



Liam Drake

GHOST
of his
PAST

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GHOST OF HIS PAST

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LIAM DRAKE

Ghost of His Past
By
Liam Drake

GHOST OF HIS PAST

For Vincent.

All voices should be heard with equality, no matter how softly they reach our ears.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BEACH

Demitri sat in the yellow chair by the window. A cool breeze came into our hotel from the ocean, caressing his dark hair. He wouldn't cry. I know he wanted to, but he was too strong for that. I wished we were back in California. Anywhere but here. Everything about Greece is beautiful, the Acropolis, the ruins, the beaches, the people. The food is to die for. But Demitri's past is thick here, and I wonder if I can fit into his future. Before today, I never understood why he hadn't come back here—back home.

Earlier that day, I met his mother at the apartment home where he grew up in Athens. A small woman with huge, dark eyes, she smiled at me and clucked her tongue. I don't speak the language, but her tone belied her dissatisfaction. She hugged me despite that, kissed me on both cheeks, and called her son *agape*, which means love, before she yammered something off in Greek about her assessment of me. I think she tries to understand, or else she doesn't get what Demitri and I are to each other.

His father didn't speak a word to me. A gray-haired old man, he shriveled up his mouth in a hateful expression I had seen my partner make when things were stressing him at work. He slammed the door when he left, muttering under his breath.

We ate homemade marmalade and toast with his mother on the balcony. Cars and pedestrians passed by on the busy street far below us. I tried to decipher what the two spoke of, but only a couple of words came clear: church and father.

It couldn't have been good. Demitri was raised Greek Orthodox. While I don't pretend to understand the religion, I know it's something like being Catholic, only with more rituals. After the meeting with his mother, we drove down the busy highway for four hours to our hotel by the sea. If only we could stay here and not go out to meet with his relatives again, I think we'd have a great time.

I didn't want him moping about. This was supposed to be our vacation. "Do you want to go for a walk on the beach?" I asked, hopeful that he would take me up on the idea.

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He glanced up from his place by the window and forced a smile at me. “Yes. That sounds like a good idea.” The sadness in his eyes made me want to hug him and keep him inside, safe with me away from the outside world.

He stood and ran a hand through his hair. The curls were starting to grow out. It looked good that way, but I knew when we got back to the states he’d cut it back for work. Demitri always appeared the part—professional, powerful, a man who meant business.

I looked like a skinny artist with a bohemian hairdo and too many tattoos—as I should since that’s exactly what I am. What a pair of contradictions we make. Dressed in jeans and nothing else, we headed down the stairs to the beach. Demitri loves the sea. He loves walking across the sand barefoot, and sometimes I feel like I lose a part of him there. I reached over and took his hand.

He squeezed my fingers and nodded. “I’m sorry about my parents,” he said.

“Don’t be. You can’t help it.”

“My dad was rude to you.”

“Yeah, well not everyone’s parents can be as perfect as mine.”

He laughed at me. My parents are about as eccentric as a lava lamp. They live in a shared community of vegans, a little known spot in New Mexico their clan calls Godspeed, where everyone farms together and produces for the good of the whole. It’s pretty cultish, and I know Demitri was both fascinated and shocked by it the first time we went there. My parents weren’t always like that. I grew up in California suburbia, and Mom and Dad both worked in law firms. During my college years, something clicked with them—empty nest syndrome or mid-life crises, I don’t know which, but they wanted something different from life and went off to find it.

We walked along the shore in silence, as far as the end of the sand to the little shops lining the road. A straight couple kissed by the quaint restaurant we had eaten at last night. I admired them. So uninhibited and free to do that out in public. It made me jealous, too. If Demitri kissed me here, what would people say? Would we get cussed at? Dirty looks? Would anyone notice us at all?

“Look at them,” Demitri said. “They don’t even know how easy it is for them just to *be*.” He pulled his hand away from mine and walked into the water until his jeans were soaked up to his ankles. There he stood, framed by the sunset, my own god, my lover. Demitri is a hard person to get to know, but I love that about him as much as I hate it.

I knew he was sad, but fighting it. What I was afraid of was that coming back home might change his mind about us. Pasts are weighted and can keep a person from moving forward.

I sat down on the sand and watched the sun sink into the water. I wished I were a painter instead of a ceramic artist, because the colors in the sky could have sold a million prints with his muscular silhouette against them. I should have grabbed my camera before we left the room.

Twilight settled in. Demitri walked toward me, shadowed by dusk. He plopped down at my side, leaned in, and kissed my neck.

Every hair on my body stood on end.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Mike, I’m glad you’re with me. I knew this wouldn’t be easy, but this is home, and I want you to know where I come from.”

His goatee ran along my cheek until our faces were aligned. I leaned forward and kissed his mouth, parting his lips with mine and delving in to taste him. Alone on the beach, there was no one to notice us, to laugh, or leer. We fit together as well as we always did, two guys who had found something in each other we couldn’t get anywhere else.

His fingers brushed over my chest, traced a nipple, hardening it and teasing with pinches that made me wince. “Hey,” I managed to croak out when his lips crossed to my cheek and then my ear. “Better stop that.”

His tongue tested my earlobe before he answered. “Or what?”

“Things could get out of hand.”

He moaned in my ear, which sent a ripple up my spine. His deep voice always turned me on. Hot fingers pressed down my abdomen to my crotch, where they cradled my growing erection.

“I have everything I need in hand,” he whispered. “You know you like it out in the open. You know this is what you want.”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t say much else. I leaned back into the sand, not caring that it would get down in my jeans. I wanted what that straight couple had. I wanted the freedom to feel my lover against me anywhere.

Demitri lay down beside me. His hand rubbed my sheathed cock, stiffening me further. He rested his head on my chest so he could watch what my body did. When I made a small cry in the back of my throat, he stopped, deftly unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, and reached inside, past my boxers to free my dick. “Turn on your side,” he said.

I did and closed my eyes to listen to the sound of the waves ebbing against the sand. The cold air would have made me shiver if he wasn’t so close to me. Up and down his hand worked. The pad of his thumb rolled over the crown of my cock with each stroke. My balls tingled. I held my

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breath. Everything shot out in a hot burst. Demitri's hand fastened and held until the last of my release spilled out onto the sand.

"God, that felt good," I whispered, trying to catch my breath.

He laughed in a quiet, knowing way, pushed my softened dick back into my pants, and zipped me up.

We rested on the beach for a long while, talking about what would happen in our future. I had moved in with him a month ago, and all my stuff had to find room in his house. He talked about how he would help me convert the third bedroom into a studio for me, and kept suggesting that I open my own gallery and get my work out of consignment at Simone's.

Demitri had been married before, years ago when he was fresh out of college. He still kept pictures of his ex in the bottom of his shorts drawer back home. It was something I'd run across by accident and never asked him about. He had revealed snippets about his past relationship, but never enough details for my curiosity. I figured we needed to talk about that someday, and maybe today was it. "Tell me about Amanda." I waited, wondering if he'd be willing to talk or not.

"Ex wife. All in the past."

"Why did you two split up?"

"Hmm." He sat up and stared down at me, his chiseled features catching the light from the restaurant's torches far in the distance. "Strange time to ask about that."

"Not really. We came to Greece so I could meet your parents. I thought you wanted me to know where you came from."

He took in a deep breath and blew it out in a pained sigh. Casting his attention to the silver rippled sea, he said, "All right. Fine." His fingers stroked over the line of hairs on my belly, bumping the rigid muscles there. He faced me. "We split up because I'm gay, all right? So you don't have to worry about me going off with some woman, if that's what you're thinking."

"Oh." I ran my fingers across his arm. "I didn't mean to make you mad."

He lay back down beside me. His hand found mine, and we stared up at the sky and the stars as the constellations appeared. "Amanda was my secretary when I started at Morgan Investments. Great worker, beautiful. I guess I wanted to try to be what everyone wanted me to be. I wanted to be able to come home and have my father smile. You know how that is."

"Yeah, I know." I didn't dare say more. This was a big revelation for him. I was afraid I'd push him too far by asking questions and he'd clam up.

"So, she kept asking me out. And I finally agreed. Amanda liked to dance."

I smiled. Demitri was a great dancer, better than I'd ever be. We used to go clubbing when we first started seeing each other. I pictured him on a dance floor with a woman and cringed.

"Anyway, that first date, I got drunk. I was nervous, and she had her hands all over me. She knew what she was doing." He cleared his throat and shuffled one foot in the sand. "We did it in the backseat of my car."

Silence spanned out. I waited.

"It was weird, you know. Like, it didn't feel bad, but it didn't feel right. Amanda and I got married three months later. We were divorced seven months after that. She came home one night and caught me looking at porn on the computer. At first, she was excited, until she figured out exactly what I was looking at. Then she nodded, said she knew it all along, but just didn't want to face it. And that was the end of it."

"Did you ever bring her here?"

He shook his head. "No. I knew I'd made a mistake. I knew it that night in the car when she screamed my name."

"I've never been with a woman," I admitted. "Just guys."

"Yeah. Your parents were okay with it when they found out?"

"Not really, but they said they'd accept whatever choice I made. I think my mom knew when I was a teen, but we never talked about it." I rolled over to face him. "I don't want any secrets between us."

"No more secrets." He turned and stared at me in the dim light. "Amanda isn't easy for me to talk about."

The waves were getting stronger, the air chillier. April in Greece was not really the best time for beaches. I knew in another hour we'd be freezing our butts off. "Let's go back and get some sleep. Long day tomorrow."

"You'll like the ceremony."

I nodded, thinking Easter was not a good time to bring your gay partner to meet your parents at all. Much less, take him to a whole village full of religious people.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ROOM

Back in the hotel, Dimitri peeled off his jeans and tossed them in the corner of the room. He grinned at me and slipped out of his underwear. "Shower?"

I unbuttoned my jeans. "Are you kidding? Did you see the size of that *thing*? I wouldn't even call it a shower. Looks like something from the fifties."

He rolled his eyes. "This hotel is old. It probably *is* from the fifties. Just wait until you see the bathrooms in the village."

I quirked a brow. "Have we gone back in time or what?"

He waved his hand at me and headed for the bathroom. I watched him go, tempted.

Taking off my jeans and boxers, I listened to the sounds of the sea outside. It was dreadfully quiet save for the waves and the wind. I felt at peace here alone with my lover, and hopeful that my fears about our future were unfounded. My conscious nagged me more than before: *He's hiding something. He's not going to stay with you.*

The water turned on. Dimitri started to sing one of his favorite songs, something by Dalaras that sounded familiar. One day I would learn Greek if only so I could understand what he whispered in my ear in the throes of passion. Plus, he often talked in his sleep and I always wanted to know what he was saying. I guess secrets scare me, even meaningless ones.

