



DEEPER BLUE

A NOVEL

A. J.
LEWELLYN

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My God, Tracy thought. *He's cruising me!*

This went on for a minute. Tracy glanced at Desi, whose face was now smashed into an airline cushion, making him think of one of Sharla's titty huggers.

The Adonis left his seat and moved in the direction of the toilets. Tracy saw him waiting and watched as one of the cubicles opened up and, with a final glance in Tracy's direction, he entered and closed the door.

Afraid of making a total fool of himself, Tracy unbuckled his seatbelt and advanced cautiously. He had no idea what furtive instinct propelled him forward because this was not his style at all, but something inside him screamed, "It's now or never." It had been a long time for him and the flesh was oh-so-willing. He approached the cubicle in question and took a deep breath when he saw that the illuminated latch indicated it was occupied. He reached out a hand and, man, he had trouble with it. He was not being discreet at all...

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BY

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DEEPER BLUE
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To Goddess Pele, for all she inspires in me.

CHAPTER 1

“So, what do you think?”

Tracy didn’t know what to think and gazed across the table at Sharla.

“Come on, truth. Give it to me with both barrels. I can take it.”

That was the problem. Sharla couldn’t take it and their wonderful teatime would be ruined. He glanced around the lavish, thirty-fifth-floor lobby bar of the Mandarin Oriental as if the correct, most acceptable answer would pop out of the wall and jump right on top of the starched white napkin on his lap.

“Oh, my God, it’s that bad?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s bad. It’s...” He held up the doughy figure with the bulging eyes and tried not to laugh. It was ugly, to say the least.

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With an impatient sigh, Sharla reached across the table and took it out of his hand, shoving it between her plump breasts. “He’s a titty hugger.”

Tracy looked away. “Lucky guy.” His gaze strayed over the stunning view of Central Park, with Columbus Circle below them. Last time they’d been here, snow kissed the tops of the tallest trees, sunlight fighting nature for its share of the floorshow.

Now it was shimmering hot, the city a golden haze. Yes, New York was the big apple. A giant, golden delicious apple.

“You don’t like him.” Sharla picked up the teapot and poured them each a second cup.

Tracy studied his fraternal twin for a moment. They rarely looked alike, except in small, unguarded moments. The nape of her neck, an amused look, and he could see himself clearly. They both had dark hair and blue eyes, not uncommon from their father’s town in northern Greece.

At the age of thirty, their lives were very different, but their love for one another as fierce as ever.

“See.” She moved the titty hugger around. “He’s my bust buddy.”

Tracy laughed. Since his curly-haired, bubbly sister had given up her job at a movie production company in favor of married, maternal bliss, Sharla had embraced increasingly odd craft schemes. The end results were sometimes pleasurable. Tracy loved it when she took to making caramels, testing all her recipes out on her husband Max and Tracy. Then she discovered crafts. Each new passion engendered creations that were all more hideous than Tracy could possibly imagine.

They also seemed to involve a lot of money and endless accessories. She went everywhere with bags and bundles. This

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time, she'd arrived with a tiny purse and little faces peering out of her cleavage, garnering stares across the thirty-fifth-floor lobby. The hotel was exquisite, if you liked clean lines and impeccable service and didn't mind eye-popping prices. Tracy liked the place. He liked the service and the utter New York-ness of it. A nice way to say goodbye to the city.

No, he told himself. *A bientôt*. He'd be back.

He sipped his tea and found the doughy titty hugger staring at him from its awkward perch between Sharla's creamy breasts, one spooky eye mashed into her flesh.

"Have you sold many?" he asked as she re-crossed her shapely legs once more. The titty hugger turned with her unexpected movement. His other weird little eye pressed into her flesh.

"A few, thank you." She gulped her tea and stared across the table at him. "What's worse? These or the nipple huggers?"

Trace almost choked on the hot liquid in his mouth. "You have a boob fetish, babe."

"And you have a dick fetish," she retorted.

The waiter chose that moment to come over with two perfect pieces of black sesame cake on a square platter. "The sauce is Buddha's Hand lemon crème and, please, enjoy the fresh berries, on the house."

He whipped out a cocktail tray with one perfect, frosted glass in the middle of it. Tracy stared at it.

The drink was like a still life painting. Absolutely exquisite. Surely he wasn't expected to trample such art and...drink it?

The waiter glanced at Sharla. "And this is a gift from your sister. It's called Cupid's Arrow. Its ingredients are Stoli Raspberry, Pol Roger NV Champagne and ruby rose petals. Bon appetite."

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Tracy thanked the waiter who closed the brown velvet curtains around them, giving them a sense of being alone. Another party had taken the table beside them and the waiter had obviously sensed the twins' desire for privacy.

For a moment, Tracy eyed the plump raspberries and found himself hurtled into a nostalgic space.

"Remember when we visited Yaya's house and we pinched all the raspberries off the neighbor's bushes?" he asked.

"Oh." Sharla's beautiful, manicured fingertips moved to her lips. "Of course I remember. That's why I ordered this cocktail for you. Don't you see, my darling? This is a wonderful new start for you."

"I hate the thought of being so far away from you when Max is away, too."

"Max has no choice. And neither do you. You need to work and so does he. Greece isn't that far. Your boss promised you could come back when the baby is born. Tracy...it's going to be okay. *We* are going to be okay."

Tracy nodded, remembering the pranks they'd pulled as kids.

"Maybe I should grow raspberries and make all sorts of things with them." Sharla's brain was whirling now, he could tell.

"Yes, that's a good idea. But please, leave your poor boobies alone."

She grinned and took a spoonful of cake. "I'm thinking, you're off on a new adventure; I'm cooking up one." She stroked her swollen belly.

Tracy had hoped for the entire hour they'd had lunch that the baby would kick her so he could cop a feel, but he didn't. Not once.

"I'm going to miss you." She leaned over, spooning some of

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the cake into his mouth, and he had to admit it was delicious. The lemon had an unexpected sweetness, which counteracted the berry's tartness.

"You won't miss me. I haven't seen you for a month as it is. You can text or call or email me a hundred times a day."

"Will you respond?" Her thick, luxurious curls framed her gorgeous face, and he knew he would miss her. A licensed tutor, he'd just come off a difficult assignment in Cape Cod with a preteen who was obsessed with surfing. Now he was heading to the sea town of Molivos on the Greek island of Lesvos. This time, he'd be working with a little French girl. He knew her name was Marjo and she was six. He knew she and her father were spending the summer on the island. Tracy was to spend time with her, show her the island, read with her and play with her. That was about it.

He thought about her father. He'd been nice enough. He was a Parisian musician, but refused to discuss music. Most musicians he knew loved to talk about music.

"I hear he's a freak about his music. Won't be recorded or whatever," Sharla said, reading his thoughts as usual.

"Yeah, I noticed. I couldn't find much about him on the Internet."

"Max is a fan...he saw him playing in Paris before we were married. Sweetie, please take a sip of that drink," Sharla whispered. "I'm killing myself here because I'm knocked up and can't touch a drop."

"Just for you." He picked it up and raised the glass. It was surprisingly heavy. "Here's mud in your eye."

Sharla laughed. "Classy, babe. Very classy."

The cocktail was superb.

"Don't you think Cupid's Arrow is the perfect name for it?"

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she asked, watching him closely.

He would never let on that the drink was a total thrill. He was too busy being surprised at the way his toes curled with sheer joy in his shoes.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, taking another sip.

“You’re going to meet someone there. I just know it. You’re going to fall in love again.”

* * *

An hour later, he was naked, but in no immediate danger of falling in love. Tracy was in more immediate danger of going crazy from having to strip naked and submit to very personal scrutiny inside a tiny office off the security checkpoint at JFK airport. It always happened to him. Since he’d been in a bad car accident and had almost his entire right shoulder replaced with titanium rods, he’d felt like a marked man. In spite of carrying copies of his x-rays, medical report and a notarized doctor’s letter, he was always hassled.

“Mr. Costantino, why do you have a European passport?” the security officer asked him once he gave Tracy permission to put his clothes back on.

A pudgy, middle-aged man who kept pushing ill-fitting glasses up the bridge of his nose, he eyed Tracy as if expecting him to start frothing pea soup from his mouth, or producing a hidden assault weapon out of thin air.

“I have dual citizenship. I’m an American citizen, but my sister and I had Greek parents who recorded our births in Greece so we could come and go as we pleased.”

“You can do that on an American passport.”

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Tracy shook his head. “No, I can’t work over there without a European passport. It’s illegal. ”

Tracy couldn’t believe this guy was going through every last piece of paper in his messenger bag. He needed his European passport for his new job and to travel throughout Europe easily, without any concern about visas and fees. He needed his American passport to get into Greece without being questioned about his participation, or lack thereof, in the country’s armed forces.

It was a mandatory requirement once Greek men became of age to serve for two years. Tracy had neatly avoided it by traveling on his US passport and spending long years away from his father’s homeland. He never expected to find himself in detention in his own country feeling like a terrorist.

“What happened to your shoulder?” the security officer asked. “Looks like a nasty injury.”

“It was.” He had a brief flashback of falling through the rear windshield and felt the tears pricking the back of his eyes. “Car accident.”

The security officer nodded and picked up Tracy’s American passport again.

With a jolt, Tracy remembered that the passport would give him access to discounted Eurail tickets. *Wait, I’ve done nothing wrong.* He mentally shook himself. The security officer looked across the desk at him and opened up the letter Benoit Seguin had sent Tracy, reminding him of their meeting in New York and offering him the job of tutoring his daughter for six months.

“And what is this?” The security officer held up a doughy figure between two fingers.

Oh man, that cooked his goose...for sure. “That’s a tit...little good luck charm from my sister.”

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The security officer looked at the titty hugger's face a little more closely.

"He's ugly, but...you know, my sister made it."

"Is she, um...handicapped?" the security officer asked.

"Only in the area of taste," Tracy said and then felt horribly disloyal.

The security officer actually smiled. One last look under an infrared light and another sweep of some other black pen-like gadget and he handed Tracy his passports and e-ticket back, a glum look on his face. It was as if he was disappointed not to find anything remiss.

So far Tracy's new adventure, his new beginning, was not turning out the way he'd hoped.

"Have a nice flight."

"Thanks." Tracy picked up his messenger and laptop bags. He waited until he was well past the security office to run to the departure gate for his four-thirty P.M. Olympic Airlines flight. He was one of the last to board. Ahead of him stood a dark-haired man so handsome Tracy almost dropped his laptop bag. He was tall, a little over six feet, an inch or two taller than Tracy. His skin was a classic Mediterranean caramel color. His hair was black and long, past his shoulders and pulled back into an immaculate ponytail with a black band.

His clothing was what Tracy would call shabby chic. Artfully ripped jeans showcased a hot body. A white Abercrombie and Fitch shirt, and killer, dark brown eyes made Tracy want to strip naked all over again.

There was the hint of amusement on the stranger's face as their gazes met and held. The Adonis, for this was how Tracy instantly thought of him, went ahead and Tracy followed, wending his way

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toward the back of the aircraft. He found himself sitting next to a woman he judged to be in her mid-thirties and whom he was convinced was Greek, even though she didn't look it. There was an attitude, a spark of passion all Greeks recognized in one another. He settled his bags underneath the seat in front of him and introduced himself.

