hard to control my heart and everything I feel.

“I love you Kris,” I whisper through the maggots. “You...you did this for me, not knowing how it would end between us. You might have thrown me out of that shower, but you still took it to fix and gave me back a memory for me...” I lift my face to his looking him straight in the eyes even though tears distort his image. “You’re a wonderful person and I love you to death.” There, I’ve said it, exposing myself completely to him.

I place the music box on the dark wooden desk and hug him.

“I don’t think it would have ended any other way. I wanted to be sure of myself and that you only wanted Kris, not the accessories.” I feel the same way and we’re lost to each other now. I can’t wait any longer, it’s only fair that he knows the truth.

“I need to tell you something.” The terror in my voice comes through perfectly enough to alarm him. He looks at me strangely, dare I say, ‘waiting for my death sentence’. He places his hands on my shoulders instead and sighs again.

“Jade, you’ll tell me tomorrow, okay? Right now, I just want to be with you, to enjoy this night in your company before tomorrow, when I find out my fate.” He strokes my face in a tender, caring way. But I’m the one alarmed now.

“Your fate?”

“Yeah. I’ll find out if the creditors have accepted Athos’s proposal or...” He places his lips on my forehead and stays like that, as if he doesn’t want to pull away.

“What if they don’t?”

“Can we think about that tomorrow? I owe you one hell of a birthday.” He takes a few steps away from me to head for the

wall behind him. He moves the chair and, with one hand, leans against the wall unlocking a panel. It appears to be a secret passageway instead the panel comes down revealing a bed.

“But we have to go to the hotel with the two lovebirds” I intervene reminding him of the promise made to our friends.

“Do you think they’ll notice?” As soon as the feet of the bed touch the ground he sits down. “I had it set up just in case,” he explains.

“Like in the event that you manage to pick up clients?” I tease him. The air is tense even though we’ve changed the subject.

“Like I’d bring them in here, show them my office and my huge bed,” he continues, holding my hand.

“Sure, like the only thing huge in here is the bed.” I cross my arms looking away from the one who is most important in my life.

“And tell me, my little Jade, what else is huge?” he asks coming in front of me and grabbing his jacket. Slowly he pulls it off me dropping it to the floor.

“Your ego,” I reveal looking into his eyes. “And your cock. They’re in proportion.” He doesn’t answer but smiles mischievously.

“It’s your fault. You make both of them swell as soon as you open your mouth.” He grabs the string on the dress undoing the bow holding the two pieces together. He opens it, fiddling with the slightly pleated edges going up my torso. He pinches it, holding the fabric tight only to pull it off its seat and drop it on my arm. He uncovers the leotard and smiles as the dress slides to the floor, leaving me alone with that piece of black lace that covers little to nothing.

“You look magnificent. I wish I had a picture of you, like that, with just your underwear. I’d make a giant blow-up of it to put up in the office.” My cheeks flush at the mere thought of a picture of me like that.

He slips his hand under the fabric of the leotard to graze my nipple. Then he moves it, dropping the strap, and then he turns to the other, leaving my breasts exposed. He doesn’t hesitate to grab the fabric with both hands to pull it off completely.

I’m naked in front of him while Kris still has his clothes on. I extend my hand towards my man, but he shies away. With his eyes on me, he starts to undress without my help. He removes everything while remaining completely naked. I start, feeling myself burning. Never before have I felt like touching him.

He spreads his arms, showing how mum did it, then collides with my body and frames my face to kiss me fiercely. Our tongues chase each other as he brings his hands to my bottom, picks me up and moves to the bed. Carefully he lays me down on the mattress continuing to chase my tongue. He doesn’t pull away for any reason, not even when from somewhere he pulls out the condom to slip it on.

I could think he planned it, but I honestly don’t care because I would have done it too.

He pulls away from my lips to go down and kiss my jaw, my neck, my sternum right where the tattoo hides the scar and then my breasts. I love the way he bites my nipples, hurting me and then soothing the same pain with his tongue. A master at giving me butterflies in my stomach as he continues his ride to his coveted destination. My private parts.

He gets up only to pull me to the edge of the mattress and bring my legs over his shoulders to enter me. But I have other plans for today.

“Wait.” I stop him and let him out. “Tonight, I want more.” His eyes lock into mine wondering if I’m really sure. “Daddy.”

He lingers as he holds what I want to feel inside me more than anything else. It wouldn’t be the first, but I so hope it’s the last.