I went into the bathroom and watched his silhouette behind the filmy white curtain. The shower was nothing more than a circle on the floor made of marble with a small lip. It barely kept the water from splashing out. The showerhead was a mounted hand held type gadget. Dimitri bent to rinse his hair, and his butt pressed against the curtain, arching the vinyl and letting water dribble out onto the tiled floor.

I shook my head. "And you want me in there with you. We'd never fit." Dimitri always did crazy stuff like that though. He was wilder than me when he wasn't at the office. "Save me some hot water!"

He stopped singing and laughed. "There's plenty. Come in and get it."

“Can’t fit.”

He poked his head past the curtain and smiled. “It’s all yours.” Dripping, he stepped out and I made my way in. The shower thing was smaller than I originally thought. I hurried through the rites, soaped my body, washed my hair, and rinsed off. When I stepped into the main room with a towel around my head, Demitri was already in bed, his back to me.

“You asleep already?”

“Almost.”

I climbed in behind him and hugged his naked body to mine. He was always warm. I was always cold. He scooted toward me. My soft cock pressed to his ass, and my chest wedged against his back. We like to sleep naked. It brings us together in an intimate way every night, even if we’ve had a fight during the day. Somehow, this small act keeps us bonded.

“Do you think your dad will be in the village for Easter?”

He groaned.

“What about your mom?”

“She’ll be there. She never misses it. Mom grew up in that village, and I think she never liked living in Athens. We lived there for a long time and spent every Easter there after Dad moved us to the city.”

“Will there be real showers?”

He turned to face me, his cheeks rounded with a grin. “We’ll be staying at my grandparents’ old house. Nothing has changed there since it was built in the ‘20s.”

“Great.” I rolled my eyes. “This is like a bad time travel movie. Why couldn’t we go into the future?”

Demitri ran his nose across mine. “I like the present just fine. I don’t want to rush the future like you do.”

His comment hurt, but I couldn’t argue with him because he pushed his mouth over mine to keep me silent. He was a good arguer, and if we had it out about me wanting things to move faster, I’d be forced to admit that he was right. His tongue plunged into my mouth. Mine met his. We tasted. We moaned. Cocks thickened and ground into each other, firm and unyielding. I like making out with him. He always takes charge, and it turns me on.

His knee shoved in between my legs, working his thigh up to my crotch. In measured strokes, he rubbed his leg against my balls. We kissed so long that my chin was raw from his goatee. Then he pulled back and sighed.

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“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I love this with you. Have to slow down. I want it to last.”

I pushed up on my hands and grinned sideways at him. “But I want to end it so we can do it again.”

“You’re bad, Mike.”

“That’s why you love me.” I straddled him. He smelled like the lemony hotel soap. His skin tasted clean and hot when I dipped my mouth to kiss his neck. I tasted him, every slow, teasing inch of his neck all the way across his chest to his left nipple. Firm and aroused for me, I sucked it between my lips and teased its tip with my tongue. He shifted his weight and lifted his arms above his head, burying his hands into his pillow. This was his show of total surrender. Not to mention total laziness, and it rarely happened.

I licked my way to his other nipple, laved it with my tongue, and then blew across it. He shivered. I touched his upper arm to feel the goose bumps rising there. Smiling devilishly, I swirled my tongue across his skin, making my journey down to his side. My kisses became stronger there. Nips, sucks, licks, all served to titillate my partner and make him desire the one thing I knew he wanted.

“You’re so good at that,” he whispered. His fingers curled into my hand, pulling and twining there. “So good...”

He pushed me down, indicating his desire.

I obliged and tasted his hip. To the side, I breathed in the sweet, musky scent of the hairs above his cock. The tip of his erection grazed my cheek, soft as velvet. But I didn’t want to end his arousal just yet. I pushed my mouth across his inner thigh, nuzzling the hairy skin while kissing him in this tender place. My fingers slipped over his balls, warming them, eliciting helpless moans from his lips. The pad of my thumb traced each curve and detail. I palmed the duo before I rolled them. My mouth worked to the root of his prick. I kissed my way up.

My other hand balanced me in this heated position. Between my legs, my own balls tingled with arousal. I wanted to reach down and get myself off at the same time, but I resisted and concentrated on my lover’s needs. After all, he’d done me on the beach and not asked for anything in return. It was payback time.

My lips closed over the head of his cock. Cum dribbled out, salty in my mouth. He thrust a few times, unable to control the animalistic urge. I gave his balls a gentle squeeze in warning. He grunted.

My fingers left his precious sac to clutch Demitri's length. I held him steady to keep him from pushing too far into my throat. I sucked him in and out in strokes that hurried along with his whimpered groans. The bed creaked when he thrust, spilling his load in my mouth. I swallowed it down. With each tense quake his body made, I rolled my tongue over his cock. His breathing slowed and he began to calm.

I released him and sat up to stare down at his face. His large eyes watched me, half closed in bliss. Sweat had beaded on his forehead. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Just you. Always you."

His eyes closed. He nodded. "You always have me. Forever. Do what you want."

I pushed off the bed to go find what I needed. Most of my stuff was still in my suitcase, propped on one of those cheap folding stands for holding up luggage. I found my bag and dug through it for a condom and a bottle of lube. I glanced over at Demitri. He watched me, serious.

Struggling with the stupid wrapper always annoyed me. I managed to tear it open without too much effort, and rolled the condom down my length. After uncapping the bottle, I slathered the cool liquid up and down my dick. I wanted to be inside him, to take him slowly. I wanted to watch his face when I came.

Anxious, I started for the bed and my waiting partner. It wasn't completely dark, but it was dim, and my right foot nailed the bed frame. "Shit!" Pain shot through me. I bounced on one foot and looked down, trying to see the damage.

"Are you all right?" he asked, sitting up to see what the matter was.

"Stubbed my toe." I collapsed on the bed and wriggled my toes, hopeful that the pain would go away.

Demitri crawled across the bed to examine my wound. His hot hands closed over my ankle and forced me to hold still. Fingers tested my big toe. "It's not bleeding. You'll be all right."

"Sorry. Ruined the moment."

"No. Not really." He lay beside me. "We have all night to find the moment. The rest of our lives."

Silent and still, we remained side by side on that tiny bed. *The rest of my life*. What a long time it seemed to be. *Forever*. The pain in my toe throbbed to nothing, and I slipped off the wasted condom. Demitri had fallen asleep. His snores echoed in the room.

I went to stand on the balcony, doubting anyone could see me in the dark. Bougainvillea had taken over the wall of the building, successfully hiding any stray night peeping Toms from my

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nakedness. I breathed deep the salty sea air. It was cold out, and stupid of me to stand there like that. “The rest of our lives,” I repeated, thinking about what the two of us would look like in ten years. Would we still love each other? Would we still be able to stand each other? I shook my head.

My mind turned to the photos of Amanda that my lover had kept. I couldn’t get over it. Why did he keep them? Was he in love with her? Did she mean more to him than just a mistake? I understood why he married her. He was that kind of guy—the kind who does what his partner says. If she was an assertive person, and she told him they needed to get married, he’d have done it.

I cringed, rehashing the day I’d come home and asked him to marry me. “Let’s do it,” I had said. “I love you and I want this to be real.” If that wasn’t assertive, I don’t know what is. He had frowned at me and shook his head no. Maybe this whole trip was his way of placating me, of giving me what I wanted. But then, he’d never brought Amanda to Greece. I needed to believe I meant more, that our future wouldn’t be something he told someone was a mistake years later.

I watched the stars until I couldn’t stand it anymore. Shivering and full of doubt, I went back to bed and tried not to touch my lover with my freezing cold skin. I didn’t want to wake him up and worry him. *I’m being stupid*, I tried to convince myself. *Demitri loves me. He wants this relationship as much as I do.*

CHAPTER THREE: THE HOUSE

The drive to the village brought us over a highway and up into a perilous mountain with roads I knew were built for goats, not cars. They were cobbled and crooked. Demitri drove and did it with a vein popping out on his forehead. If it were me, I'd have been cussing with every gear shift. The farther we drove into the middle ages type villa, the more worried I became. This was not some wayward tourist's hot vacation spot. This was a village complete with grandmothers who still wore kerchiefs tied over their heads and little old men who followed sheep around with a stick. We passed a bakery, nothing more than a stucco and stone hovel with the most heavenly scent of fresh bread wafting out that I have ever smelled. There was an apple orchard, a water gutter that ran along the roadside, and olive trees, so many olive trees that I began to wonder why the price of olive oil was so high.

"I used to get bread there every day." He nodded back at the bakery we had passed. "My mom would give me money, and I would do the shopping for her while my father was working. He took seasonal jobs here."

"Seasonal jobs?"

Demitri nodded, his eyes fixed on the way ahead. "Yeah. He picked fruit, usually. Did some hard labor building block walls."

"Oh."

The little rental car strained up the curving cobbled road. We turned and turned some more until we passed a tiny church. "That's the place?" I asked.

"Yes. I remember it looked bigger."

"It does seem small. That church services the whole village?"

He chuckled at me. "Yeah. We might have to stand outside. I was an altar boy when I was a kid, but I do remember a lot of people had to stand in the courtyard. It doesn't matter. At night we go outside anyways."

"Explain it all to me again."

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Demitri sighed, frustrated. "All right, but this is the last time. Pay attention."

I wondered if I should take notes. Grinning, I said, "Okay."

"'Okay' he says. Funny. Tomorrow night, we will go to the church for the ceremony where they bear Christ's epitaph around the village. Everyone must carry a lighted candle and sing. The next day, we go to the church at night. When it is midnight, they will turn out the lights, and the priest will light candles and we will celebrate the resurrection."

"When is the last time you did this?"

He stopped the car in front of an ancient stucco building with a trellised patio thick with grapevines. Demitri opened his door and frowned. "Before I left for the states to go to college."

We unloaded our suitcases and entered the gated patio. Several butterflies swept past my face. In the distance I heard a dog barking and the sound of chickens clucking. Demitri pushed the key into the lock and we made our way inside his grandparents' empty old house. The place smelled like dried flowers. There were religious pictures on the walls, where most people would have family pictures, and a shrine with folding wood icons and candles had been set up on a small table by the front door.

Following my lover through the living room, I wondered what it must have been like to visit this house as a child. The icons and shrine were enough to make me nervous. I already felt stifled by the village, and we hadn't even met anyone in it yet.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yeah."