She smiled. "Hi, I'm Desi."

Yep, she was Greek. "That's short for Despina, isn't it?"

She pouted. "Dang. And after I made special efforts to trim my nose hairs and the eyebrows meeting in the middle...say, what kind of name is Tracy for a guy, anyway?"

He laughed again. For some reason, he found Desi refreshing. "My father's favorite actor was Spencer Tracy."

"Humph. Good thing it wasn't Mr. T, eh?"

"Right. Or Madonna."

Desi laughed. "Where are you going?"

"Athens," he said, which was only half the truth.

"You married? Which hotel you staying at?"

Tracy started to laugh, and Desi received a text message, which kept her thumbs busy as she tapped away on her Crackberry. Tracy took advantage of her distraction and slipped in his iPod ear buds.

With a little over ten hours to occupy his time, he debated his choices. He loved movies and would definitely check out the in-flight entertainment, but he was immersed in the book he was reading about the fall of Pompeii. There was also his thesis for his Master's degree. His laptop battery had about two hours of juice. Yeah, he should start with that.

As the plane left the ground with a rumble and soared through the skies, he contemplated his first return to Greece in eighteen years. He felt a pang of remorse about not seeing his Papou, his

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granddad, in all that time. Sharla and her husband Max had been to visit him more recently and said he was so rude and unwelcoming he shouldn't bother. Except, Papou was all alone in his town of Thessaloniki. He'd outlived his wife and still owned the local bakery according to Sharla.

There was a ferry operating directly between Thessaloniki and the island of Lesbos. Tracy would visit him the first chance he got.

A smile formed on his lips while thinking of his granddad making coffee every morning and pouring it over a bowl of cereal. Tracy looked up and was startled to see his Adonis staring across the aisle at him. He was one row forward, in the aisle seat.

For a moment, Tracy wondered if he was imagining things. Maybe he was staring at Desi. He glanced beside him and saw she was sleeping, mouth agape, a touch of drool at the corner of her ruby-red lined lips. He stared back again, but the Adonis wasn't looking. Okay, so he was imagining things.

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The Adonis had to help him open it from the other side. Amusement flitted across the man's dark eyes as he reached in and pulled Tracy toward him. He laughed, a deep, wonderful laugh revealing a row of white teeth. For a moment, Tracy was mesmerized. He liked good teeth. The cubicle was cramped. Tracy squeezed into the small space and together, the two men managed to lock it. The Adonis grunted and tugged Tracy right to him, kissing him. The kisses were sweet until he cupped Tracy's head, taking his breath away.

"I love the way you taste," Tracy whispered into his mouth. He was dizzy from the other man's touch as the Adonis let his fingers stroll across Tracy's crotch, insistently rubbing the head of his cock through his jeans.

Oh great, I'm gonna have a nice wet spot soon. Tracy felt the stranger deftly flipping open his button-fly jeans, their gazes colliding as he slid down the jeans and Tracy's boxer briefs to grant him access. He was so sexy, Tracy grasping to identify the scent of the Adonis' skin. *Figs. That's how he smells. Just like fresh figs.* He thrust Tracy against the door and half-kneeling, half-crouching, his mouth moving straight to Tracy's cock.

Tracy was in shock that the Adonis had taken control. He fought the odd, chemical odor of the cubicle, more intense due to

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their combined body heat and the lack of space. He kept thinking of figs.

The stranger licked and sucked him with abandon. It inflamed Tracy, knowing people were right outside the door. An in-flight intercom announcement squawked from the wall.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned on the seatbelt sign. Please return to your seats now.”

Tracy panicked. He was so close and the Adonis knew what he was doing. He put extra pressure on the underside of Tracy’s cock with his tongue. They couldn’t stop now. The Adonis drew his mouth back and forth over the shaft. He gently held Tracy’s balls. Tracy looked down, enthralled that a complete stranger had complete control of him, even for this one moment.

He came so hard he saw fireworks and bright white lights flashing in his brain. He let out a moan as the plane experienced turbulence. The Adonis held onto his balls, rotating them in his fingers, igniting a fresh gust of fire.

A flight attendant hammered on the door.

“Sir, please return to your seat. We are experiencing high turbulence,” she shouted.

“No kidding,” Tracy murmured.

The Adonis straightened and they looked at each other, trying not to laugh.

“I want to see you again. I have to see you again,” Tracy rambled. The Adonis leaned in, touching Tracy’s nose with his and let himself out of the cubicle, leaving Tracy to hide inside the unlocked space, waiting for the stupid seatbelt light to go off.

It didn’t.

He waited and prayed that nobody realized he was lurking in there. As soon as the light went off, he heard movement and came

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out, but everyone in the cabin remained seated. As he returned to his seat, he felt every eye on him, except the Adonis, who sat with his head back, eyes closed.

Tracy felt like he was wearing a scarlet letter or a neon sign reading, whore.

The Adonis avoided his gaze for the rest of the flight. Tracy found himself feeling alternately depressed about this and buoyant that he'd even had such a fleeting, decadent experience. He was not an unattractive man, he told himself. He just wasn't the fling type...he wondered about the Adonis, who sat back, a newspaper in his hands, shielding his face from view. Was he the fling type?

Tracy pushed aside the thoughts of his failed relationship with Mikos. It was over. Mikos was never coming back. Mikos was the fling type, through and through.

Beside him, Desi stirred and began prattling about her travel plans. He barely listened, only nodding and grinning as he thought appropriate. Breakfast was a mystery meal, made allegedly of eggs and feta cheese.

"This isn't an egg." Desi jabbed the spongy yellow mass in front of her with her plastic fork.

"No?" Tracy came back to earth long enough to ask. "What do you think it is?"

She ran her tongue around her mouth like a kid, smacking her lips together. "I think it's a warmed up silicone breast implant with food dye injected into it."

Tracy and the guy in the seat next to them across the aisle roared with laughter. It was such a raucous sound, Tracy felt, rather than saw the Adonis lower his paper and gaze over at them. When he looked up, the newspaper flew back to his face again.

He was watching me...he doesn't hate me! For some reason,

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Tracy felt like skipping and dancing.

They arrived in Athens at eleven o'clock in the morning. When the plane touched down, his Adonis disappeared before Tracy even retrieved his suitcase.

Desi, swamped by family members, gave him a friendly wave.

“Don’t forget to come by, eh?” she said.

Come by where? He felt a little guilty now about not listening to a word she’d said.

He stopped at one of the many cash machines to convert some American currency into euros. Outside, Athens was as noisy as he remembered, and his eyes adjusted to the light. It was dirty, and graffiti covered every inch of wall space. As kids, their parents had brought them to Greece many times, and he grinned, watching the cars lined up at a red light. He laughed as the drivers began honking at each other. The old tradition of preparing each other for the green light was alive and well. The light changed, and Tracy crossed the road, checking the foldout timetable for the Monostiraki train station.

He had plenty of time, so he sauntered into the entrance, the swirl of activity welcoming him. It astonished him how the intact, ancient temple of Thission was a casual bystander to almost anything you could imagine being flogged at a huge flea market. Everywhere he turned, people badgered him to buy.

“*Ohi, parakalo*. No, thank you.” It was shocking how easily his Greek came back to him. The big-ticket items seemed to be anything American. Brand names swam before his eyes and he calculated the cost of things as being pretty good. It averaged that an American dollar was about one-point-three euros.

He passed a series of columns and his mind went into a tailspin. He remembered these from childhood. A library...yes, but

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which one? He remembered his grandfather's voice.

"This was the Roman emperor Hadrian's library," Papou had said. "This here was the Roman Agora and the Tower of the Winds. This was the market of Caesar and Augustus."

Papou loved the Roman history of Greece, but like many old timers did not love the Turkish influence. Many of the islands, once invaded by their nearest neighbor, had been reclaimed, but the Turkish rule had left its mark. He saw a mosque with a sign in Greek. Alas, his knowledge of the language was not good enough to decipher it at such short notice.

Just outside Syntagma Square, he grabbed a rickety table at a small café, ordering Greek coffee *meso*, medium. A man beside him played a flute. The sound was haunting. Tracy's gaze flew to the ruins of the Parthenon and he felt he'd come home. It was a wonderful feeling. He had music, history and coffee on the way. These were his essentials, the things that fuelled all his passions.

For a moment, he remembered the Adonis suckling him on the flight and he brushed the thought from his mind.

"Gypsy," he heard somebody say.

Tracy managed to slip the talented musician a few coins in his outstretched cap as a police officer entered the square on a bicycle. The flutist vanished.

The waitress brought Tracy a tray with a small, battered *briki* pot that contained enough coffee for two cups, a demitasse cup and a tiny piece of *loukoumia*, or Turkish delight, nestled in the spoon. The scent of rosewater wafted from the tiny pink square, and he demolished it in two bites, checking his itinerary again. He would take the train to the seaport of Pireaus and from there, in the evening, he would take a ferry to the island of Lesvos, a twelve-hour overnight trip.

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There was nothing keeping him in Athens, and Sharla and Max had given him a list of fun places to visit in Pireaus. His sat-phone rang. *Sharla*.

“Are you there?” she asked.

“Sitting in Syntagma Square,” he told her.

“The beggars in Athens are pitiful. The old ladies are the worst. You buy something from one, she’ll whistle and twenty of her friends will show up.”

Tracy laughed. He noticed an old lady dressed head to toe in black, hawking a box of coffee cups to the tourists cramming tables. His coffee was perfect. As a child, poor Sharla endured summers with their Yaya, their grandma, in Thessaloniki who taught her how to cook. Sharla had stood on a chair stirring coffee in the *briki* on the old stove, and Yaya would scream at her if it ever bubbled to a boil.

“Coffee without the skim on top is like a little girl going outside without her underpants on,” Yaya would yell.

Tracy had endured lessons in butchery from Papou, crying as his grandfather slaughtered rabbits and chickens for suppers he couldn’t eat. He was unable to eat either animal as an adult and never forgot the goat he’d treasured as a pet winding up in the cooking pot with fennel, rosemary and potatoes.

“I miss you already,” Sharla said. “That’s my other line. Stay in touch.”

He smoothed out the island map of Lesvos. Molivos was the main town and on the northern tip, edging out over the Aegean Sea. People said it was the most beautiful town in all of Greece, certainly on Lesvos.

Leaving money in the folds of the bill on the tray, he ran to the Monostiraki before the old beggar lady could reach him. He was

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pleased to find the train trip took just fifteen minutes. He enjoyed hearing the burst of languages around him. Coming out of the station at the far more pleasant sea town of Pireaus, he found it took longer to cross the road from the station to the seaport than it took to arrive from Athens. The lights seldom changed, and when they did, he and the other hordes ran across the road to find themselves stuck on a traffic island in the middle of the road, with traffic barely missing them on both sides.

At the NEL Lines counter, the attendant greeted him in Greek, then English. "Your reservation and information packet is ready," she said, handing him a blue envelope. "You need to be back here by six-thirty this evening. We leave at seven."

She smiled at him. "It is a twelve-hour voyage, arriving at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. We have a taxi reserved for you in Mytilini. The driver will be holding up a sign with your name on it. The taxi is all arranged, gratuity already included."