Kristòs positions himself better and does as I tell him. He enters slowly, perhaps fearing that I will block him from too much pain. It hurts but it’s bearable. Especially since I know what pleasure I’m going to feel in a little while. He moves back very slowly, afraid of the sensations he is feeling, afraid of being the author of my pain. His eyes never leave mine and I hold him, caress him, and kiss him to encourage him to let go, just as I do with my body, a puppet in his hands.

When he understands that everything is okay, he increases the rhythm, driving me crazy. Today I want to give him everything, tomorrow we’ll see.

He sinks into me with so much passion and transport that I can’t explain. He seems to enjoy this little transgression, this gamble. He seems to want to give me everything, just like me.

He spreads my legs wider, caressing them, reaching up to my intimacy. He plays with my clitoris while his lunges are faster and deeper.

In addition to taking a part of my body that I have granted to very few, he slips a finger inside me amplifying the sensations, the pleasure this is giving me.

“Kris!” I shout his name because I wish he would stop taking it easy and give me the finishing blow. He humours me

and, like me, shouts my name while throwing his head back. I tighten my muscles slightly and he seems to be dying of pleasure as much as I am. With the last thrust we reach our climax together. He climbs out of me and onto the bed, resting his head on my shoulder.

“Did I hurt you?”

“My legs hurt, you’ll have to make up for that with a massage,” I mutter breathily. I sense his facial muscles twitch into an amused smirk, one I love seeing on his face.

“Are you coming under the covers? I’d like to cuddle you, it would help.” He kisses my shoulder and then stands up to show me his worried face.

“About what?”

“To feel less guilty. I hurt you and I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you more.”

Chapter 28



“Kris, wake up. We need to go back to the hotel, get our things and leave.” I shake the sleeping man by my side who doesn’t seem to want to wake up. I shake him once more and his beautiful eyes are on me. He moans, making a guttural sound so deep that I giggle. I lean over him to let him have a few kisses, but all I get is his arm around my waist, pulling me to him.

“We’ll sleep on the plane and then go home.”

“Let’s stay here. I don’t feel like going back to Santorini.” He complains. His tone is serious, perhaps too much so. I know what awaits him today and what returning to the hotel entails. Athos may already have news.

“Okay, so I’m going to go over there now and see if they’ve left anything edible for breakfast. You don’t get up.” I leave him a kiss on his cheek and a slap on his butt. I wear the leotard and his shirt so I can feel his presence as I rummage through the fridge at his place.

I walk down the aisle to the counter and start looking for something that might work for both of us.

“You guys finally woke up.” My heart stops beating in fright. I search my eyes for the owner of the voice finding a woman sitting at one of the small tables. Blonde hair, long and

wavy, long legs crossed. The same one who was in Xeni's bar. Karen.

"How did you get in?" I ask seriously. The woman grabs the glass in front of her to take a sip of whatever she poured.

"Don't be alarmed. I have this." She raises her hand, showing me the key to the club.

"What are you doing here?" I hope she answers fully. Though I doubt I'll get cooperation.

"I'm looking for Kris. I was told he's here. I've been looking for him for weeks," she informs me in an obvious tone.

"What more do you want?"

"How much you talk as soon as you wake up." She makes a disgusted grimace. She grabs her glass and stands up coming towards me. "I'm..."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Kris's voice rings out powerfully in the huge room. The woman doesn't turn to look at him even though she came here for him.

"Karen," she rays, holding out her hand. She is the woman who was with Kris but chose to leave him for Enea. I don't grab her hand; I'm not going to show friendship. "You must be Jade, the one fucking my husband." My heart explodes on the spot.

"Ex-wife. Specify that," he thunders.

"I just hope you didn't get knocked up like your little friend." She sneers at Ele shamelessly.

"How dare you?" I thunder through clenched teeth.

“Tell me, does she know who you are, Jade?” she continues.

With her free hand she throws a newspaper on the counter where there are our pictures, taken yesterday while we were getting busy in the back. Four shots where they perfectly capture our kiss, him caressing my bum, the intercourse, and the kiss before we go back in.

“Or should I say Giada, daughter of Bari’s most famous businessman?” She whispers quietly. “Until I sign the papers, I’m your wife,” she shouts towards him, he who is standing dumbfounded just beyond.

“You slept with Enea for years, you’re with him and you come here demanding me? What is wrong with you?”

Kris steps closer trying to get her hand off mine. Only now does he notice the newspaper in front of us, surely more attracted by the headline with our names written in big letters. He grabs it, scans the pictures, and then looks up at me. Enraged? Shocked? Definitely both.