In the bedroom, he opened the shutters and turned a crank handle to open the window. Cool, fresh air wafted inside. I set my suitcase by the foot of the bed. Testing the rock hard mattress with one hand, I stared at Demitri. He stood at the window, looking out over the grape trellis and street beyond, his expression grim.

"You all right?"

He cleared his throat before he faced me. "No. Not really."

I sat on the bed and held my arms open. "What's wrong?"

"Lots of old memories."

He crossed the room to join me. We held each other close. I breathed in his scent, waiting to find out what was bugging him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head against my shoulder. "Not right now."

"I want something from the bakery."

“Okay,” Dimitri said. “We can go for a walk. You always want me to keep moving when I get like this. You’re good for me.”

We left the house unlocked, which was a first for me, and walked along the side of the winding road back the way we had come. It was early yet, and the air in the mountains cool and crisp. I wanted to hold his hand, but there were too many neighbors watching from patios and balconies. I wondered if they knew who he was. If he hadn’t been here since before college, maybe he didn’t even look the same to these people.

“Yassou, Dimitri!” A woman called.

My lover waved at her. A slow smile spread across his lips. “Yassou Lukia!”

The buxom, dark-haired woman opened a gate to a flower lined front yard to hurry out to meet with him. They embraced, exchanging kisses on cheeks and speaking so rapidly that I couldn’t make out a word of it. I felt forgotten. Left out. For nearly five minutes that’s exactly what I was.

I cleared my throat.

Lukia smiled at me.

“This is Mixalis,” Dimitri said, introducing me with the Greek translation of my name.

I held out my hand to shake hers, but she grabbed my shoulders and planted a kiss on each side of my face before I could escape. Her bulbous breasts grazed my chest. I held my breath and knew my face had turned beet red.

“I’m Lukia!” she blurted. “Dimitri’s cousin. You come my house. I show you...” She frowned, grasping for the words. “Come, come,” she finally said.

Her hand fastened itself to mine before she dragged me through the gateway. Looking back, I silently cursed at my lover whose bemused expression only proved he knew this would happen.

“You are American, no?”

“Yes.” She marched me into the house. Good smells permeated the kitchen we bypassed. I wanted to go in there and poke around, but she kept going until we reached a sitting room. An old woman was watching TV and shelling peas from her seat on a flowery couch. She looked straight through me as if I didn’t exist.

“You are Dimitri’s...Mmm. What is this word?”

I didn’t know what she was trying to say, so I shrugged. We never discussed how much he would tell his family about us. I had the feeling that he hadn’t explained.

“Friend.” Dimitri caught up to us and supplied the answer, along with the answer to my question about who knew what.

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“Friend,” she repeated, but looked skeptical as to whether it was the right word she searched for. It didn’t matter, and I hardly had time to be mad over my title demotion. Lukia pulled me through a hall to a small bedroom where she had a table of pottery set out to dry. Unglazed and in their first stages of production, they looked naked.

“See. I make them like you do.”

Demitri laughed. “She knows more about you than you think, Mike. Lukia and I are first cousins, best friends when I used to live here. We still email each other.”

I inspected her pieces, my pride no longer wounded. “You have a wheel?”

“Yes, yes, a wheel. And I fire them in the yard.”

The symmetry was perfection. “Do you have any finished ones?”

She nodded, excited to share more. “Come, come,” she sang, dragging me out and into another room. Demitri stayed behind.

“Mm. My mama, she not understand,” Lukia said. “But I know my cousin. I happy for you and him. He likes you so much.”

“Thanks.” I hoped she knew he was gay, but I wasn’t about to say anything else in case that’s not what she meant. She showed me her shelves of bowls and urns, some with price tags dangling from them. While we talked about pottery and glazes in very broken English, I heard Demitri’s voice, low and calm in the sitting room, mingling with the older woman’s.

“Lukia?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to walk to the bakery with us?” I held my stomach so she’d understand.

“Yes, yes. Come, we go!” Excited, she took to leading me out. We fled the little house full of its knick knacks and flowers. Demitri soon joined us outside.

Over bread and coffee, Demitri and Lukia caught up on old times, laughing and sharing stories in Greek, and a little in English when they remembered I was there. I didn’t like being forgotten and ignored. The longer we sat there, the more pissed I became. The day waned, and we found ourselves before the house. I trudged inside while the two of them shared goodbyes.

“Are you going to pretend I don’t exist every time one of your relatives shows up?”

Demitri flopped onto the couch. “Shit, Mike. I didn’t mean to ignore you. It’s just that I haven’t seen her in years. She knows about us.”

“Right.” I felt an argument coming on and started for the door, not in the mood to have one now.

“Where are you going?”

“For a walk.”

I slammed the door behind me and trudged across the road into the trees. There was a small path with goat droppings that meandered through the foliage. The farther I went, the more stupid and selfish I felt. I found a little stream of water, barely wide enough to step across, and sat myself down on a flat stone there to think.

Soon, footsteps crushed through the grass until my lover stood beside me with his hands jammed into his pockets. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

I drew in a deep breath to give myself time to think. So many questions swirled in my thoughts, but one pushed its way to the forefront. “You tell *me* what’s wrong. Something about being here bothers you. What is it?”

“Old memories, Mike.” He sat down beside me and took my hand in his, giving a squeeze. “Small towns are the same everywhere. Especially here.”

“What happened? Does it have to do with your father?”

“Yes.”

He stared at the water as if seeking answers there. “You see how it is with him. We don’t get along. Never have. This village, coming home, it reminds me of that, of how he always was disappointed in me.” Demitri leaned into me and I leaned back.

“Does he know?”

“Knowing is one thing. Accepting and understanding is another.”

I nodded. Everywhere we went, I was always aware of the stigma we faced being gay. It’s one thing to look different from the majority of people around, or to talk with a different accent. But being gay isn’t something straight people are okay with, not most that I had met. Maybe the college towns, the real big cities, but small towns were small, and a village was about as small as I’d ever been to.

“When did he find out?”

Demitri’s face became a grim mask of sorrow, the old kind that lingers and fills a person with regret. “He found out when I was fifteen.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There is not much to say. An older boy and I were very good friends. He stayed over one night and we were play fighting, you know, like kids do. It didn’t mean anything to me, just fun. And

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then, he had me down on the floor, my hands pinned. He leaned over, I lifted me face. We kissed, and my father walked in on us.”

“God. What did he do?”

Demitri frowned. “He stood there in the doorway and didn’t say a word. My friend realized my father was there and made up all kinds of lies, that we were playing and it was a dare. I remember the look on my father’s face, and the way my mouth felt. I wanted to kiss my friend again, but I knew I shouldn’t. I guess you could say that my father found out I was gay at the same time I did.”

“Where did this happen?”

“Here. At my grandparents’ house.”

“In the room we’re staying in?”

“Yes.”

“What ever happened to your friend?”

“My father sent him home. Later that evening, he walked over to his house and spoke to his mother about it. I know this from Lukia, because my friend lived next door to her.”

“So, the truth comes out. You’ve returned to Greece after all these years to look up your first crush.” I laughed, nervous that it might be true.

“No Mike,” he said, serious. “No. Nicolas is dead.”

A wave of chilly foreboding washed over me.

Demitri stood. “It’s getting cold out. Let’s go back to the house and turn the heat on.”

Without waiting for me to respond, he walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SILHOUETTE

Back at the house, we sat in front of an ancient TV showing Greek news. The old couch was worn, and my butt sunken into the pillows so much that I doubted I could get out without help. I held a drink in one hand, and wished it were something stronger than the Merlot we'd brought from Athens. I had a feeling I'd need hard liquor to get me through the revelations we faced that night. Demitri had showered and shaved, and stood beside me in his robe, the top open to reveal his hairy chest. He hadn't said anything more about his first kiss since the stream, and my mind turned with dark thoughts of a vengeful father killing off a young man and making it look like an accident.

"So, tell me the rest of the story," I urged, a little frightened of what might be brought to light.

Demitri swirled his glass. The blood red liquid caught the light from the TV. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"No secrets between us," I reminded him.

He drank.

"What else happened with the two of you?"

"Mmm." He closed his eyes and drank again. Setting his glass on the table beside the couch without looking, Demitri began. "After that night, I didn't see Nicolas for a week. I knew he was in trouble with his mother. His father died when he was three, and he had two sisters that were older than him. Their house used to be loud and busy all the time. That's why he liked to go off with Lukia and me. Nicolas's sisters didn't really like him, and used to pick on him. You see, in traditional Greek families, the sisters take care of the men, even the brothers. I never had that luxury, except for my mother. I think his sisters resented him for being spoiled and having to clean up after him.

"On a Monday, I went to Lukia's house after my father left for work. My mother was too busy hanging laundry out to care about where I went. I didn't even need to tell Lukia what happened. She already knew. She took me into her room and asked me what it felt like to kiss a boy. We laughed about it. But then, I told her the truth, that it felt good.

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“She said Nicolas’s mother had beaten him, and that he hadn’t come out of the house since my father went over there. We came up with a plan to see him. She would act like they were dating. She left the house and went over there to ask to see him. I watched from her bedroom window. His mother answered the door and let her in, but she didn’t come out for at least an hour.”

He sighed. His dark eyes opened to take in his surroundings as if he’d come back from a long journey into the past. I pictured him as a teen, young and gangly with unruly curls and a sideways grin of mischief.

“She hurried back home and shut the door to her bedroom to tell me everything. ‘His back is all bruised,’ she had said. And I felt bad for all of it. I know it wasn’t my fault. He had kissed me, even though I kissed back, but I don’t think I would have kissed him first. Lukia had asked if Nicolas could come over, but his mother said no, that she could see him at church and that was all.

“As the months passed, we saw him during church sometimes. After a while, he would wait for Lukia and me behind the bakery in the mornings and walk back home with us. It was summer. The days were hot, and she took to holding his hand to keep up the appearance. Lukia is two years older than me, and she’s the kind of person who cares about everyone, and protects them. She knew what I was, but she never made fun of me for it. She knew what Nicolas was too.”

Our hands met and locked together, warm and comforting. Demitri smiled, his demeanor changing to a lighter mood. “The three of us used to meet in the woods in the evenings. Nicolas and I would run off together while Lukia kept watch on the top of the hill by the cemetery. He kissed me again by that stream you found. Kissed me until I couldn’t breathe.”

Demitri described the way the grass felt beneath him when his first lover wrestled him down against it. He told me how they tumbled together, bodies melding and rolling as one until they came to a stop, Demitri on top of Nicolas, curious and full of wonder.