The attendant gazed up at him in the middle of her spiel. "Mr. Seguin booked you a cabin. We only have a few of those, and you will find yours is very comfortable. There are restaurants and bars on the ship. Here is your ticket and your taxi confirmation. Oh, Mr. Seguin asked that you call the family house to let them know you've arrived safely in Pireaus."

"Thank you." Tracy shuffled away and pulled out his new sat-phone. Max had persuaded him it was essential, especially if he was going to travel to other islands. This way, he would always be able to keep in touch.

The sound of the long, flat rings delighted him, so different to America. Nobody on the other end answered. He'd call back later.

"Buy a moped," had been Max's other piece of advice. "You put it on the ferry and hop off at each new island and off you go."

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Tracy noticed a moped lot across the road. He would wait on that. He was anxious to look around and grab a late lunch, but where to eat?

He asked several people and the consensus seemed to be Zea, a beachfront town farther along the coast. Some people told him Pasalimani and he was torn until he realized Pasalamani was the new name for the ancient sea town of Zea. He grabbed a taxi and the driver took him along the oceanfront, about a fifteen-minute drive, keeping up a non-stop patter about local politics. Tracy kept his eye on the passing scenery, dismayed by the plethora of military-style stores. One place had an imposing array of uzis lined up inside the window.

Other stores also displayed weapons and military-style clothing.

"Terrorists," the taxi driver shrieked. "Everywhere! Hiding. But we are ready!"

Tracy felt a sudden chill that did not lift until they arrived in Pasalimani and he paid off the taxi. Ah, now this was the Greece he wanted—the calm, peaceful Mediterranean. He watched some swimmers enjoying the ocean and gazed at the outdoor cafés lining the boardwalk. He turned to look up at a hill that the taxi driver had pointed out, but chose to stay by the sea. He tried calling the Seguin household again as he strode, but got no response.

He snagged the perfect table and ordered a Greek salad. The waiter urged him to try the *kalamarakia*, which he was pleased to discover was calamari. He agreed to both, declining a glass of white wine. He wanted to explore the harbor before he had to return to Pireaus. He was tired and knew the wine would knock him out. His sat-phone rang as he sat, waiting for his meal.

"Mr. Costantino?"

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“Yes?” He tried to place the voice, but couldn’t. It was a clipped European accent, the owner of which seemed very angry.

“This is your employer—”

“Oh, Mr. Seguin, good afternoon. I—”

“Have you arrived in Pireaus?”

“Yes, thank you. I tried—”

“Why did you ignore my orders to call as soon as you arrived?”

“I did call. I—”

“See here, Mr. Costantino. I want you to remember you are here to serve me and my daughter. I need to know I can trust you.”

Tracy was wide awake and furious himself now. “I’m trustworthy. I tried to call. I—”

“Mr. Costantino, I do not accept excuses. I do not accept them from my child and I certainly will not tolerate them from you. I hope this isn’t an example of the level of expertise I am to expect.”

Tracy was at a loss for words, polite words, that is. He had plenty of unpleasant ones in his quiver.

“I expect from now on that you adhere to my instructions.”

Tracy seethed at being spoken to this way, but he wasn’t ready to give up on his new adventure, in spite of what he took to be a second negative signpost.

“Yes, Mr. Seguin.”

There was a pause. “Do better, Mr. Costantino, or else.”

CHAPTER 2

He stood outside the huge gray stone mansion perched high on the hill in Molivos. It had the typical red tile roof, wooden shutters painted green adorning the windows and cats slumbering outside in the sun. Gigantic clay pots of pink and red geraniums and red roses lined the front and crested in a trellis above the entrance. There were more pots in strategic places on the many balconies he saw. It all looked accidental, effortless, but he knew somebody tended these flowers well. There wasn't a wilting bloom in sight.

Tracy had had a rough night at sea, which had nothing to do with the ship. His voyage had been fine, but his conversation with Benoit Seguin had been troubling. He had tossed and turned all night, falling asleep in the early hours, even missing the ferry's stop at Chios Island, before arriving in Lesbos.

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He squared his shoulders and was about to pull the bell when he heard church bells ringing in the distance.

For a moment, he felt like Maria Von Trapp and understood exactly how she felt, stepping into the unknown to deal with a captain and seven children. The lines of the song, “Confidence,” ran through his mind. She was a girl. A nun. She did it. He was a man of the world. He could do it. *Confidence.*

He was surprised when his own hand reached up for the long chain on the front door bell. The loud tinkle broke the day’s silence and a couple of the cats out front yawned.

A cry overhead drew his attention away. A sea eagle dipped and soared. *Confidence.*

The front door opened and he could smell baking cookies. He was certain they were *koulourakia*, his childhood favorite. The woman who came to greet him was clad in widow’s weeds and wore a gold cross at her neck that was almost bigger than she was, and, with a pang, he remembered his own Yaya.

“*Embros...hello,*” she said. She tilted her head in a cockeyed way, and he realized she was much younger than she appeared. She was no grandma, in spite of her dress. She was middle-aged or close to it, and beneath the somber attire, had a merry disposition. “*Ella, pethi, ella. Come on, child.*”

He supposed to someone who dressed as if she were as old as dirt, he was a child. With one last anxious look over his shoulder at the road that would safely carry him to the next town of Efthalou, he stepped forward into the dark, cool confines of the massive house.

“*Asti...leave it.*” The woman pointed to the bottom of the stairs. “*Asti!*” she said again, louder, and he realized she wanted him to leave his baggage there.

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He glanced around and saw a salon with a grand piano to his right. This must be where Benoit Seguin worked. Artwork on the walls intrigued him, but for now, he left everything as the woman wished and he followed her to the left down a long corridor and into the sunny kitchen where she had been in the middle of putting egg wash over baked goods. *Ah*. Here, he could show his confidence. He picked up the pastry brush and swept it over the bread and twists of cookies waiting for the oven.

“Milas Elenika? You speak Greek?”

He told her he did and she broke into a surprisingly toothy smile.

“Call me Toula,” she told him in Greek, then she started to laugh. It puzzled him.

“I speak English, too,” she said. “But not French. He”—she jabbed a finger toward the other part of the house—“he doesn’t know.”

Tracy nodded and spent a happy ten minutes helping Toula in the kitchen. He started to worry when he noticed a gigantic pot of chopped vegetables sitting on the stove and hoped that some living creature wasn’t about to die and top the fragrant casserole.

“Fasolathi,” she said and he almost crowed with happiness. Bean casserole. It was as if she read his mind. He felt a sense of peace at the familiar comfort food and wondered who made it now for his grandfather.

“Where is Marjo?” he asked.

She imitated a sleeping motion, and he wondered if the child was sick. He ran through his one and only meeting with Benoit Seguin. It had been Max who’d met the man after a benefit concert at the Brooklyn Museum and called Tracy telling him about the job.

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He'd jumped at the chance and met Mr. Seguin at Zanzibar. He seemed very French, angry that he couldn't smoke in public places even in New York and proclaimed everybody as being *cowards* for giving up the habit.

"In France," he'd said, "we smoke the minute we are born."

Looking up Benoit Sequin on Facebook, Twitter and MySpace garnered no results. Wikipedia had a listing for him and the biographic details were minimal. A Frenchman who traveled Europe and wrote a variety of music styles, he apparently had a phobia about being recorded and preferred live performances.

That accounted for the lack of information on iTunes and for why he had no MySpace page.

"Now," said Toula, lapsing into Greek, "you can put these in the oven for me and then you can look at the piano. The little one will be awake soon. Then you can tune it. You can make all the noise you want."

He gaped at her. "Tune the piano?"

She gave him a funny look. "Of course. Mr. Seguin wants it fixed. He says it's out of tune." She glanced at a piece of paper on the fridge and handed it to him. "He says it needs a pitch raise and something about a hammer."

"But I don't know anything about pianos."

"*Saclamara!*" He knew this was the Greek word for rubbish or gibberish.

"I'm not the piano tuner," he said, a feeling of dread coming over him.

She looked confused and he rushed to assuage her concern.

"I'm the new tutor for Marjo."

She was back to English now. "No, no. Tutor is a woman."

"No, no. Tutor is a man. Me."

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She looked shocked, then began to laugh, pointing a finger at him. “You?” She laughed so hard tears poured down her face and she held her stomach. For some reason, her laughter was contagious. He laughed, too, until a shadow crossed the threshold. He was shocked to see a little girl in pink pajamas, tousle-haired, staring at him. A small black-and-white kitten in her arms meowed at him.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” he said back.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Tracy Costantino. You can call me Tracy. I hope we’re going to be great friends, Marjo.”

“Why?”

The kitten meowed again, and he realized the little girl’s grip was strong.

“Well, because we’re going to be spending lots of time together.”

“Why?”

“I’m your new tutor.”

“No, Daddy said my new tutor is a woman.”

“I’m your new tutor and I’m sorry, but I’m not a woman.”

Her grave brown eyes moistened. “Oh...Daddy’s going to be really mad.”

“I met your daddy and I—” He remembered the chilly phone conversation the day before. “Your daddy is the one who hired me.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Really?”

“Really.”

Her expression softened. She was a very intense child, he decided. Her brown hair was thick and long, messy now from

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pigtails left in overnight. She stared at him, her expression hopeful.

“Will you have breakfast with me?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to mimic her and ask why. Instead, he nodded and Toula pointed to a table outside. It was like the suitcases all over again. Put them here. Put yourself there. Marjo let the kitten down gently on the floor and it scampered away on uncertain legs toward the piano room.

Marjo put her hand into Tracy's. She seemed to be feeling around with her fingers, looking for a comfortable way to hold him. She wriggled around until his thumb was right in her palm. He thought he might be imagining it, but it was such a small gesture, he brushed the thought aside. She dragged him outside. The courtyard was charming. Dripping in olive and lemon trees and rosemary bushes, it held a table and chairs, a couple of chaises.

It was truly like a secret garden. As they took their seats at the table, across the courtyard he saw a door open and heard a phone ringing, then a voice spoke.

“Embros?”

He looked up as the voice seemed closer now. A face looked out of the open door. It was Benoit Seguin. He held the receiver to his ear, but waved to Tracy, who waved back just as Toula came out with a bowl of yogurt drizzled with honey and what looked like a coffee frappé for Tracy. Marjo had two hard-boiled eggs, a couple of cookies fresh from the oven and a glass of milk.

Benoit was exactly as Tracy remembered him. Tall, receding hairline, going gray, he gave Tracy a thumbs-up and went back to his conversation.

“Kali orexi...bon appetite,” Toula said and crossed herself in the Greek style.

“Merci,” Marjo said.

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“Do you know how to say that in Greek?” he asked her.

“Do you?” she countered.

“Yes, I do.” He sipped at the frappé. This was heaven. Ice cold and just mildly sweet, the coffee was strong and rich. He groaned in ecstasy.

“Say it then,” Marjo said, her bare feet kicking the air several inches above the ground.

“No, you say it.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

Marjo laughed, ecstatic with this new game. Toula threw her hands toward their breakfast bowls. “*Fai! Fai! Eat!*”

Tracy ate. It was hard to describe the incredible, creamy, thick texture of the yogurt. It was somewhere between a cheese and a custard. Little Marjo tossed a handful of nuts onto her plate, eating them with her fingers. She passed him the scant remains. He picked up a few, scattered them on his yogurt and watched her eating.