“Are you guys serious? You didn’t know she’s Giada D’Agostino, the daughter of Bari’s most influential businessman?” she asks, looking at him. “And you didn’t know he’s married? Of course, otherwise you wouldn’t have slept with him, right? Or do you do that with every married man you meet? For example, Raffaele. No, you care about money and he’s not one of your favourites, right?”

“If it was about those, I’d be fresh since you’re ruining it” I thunder defending my honour and the man I love. A mixture of feelings are building up inside me.

“Shut up” thunders Kristòs throwing me a dirty look.

“Is that what he told you? That’s good, anyway, thanks for reminding me,” she smiles, positioning herself so that she’s looking at both of them. She rests her elbow on the counter. “Do you really think your proposal makes sense? You sold our house without including it in the divorce?”

“Our? There’s nothing in it that’s ours. Your father had a prenuptial agreement drawn up where you don’t get anything I create. Where were you when my father died? When I was operated on? When Athos locked me in a clinic to get me clean, where the fuck were you? Oh yeah, banging Enea. So don’t come and complain to me, you lost all rights.” I can’t listen, stand here while they talk about things that don’t concern me. I tried to intervene, to defend Kristòs, but he didn’t want to hear.

He is married, like Raffaele. He kept it from me, like Raffaele who kept telling me it was over.

I hold back my tears and, while they are face to face, I step back. I walk out of the room and into his office. I can’t stay here, because if Karen leaves, Kristòs will come in like a river and I don’t think I can handle that. He kept it from me that he was married.

Shit, Giada, you seem to have the radar for the busy ones.

Quickly, I remove my shirt and slip on my dress to sneak out of here before they notice I’m gone. In that case, the back door should give onto a side access for the suppliers. I’ll go out that way.

I walk down the corridor amidst the shouts of the two who seem genuinely furious about something I don’t intend to understand. I open the door and slip out, running down the small street that fortunately leads to the main one. I barely

remember how to get to the hotel, so I'm fumbling with the few landmarks I remember.

When I finally enter the lobby, everyone turns to look at me, no doubt due to the smudged make-up from the tears and the dishevelled hairdo. I ignore them because I don't have to give them any explanations. I stand in front of the lift waiting for it to arrive.

When it opens, I am happy to find it empty. I go in and as soon as the doors close, sobs rise into the air. Anger, disappointment, frustration all make themselves felt at this very moment. The doors open, revealing the suite of deception. Silently I try to sneak into the room to gather my things and leave, but Athos seems to have a radar on me and exits from his room at that very moment.

"Giada," he whispers shocked to see me in this state. "What happened?" He tries to caress my face, but I retreat. Can he really not understand?

"No one was busy, no one left anyone for you, were you serious or did you forget about Karen?" His eyes widen. He swallows and closes his lips. "Don't say a word. You played right into her hands; you enjoyed playing free men who find little girls to make them feel alive. You're just pathetic." I purposely offend him, and he cashes in without argument.

"Your secret is no less," he tries to scratch me, but fails.

"Look at today's paper," I inform him sharply. I turn around as I enter the room. Quickly I grab my few things to stuff them into the suitcase.

"What are you going to do?" he pops out from behind the doorframe. Eyes sleepy, face sad regardless.

“I’m going home.” Straight to the point because the less I talk, the better off I am. The tears come back as the zip on my backpack doesn’t want to close. I only left out a change of clothes to take off this damn dress.

Athos leaves the room as soon as I start undressing. I would have done it even in front of him, I don’t care about anything anymore. He comes in without knocking just as I’m zipping up my jeans. He stands in front of me handing me some money.

“I don’t want your money; I could pass for someone who takes advantage of you.”

“Don’t be silly. They’re for the flight. Go home, stay a few hours alone and wait for us to arrive. We’ll talk about it; you’ll talk to him revealing who you are and listen to his story.” He lists the things I would have to do to save something raised on lies.

I grab it just to get him out of here.

“What should I tell Ele?”

“The truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.” I clench my jaw and he sighs resignedly. He may be sad about his own business, about what’s happening to his friend, but I don’t care anymore. He leaves the room and goes back to his own. Only now do I realise that I have very little time before Kristòs notices I’m gone.

I leave the banknotes on the bed, on top of my dress, and grab my rucksack. For what I want to do, I don’t need to be in constant debt to him.