“That time I bent over him, and we opened our mouths to taste each other, tongues grappling, hands knotting. Beneath our pants, we were both hard, crushed into each other. I ground myself against him, getting off on being so close. I came in a rush and pulled away, embarrassed. He only smiled and laughed and said we should call for Lukia and go down to the pond by his uncle’s land and swim. I got up and pulled down my shirt to hide what had happened.”

He moved closer to me, a melancholy look in his eyes. His lips brushed over my cheek. A kiss heated my earlobe. His mouth worked down my neck. I melted into his attentions and decided I didn’t want to hear more about Nicolas at that moment. I wanted to know about us right now. I wanted to feel the fire of his touch on my skin, and taste the wine on his breath. He tugged away my

robe. I was naked underneath. His expert fingers rubbed across my chest while his kisses descended to my nipple.

I leaned back and focused on his mouth delivering pleasure with wet licks and sucks. He nipped at my skin, worked across my chest and delved against the side of my torso. This both tickled and pleased me, hinting at what more tantalizing sensations would come.

His hand slipped between my legs to cup my balls. The pad of his thumb ran underneath my hard dick, causing it to thicken with need. Up and down he touched until I felt like I would burst.

He sat back and untied his robe. It dropped to the floor. "Lay down," he said. "I want to be on top of you." I stared at his long, hard cock for a moment before I complied, my body sinking into the cushions. He set himself atop me. Demitri took my hands and held them above my head. He kissed my mouth, with gentle assertion as if it were the first time, as if I was Nicolas and he was the young man he'd been then, discovering the pleasures he desired.

I liked the idea of being his first. I kissed back, matching his tentative attack. His hips shifted up and then down to grind our erections against each other. Velvet soft skin rubbed. Hot length and arousal connected. His balls hung atop mine.

He thrust in hurried lunges until his entire body stiffened. Our lips lost contact. Demitri groaned and came in a gush across my belly. Hot and wet, his release slickened the meeting of our skin and ran down into my pubic hair. I thrust up at him, and we continued our prone dance until I came between our bodies. Our kisses continued.

It was past midnight when we parted and went to the bathroom to rinse away what we had shared. He was right about this old place. The shower wasn't much of a shower at all, and the one in the motel had been a luxury in comparison. The entire bathroom was tiled in avocado green from ceiling to floor. A drain waited to catch up any water, and the ancient sprayer he turned on soon steamed up the small room. There was nothing to contain the water, not even a circle of marble.

Clean again, and spent from a long day of driving and remembering, we went to bed naked and he fell asleep in my arms. I lay there awake, thinking about our future again. I don't know why I kept feeling so insecure about what was to come, but I did.

When I finally dozed off, my mind envisioned the two of us out in the woods with Lukia watching from some high vantage to be sure none of the villagers discovered our tryst. Naked and entangled, we made love to each other in the shadow of a great church. What it meant, I didn't know, maybe just the stress of having to be in the village, of learning about my lover's past, and

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facing his coming to terms with the religion and secrets he had left behind. But it wasn't a good dream. It was a nightmare of fear, hatred, and secrets.

Sometime in the night, I rolled away from the safety of my lover's arms and the covers. Cold embraced me. I shivered and dreamed of being alone and abandoned in a dark place where no one knew me, and no one wanted to help me escape. Men wearing black clothing turned their backs on me. I tried to get out, but the horrible feeling that it was too late to escape overwhelmed me. There was no way out, no way out alive at least. I wandered corridors and halls until my feet ached with blisters. Exhausted and hopeless, I collapsed in one of many empty rooms and raised my head to a ray of light streaming from a high window. Rainbow colors met my eyes. I squinted at the unbearable brightness, and yet all I wanted to do was look into it and find the truth.

"Mike! Wake up. You're having a bad dream." Hot palms held my shoulders. Demitri's unique scent filled my nostrils. "It's just a dream."

"A dream," I repeated.

"Are you all right? You were screaming."

I blinked. Twilight lightened the room in shades of gray. "I dreamed I was alone. That's all." The shadows played across my lover's face. But I had dreamed of a different kind of alone, a place I didn't belong in or care to ever be.

"You're not alone, Mike." He held me against his body and pulled the covers over our nakedness. "I won't leave you alone."

The unmistakable sensation that someone was watching us unsettled me. I raised my head and stared at the doorway. The silhouette of a young man dressed in dark clothing, all shadow and black, spied on us from that vantage. Goose bumps prickled my skin. The image reminded me of what I imagined Demitri's father would have looked like, staring down at his son with disapproval.

The shape vanished as the sun rose higher and lit the shadows, exiling them from the room. The world returned to the present, but I knew we had been visited by something from the past. What I didn't know was if I should share this strange secret with Demitri. Would he laugh at me? Would he think I was losing my mind? I tried to forget the shape of the ghost in the doorway, but the longer I lay there and stared at the empty space where it had been, the more I realized something had been there moments before, a silent something that had a message to share with me or maybe both of us.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BAKERY

I opened the door to Lukia dressed in a bright green blouse and slacks. She smiled at me and burst in, all flowery perfume when she grabbed hold of me and kissed one side of my face and then the other. I did the same, thinking I could get used to such a warm welcome with time. It was better than a handshake.

“Michael! Good morning. Come, we go walk to the baker.”

Demitri laughed from the kitchen where he stood over a pan of frying eggs. He sputtered off a slew of words in Greek before Lukia took my hand and pulled me outside into the fresh air.

“You sleep good?” she asked.

“Well enough,” I lied.

“Every day my cousin and I walked this way to the bakery in the summers. We used to have much fun.”

“He told me a little about it.” I wondered how much more she might tell me. Was it wrong to ask about Nicolas? I kept up with Lukia, her fingers clutching mine with a familiarity she shared with my lover. I felt like Nicolas might have done the same, protected by this woman in a village where time stood still. From balconies and porches, people peered as we passed, staring over steaming mugs of coffee. Children laughed and played in a small park with a swing set and monkey bars. Congenial greetings and waves met us at every turn.

“Did he tell you about Nicolas?” Lukia asked, staring straight ahead.

“He told me you three used to walk back from the bakery together, and that you all played in the woods.” The scents of yeast and baking bread wafted to us on the chill morning air. Not far away, an old man’s voice echoed over a loudspeaker in Greek, the broadcast of the church’s sermon for shut-ins.

Lukia went silent and crossed to the other side of the street with me in tow. We entered the tiny building where an old man and a young man slaved over dough. Their matching noses and

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eyebrows proved that they were related. Father and son most likely. A woman stood near the register bagging bread that had cooled.

“Yassou,” she said and offered a smile. Lukia spoke to the woman while I perused the day’s fresh loaves. I paid, and we soon left, but she didn’t lead me back the way they’d come.

“Do you know what happened to Nicolas?” she said, her voice lower. I found that strange since it was doubtful that many people in the village spoke English.

“He said Nicolas died.”

She nodded and bit her lip. We edged down a steep hill, the cobbles bumpy underfoot. “Nicolas loved Demitri. That love that killed him. Not to hold onto him, to be himself.”

At the base of the hill, she pointed to a side street that led up to another hill. “He is buried up there in the cemetery. Maybe one day, we go up there together. It would be nice if Demitri visited his grave.”

“Are you sure it won’t upset him?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe yes.”

We wound through more streets until we stood before the little Orthodox Church. The wide open doors revealed a service going on inside.

“Why aren’t you in there?”

She sighed and pulled me along. “After I take you home, I go back to church. I have to take care...my mother, so I leave to be sure she is well and good.”

“Oh.” I nodded, understanding. “I hope I don’t mess up tonight.”

She looked confused.

“At the ceremony tonight, when we walk through the town and sing.”

“Ah! No. You will be good. And tomorrow night, when someone say to you *Christos anesti*, you say *Alethos anesti*. It is easy.”

“I’ve already forgotten it.”

She laughed at me. “Alethos anesti.”

I shook my head. “Not a clue.”

She repeated it a few more times, slower with each try, but the words simply didn’t stick.

“You will learn soon. Do not worry. Tell me, Demitri, he makes you happy?”

“Yes.” A blush crept up my face. “Very happy.”

“People, um, maybe your family, they like Demitri?”

“He met my parents last spring. They got along fine.”

“Well and good,” she said. We passed a house with a white picket fence and loads of blooming flowers. Lukia pointed at the place. “This was Nicolas’s house. His family moved away after he died.” She struggled with the words for a moment. “How you say...shame?”

“Lukial” A grating voice interrupted us.

“Oh, I go. My mother needs me now.” With that, she left me standing in front of her house, staring back at Demitri’s past. Whoever lived there now certainly liked to garden. A wrought iron gate showed off even more flowers in the backyard. I stared at the windows, trying to guess which one might have been Nicolas’s room. White lace curtains fluttered there in the breeze. The church loudspeaker blared out a cacophony of male voices singing hallelujahs in unison; at least I think that’s what they were singing. I couldn’t be sure.

I followed the road back to Demitri and found him sitting on the front porch. He had set out a small table and three chairs as well as plates and a covered dish, which contained our breakfast.

“She couldn’t stay?” he asked.

“No. Her mother was calling her.”

He lifted the lid and served up eggs for the both of us, and then fresh orange slices. “Her mother has Alzheimer’s. It’s gotten bad this past year.”

“That’s awful.” I set a loaf of bread on the table and took the rest inside.

Seating myself beside him, I looked out over the village before us. “I hope neither of us gets that when we get old.”

“If I do, I hope I remember you.” He held back a laugh.

“If you don’t, we can meet all over again every day.”

“Funny, Mike.” He flashed a sideways grin at me. “Very funny.”

“I like the sound of it anyways.”

Demitri started in on his breakfast.

I followed suit. The eggs were good, better than any I’d ever had. He’d gotten them from one of the neighbors, nest to plate, practically. The grapes had come from the trellis over our heads. Sweet and fresh, they tasted like Greece, or at least what I like to remember Greece tasting like.

“If Lukia can stay out tonight, maybe she can walk with us around the village,” I suggested.

“That would be best.”

“Is there anyone you want to visit? More cousins?”

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Easter Sunday, we'll be at Lukia's house. Most of my relatives will show up there. After Easter, there are some higher up the mountain I want to drop in on. And I want to drive out to the monastery, but you don't have to go there."

"Monastery? Is there something you're not telling me?"

His smile faded. "No, it's just something I need to do while we're here."

"Not turning into a priest on me, are you?"

He shook his head, silent.

I finished my eggs and couldn't stop thinking about his past. "How did Nicolas die?" I blurted.

A few houses down, a dog started barking. Demitri leaned forward to look down the street for the reason why. "Can we talk about it some other time?"

"All right, as long as it wasn't your father who killed him."