It was as if this activity was a chore for the little girl. It puzzled him, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t know her and thought he might be imagining things.

“Do you know what *Molivos* means?” she asked him.

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

She tossed the rest of her nuts into the garden. “What does it mean?”

“Mountain of olives. And we certainly have lots of olives here, don’t we?”

Her steady gaze never left his face. “How come you’re a man?”

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"I don't know. I was born that way."

She laughed and her little face infused with bright intelligence as well as impish delight. "Why?" she asked.

She was a little old for the *why* stage, but he knew from his meeting with Mr. Seguin that his daughter spent a lot of time alone. He wanted her tutored because he wanted her in the house. He wanted her close.

"Can we go to the castle?" she suddenly asked.

He turned to look at the stone walls looming behind them.

"We'll ask your father," he said and he heard the front doorbell ringing. This would be the piano tuner, he guessed.

Breakfast over, he and Marjo took their empty dishes into the kitchen. Toula took the cookies out of the oven.

"We want to go to the castle," Marjo told her.

"Do we need to ask Mr. Seguin for his permission?" Tracy asked Toula.

"No," she said in Greek. "He's busy now. I'll tell him you're going, okay?"

Tracy didn't know much about the castle and was eager to research it a little more before taking Marjo there.

"Can I take my things up to my room?"

Toula hesitated only a fraction of a second before nodding.

She brushed past him, leading the way. He followed up three flights of stairs, his bags in hand, to the very top floor. The room was warm; the bedding was pink. It was a double bed with a pink-and-white chenille bedspread. Antique nightstands stood on either side of it, Tiffany glass lamps on both. There was a matching wardrobe and a dressing table that contained cut roses in a vase. It was a charming room. Pink towels with a pink shell-shaped soap waited on a chair beside the dresser. She'd been expecting a

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woman, no doubt of that. Toula threw open the wooden shutters, and he glimpsed the Aegean Sea far below, salt on the air as he inhaled. It was going to be okay.

Confidence.

Toula watched nervously as Tracy deposited his things and plugged in his laptop.

“Do we have Internet?” he asked her.

“No, no. Cafés by the beach. You’ll find it there.”

How inconvenient. He’d planned to use the Internet during class times with Marjo. He’d have to improvise. He pulled out his travel guide to Lesvos and thumbed through the marked pages. It had been almost impossible researching the island’s history online. It remained one of the few tourist destinations in Greece that required actually visiting to learn all about it.

He liked the idea of exploring with a little girl. It would all be new to both of them.

“Do you play music?” Marjo wanted to know.

“No, but I love it.”

“I want to learn guitar.”

“Can’t your daddy teach you?” he asked, regretting his question when he saw the glum look on her face.

“He’s too busy. I want to learn piano, too. I want to learn the ukulele. My friend Gina has one.”

“Well, I don’t happen to have a ukulele handy right now. How about we go visit the castle?”

“Cool! I know all about the castle.” Marjo pulled his hand to her. “Come *on*.” She tugged at him and laughing, he allowed her to ensnare him. She did the thumb thing again and secure in this tiny, safe little ritual, she was ready to roll.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” he asked her at the top of

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the stairs.

“What?”

“You’re in pajamas.”

The little girl laughed, and Toula took her to the bedroom to change. He sat on the top step listening to the sounds of the house. All he could hear was Toula coaxing the little girl to put on a pair of shorts. Beyond that, yes, he could really hear it, the sound of ocean waves.

Marjo sprang from her bedroom like a caged animal released from captivity and Tracy noticed the kitten from earlier darting behind a grandfather clock on the first floor. His gaze moved to Marjo’s head.

“We’re not brushing our hair today?”

She scowled. “No. I hate brushing my hair.”

“But your hair is so lovely. Come and sit beside me. I’ll do it.”

“I have knots. It hurts.”

“I know how to get knots out without hurting.”

“No!” she screamed, and he stood quickly as she seemed to be winding herself up for a hissy fit.

His glance flew to Toula, who looked stricken. He guessed that women of Toula’s generation never screamed at adults this way.

“I guess we’d better go then.”

Marjo took his hand, fidgeting until his thumb was in that special place, and he found himself melting.

She took charge of him, clattering down the stairs. She jumped for the front door handle.

“What’s that noise?” she asked, breaking away from him and running toward the piano room.

“Quick, she’s not allowed in there!” Toula hissed in his ear, gliding past him.

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Great...she was getting out of the way, letting him take the fall for the little girl's transgression.

Tracy didn't break his stride, arriving just in time to snatch the little girl away before her hands could touch the piano. The man kneeling on the floor looked up and Tracy's shock was a mirror of the man on the ground.

My God! His Adonis! His Adonis was the piano tuner.

"What are you doing here?" the Adonis snarled.

Before Tracy could respond, Marjo wriggled from his grasp and ran to him. "Daddy!" she shrieked.

Tracy saw a big overhand right coming at his jaw and had no time to duck. It landed with pinpoint precision and the last thing he remembered was his head hitting the hardwood floor.

CHAPTER 3

He came to, with two faces peering down at him. *Cold*. He was freezing cold. His fingers moved to his chin, but his arms felt leaden.

“You have a concussion,” Toula said, her face streaked with tears. “The doctor put the ice bag there.”

Tracy was so out of it he couldn’t tell if she spoke English, Greek or French. He nodded because he couldn’t talk and the effort of sorting through languages was too much.

“Is he awake?”

“Give him time,” a man’s voice said. “You hurt him badly.”

No. I’m fine. Tracy struggled to rise. He wasn’t fine. He had a hell of a hangover. Wait, the Adonis had slugged him. He remembered the feeling of pain shooting from his chin, up his arms

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and down his spine and then...nothing.

The Adonis loomed over him. "He looks fine to me."

"Benoit," the other male voice said, "let him rest."

Rest. Confidence. Tracy struggled to understand why the piano tuner had hit him. The three people in the room argued in aggressive, low tones, and Tracy inched his way to a sitting position with difficulty.

Toula, the piano tuner and Mr. Seguin all stared at him. The piano tuner looked furious.

"I'm sorry I hit you. I thought you were trying to abduct my child. Are you able to stand?"

"Stand? I'm dead, aren't I?" Tracy's unfocused gaze flittered around the room. It was all a blur. He was on a sofa judging by his feet dangling over the edge. My, they were a long way away. He was so tall. How did he ever touch his toes? It was such a long way to his toes. When *was* the last time he touched them? His gaze lingered on the piano. What was the piano tuner saying? That Marjo was *his* daughter?

His vision came back and the sound of a bird outside seemed to awaken him more fully. His gaze drifted once more to the piano tuner and he realized with a start that he was in the room alone with him.

"How do you feel?"

For the first time the piano tuner didn't seem full of venom.

"Why did you hit me?"

"I thought you were kidnapping her."

"I thought she was Mr. Seguin's daughter. I'm the tutor," Tracy began.

"Yes, yes. I'm Benoit Seguin."

Tracy stared at him, moving the ice pack along his jaw.

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“You’re Benoit Seguin?”

“Yes.”

“Then who interviewed me in...” His brain wasn’t following his direction.

“In New York? My father. You look much better, but I’m sorry you’re going to have a headache for a day or so.” Benoit Seguin strode back and forth, hands on hips. “This won’t work. Not just because you’re gay—”

“I’m gay? Hey, you’re the one who sucked *my* cock remember?”

Benoit’s eyes flashed. “Never mention that again.” He paced some more and the air seemed to deflate from him. “I thought you were a woman. My father said he found the perfect tutor. He told me your name and how you have an excellent reputation with children, adapting to each case. I—” He stopped. “Your nose is bleeding again. Here. Don’t bleed on my sofa, please.”

He thrust some gauze at Tracy, who was shocked to see the white fabric smeared with bright red blood.

“How did I get a nose bleed?”

Benoit Seguin had the grace to appear genuinely stricken. “Impact of hitting your head on the floor. Doctor says it’s lucky I didn’t kill you.”

“You gave it your best effort.”

For some reason, he felt the need to reassure the guy with a bit of misguided humor. He saw that it was a mistake. Tracy knew in that moment that Benoit Seguin was a frightened man. Frightened of what? He’d always been good at reading energy, but this man confused him.

The moment passed. Benoit was all business again. “I will pay you for the week, but you’ll need to leave today.” He strode across

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the room to a desk and removed a large leather folder. "I will give you an excellent reference. I—"

"If you fire me now, I'll sue you."

"You—"

Tracy cut him off. "I'm American. We love to sue. We're a litigious society."

Benoit just stared at him.

"I won't sue you if you give me a chance with Marjo."

Benoit blinked and seemed to come back to his senses. "I can't have a man around my child."

"Why not? I'm a very good tutor. You said so yourself."

Benoit seemed to be working hard to keep his anger under control. "I thought you were a woman."

"I am a good teacher. I love children, and if you're concerned at all about her safety, barring unseen sucker punches, I can protect her."

"No. It won't work."

"This is discrimination. You can get into a lot of trouble for that. Besides, you hit me."

Benoit sighed. "This is a misunderstanding. I don't want a male tutor. I want a woman. I—"

Tracy had no idea where his bravado was coming from, but he felt the strong urge to fight for his job. He'd never been fired before and he did not want to go home this way...tail between his legs.

"I will raise a stink, believe me. If you send me packing, your name will be all over the news. I know how private you are."

Benoit drew a leather-bound chair away from the desk. Man, he was sexy. He wore jeans and a black silk shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

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"I need to think." Benoit looked at the floor. He was barefoot and should have been carefree. "Okay, I'll give you one week. There are rules to be observed."

"Name them."

"She's not to come in here and play my instruments. Especially the piano."

Tracy nodded and his employer continued.

"You are responsible for anything she does wrong and I expect"—he gave Tracy a hard glance—"if you are going to take my daughter out of this house that her hair is properly brushed. She looked like she'd been dragged backward through a bush when she came in here."

Tracy nodded. The little girl had resisted grooming. Well, he'd make sure he ran a comb through her hair even if it meant tears and tantrums.

"That's all for now. I suggest you relax a little longer. Do you want to go to the hospital, run some tests?"

"No," Tracy said. "But thanks for asking. "I still don't feel...right."

"Rest a bit. Have some lunch, then think about a swim. There are some mineral baths up on the hill."

"Marjo is anxious to visit the castle. May I take her?"

"You may do anything you like as long as you don't take her off this island and she is back for all meals. Toula will be your point person. If you are out swimming in the day, I expect her to be back for lunch. I time all my writing sessions so I see my daughter for lunch and dinner."

"No problem." Tracy lay back against the pillows on the sofa and intended to shut his eyes for just a moment. Benoit Sequin spoke to him, but his voice seemed far away and then stopped all

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together.

Tracy thought about his sister and wished with all his heart that her baby had kicked her belly so he could feel it. He needed more than anything to believe in life, not just death.

* * *

“Lunch is ready.”

Tracy awoke to Marjo screeching in his ear, shaking him awake. The headache was worse, if that was possible, and seemed to have settled over his right eye. The piano room was devoid of other humans.