I leave the suite with only one regret, not being able to say goodbye to Electre. She is the only one who has nothing to do with all this.

Once in the lobby I walk through it without looking anyone in the face. I open the door and the air hits my face, making my eyes feel wet. I stop a taxi with all the determination I have left. Yes, I am exhausted, drained by everything that has happened to me.

As soon as I get in and reveal my destination, I notice that from the taxi behind mine, Kristòs rushes out to vanish inside the hotel.

“Please, could you hurry up?” I’m afraid Athos might reveal my destination to Kris and finding him at the airport is not a good idea.

The driver speeds off without bothering to attract attention. I thank him, handing him my card. Now I don’t care about anything.

At home, of course, in Bari and not in Santorini. It’s not my home there, nobody really wanted me there. In my haste, I switch off the phone and reach the automatic counter to book the first flight to any Italian destination. I can book the flight to Bari even when I get home. Luck has decided to be my ally by finding the direct flight that leaves in an hour. I would like to rejoice at this, but I don’t have the strength to do so. I pay with my credit card, aware that my parents will be notified. No more hiding, I don’t want to do it anymore.

The machine prints the ticket and I run to the gate, getting on the plane immediately after checking in. Only when I am sitting in my seat do I manage to breathe a sigh of relief and relax. Everyone thinks I’m flying to Santorini but instead I’m going back to Bari to my family.

I tried to run away from them because I did not accept my father’s impositions, demanding to live with a friend without asking her permission first. I forced my way into her life, not

to mention Kris's, which I completely turned upside down. None of them deserved my meddling. They deserved to go on living in peace.

I close my eyes, trying not to cry, but I feel the tears line my cheeks.

“Giada.” A male voice calls me back making me lift my face. Even though my eyes are clouded with tears, I can see a silhouette in front of me. Raven-coloured hair and amber skin, just like Kris's. My heart races at the thought of him finding me. Only when I bring it into focus does my breath catch.

Oh, Jesus Christ.

“What are you doing here?”

My eyes scan his face for some clue.

“Did something happen?”

“No, I'm just going home.” He sits down beside me and draws me to him in a tight embrace. Unexpected but comforting for some strange reason. It's nothing like Kristòs', but in this moment I realise he's helping me not to fall to the ground. I feel like a little girl in need of comfort.

He caresses my face, urging me to lift it towards him. When I comply, he tries to do something I didn't think possible: kiss me. My eyes widen and I duck in time.

What the hell is he thinking?

“Sorry, blame it on old memories,” he bows his head biting his lip to restrain himself. “I need to make a call. Give me a second.” He moves away from me and grabs his mobile phone accompanied by a business card. He copies the number and brings the phone to his ear.

“Hi, this is Raffaele. I’m sorry, but I’m forced to postpone the appointment until a later date. Something has come up and I don’t know when I’ll be able to come back.” He turns to me and gives me a smile that should reassure me. “Of course, I will not fail to keep you informed about it. Have no doubt, you have my full support. Goodbye.”

He has just enough time to switch off his phone before the stewardess comes by to check if everyone is in their seats.

“Giada, don’t worry, everything will be fine,” and he holds me tighter than ever, continuing to reassure me from time to time.

The plane leaves and I close my eyes, letting myself go into the arms of the man I ran away from, hated with all my might, threatened. He is the only person I can cling to, at least for the journey. Then we’ll see.

It only remains for me to do the last thing: goodbye Electre. Farewell Athos. Goodbye Kriros. Goodbye Santorini. It’s been a disastrous pleasure meeting you.

The End

Acknowledgments

Here we are at the first ending of this story. It was not easy to write it; the characters are very far from me, but I succeeded.

I would like to thank my stalker who helped me and supported me in difficult moments. I dedicate the whole series to her because it's thanks to her that Kris exists.

Thanks to Federica for her help in making this dream even more real.

Thanks to Kathleen for her magic touch.

About the Author

Nataša Ursic was born in 1986. She lives in a small village on the border between Italy and Slovenia. It is part of the Slovenian minority in Italy.

Mother, wife and worker, she expressed her thoughts and feelings by deciding to publish her first novel in 2017 entitled: Non Scegliermi, which was followed by two more books that make up the pink / noir trilogy: Non Amarmi and Non Odiarmi.

After a hiatus, she chose to follow her instincts and write different genres. Witness is the new Greek series. Secret love focus on the erotic Age gap. In 2022 she decided to translate it into English.

Nataša has many stories in store that focus on various sub-genres in Romance.