"Michael!" He widened his eyes to stare at me in disbelief. "My father would never do such a thing. I can't believe that's what you thought."

I felt bad and decided to shut up about the subject. After I finished up my meal, I tore into the fresh bread and set to watching the village over my mug of coffee. It seemed the thing to do. If not for my hair, I might have looked like any one of the other people who lived there.

We lazed through the morning and afternoon, and eventually went back into the house to have lunch. It was a much needed rest for the both of us. Demitri's job back home was high stress, and my plan to start my own business when we went back had my mind turning over and over with all I needed to do. In the living room he took hold of my shoulders.

"You're tense. Let me loosen you up."

I moaned my assent while he dug his thumbs into my tight muscles.

"Lean against the wall. You worry too much. I can tell when you do."

I placed both hands on the plastered wall to prop myself up, bowing my head. His hands moved to the knotted spot between my shoulder blades, and then lower, pressing into my back until sly fingers delved into my pants and pushed them down a few inches.

"And here I thought you wanted to offer your services as a masseuse. You tricked me."

His breath tickled my neck. "I *am* offering you my services. Don't you want them?"

He hooked his thumbs in my boxers. Pulling them away, he bared my ass and rubbed his clothed crotch against me.

"Someone's been thinking hot thoughts."

“Yeah.” He kissed the back of my neck and nipped once, thrusting his bulge at me. “I want to take you right here against the wall.”

“Mmm. Okay.” Fingers swept over my ass, rubbing and seeking lower until one hand dipped to my hole. I bent over to give him better access. A single digit circled, calming me. He dipped the tip inside, drew slower circles, pushed in, pulled out, and I heard his jeans falling to the ground.

His fingers left.

I waited to experience what he would do to me next. The crackle of plastic, slick, wet sounds, and a familiar scent aroused me further. His finger returned to explore, this time moist with lube that he’d warmed in his hands. He slipped inside and massaged. Another finger entered.

“You’re so tight for me. Relax.”

I slowed my breathing and tried to push away my thoughts. Deeper he penetrated, preparing me for what he intended.

“That’s better.”

More slick sounds.

He moved forward, positioning himself. His fingers slid away. The bulbous tip of his cock pressed at my hole until it pushed inside, slow, but with determined force. Demitri’s thick length filled me until he stopped. “I want to get you off,” he said in a low rasp.

A warm, moist hand closed over my hard-on. With a practiced touch, he stroked me. His other hand clamped onto my hip to hold me steady. “I know how you like it,” he whispered. “I know what you want.” His pace increased. I strained backward to force more of him into me. Harder his strokes pulled at me until my teeth clenched, and I couldn’t breathe. My balls sizzled from impending completion before I came all over his hand.

My cry set his hips in motion. Skin slapped against skin. Hips swayed and met. Each time he buried himself into me, I felt the helplessness of submission. Each time he pulled back, I wanted him in again. His other hand moved to my hip. The sex became rushed, almost angry. Demitri pounded at my ass toward his orgasm. I endured and knew I would be sore later despite the lube.

He let out a deep gusting breath mingled with a tortured whimper. Heat filled me in bursts when he spilled his load. His fingers dug into my skin to hold me still while he rammed in a few final times.

“God that was good,” he said. “That felt so damn good.”

Bleary eyed and sated, I turned my head to look back at him. “Yeah. Must be something in the eggs.”

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He made a small exhausted laugh before he pulled out. “Must be.” A slap to my butt cheek signaled he was done, and he sauntered off to the bathroom. I stood there and watched him go, admiring his muscular body and tight ass. He left the door open and turned the shower on, an invitation.

I kicked my pants and boxers from my feet and unbuttoned my shirt. Gathering up our discarded clothes, I decided to toss them in the hamper by our bed before taking him up on his enticement. I passed through the open doorway and an icy chill ran down my spine. My vision blurred. Dizziness had me reaching for the jamb to support myself.

The space in that doorway felt entirely wrong. A whisper tickled my ear, “*Demitri.*”

I shivered and stepped back, clothes dropped every which way. *Crap. It’s a ghost.* I hurried to the bathroom, my heart racing, my chest tightening with each sharp intake of breath. Steam wisped around me, and I closed my eyes and counted to ten. *You’re imagining this,* I tried to convince myself. *There’s no one here, no ghost, no creepy shadows at night. You’re paranoid is all.*

“Hey lover.” Demitri took a hold of me and pulled me backward until we stood beneath the spray of hot water together. His soapy hands washed away my fear, and his brown eyes kept me cemented in reality until I let go of the idea that the house was haunted.

CHAPTER SIX: EPITAPH

Wearing dress pants and a white shirt, topped off with a warm jacket, I stood beside Lukia holding a candle. Ahead of us, Demitri jabbered on to a man he had introduced me to as his friend. Lukia had explained that the guy was another cousin. I soon came to understand that everyone, even distantly related relatives, were referred to as cousins.

“You like the ceremony?” she asked.

I nodded.

Singing began at the front of the huge processional line we stood in. I craned my neck to see the epitaph, as Demitri described it, a sort of bier decorated with flowers. Every person, from child to grandparent, carried a lit beige colored candle. My lover picked up the tune as we started parading through the dark streets in the village and soon joined me.

Lukia stood at my side, a sad smile on her lips. “I remember the last time we did this together,” she told Demitri, speaking English, no doubt for my benefit. “Do you?”

“Of course.”

I waited, because this meant something. She had brought it up on purpose.

“It’s good to have you home, Demitri. Good that you have Michael.”

My lover said nothing more, but watched the way ahead, his eyes focused on the many lights before us.

“What about you, Lukia?” I asked. “Do you have someone?”

Her smile became sheepish. “Not yet. Here it is...a small place.” She sounded sad, and I guessed with her having to care for her mother that she didn’t have time for relationships. Or maybe no one had approached her for reasons to do with her past.

“You’ll find someone,” Demitri said. “You have a good heart.”

Lukia nodded. She squeezed my hand and sang softly to match the other voices. She fit here in the village, a small puzzle piece of a greater whole that I did not belong to, and never would. I glanced sideways at Demitri. He didn’t fit either, despite his knowing what to say and how to sing

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their songs. He knew their rituals. He knew secrets here, but he had left this part of himself behind a long time ago.

We walked past the cemetery. Lukia tugged at my fingers. I followed, and Demitri did as well. Breaking from the procession, the three of us backtracked before we climbed the hill, our candles the only small lights to guide our way until, one by one at the top, we blew them out. We didn't want to be followed or discovered. This unspoken knowledge enlightened me.

"You should have come before now," she whispered to Demitri.

His hand found mine, our fingers linking. In the dark, I felt him trembling. I wanted to ask what had happened and find out the entire story of their shared past. But now was not the time. Lukia guided us along, sure of her way. Gravestones loomed all around us. Cool air brought scents of flowers, old and new. In the distance, voices in song faded farther away.

We stopped. Lukia let go of my hand.

"Nicolas is here," she said.

The wind picked up. I shivered. Her broken English had come out like a cryptic message with a double meaning. My chest tightened. Squinting at the Orthodox cross that served as Nicolas's headstone, I could have sworn I saw a silvery shimmer of mist rising from the earth. My temples pounded. Dizziness, much like that I had experienced in the doorway of the house, settled over me. I swayed, holding as best as I could to Demitri's hand until it slipped away. Falling. Descending. Thoughts trailed into oblivion.

The next thing I knew, I lay across the bed in Demitri's grandparents' house, the light in the middle of the ceiling shining in my face. Lukia hovered over me. A warm washcloth dabbed my face. She said something in Greek.

Demitri appeared at the opposite side of the bed, his hair disheveled.

I blinked. "Did you see it?"

His eyebrows tensed. "See what, Mike?"

"By the grave. Did you see the mist?"

He looked at Lukia. She frowned. "We didn't see anything. You passed out. How do you feel?"

"I feel tired."

Lukia whispered a slew of words I couldn't understand. I focused on her mouth, trying to decipher them. The strangest observation that her lips were beautiful caused me to blush. I had never been attracted to women before. I reached, my fingers quivering, until they made contact with

her chin and pushed up over her mouth. Her lips were soft and yielding. She jumped back and sucked in a startled breath. She gaped at me as if I had done something sacrilegious. Forbidden. Taboo. It felt like I had.

Demitri took hold of my hand. "What's wrong with you?"

I turned my head to face him. Just behind him though, a shadow caught my attention. Dark and unyielding, the silhouette of a man observed all that we did. I couldn't make out his face or any other details, only darkness, secrets, sadness.

"Kiss me," I said, my voice barely audible.

He leaned over and brushed his lips across mine. Beside us, I heard Lukia sigh. When I looked at the doorway again, it was empty.

"I think I had too much wine today. That's all." Guilt spread through me for having worried them. "I'll be all right tomorrow."

Lukia backed away, her hand still over her mouth. "I go home now," she forced out in a disturbed squeak. She left us, passing through the doorway as if no ghost had been there. Maybe none had. Maybe I did have too much wine. I couldn't be certain.

Later that night, when Demitri crawled into bed beside me, he said something that made me think I had seen something real.

"Why did you touch her like that?" Jealousy resounded in his question, and a hint of terror.

"I don't know. I just felt compelled to touch her lips."

He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet beneath the sheets. "Nicolas used to do that to her all the time. Exactly as you did."

Anger rose in me. "I'm not Nicolas. If you think this is all some sort of freaky way to relive your past and make me into someone I'm not, you're wrong."

"No, Mike. That's not what I think." He patted my arm to comfort me. "It scared her. Hell, it scared me. And then what you said at the grave, your fainting... The nightmare you had. Maybe it was a bad idea to come here. I've been avoiding it for years. I should have stayed away. Better for everyone, really."

I pushed away from him and raked my fingers through my hair. "Look, I don't know what you and this dead guy did. I don't know why your cousin is so involved in it either. But I've seen some weird shit since you told me about Nicolas, shit that's creeping me out. Maybe I'm resentful that he had you before me. Maybe I hate it that you had a wife before we met. But I'm beginning to think that what I've seen is real."

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Demitri sat up and stared at me. “What did you see? Tell me. I want to understand.”

“I think it’s a ghost. Twice in the doorway.” I pointed. “And once there I got all dizzy when I walked through it. I heard a voice whispering your name. Then, at the cemetery, like I said, I saw something...a mist. Like a fog. And just now, the thing with Lukia, and before I asked you to kiss me, I saw the ghost again.”

With the lights out, I couldn’t see his expression. I waited for him to laugh at me or tell me I’d lost my mind. Instead he said, “I’m not sure I believe in ghosts.”