Marjo tugged at his hand. “Daddy said we have to come to lunch, then we can go to the castle.”

He allowed himself to be jerked to a sitting position and, with an effort, he raised himself to his feet, his head pounding. He could smell coffee and followed his nose. He almost missed a step and fell out the door to the courtyard, but Mr. Seguin Senior caught him. He noticed with satisfaction that Benoit, who was sitting at the end of the table, rose, but quickly returned to his seat when it was evident Tracy was okay.

Marjo sat to her father’s left and the small family passed around plates of food that looked and smelled wonderful. The *fassolathia* casserole was perfect. The bread was fresh, and Tracy happily sampled olives and hunks of feta cheese, experiencing a small twinge of pain when he accidentally bit down on an olive pit.

He experienced a moment of panic and gingerly inserted his finger into his mouth.

“You okay?” Mr. Seguin Senior asked him.

Tracy was relieved to find nothing wiggling and no teeth

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missing. "Yes, thank you."

Benoit glanced up at him, then back at his food.

Toula drizzled olive oil on a plate for him and he continually dipped his bread into it. The twinge in his tooth came and went, his head constantly throbbing. It was only to be expected for a day or two, he imagined.

Marjo, who apparently loved hard-boiled eggs, consumed four of them chopped up in a bowl. She resisted anything else that came her way except bread.

"They're my favorite thing in the whole world," she told Tracy. "I love eggs!"

Toula brought out a platter of *spanakopita*, cheese and spinach triangles, which were delicious. Again, Marjo resisted, but did eat a couple of plain cookies. Toula poured him a cup of Greek coffee, placing it on a tray beside him with a tall glass of cold water, the typical Greek way. The coffee helped, and she poured him a second cup from a large *brika*.

Benoit tucked into the *taramasalata*, a dip made of fish roe, and by the time it reached Tracy, little remained.

"Please bring more," Benoit said to Toula, who hurried away to the kitchen.

There was a spark of genuine compassion when Benoit looked at him. "Feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you."

"Will you color with me?" Marjo asked him.

"Of course I will." Tracy smiled at her, and she ran indoors.

"I want to apologize," Benoit's father began. "This is all my fault. You were the best man...the best person...for this job and I had every intention of introducing you to my son when you arrived this morning. Then I got busy on the phone. I felt once he met you

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he would see you have quite a gift with children.”

Tracy didn’t know how to respond to this. He settled for, “Thank you.” He dipped his bread into the olive oil once more.

“I hope we can start again,” Mr. Seguin Senior said.

“Absolutely.” Tracy sipped his coffee, wondering if it would be rude to ask for more.

“Fine. We have so much to do, Benoit and I. He’s performing a concert up at the castle next week.”

“Is that why you came to Molivos?” Tracy asked, sorry now that he’d consumed the coffee so fast. He was down to the sediment and his tongue felt gritty.

“No,” Benoit said. “Not specifically. I came to work with a few musicians...there’s one coming tomorrow. He’s a wonderful artist. He’ll be here for a couple of days. But really, I came because of the history of music here.”

Tracy smiled. “Now I know why your father didn’t like answering questions about music during our interview. He’s not the musician.”

Benoit smiled.

“What is the history of music here?” Tracy asked as Marjo returned with a book bag containing coloring books and dozens of crayons.

Toula returned with the fresh *taramasalata* and looked at Tracy’s coffee cup. “Would you like more?” she asked him in Greek.

“*Parakalo*. Please.”

She bustled off again, and Marjo upended the book bag on the table, but Tracy caught it just in time, only two crayons spilling onto the glass-topped surface. He caught Benoit’s warning glance. He remembered he was responsible for everything she did, and he

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broke eye contact to retrieve one of the coloring books and some crayons for her.

Marjo began to color one page, nudging Tracy to do the other.

Tracy felt Benoit's gaze on him. "We were talking about the history of music here."

"Boring," Marjo said.

Her father laughed. "It's not boring, baby. It's fascinating." He shrugged. "They say this island was the seat of Greek music. They say the ancient king who ruled the castle had five beautiful daughters and ancient musicians tried to woo them with music."

"I read something about that," Tracy said, selecting the right green for a dragon's skin. "King...Makara, right?"

Benoit smiled. "Yes. The music, they say, was so lovely, so enchanting, the ancient poet Arion wrote to the music."

Tracy glanced at him. "The music still exists?"

"I have read of it...in Virgil...other texts. I hope to find it. The castle has an extensive library of ten thousand ancient volumes. I hope to gain access to it. The legends I have read said the great god Zeus himself loved the music from this island."

He paused and his cheeks reddened. "Sorry. Now I am being boring."

"No, far from it. It's a wonderful story. I hope...I think you'll find this music and I look forward to hearing it. Both of us do, right, Marjo?"

"I like Beyoncé," she said, making the adults around her laugh.

* * *

An hour later, Tracy was waiting for his small charge outside her bedroom on the first floor. He spied his boss striding by him.

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"Can I ask you something?"

Benoit stopped, a wary expression on his face.

"I'm curious why you don't like your music being recorded."

"Oh." Benoit's whole expression changed. "I...I like the sense that if it's not recorded, it never sounds the same way twice."

"Like trying to catch angels singing."

Benoit looked startled. "Yes. Music should be different, each and every time." He was about to say something else when his daughter emerged from the restroom.

"We're going swimming now, Daddy. Don't miss me."

"I'm sorry, bunny, but I will miss you."

She rocked on her toes. "I'll be back, Daddy."

"Do I get a kiss?"

"Sure." She reached up to him, and he bent down, kissing both her cheeks, French-style.

"What about one for Tracy?" she asked.

Her father looked astonished.

"Come on, Daddy," she said.

Her father shrugged, and the two men exchanged the same double kiss. Little Marjo slipped her hand into Tracy's, and he felt a small thrill of pleasure when she put his thumb in the middle of her hand.

"Happy music making," Tracy said.

Benoit nodded and watched them walk away from him.

"Key," he suddenly said and pointed to an urn on the entry table. Tracy fished in it.

"That unlocks the front gate and lets you into the house. It's yours for the duration. Don't lose it."

Aye, aye, Captain.

Outside the house, they turned first in one direction, then

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another.

They walked uphill and found a British couple heading to the castle as well.

Greeting Tracy and Marjo like long lost friends, the couple, Mark and Jenny, seemed to have a ton of books about the Greek islands and showed him marked passages about the castle.

“We’ve collected them through the islands, but we got a couple of good ones down at Estravagario Bookstore near the beach. The only bookstore here,” Mark said.

Tracy made a mental note to take Marjo in there as soon as possible.

“Of course, the legend is one of those things lost over time,” Jenny said.

“Legend?” Tracy asked.

Marjo skipped ahead of them. She had energy and enthusiasm for everything. It would help her later in life, he decided.

“Yes, the king had five daughters. Beautiful daughters. The youngest was his favorite, Mithymna.”

“That’s the official name of this town, right?” Tracy said.

Jenny smiled. “Yes it is. And Mithymna was abducted.”

“Really? By whom?”

Mark shrugged. “That’s what we want to find out. It’s ancient history, but fascinating. There’s nothing online about any of this.”

Tracy laughed. “Yeah, I noticed.”

As they walked, Tracy took the time to point out the different flowers growing to Marjo. They passed poppies blooming everywhere, as well as walnut and olive trees. They tiptoed past lizards lounging in the sun.

Jenny and Mark pointed out many aspects to the castle that were fascinating. Tracy couldn’t believe the glorious view from its

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stone turrets. A big sign in English and Greek listed the upcoming concert series each weekend. His heart skipped a beat when he read Benoit Seguin's name.

He pulled himself up short. What was the matter with him? He couldn't have a soft spot for his boss. He couldn't have any feelings at all for the man. He was here to do a job.

For one tiny second he realized he hadn't felt this way, the early stirrings of desire, of longing, since the day he'd met Mikos.

Marjo ran around the castle like she owned the place. The interior of the castle was open on the main floor, the library closed. They covered every inch outside, marveling over the birds nesting in trees. Tracy kept pace with Marjo and together they made up stories about the five princesses—where they slept, where they bathed and where they had lunch and dinner.

"Dinner," she suddenly said. "Tracy, I'm starved!"

They bid their new friends goodbye and walked home, talking about the five princesses.

"I bet they ran out of hard-boiled eggs a lot," Marjo said, making Tracy laugh.

* * *

"You're late." Benoit Seguin waited at the top of the stairs, but one look at his daughter's happy face and he seemed to relent.

"I'm sorry. We lost track of time," Tracy said.

"Don't do it again."

Tracy felt the heat rising in him. He hated Benoit chastising him in front of Marjo. He would speak to his employer privately about this after dinner.

"Daddy, Daddy, we had a wonderful time. We—"

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Her father cut her off. "Not now, baby. We're going out to dinner, and I want you to change into your prettiest frock, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy!"

She raced up the stairs past her father, whose gaze locked with Tracy's.

"You're her tutor. You're also responsible for getting her ready." He made a display of checking his watch. "You have ten minutes."

Tracy ran up the stairs and into Marjo's bedroom. She had her own small bathroom with a sink and a tub and he ran the taps, squeezing lime and mint bath gel into the water. She ran around in her underpants until he caught her and deposited her in the water, removing her panties as he went along.

"I have a twin sister," he said. "We used to bathe together. We had bubble fights."

"What's that?" she asked.

Uh-oh. He'd done it now. He scooped up a handful of fragrant bubbles and blew them at her. She shrieked with joy, copying him. Soon bubbles covered them both and the bathroom was wet. He dried her off, mopped up the floor with extra towels and quickly dressed her.

"I love bubbles!" Marjo squealed.

"So do I," he said, dressing her in the pale blue sun dress she picked out from the closet and a pair of slides that matched. He brushed her hair, tied it with a ribbon, and they walked out of her bedroom as Benoit emerged from his own room freshly attired.

His gaze swept over his daughter in a critical way, and Tracy rushed to say something that wouldn't crush the little girl's feelings. "Doesn't Marjo look pretty? She picked this dress herself."

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“Yes,” her father said, his expression not matching his words.

Boy, is this guy a tough customer, Tracy thought.

“You have the evening off. Toula has the evening off, too, and won’t be cooking, so you’ll have to fend for yourself. Have a good night.”

Benoit took his daughter’s hand, and she started to cry. “But I want Tracy to come with us, Daddy.”

“That’s enough,” her father said. Mr. Benoit Senior watched from the front door, but said nothing. Tracy could still hear Marjo crying outside and it tore at him.

He’s jealous. He’s jealous that I’m getting along with her.

It didn’t make him feel any better. He heard the sound of a car starting and pulling away...then, silence.

He felt jealous, too. He was jealous not to be going to dinner with the family. In all the years he’d been working as a tutor, he had always been invited to family meals. He was also a very self-sufficient man, and it bothered him to feel so lost...so lonely.

Tracy went to his room, picked up his laptop and, for the first time, felt sorry he hadn’t purchased a moped. He’d noticed a bicycle in the courtyard and wondered who it belonged to. He’d cycle down to the beachfront and hit one of the Internet cafés there.

In the kitchen, Toula sat back with a cigarette and a cup of coffee and almost screamed when he walked in.