I peeked at the doorway, empty now. “I never did, until now.”

“What should we do?” He moved close to me and wrapped his arms around my body, drawing me toward him.

“I don’t know, Demitri. I...think it’s Nicolas. Maybe he wants to tell you something. Maybe you need to make peace with him. I have no idea.”

“He left me. Not the other way around.”

I let myself be cradled against my lover’s chest. He rubbed his hand up and down my arm while he confessed more of his past. “Things kept on between us for years with Lukia looking out for us. Meetings in the pond, the woods, in dark alleys and once, even in a closet. Kind of ironic, really.”

I laughed under my breath.

“Then, one morning, he came over to Lukia’s to meet with me. His sister was waiting outside and followed without us knowing. I’ll never forget that day.”

I glanced at the doorway. The darkness there thickened. Demitri went on. I wanted to tell him what I saw, but a cold feeling crept along my spine, and my voice dried up in my throat. All I can guess is that Nicolas wanted to hear the story as well.

“The three of us walked past the bakery and cut off into the woods. We went to our usual spot. Lukia stayed up on the hill, reading a book while Nicolas and I trudged down for some privacy in the thick bushes. We sat on the ground, the earth cool and moist beneath us, and he squeezed my hand so tight it hurt. ‘I have something to tell you,’ he had said. ‘And I hope you will understand.’”

The shadows in the doorway moved toward the bed, toward us, toward me. Demitri had paused, to gather his words or for effect, I’m not sure which. In that small silent moment, I wanted to scream. I needed to tell him that the ghost had returned, but the specter’s icy hand closed over my mouth, and my voice dried up in my throat. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t fight back. I had become a helpless witness to what would happen next.

Demitri's chest rose and fell in choked gasps. I knew he was crying and trying his best not to. It took some time for him to go on. "So, I told him to tell me. I figured it was something about his mom, nothing big. Then Nicolas leaned in and kissed me softly. He frowned when he pulled away. 'I'm going to ask Lukia to marry me,' he said. It was the last thing I expected, and I knew why he was doing it.

"'You can't do that to her. It's not fair,' I told him. 'It's a lie.' He just shrugged and tried to pull away from me. I was nineteen then, and he was almost twenty-two. But I was stronger than him. I pushed him down against the ground and held him in place. Leaves and dirt tangled in his hair. He looked mad, but not really that mad. I think it was then that I knew I was in love with him. I couldn't stand the thought of him being with anyone else—even if it was all fake."

I wanted to ask Demitri a thousand questions. Part of me knew and understood. Nicolas wanted to marry Lukia so no one would talk. Maybe he'd gotten tired of trying to be himself and decided to live the way everyone expected. The ghost's fingers crushed my mouth until I felt the cold of its misty form slipping past my skin. My body reacted by tensing.

Demitri noticed and pulled me up. "Are you okay, Mike?"

My muscles relaxed. I went limp. My mind spun with colorful images of flowers and when I breathed in, I smelled the heady incense of the church we'd been in that night—lemon and roses—thick and pungent, enough to make me gag.

"Mike!" He shook me once, gently. "Michael!" Demitri swore under his breath in Greek.

I blinked to clear my vision. My mouth opened, and words spilled out that were not my own, and not English. Demitri's eyes widened. He released me and backed away until he stumbled off the bed. He stood near the doorway, ready to run, but transfixed by the spirit that spoke through me. Though I was present, much as it had been at the café with Lukia, I was not a part of this conversation. It went on in Greek, in rushed words I could not decipher. I heard the word *agape* pass from my lips. The soul that had possessed me willed my body to stand.

In stiff steps I approached my lover, forced to do so by the entity within me. Together, we cupped Demitri's cheeks with my hands and leaned forward to kiss his lips. "*Sygnome*," my voice said. "*Sygnome, agape*."

Tears dribbled from my lover's eyes.

Cold spread out from my body. Shadows darkened the room and left us, all alone with just each other. "Demitri?" I kept my hands on his face, unsure of what to do.

"Michael?"

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“Yeah.”

He fastened his arms around my waist and pulled me tight against him. He didn't say anything, as he held me close and sobbed against my shoulder.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RESURRECTION

I hadn't slept well at all on the floor with my lover's head in my lap, and my back propped against the wall. I had sat there and stared at the doorway, wondering if Nicolas had left us, or if some part of him now resided in me. Late the next morning, we stopped by Lukia's house. She was in the kitchen dyeing a massive pot full of Easter eggs. The red water within looked like blood to me. Demitri greeted his cousin and then promptly left us alone. He wandered out the back door to the yard beyond where I heard him speaking with two other men. He hadn't invited me to go with him. I knew his mood. He wanted to be apart from me to sort out what had happened the night before.

"Good morning," I said.

Lukia stirred the pot, pulled an egg to the surface and examined it before settling it back into the water. She set her slotted spoon in a bowl by the stove and turned to face me. Her eyes welled with unshed tears. Her full lips smiled in a forced way. "Yassou Mixalis," she said, and took hold of me in a crushing embrace. The first kiss she placed on my cheek seared into my skin. The second, on my opposite cheek burned in the same way. "Kalimera."

"I'm sorry if I upset you last night."

She nodded. "It is nothing. Today, I make the eggs for tomorrow. The lamb goes on the spit early in the morning. You and Demitri will come, no?"

"Yes." I found it strange that she avoided what had happened last night.

She bit at her bottom lip. Her dark eyes searched my face. For what, I couldn't be sure.

"How did Nicolas die?" I asked.

She made a small groan. Her hand clasped mine, warm and soft. "I will tell you what I know. Demitri and Nicolas fought one time. Down by the trees—our secret place. But their fight turned into something more. I wasn't watching..." She sighed. Looking back at the pot, she went on. "I was reading my book. Maria, Nicolas's sister, saw them together."

"Oh."

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“It is my fault.”

I realized that her hand felt very familiar in mine, as if I had held it a thousand times before now. Although I had liked her before that day, the emotions that swelled in my chest were different now—stronger. I slipped my hand from hers, disliking the sensation. “Then what happened?”

She stared at the floor for a moment. I could tell my pulling away hurt her. Lukia went back to work, dipping eggs from the dye and setting them on paper towels to dry. “A few days later, Nicolas joined the church. He went away for school. His mother said how proud she was that her son was giving himself to God.”

“And then Demitri left for America?”

Lukia nodded.

“I got one letter from Nicolas, two years after he moved to the monastery. I kept it.” She sniffled. The last of the eggs rested safely in place. “All it said was: Sygnome, agape.” She washed her hands in the sink and looked out the little window to the backyard. Demitri was there, helping another man move a metal spit into place. “I’m sorry, my love,” she translated. Chills ran down my spine. “I’m sure he meant the letter for Demitri.” Lukia faced me. He hung himself in a little prayer room.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I had wanted to know, but now that I did, a shock of foreboding went through me. My connection to this dead man’s spirit frightened me. I wanted to go home—back to where no one I knew got together for religious holidays, and the past remained unspoken. It was safer there, safer not knowing these things about Demitri. But now they had touched me and become a part of my life.

“Mike?”

“Yes?”

She set her hand on my cheek, her fingers shaking, but warm. Her thumb ran across my lips in a soft caress. This is what I had done to her the night before. Tingles swept through my body.

“What’s happening?” I asked, beneath her touch. “Why is this happening to me?” I took her wrist in my fist.

Her fingers halted. She turned her head slightly to the side with a curious look.

Behind her, I saw Demitri staring at me through the window. His brown eyes looked haunted and darkness lingered beneath them. He was tired like I was. This trip and its revelations were taking a toll on both of us.

“Nicolas is still...here.”

I released her hand. “Maybe.” After turning my back on her, I stomped out of the small kitchen and through the hallway. In the backyard I tried to keep my composure. The men stared at me until Demitri came over and introduced us. Neither spoke English, but shook my hand and smiled, offering a slew of kindness in words I didn’t understand.

We spent the rest of the morning arranging tables and chairs in the yard. With all of the preparations done, my lover and I left Lukia’s house and walked toward home. The perfume of the flowers growing in Nicolas’s old yard followed us. I sneezed a few times before we reached the grape trellis covered patio. “How are you?”

“As well as can be expected. You?”

“I’m not sure. I’m scared,” I told him. “I don’t get what’s happening to me.”

A yellow taxi wound its way along the cobbled road before it pulled up in front of the house. I craned my neck to see who had arrived. Demitri’s mother got out. “Yassou!” she called merrily to us. With a wave, she diminished any hope I had of this vacation getting better. Now we would be stuck in the house with her—no privacy, no sleeping in the same room.

Demitri sighed and forced a fake smile. He greeted her with kisses to each cheek and then went to gather her one suitcase from the trunk. We all went inside. I picked up our bedroom a bit, wondering which of us would end up on the couch that night.

His mother took hold of my arm when I came out of the room. “Mixalis, are you well?” she asked in heavily accented English. There was genuine concern in her eyes. “Demitri feeds you?”

I nodded. “I’m good.”

She hugged me, which threw me off guard. I hadn’t thought she knew any English, but maybe that was the extent of it. She set off toward the small kitchenette to inspect the refrigerator and take stock of what we had.

“I’m going to lie down for a while,” Demitri told me. He placed a hand on my shoulder, patted once, and then left me all alone with his mom. I decided to make the best of it. After seating myself at the table by the kitchen, I watched her start a soup on the stove. She shot me jovial sideways glances every so often, but the language barrier kept us mostly silent or speaking with our hands.

I wished I could slink into the bedroom and sleep away her presence, but I was too afraid of what she might think. The house soon filled with the delicious scent of onions and oil. She rinsed a colander full of lentils and chopped tomatoes into small pieces.

I smiled and nodded. “Smells good,” I told her.

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She smiled and nodded back.

A tingle swept over my body. It felt like the ghost was with me again, pressing at my control. I fought him. My temples began to thrum with pain. Reaching up with both fingers, I touched my temples and rubbed at the sides of my head.

It took me a while to notice that Demitri's mother had stopped what she was doing and stared at me, her eyes wide. She whispered and made the sign of the cross three times, then blew at me in some sort of ritualistic manner. The pain subsided. I realized something about this village. There was a special kind of magic here, all tangled in with faith. She believed what she was doing would help me, a non-believer in anything of a spiritual nature, and somehow, her faith had pushed away the entity that had fused with me.

Maybe she didn't like what was going on between her son and I, but Demitri's mother meant me no harm. "Efreristo," I told her, and got up from the seat to go around the counter. She looked up at me with her big, brown eyes. I put my arms around her shoulders and hugged her.