“Don’t worry. It’s only me.”

She gasped and spluttered. “I was getting ready to throw this out the window. He hates smoking.”

So did Tracy, but he didn’t say so. He kept a smile on his face. “I was thinking I’d go down to an Internet café by the beach. Is there any chance I can borrow the bicycle in the courtyard?”

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She looked at him blankly for a moment. “The bicycle? Oh, yes. I don’t mind. It’s mine.” She laughed. “I hardly ever use it.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. Bring me back some chocolate, dark chocolate, please, and I will be a happy woman.”

She lit a fresh cigarette from the smoldering butt, and he realized she was content in the kitchen alone with her coffee, her thoughts and a couple of snatched cigarettes.

“I’ll do that,” he said, keeping his voice soft and allowing Toulas her privacy.

“You’re doing very well,” she said to his retreating back.

He turned to smile at her, but her gaze was outside the window.

Out in the courtyard, he picked up the bicycle from against the wall. It felt solid. The tires had plenty of air. He felt odd leaving...it was hard to explain. He brushed the thought aside, feeling that pang he’d experienced of being left out.

He cycled easily downhill into town, marveling at the stone streets, the friendliness of people passing him. He laughed at guys on motorcycles, texting with one hand, steering with the other. The setting sun brought out the lights and a feeling he was in *Brigadoon*. He’d never seen anything as beautiful as the island of Lesbos. He moved on, and even those in cars waved to him. An old man on a donkey grinned and jabbed his thumb over Tracy’s head. Braking hard, he turned to look. It was truly an unforgettable sight. The castle on the hill had been lit up in different colored lights, lending a holiday atmosphere to an already magical kingdom.

Down by the beach, the traffic noise of motorbikes was almost unbearable. He noticed brightly painted chairs and tables outside almost every store and *cafenion*. Ivy grew down and across everything. Cats lined the still-warm stone walls.

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It was all utterly charming.

Approaching the *argos*, the market, he spotted the Internet sign in the window of Central Café and wondered if he could leave the bicycle out front.

“Nobody steals here,” a young Swedish tourist told him, breezing past him with a bulging backpack that nearly smacked Tracy’s still-tender chin.

Tracy was a true New Yorker and paid his five euros and sat at an outlet close to the door so he could keep an eye on the bicycle. He switched over the plug on his cord and fired up the laptop, constantly checking on the bicycle. He checked his email. Nothing that needed his urgent attention. There was the usual assortment of spam email. A limitless number of Nigerian businessmen wanted to make him rich. A dead Michael Jackson wanted him to be the beneficiary of his massive estate. He glanced at the bicycle again and then went to the counter and bought a frappé. He was surprised it was made with instant coffee and realized it was the Greek sensation. He smiled to himself. Back in the US, instant coffee was the redheaded stepchild in the big-bucks coffee industry.

Outside again, he sipped the drink and inhaled the scent of the vine-covered stone walls making up the entire town center. What was that flower? It evoked nostalgia, and yet he couldn’t recall smelling it before. It grew everywhere and soaked the atmosphere.

He hunted through his memory banks. Nope, it wasn’t coming to him. He’d ask Toula when he got home. He wheeled the bike down the stone cobbled path toward the ocean. Was he hungry? Not really. He saw a grocery store, drained the frappé and tossed the plastic cup, noticing a restaurant called the Captain’s Table. He perused the menu out front. Not cheap, not that he had to worry, but for the first time ever, he felt peculiar sitting at an expensive

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restaurant on his own having a meal.

Tracy realized how much he missed Sharla and his friends. Each time he left New York, he left his life. At one of the very last tables toward the ocean, he spotted the Seguin family. Benoit and his father had two female companions. Benoit was laughing, a small cigar at his lips.

Wow. And yet he'd told Toula he disliked smoking. Seguin Senior was pouring wine, and little Marjo seemed riveted by the merriment. Tracy sighed, heading away from the restaurant and into the grocery store.

Was Benoit gay? Straight? No, not straight. Possibly bisexual. No man did the things they'd done together if he didn't have some...passion for men.

He bought several bars of chocolate, a bag of pistachio nuts, a large bottle of mineral water and some headache tablets. He couldn't read the Greek words, but the woman who owned the store pointed to her head.

"Pounakefalo," she said. "Headache."

With an effort, he pedaled the bike upcountry, back toward home. With his messenger bag containing his laptop and his new purchases, it was hard going. His head throbbed as he wheeled the bike back into the courtyard.

"You want some dinner?" Toula asked him.

"No, thanks. I know it's your night off."

She waved away his words. "I warmed you up some soup."

He could smell it now. "Is that *avgalemeno*?"

She nodded.

"Oh, it's my favorite. I can't say no to that." He followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table without even taking the strap of his messenger from his shoulders. He thanked her and bent his

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head to a bowl of the thick, fluffy white contents. The egg and lemon soup was just like his Yaya made it, lighter than air, yet with a secret deep layer of chicken pieces and just-cooked rice complementing the soup.

"Don't tell him I fed you," Toula said.

He shook his head. "I won't, thank you." He paused as she pawed through the candy bars. "Toula, what is that flower growing everywhere down by the sea?"

She smiled. "Wisteria. It enters the soul, that one."

"Wisteria." It seemed to haunt him even now. "Did you grow up here?"

"On Lesbos, yes. But my family comes from the other side of the island." Her face clouded over for a moment. She was remembering wistful times, he could tell.

"How long have you been widowed?"

She stared at him, her eyes moistening. "Ten years."

He nodded. Her grief was still strong.

"I can't say I miss *him*. I miss being a wife." She paused. "That's not true. I miss him, I've just gotten used to living without him. I don't remember things about him sometimes. I have to fight to remember his scent, his laughter...does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does." Tracy felt this about his parents. "We never get over them...we get used to life without them."

She nodded. "About a year ago, my aunt, who rents out houses across the island, suggested I start cooking for families. I..." Her gaze fell on the candy bars.

"Take whatever you want...they're yours," he assured her.

The distraction of debating over candy bars seemed to galvanize her thoughts and, as she broke off a piece of thick, dark chocolate, she inhaled the aroma. "This is good, Tracy. You know

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your chocolate.”

He waited her out, but she had stopped talking.

“Do you like the work?”

“Yes. I live in paradise. It has helped me stop feeling old.”

“That was my first impression of you, that you were an old woman.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Tracy laughed. “We’re going to get you out of your widow’s weeds.”

“Is that a fact?”

“That’s a promise.”

“Oh, nuts. They hide a multitude of sins.”

Tracy drained a glass of cold water after downing a couple of pills.

“Tell me,” he said, when the last bit of soup was gone. “Is it my imagination, or is Marjo a fussy eater?”

“Fussy eater?” Toula laughed as if it were the funniest thing she’d ever heard. “Yes, she’s a fussy eater. I’ve worked with the family for a few weeks now. I’ve learned she likes bread and cookies...pretzels.” Toula paused. “She likes my eggs, too. Her father said she should have all the eggs she wants. She likes ice cream as well. I can’t get her to eat anything else.”

“She’s always been like this?”

Toula shrugged. “So he says.”

Tracy lapsed into silence. My God, the food on this island was wonderful. He realized Marjo’s eating habits were a control issue. Her father seemed unconcerned, but now that he thought about it, Tracy realized this was why Benoit wanted to eat all his meals with her, to make sure Marjo ate.

Toula’s thoughts must have been running on parallel lines.

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She laughed. “Mr. Benoit is a funny man. Not Greek and yet so Greek. I can’t figure him out.”

You’re not the only one, he wanted to say. He thanked Toula, impulsively hugging her, and went to his room.

CHAPTER 4

Tracy heard the family coming in very late, turned in his bed and checked the digital clock on the nightstand. *Two o'clock in the morning!* What in the world was a six-year-old doing up so late?

Greeks...yes, Toula was right. Nothing began before ten p.m. and he'd missed it. He thought about Toula's words. *Not Greek and yet so Greek...* Stop thinking about him, he told himself firmly and willed himself to go back to sleep.

Sleep eluded him and he found himself listening for ambient sounds. Downstairs, he heard faint piano playing and, for some odd reason, felt reassured that Benoit, too, was restless.

He slept on and off, the piano alternately lulling him to sleep, then awakening him. He had the peculiar feeling of a lover nudging him awake to make love, then changing his mind.

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Morning dawned bright and hot and he could hear flute music now. His eyes opened and he felt the bump at the back of his head, then pressed his bruised chin. It hurt even more this morning for some reason. He picked up the half-empty bottle of mineral water, downed some more tablets and dragged board shorts up over his long legs and over his boxer briefs. He threw on a fresh T-shirt and padded downstairs.

He knew the song of the flute, but wondered where he'd heard it before. It puzzled and yet intrigued him. The piano room door was open and he heard the sound of male laughter. His Adonis—no, he had to stop thinking of him like that—stood in the doorway and turned when Tracy approached.

Beyond his right shoulder, Tracy saw the flute player and realized he'd seen him before.

The flute player caught his gaze and, lowering the instrument from his mouth, he grinned. "Hey, I know you!"

Tracy nodded. He recognized the dark-haired, straggly-looking beatnik and avoided the hard pebbles of anger that had become Benoit's eyes. He stared at the flutist, and then at the flute.

"Yes!" Tracy was thrilled. "You were playing when I had coffee at Syntagma Square a couple of days ago. You played the same piece of music."

"I was there indeed." The flutist glanced at Benoit. "Your friend gave me some money. Perhaps he gave me more than he intended. It was enough for a good bottle of wine and a salad that night."

"Did I really?" Tracy laughed. "Well, it was worth it. That flute is really remarkable. Is it...a rare one?"

"Not rare, but valuable. It's a Turkish *duduk* flute. About fifteen hundred years old." He held it, extended in his fingers.

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Tracy stepped forward and examined it.

“What kind of wood is that?”

“Apricot wood.”

Tracy was impressed. “Has Marjo seen it? She’s fascinated by instruments, you know.”

A frisson of chilly energy passed between Benoit and the flute player.

“Perhaps Benoit thinks it’s too sexy for his little girl,” the flute player said and laughed.

There was an intimacy in their traded glances that made Tracy wonder if the two men were lovers.

“They say this flute is the most eloquent conveyor of human emotions,” the flutist said. “My name is Dimitri, by the way.”

“Tracy.” They shook hands, and Benoit came out of whatever trance he’d been in.

“We must press on, Dimitri.”

“Of course. Nice to meet you, Dimitri,” Tracy said and backed out of the room. He stopped. “Mr. Seguin—”

“Please, call me Benoit.”

“Benoit, I just wanted to say I really enjoyed the piece you played on the piano last night.”

His employer looked surprised. “But I didn’t play anything last night. I went right to bed.”

Tracy was shocked. He’d heard the piano very clearly. How could Benoit deny he’d been playing? As Benoit closed the door on him, he overheard him saying something about good help being hard to find.

The shared laughter between Dimitri and Benoit enflamed his cheeks. He was mortified.

Neither man came to breakfast and Marjo seemed very

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subdued, so morose, in fact, that nothing could cheer her up.

"Up till all hours," Toula muttered darkly, bring Tracy his coffee.