She smiled again, looking bewildered, and then pulled away with a wave of her hand. His mother set back to work on her soup, and I watched, paying close attention so that I could try the recipe when I returned to the states.

* * * *

That evening, the three of us set off to church, Demitri's mother chattering on to him so fast that I could hardly make out where the words began and ended. The little chapel on the hill was crowded, so much so that we couldn't fit inside. We bought white candles from a little, old man selling them outside.

"White for Christ," Lukia said, joining us. She wore a fanciful spring dress and her hair was up in a bun. "Demitri taught you what to say?"

I nodded.

"You remember the words."

"No, but I will hide behind you."

She giggled at me, drawing Demitri's mother's attention. The two women said their hellos and exchanged the formal kisses on each cheek in hushed voices. We spent the rest of the evening watching the ceremony as best we could. Inside I noticed that women sat on one side of the church

and men sat on the other. How must it have been to grow up in this village? How would it have been to be gay here?

Midnight brought the clanging of church bells. The lights went out in the small church. A single candle flickered at the forefront of the chapel, alone. The priest went to pass that light to the first person in the pew nearest him. That person passed the flame to the next candle and then the next, until everyone inside held a lit white candle. The congregation filtered outside into the stone courtyard with us, lighting the candles of those who could not fit inside. The priest came too, followed by a small choir and altar boys bearing staffs that had religious symbols on them.

My candle was a connection to the people here, to a higher purpose and a calling I did not fully understand.

I felt dizzy then, and the unmistakable wave of *déjà vu* that swept over me caused me to pinch my eyes closed. I had never seen this—never been a part of this ceremony, and yet I had, or rather, *he* had. A shudder overtook me. My fingers tightened on the candle and the ghost forced open my eyes. I felt him push his way to the forefront of my mind.

“Christos anesti,” my voice said to Lukia.

“Alethos anesti,” she replied, looking pleased that I had mastered the words. My hand reached for hers and our fingers knotted together. A sizzle of familiarity ran through me.

“Christos anesti,” Demitri said, and I felt his finger curl into my belt loop, a protective gesture.

“Alethos anesti, agape.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. He knew. I knew he knew I wasn’t able to control what was coming out of my mouth or what I might do.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested.

Lukia nodded.

Demitri explained to his mother, and although she looked displeased, she nodded and dismissed the three of us as we meandered away, our candles casting flickering glows on our faces. We followed the cobbled road for a time before we veered off into the trees. I heard extra thoughts in my mind, Nicolas’ thought, all in Greek, all foreign to me. The stabbing pain of loss and regret pierced my consciousness, and for the first time I wondered if he had possessed me out of sheer loneliness, or if he only longed for one last time with his former lover.

“He is with us now,” Demitri said.

Lukia nodded.

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My body made no response. A starburst of color exploded before my eyes. Then darkness consumed me. I heard voices, felt hands on my body. The colors melded into a pattern, a leaded glass window backlit by the sun. Nicolas was trying to tell me, to tell *us* something.

I heard a whispered prayer and felt someone's soft breath puff against my face three times. When I opened my eyes, it was Lukia who was looking down on me. At my back, Demitri held my limp body in his arms to keep me from falling. The wave of pressure that had pressed in on my head vanished.

"What happened?" I asked. It was so dark with only moonlight filtering down from the trees to offer any light.

"Nicolas spoke to me—through you."

It took me a moment to focus on what his words meant. "Well, what did he say?"

"I need to go the monastery."

Lukia wiped at her cheek, erasing what must have been tears. "You should not go."

I felt weak and tired. Beside me on the fallen leaves laid our candles, all burnt out, the flame we had shared with the church now lost—the connection broken. I sucked in a choked breath and wept. Why it should bother me so much, I couldn't explain, but I wanted that light back. I needed it in my hands, to hold it, to be a part of it. There was unification in that light.

"It's all right," Demitri said. He kissed my cheek. "Mike, this is all going to stop. We can go home after tomorrow, cut this trip short. I never should have come back."

Lukia backed away from us. "That is wrong, Demitri. You never should have left. If you had been here, if you had stayed, maybe this—"

"Nico chose his path. I didn't push him down it!" He continued on in Greek, and I was left out, forgotten, as the two of them broke into a heated argument.

I stepped away from my lover, no longer in need of his arms to support me. "Enough of this. Tomorrow, we go to the monastery, and we face whatever this means—together. That's the way it should be." I folded my arms across my chest, angry now. "You've kept enough secrets from me. I want to know you! I want understand. If you expect me to stay with you, I need to know about your life before me. No more secrets."

"This isn't my secret. It belongs to Nicolas."

Lukia sniffled. "I can't go. I can't go to that place again."

Demitri nodded and spoke softly to her in Greek. She took a step toward me, glanced at the fallen candles, and then left. I watched her trudge through the woods on her way back to the road, feeling like she was a piece of this puzzle that needed to fit but never would.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUNDAY MORNING

Easter morning came to me where I lay on the couch, the sun shimmering through an open window to warm my face. I could hear Demitri and his mother outside talking, and the sounds of roosters crowing. I sat up and ran my hands through my hair. Today was the big day we had been waiting for. Easter in Greece, and a visit to the monastery where Nicolas had died. I got up and folded the throw I'd slept beneath and then set it neatly on the armrest of the couch. It was chilly and I needed a shower. I walked to the bathroom and shuddered when I stepped through the doorway.

"Leave me alone," I said to the dizzy chill that tried to seduce me. "Or I'll have his mother send you away again." I closed the door behind me and heard laughter in my head, a low chuckle. "It's not funny at all."

I showered as fast as I could, anxious to be at Demitri's side. As the soap slid over my skin, guided by my hand, I felt Nicolas push at my defenses. It was a gentle nudge, a sharing of sorts. My hand swept down to my pubic hairs, massaging the soap back and forth. Goose bumps broke out on my arms. I wasn't in control again. I closed my eyes, focusing on the entity and my need for him to leave.

Gentle fingers slipped over the head of my dick. A voice whispered in my ear in very broken English. "Don't...fear." He guided my hand down the length of my sex, awakening desire and lust. Ghostly lips caressed my neck then worked up to my earlobe. I swear I felt the thickness of another man's cock jutting against my wet thigh.

"This isn't right," I said.

Mischievous laughter filled my head, winking out as suddenly as it had occurred. The soap slipped from my hand and plopped onto the tile floor.

I looked down at my hand and frowned. Water rushed over my body, washing away the suds and the guilt. I hadn't done anything wrong. I didn't ask for the ghost of my lover's past to hop into the shower with me and share tips on arousing men. "I'm losing it."

I bent and retrieved the soap. After placing it back on its plastic shelf, I turned and rinsed a final time. The water shut off with a firm twist to the handle. I towed dry and dressed hastily in semi casual pants and a clean white shirt.

When I emerged from the house, Demitri looked up at me from where he sat on the patio by his mother. "Did you sleep well?" Concerned lines crinkled his forehead.

"As good as can be expected."

He smiled at me. "You hungry?"

I rubbed my stomach. "Always."

We headed out to Lukia's house, Demitri's mother at my side. She was unusually quiet and distant, staring off to the side of the road. With her there, I felt safe. She had made the ghost stop before, so what reason would there be for it to come again in her presence?

"Is there magic in your family?" I asked my lover. "Some voodoo stuff I should know about?"

He repressed a chortle. "No. What makes you ask that?"

"Yesterday when the headache started and you were asleep, your mother made it stop. She said some words and blew on me, made the sign of the cross a few times."

Demitri laughed. "She thought you had the eye."

"The eye?"

"Yeah." He stared up at Nicolas' window as we passed the house, the sweet scent of flowers overwhelming. "The evil eye. Superstitious thing."

"But, it worked. It made him stop."

Demitri shook his head. "If you want to believe in it, go ahead, but I don't."

We walked around to the backyard of Lukia's house where a gathering of people were busy feasting and dancing. Music filtered through the air from a portable radio, and men's boisterous voices belted out the words to the tune. Lukia's mother sat in a cushioned patio chair by the back door, and she waved to Demitri's mom.

"What do you believe?" I asked him. "Do you believe in God, in ghosts, that Nicolas really is here with us right now?"

"I believe Nicolas never left me." Demitri looked away, his mood distant. "Maybe some things should never have happened, but that's how life is. I can't take back my past, no more than he could have done anything other than what he did at the time." He frowned and stalked away from

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me then. Demitri shook hands with the men, most of whom were probably his cousins or distant relatives.

I went to sit at the long table that had been arranged on Lukia's back patio. Surrounded by their relatives, the air buzzing with foreign words, the scent of lamb roasting on the spit, and good things to eat before me, I suddenly felt that I belonged in this moment. This despite my lover's dark mood. So many things did not make sense to me here, but this moment did. It was simple. Old as time itself, it was a gathering of people to rejoice. I could do that well enough. I could eat, drink, and be merry. Goodness knows, I needed to.

When the men pulled the lamb from the spit and cut it up into portions, Demitri finally joined the table. Lukia smiled from beside me before she offered a red dyed egg. "It is good you are here with us, Mike. I am happy today."

I nodded and took the offering. Following suit with the others, we tried to break each others' eggs in a game for luck. Mine smashed the top of hers, and my neighbor's as well. Demitri looked on from the opposite side of the table, a sad sort of smile on his face. His egg lay decimated on a napkin before him.

A sensation akin to electricity buzzed in the air, and the *déjà vu* I had come to expect washed over me. Maybe I needed to be here, and maybe Nicolas did too. I suppose he was missing his past life and taking joy in being able to reconnect with it even if he had to do so through a gawky, awkward guy from the states. Visions flashed through my mind of Lukia and Demitri in younger years—the ghost's vision. Happiness filled me, shared and yet not totally divided. This time, I didn't fight him when he pushed into my mind. Instead, I let him take over. My hand found Lukia's and squeezed. She jumped at the contact, but didn't pull away.

Across the table, my lover nodded at me.

We ate and wiled away an hour talking over the food until it was time to go.

As I hugged Lukia in the doorway of her house later, I knew I would likely never see her again—or was that Nicolas' thought?

We left in the rental car, Demitri driving with his window down and the wind ruffling his thick hair. He looked worried, haunted even, with dark circles under his eyes, and his lips pursed in a stern line. We drove along the main road that wound up the mountain. The scenery kept drawing my eye, olive trees, stone houses, orchards, and sheep. Time passed slowly until he finally broke the silence between us.

"What do you think will happen when we get there?"

I shrugged. “No clue.”

“Is he... I mean...does he talk to you?”

I thought of the shower and the way my hand had moved without my willing it to do so.