The smell of thyme and oregano were strong in the garden today. Tracy reached over and snapped off a large sprig of rosemary, rubbing the herb between the palms of his hands.

"What would you like to do today?" Tracy asked Marjo.

She shrugged. She declined eggs and even a cookie. She seemed on the verge of tears, especially when laughter filtered to them from the music room.

"Come here, sweetheart."

She hesitated and finally came to him, crawling on his lap.

"Close your eyes."

She leaned her head back against Tracy's chest and he held his rosemary-scented hands in front of her nose.

"Breathe," he said.

She did.

"Oh," she said after a minute. "That's really good."

She sat up, her eyes bright, her mood jubilant.

"How did you do that?" Toula marveled.

"I didn't." He shrugged. "It was the rosemary. Nature did it all." He glanced down at Marjo.

"You want to listen to Daddy and Dimitri playing?"

Her little face lit up, and he wondered once again why her father kept her away when it was clear his child loved music.

Toula shook her head and mouthed, *No*, but Tracy merely turned his chair around and through the open window of the piano room, they heard the entire beautiful song.

"What instruments do you hear?" he asked Marjo.

"*Bouzouki*," she said instantly.

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“What else?”

“Flute.”

The heart-breaking melody broke into a fast canter, and he had an image of riding a horse across a green meadow. The sad tune returned, ending on a plaintive note from the flute. For a moment, Tracy lamented that he would never hear this piece in quite the same way again. Spontaneously, he and Marjo broke into applause and Dimitri popped his head out the open window and waved.

Ten seconds later, the window closed. Boy, that Benoit was such a sourpuss.

Marjo still had no grand desires for the day, but allowed Tracy to feed her bits of bread and egg, and her mood brightened.

“I say so we go down to the beach, buy a moped for the two of us to ride around the island and then we must stop for an ice cream,” Tracy suggested.

“Wow, cool. I love ice cream.”

Tracy told Toula their plans.

“Just be home by one for lunch,” she said, hugging Marjo goodbye.

* * *

They had a wonderful morning test-driving several mopeds, and he picked the one that, although a ghastly mustard color, had ample room and a seat belt for his charge. He sprang for helmets for them both. On his first weekend off, he was determined to take the moped by ferry over the Thessaloniki to visit his grandfather.

For now, the hunt was on for ice cream. He strapped Marjo onto the moped and instructed her to hold onto his waist. She was an excellent traveling companion, and he asked her continually if

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she was okay.

“Yah!” she called out.

At a charming beachside hotel called the Sea Horse, they spotted a family with small children all eating ice cream.

“You like this place?” he asked Marjo.

“Yah!”

They pulled over and found themselves entranced. The hotel had a travel agency with a lot of brochures and guidebooks. At the outdoor *caffenion*, they both ordered ice cream, and Tracy drank coffee.

Marjo held her new red helmet in her possessive grip as Tracy made lists of places to explore. After lunch, they’d hit the bookstore.

“What do you think about snorkeling and swimming? You want to go to Rabbit Island sometime and see all the animals?”

Marjo looked at him. “I want to do everything.”

He glanced at a blue EU flag standing in the middle of the horseshoe-shaped beach.

“Do you know what that means?” he asked her.

She shook her head.

“It means the beach is clean. See here? There are beach inspectors all over Europe who test all the beaches year-round.”

“Wow,” she said. “But there isn’t much sand. It’s all pebbles.”

“We’ll find a sandy beach, I promise.”

Her smile was so dazzling he melted. “You want some more ice cream?”

She nodded eagerly and he knew when his work here was finished, he would miss this sweet little girl.

* * *

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Toula outdid herself with an amazing lunch of pan-fried sardines. Tracy had never eaten fresh sardines.

"I dressed them with the local olive oil and some lemons and, of course, oregano," she said. She drank a shot of Ouzo Mini, proclaiming it to be the best on the island.

"Lesvos is known for its ouzo, olive oil and its sardines," Benoit agreed. His gaze moved to Toula. "Some might argue about Mini being the best brand. I prefer Veto myself."

"Veto?" Toula looked disgusted. "I bet they make that stuff with rancid potatoes and drain water."

"No, that's how they make Mini."

"Is not."

"Is too."

Tracy laughed, and they both looked at him. He shrugged. "Don't look at me. I haven't tried any ouzo yet."

"Be careful of some of the cafés at the beach," Toula said. "Some of them will pour Matis into a bottle of Mini and you'll never know the difference."

"So if I wouldn't know the difference, why would it matter?" Tracy asked.

Benoit laughed, so Marjo laughed.

Toula's expression was outraged. "Because Mini is the king of ouzos." She was so indignant, Tracy was afraid his next meal might come accompanied by rancid potatoes.

She pushed a glass of ouzo toward him. "Here, you try this."

Tracy shook his head. "I don't drink during the day. I am good for nothing after a cocktail."

"Ouzo is good for you," Toula said. She glanced at Marjo. She had allotted the little girl two hard-boiled eggs for lunch. Marjo grumbled at first, but soon got over it when she found fresh, warm

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bread arriving at the table.

Tracy prompted her to tell her father about their trip to the castle. As she talked, he sliced an apple and Marjo ate a few slivers, surprising him. Her father watched in a surreptitious way, jotting constantly in a black leather notebook he seemed to carry everywhere.

Not wanting to push the little girl, Tracy stopped giving her pieces of fruit and was amazed when she dug into his bowl, pulling out another slice. Benoit winked at Tracy and closed his notebook. He listened to Marjo's breathless rendition of the moped adventure.

"This island is like a live classroom," Benoit said. "At least, you make it that way for Marjo."

Tracy accepted the compliment. That had been his intention. Teach her by showing, by experiencing the island's wonders with her.

"Want to try a little piece of fish?" he asked Marjo. She shook her head violently, reaching into the breadbasket instead. Tracy saw Benoit's eyes sadden, but his mood changed so fast he thought he imagined it.

"I must take a look at that moped," he suddenly said, opening his notebook again.

Tracy kept Marjo occupied until her father was ready. After lunch, he looked the moped over and proclaimed it a good investment.

"You mind if I take Marjo for a spin on it?" he asked.

Tracy didn't mind. In fact, he was tired and thought a nap would help dislodge his still-screaming headache.

Benoit said he and Marjo would be back in an hour, so Tracy and Toula headed to their rooms for a siesta, the way of life in

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Europe.

He lay on his bed, wishing he could see the ocean when he wasn't standing up. His hands flew down to his shorts. There was no lock on his bedroom door and he was afraid of stripping completely and Marjo barging in, or perhaps Toula, though why she would barge in was a notion he put down to pure fear. The fear of getting caught.

His parents hadn't been prudes exactly, but sex was not something they'd encouraged in conversation. His sister had fared worse, not allowed to go on dates when Tracy had late curfews. That began their tradition of double dating, and then he'd discovered he was gay and, specifically, was attracted to his sister's boyfriend. That ended their double dating life at his insistence. She'd married Max and, mercifully, Tracy found he was no longer attracted to him.

He pushed his shorts down and touched his cock. Sex was wonderful, but sometimes, playing with yourself was pretty hot, too. He felt his shaft lengthening and thickening and then, to his horror, the door opened.

Benoit stood there, looking like an angry eagle, and Tracy felt helpless, lying on his bed masturbating.

Oh, God.

His employer smiled, the lethal smile of a love god. He closed the door. Out of the back pocket of his jeans, he extracted a large iron key and locked the door. Tracy looked up at him, helpless. Torn between the euphoria of desire and blind panic, he froze, his mind blank.

"Don't stop," Benoit said. "I want you to touch yourself for me." His lips barely met Tracy's, but their meager contact was enough to keep his cock rigid.

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"I want to watch you." Benoit's mouth moved to Tracy's throat. Somehow he'd crossed the room without Tracy noticing.

"Please get undressed," Tracy said, his voice sounding thick even to his own ears. He sounded like a child, begging. This was how he felt. He wanted to see his grouchy Adonis naked.

Benoit's fingers strolled from Tracy's temple down to his chin. His fingers seemed to press harder when he came to the site of the bruising, and Tracy held his breath when Benoit kissed along the jaw, his eyes closed as if in prayer.

Tracy saw the long, dark lashes of the other man and he found himself falling deeper into his vat of bitter honey. He wanted the man, yet felt the physical pain as the insistent fingers moved again across his jaw.

Benoit's eyes opened. "Turn over."

Tracy shook his head, and Benoit kissed him. They were hungry, furtive kisses that made Tracy swoon until, when Benoit asked him once again, he turned, his face pressing into the bedspread.

He turned his face to the side, hearing Benoit groan as he slid the boxer briefs down Tracy's thighs, removing them completely. Tracy felt the hot breath on his ass, his cock in an awkward position underneath him. He shifted and the motion sent Benoit diving between his ass cheeks.

Tracy started laughing, biting his lip at the unexpected thrill of having his ass licked. He couldn't believe the bossy way Benoit kneaded his ass cheeks as his tongue went right for Tracy's hole.

"That's been waiting for me all day," Benoit murmured into Tracy's flesh and he realized it was true. He'd pined for the man at breakfast and lunch. This was sweet torture.

"Get up on your knees."

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Tracy had never had anyone command him this way and his cock hardened in response. Some primal instinct in him, which shocked and enthralled him, enjoyed the sensation of giving up control. He loved being exposed to Benoit like this.

He turned and glimpsed Benoit's naked body.

Oh, he was gorgeous, with a thick, uncut cock and surprisingly muscular thighs. Benoit moved right behind him, gripping Tracy's hips, tilting his ass to his face. Tracy felt like an offering...a sexual sacrifice to some ancient Greek god.

"Stroke your cock for me." Benoit's voice seemed to come from far away and then came the tongue, hot and wet at the base of his spine. Tracy couldn't speak.

A loud crash, a squeal of brakes, a scream...all jolted him back to reality.

Tracy fell back against the damp sheets. Man, that was one wild fantasy. For a few minutes there, he was certain Benoit had been here with him. He wondered if the man did have an uncut cock and brushed the cobweb of thoughts out of his mind.

Whatever happened outside had broken the spell of passion. He heard voices...Benoit. Marjo. He could hear Benoit's voice trying to sound reassuring.

Frowning, he threw on clothes and ran downstairs to meet them.

They were entering the house as Tracy reached bottom of the stairs.

"Is everything okay? I heard a crash—"

"I'm sorry," Benoit said. "We just had an accident. The moped is totaled."

"What?" Tracy ran to the little girl. "Are you all right?"

She seemed fine, but let him wrap his arms around her.

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"It was the weirdest thing. This car saw us coming...a black BMW...but didn't slow down. In fact..." Benoit hesitated. "I had to veer over to the cliffs to get away from him."

"That was so cool!" Marjo enthused. "You were like James Bond, Daddy!"

"The car kept going, but I got the license number." Benoit handed Tracy a piece of paper with some numbers penciled on it.

Outside, he surveyed the mangled wreck of his moped. He was glad Benoit and Marjo were okay, but he was devastated, absolutely gutted, that his brand new toy was wrecked.

"You have insurance?" Benoit asked him. He and Marjo stood, watching him.

"Yes, but they told me it would take time to adjust any claims." He blew out a breath. It wasn't fair. He'd just bought the thing!