“He did say something to me this morning.” Guilt flushed my face. It had felt good in a creepy way.

“What?”

“Don’t fear.”

Demitri’s lips tightened. He slowed for a herd of goats that were crossing the road. With a nod, he drew my attention to the stone building high on the hill. The sun was behind the clouds, but a single ray cast light on the monastery. “Almost there.”

Emotions clouded my vision. I wanted to cry, to be in that place, to stay there, and reach for the light that had evaded my life—or the life of the ghost sharing my soul. As the car climbed up the narrow road to the stone building beyond, the lines that parted Nicolas and from my consciousness became blurred. Who was I? How had I come to this place? Fear rippled down my spine when we pulled in to the modest gravel parking lot. Demitri had to open the door for me and nudge my shoulder before I would step out. When I did, a crisp breeze blew through my hair, chilling my skin. I had been here before, a long time ago. I wanted to be here, to be safe, to deny who and what I was—to dedicate myself to a higher power. But I knew I would fail. My fingers tingled.

Demitri took my hand and squeezed. “Should we go back home?” He stared at me, deep into my eyes, his own full of worry. “Or you could stay here, wait in the car maybe.”

“No,” Nicolas answered for me. “Don’t fear.”

My lover nodded and started for the entry, his expression grim.

I had become a silent witness within my body again.

Past the arches, we walked through an immaculate garden. A priest came to greet us, dressed all in black, his beard and hair long and combed. He spoke to Demitri. I was but a shadow, a vessel carrying a spirit on its final journey to complete whatever task it needed done before it could move on.

The priest fed us sweets covered with powdered sugar. He offered us cool water and invited us to join in their meal, but Demitri asked only to see the room where Nicholas had lived. Across brick walkways, past modest rooms and the chapel, we journeyed. My body felt light, my heart a rampaging beat slamming inside my chest. I looked up at a two story building and saw a stained glass window. It was familiar. I had seen it in my nightmares many times by then.

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The priest took us to a long, old building lined with wooden doors. As it was the holiest of days for them, there was no one to slow us down. Nicolas's old room was at the end of the line, the last door. We were led inside into a cramped, dark place that looked like it hadn't been used in many years. Here I felt nothing but the cold layer of control over me. There were no memories here that the ghost cared to share with me.

The priest and my lover exchanged more words. Then we were left alone. I watched as the black clothed man marched away.

"Mike?" Demitri stepped in front of me. "He said we can stay as long as we want, and that if we care to join them to dine in the main hall afterward, that we are welcome."

I wanted to speak, to warn him, but the cold would not allow my interference. I suddenly needed to go to that room on the second story of the building, the room with the stained glassed window. I knew how to get there, just which way to turn, and which stairs would take me to that place. I walked away, and behind me, my lover followed. He had to hurry to keep up.

I could have walked there with my eyes closed. Through a side door, I entered the building. It was like my dreams, full of corridors. Half expecting dark robed men to chase me, I sprinted toward the steps that led round and round to the second floor.

"Michael!" my lover shouted, and anger filled me.

"He should call me Nicolas, not Michael. Doesn't he know me by now? Doesn't he see what I have done? I waited for him to come back to me. Know all the lonely nights I spent in this room, begging for a way out of what I did. There were some in the place like me, but they denied who and what they were. I did too, until it drove me beyond reason, and the one voice I used to hear in my head became two and then three, more and more, until they spoke in a cacophony of voices and told me to do things—terrible things. But how could I? How could I hurt those around me? Now, I am the voice, and you must listen. Demitri will know what to do. When his mouth claims mine, when his warm hands slide up this body and hold me to him, everything will be all right. The world will stop spinning. The voices will be silent—including yours. I will be Nicolas again."

Nicolas forced me to take a deep breath and push open the door. This room was his sanctuary, the place he was alone, where he bent at the altar and prayed for forgiveness.

"Why was I been made this way? Everyone else fits into place, except me. I want what you have."

I tried to speak. I needed to warn Demitri, but Nicolas made me be silent.

He urged my hands to tear away my clothes until I stood nude. I heard Demitri's footfalls on the steps, his cries for me to slow down.

"It was Easter Sunday as it was so many years ago when I last climbed upon this altar."

Glancing up, I noticed ropes that led to a bell high above. I jumped atop the stone, the cold of it, icy beneath my bare feet. With both hands I took hold of the rope. The bell clanged, soft and melodious. After curling the rope into the fist of my hand, I spun three times until the slack caught around my throat, tightening, holding me still, shortening my breaths.

Demitri burst into the doorway, his brown eyes wide, his mouth open in surprise. “Michael, what are you doing?” He took a step toward me.

I took a step toward the edge of the altar. The voice in my head told me to fall forward—to end our new life together. My toes wriggled at the edge. *Nicolas*, I thought, frantic, *there are not many second chances*.

The ghost was jealous of me, of the fact that I had his lover, that he had taken what was mine once. I stepped over the edge of the altar, terrified. My body fell forward. I waited for the crunch of my neck, for I remembered that too, from the shared memories Nicolas poured into my mind.

“No!” Demitri came for me then. His strong arms encircled me. The bell gave one loud clang. Then he was turning me, freeing me from my self-made bonds.

“I am loved once again. I am Demitri’s, and when he looks into your eyes, he sees past your face.”

Demitri whispered, “Nicolas.” His lips quivered as he lowered his mouth to mine. I tasted him. Our tongues touched. The lost soul within me recalled every stolen kiss, every longing embrace, and I feared that my time in this world was over.

CHAPTER NINE: AFTER

I drew in a deep breath and tasted my lover's scent. The dizziness receded. The chill I felt was not from the entity that had taken over my body, but from my lack of clothes. I turned my head and stared up at the angel in the leaded glass window. In my nightmares it had seemed vile, a colorful witness to something horrible, but now, as light showed through its face in a thick ray, I realized that the angel was only watching. It could not help what had happened in this little prayer room no more than Demitri could have.

"It's over," I said.

"Mike?"

I nodded.

He breathed a sigh of relief and cradled me in his arms. If we were caught in this position, I'm sure the priests would have thrown us out, but as it was, no one came to see why the bell above had sounded off. No one discovered us there as we clung desperately to each other, touched and changed by a chilling visit from Demitri's past.

"I want to go home now," I said. "I never want to come back to this place."

"All right." He helped me up and gathered my fallen clothing. My fingers shook as I dressed myself. Silently, I searched my mind for some sign of Nicolas, for a fleeting hint that he still remained. It made no sense to me that he could have possessed me so completely only to vanish after sharing a kiss with my lover. Could it be that was all he wanted? To be seen one last time? To be loved and acknowledged?

On unsteady feet, I kept pace with Demitri. We wandered out, back the way we'd come, through the gardens and toward the exit, the voices of the priests far in the distance—soothing and familiar. Demitri drove us back to the village, his mouth tight with worry. I said nothing. Exhaustion made black circles cloud my vision. The scenery outside the window no longer entranced me. I stared straight ahead at the lines painted on the road as they slipped past the car and we left so much behind us.

At his grandparents' home, I got out of the car and stumbled inside. After flopping on the couch, I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the village. A rooster crowed somewhere outside. Music played elsewhere. Demitri shuttled back and forth from the bedroom we had shared to the living room. I didn't need to look to know what he was doing. The soft whisper of clothes and the rattle of our suitcase wheels told all. I listened harder to that inner silence I had known all my life, fearful of what might be hiding within me.

Demitri finished packing our belongings, poured out two glasses of Merlot, and came to sink into the couch cushions at my side. "Have a drink," he said. "Sometimes it helps."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes first. Then I look the glass and downed half. "He died all alone in that room, wishing you would come to save him."

"How could I have known? He never wrote. He left me. Had he stayed, I would have continued on with him. I loved Nicolas. He just couldn't handle the pressure of what we shared or the reality of a future together."

"It wasn't really his fault," I murmured. "If you could have him back, would you want that?"

"He's dead. What you're suggesting is impossible."

I nodded, but worried over the idea. What if it wasn't impossible? What if a soul *could* slip inside another person's body and take over, root itself in, and push out the rightful owner? Is that what had happened to me? Would I wake up one day, weeks from now, and think I was Nicolas? I sipped and swilled the red wine in my mouth, savoring the dry quality of it.

Demitri turned on the TV. We sat and watched the whole of Greece celebrating Easter on a talk show. Images taken from different parts of the country flashed on the screen at intervals.

Easter. Resurrection. Rebirth. I shuddered.

We drank the rest of the bottle down. By the time his mother arrived home, my mind was buzzing with pins and needles. The alcohol had loosened up my tongue. I could say anything I wanted, so I clenched my teeth and tried to stay quiet. My lover and his mother exchanged words as I stood and made my way toward the bedroom. I wanted to sleep on the mattress, not on the couch again. When I reached the doorway, I hesitated, a chill tingling at the base of my skull. What if it started again? What if Nicolas was still with me, waiting for the opportune moment.

I sucked in a harried breath and stepped through.

Nothing.

No dizziness.

GHOST OF HIS PAST

The bed looked good. I climbed atop it and stared at the doorway, awaiting the return of the shadow I had seen there many times by then. He didn't come, and I drifted off to sleep my last night in Greece. No dreams haunted me. No nightmares of a past long lost tormented my sleep.

* * * *

In the morning, we said our goodbyes to Demitri's mother and made the tedious drive to Athens. After we boarded the plane, I truly felt like this strange ordeal was over. We sat down and put away our carry-on luggage. My lover slipped his fingers into mine and squeezed. "It will be good to be home again," he said with a wan smile. "Good to have everything back to the way it was before."

"Yes." I stared out the window and wondered if things would be. My own feelings of jealousy, of regret that I had not been his one and only lover, seemed trivial now. The sideways stare of the woman in the next aisle, who so blatantly was offended by our open show of affection, no longer bothered me. Who was she, or anyone else for that matter, to tell me I could not love? What right did the world have to dictate happiness or norms or what is right and what is wrong when it comes to matters of the heart?

I leaned over and kissed Demitri on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"I love you. I always will, no matter what. And I will never be afraid of who sees that or what other people think. I love you and I want you to know. I want the world to know."

He nodded, his eyes sparkling with sadness. "I love you, too."

A familiar chill caressed my skin. Goose bumps prickled up and down my arms, but I ignored the sensation and the strange pressure in the back of my mind. Demitri was my lover now, no matter what ghosts lingered in his past.

LIAM DRAKE

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Liam Drake writes gay erotic romance and speculative fiction with a heavy focus on horror. He resides in the states with his muse, Vincent, and can be found online from time to time, when he isn't writing or gardening, at his blog.

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