"I'll rent you one," Benoit said. "Come on, *pethia*." Tracy cracked a small smile at his use of the Greek word for children. He and Marjo followed him up the slope to where a blue Volvo was parked, hugging the mountainside.

Benoit lashed the moped to the rear of the vehicle using bungee cords.

Marjo tugged Tracy's hand. "Buckle up," she whispered. "Daddy's the worst driver ever."

"Hey, I heard that," Benoit said and proceeded to prove his daughter right. Tracy had never been on such a hair-raising ride in his life. He was glad it was soon over and, on shaky legs, they arrived at the moped lot. The salesman was as devastated as Tracy was.

"Unfortunately, your insurance policy covers one rider, you," he said.

Tracy felt crushed anew.

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"I'll buy one to replace it," Benoit said. "It's my fault this happened."

The salesman studied the slip of paper. "This is the license of the car that caused the accident? Humph. That's weird."

"What is?" Tracy asked.

"It's not a Greek license number. I wonder how a car like this got on the island...anyway, let me show you what else I have."

They found another moped in a deep blue shade that was not quite as luxurious and comfortable as the one Tracy had bought, but Marjo seemed to like it.

"It's the same color as your eyes," she told Tracy.

* * *

For the next few days, Tracy and Marjo did everything together. He loved spending time with her, and she was as intrigued with the history of the islands as the hatching of the island's nesting birds on Rabbit Island.

It had been difficult to get Benoit to agree to Tracy's request to take Marjo to the small island, a half-day's journey by charter boat. As it happened, when he made his own inquiries, Benoit discovered a charter boat that took four passengers, maximum, and booked it for him and Marjo, Tracy and Toula. At the last minute, he begged off, saying he needed to write, so Toula stayed home, and Marjo and Tracy went, zooming off down the road on the moped.

They encountered Mark and Jenny, the British couple from their trip to the castle, who were on a moped going in the other direction. They waved and stopped to talk for a few minutes.

"Would you like to come with us?" Tracy asked them.

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Marjo anticipated a wonderful time learning about the animals on Rabbit Island. She and Tracy had already made a list of birds and insects they'd seen on Molivos.

"I want to see if there is a white-throated robin," Jenny told them. "They're supposedly extinct."

The boat trip took half an hour and the captain pointed out a colony of nesting Mediterranean gulls.

"Don't get too close," he warned. "They'll attack."

The boat's crew had learned this the hard way.

Marjo was entranced by the terrapin turtles sun baking on the pebble-strewn shores of the island. The captain pointed out black-and-white house martins and hummingbird hawk moths that were so huge and made the same humming sound, it was easy to confuse them with actual hummingbirds.

He provided thick cheese and salami sandwiches and cans of soda. Marjo didn't seem to mind that there were no eggs. She was happy with the bread and cheese. She removed the salami, which Mark ate. Tracy wondered if she normally ate cheese and felt ecstatic that she unconsciously ate something new.

The long, spindly-legged spoonbills stepping around the shallow waters as they sailed back to Lesvos captivated her. She fell asleep in Tracy's arms as the hot afternoon slid into a warm early evening.

"We didn't find the robins," Jenny said, looking depressed. She glanced at Marjo. "We didn't stop trying to find them though, did we? I'm amazed how enthusiastic and interested she is in everything. There's a book about the island birds. I'm sure I've seen it at Estravagario Bookstore. It's full of color photos. She'll love it."

Tracy's arms tightened around his sleeping charge. Tomorrow,

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he and Marjo would go there and see if they could find it.

Back on Molivos, he found his sat-phone ringing.

Juggling the sleeping girl in his arms, he was not surprised it was Benoit calling him.

"You need to come home now or else you'll be late again."

Tracy opened his mouth to respond, but Benoit hung up on him.

He hated having to awaken the little girl, but she seemed alert and full of energy as they motored up the mountain, joining the throng of mopeds and motorbikes on the tiny paved roads.

"I love you," she shouted into Tracy's back. At least that's what he thought she said.

I love you, too, he said but not aloud.

Back at the house, Benoit was waiting for them out front.

"Five minutes late. You were supposed to be here at seven."

"Daddy, Daddy," the little girl shouted as her father unbuckled her from the moped, "I had a wonderful day."

She burred so much her father laughed.

"We're meeting friends for dinner," he said to her. "There's no time to change." His glance at Tracy was accusatory.

The little girl skipped over to greet her grandfather, and Tracy took his chance. "She ate a cheese sandwich for lunch."

Benoit opened and closed his mouth. "What kind of cheese?" He glanced over at his daughter, as if afraid she'd overhear them.

"Kaseri."

Benoit nodded. "Please tell Toula to buy some if she doesn't have any."

Tracy nodded.

"I'm taking my daughter away tomorrow."

"Where?" Tracy asked before he could stop himself.

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“To visit...a friend. So you have the weekend free. I expect you home Sunday night for dinner.”

“Oh...okay.” Tracy felt depressed, but pasted a smile on his face. He didn’t know what else to say, except the one thing he did not want to say.

“Thanks.”

CHAPTER 5

He had a quiet evening alone in the house, feeling sullen about not having dinner with the family and not having any idea where Benoit was taking Marjo for the weekend. Hunger drove him to the kitchen, but he had no idea where Toula was and did not want to raid the fridge and take something she needed, so he headed down to the beach on his moped.

At the Internet café, he sought information on ferry rides to Thessaloniki. He did not want to go to Thessaloniki right now, but there was a special summer-only fast ferry traveling directly to his grandfather's town and he decided it was now or never.

He booked the tickets online to leave the following morning, returning Sunday. He knew this was not enough time to visit his grandfather, but it was a start. Should he call him? He decided he

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wouldn't.

The ferry would leave at seven o'clock in the morning and arrive five hours later. He felt nervous, but excited. It was a good thing he was focusing on his own life now, instead of so much on Marjo.

Marjo. Apart from her food fetishes, she was the most easy-going, wonderful child.

The ferry port was closing when he arrived to pick up his tickets for the next day, but the attendant was in a good mood and slopped the local, milky-colored ouzo into a pair of shot glasses.

"Here, have a drink."

"This is the first ouzo I'm trying," Tracy said. "Which one is this?"

"Veto, best on the island."

Benoit's favorite. Tracy sipped cautiously and enjoyed the tang of anise at the back of his throat. Tracy collected his ticket, and one drink turned into three. He wondered if he was in any shape to ride the moped home.

He stopped for coffee at the Sea Horse and found his new British friends Mark and Jenny entertaining their fellow diners with the gigantic octopus legs on their plate.

"I can't eat this," Mark said. "It feels...barbaric."

Tracy had a wonderful, easy night with them and sobered up long enough to return home.

He'd hardly been in bed five minutes when the piano playing started. Wait...when had they come home? He heard voices...an argument. *Two men. It must be Benoit and Dimitri.* The piano playing got louder and he wondered how Marjo could sleep through it. Sleep certainly eluded him.

Should he say something?

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He feared interrupting the session, but the music was so loud his bedroom door was vibrating. He slipped out of bed, threw on his shorts and T-shirt and opened the door. The music stopped. A door closed and he heard nothing more. *How... weird.*

Tracy returned to his bed and willed himself to ignore the strange, angry music and get some rest.

* * *

The fast ferry caused more than a few people on board to run to the rest rooms and lose their cookies. The sea was choppy, but Tracy had booked an outside seat facing in the direction his ouzo-drinking ticket seller had advised with the flow of the voyage.

His new sandals, a gift from Sharla, made his feet chafe, but he wore them, feeling like she was his partner in crime. He was anxious about seeing his grandfather. He hadn't seen him since the last summer he and Sharla visited their grandparents and their Yaya, apparently suffering dementia, had become impossible to live with. She never remembered her grandchildren's names. She accused Papou of trying to murder her and hoarded packages of old cookies in her bedroom closets saying Papou starved her.

Tracy's parents hadn't believed the twins' stories at first. Looking back on things now, he realized his parents had come to rely on the almost three months the twins spent in Greece with their grandparents. Their parents didn't particularly like giving up their summer freedom. Yaya had died, and with it, all talk of going back to Thessaloniki.

Papou had remarried, but none of the family had met the woman who had also died. Tracy knew Papou was now on his third marriage.

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He had shunned Sharla and Max's efforts to visit him. Maybe it would be different for him. Maybe Papou would be pleased to see him.

They docked early at Thessaloniki's seaport on the outskirts of the old Ladadika district, the thriving olive oil trading center. One of the original remaining neighborhoods to survive a deadly 1917 fire that wiped out a great portion of the city, Ladadika was charming and quaint. Tracy was surprised how built up the rest of the city was. Thessaloniki, the second largest metropolis in Greece and a splendid example of Byzantine architecture, now had modern apartment buildings and tall houses jumbled together with ancient stone relics, lining the ocean as far as the eye could see.

Tracy wheeled the moped off the ferry and gripped the handlebars. Papou lived in Agia Triada, a small village about twenty miles along the coast from Thessaloniki. He knew Papou still lived in Agia Triada because he and Sharla had checked with the one remaining aunt who stayed in contact with him. It was, he hoped, still built in stone and filled with Bronze Age relics. Man, his feet hurt. He pondered rummaging through his backpack now and decided the sandals were sturdy. He could change later.

Bracing himself against the unknown, he rode the coast along the narrow, threading trail appreciating that the old Thessaloniki still existed the farther he traveled from the main square. The sea winds whipped his face, sending light ocean spray across his face and arms. He loved the sensation. He thought the clouds were just a little bit closer here. He glimpsed the ruins of early Minoan *tholos* tombs and thanked the heavens that the ruins of the ancient city and its ancient palace and market place hadn't been transformed into a spa resort.

His heart beat faster as he took the turn, marveling that he

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remembered the unmarked entrance to Papou's old stone house high on the crest of Agia Triada, which meant Holy Trinity in English, and overlooked the sea. It filled him with deep regret that he had waited so long, but knew it was not his fault. Papou hadn't wanted to see him after the last summer with Yaya...then there was the accident. Papou had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with his family. Now he parked out front and knocked on the door. He peered around the sides of the house. Not much had changed from what he could see. He put his ear to the heavy, wooden front door and heard nothing. He tried again.

There was no answer.

Tracy checked his watch. It was now ten minutes to one. He guessed Papou would be at the bakery. He knew Papou still owned it. He left the moped where it was and walked down the hill a block away, where every corner contained a *cafenion*, a restaurant, grocery store, a *loulouthakia*, or flower shop, and he could see the bakery was still there.

He felt disoriented slightly by seeing Papou marching up and down in front of the bakery. *Just like old times.* As usual, everybody else worked, and Papou, dressed in his finest, acted as host, though in truth, his gruff nature was more off-putting than inviting.

"Yasou...hello, Papou." Tracy's hands felt clammy.

His grandfather's faded blue eyes stared at him. He recognized him all right, but stared straight through Tracy. He walked into the bakery, and Tracy followed. Papou went straight out the back, and Tracy stared at the three women behind the counter gazing blankly at him.

"May I help you?" a middle-aged woman asked him in Greek.

Tracy smiled and walked toward her, talking in Greek. "Good

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afternoon, I came to see my grandfather.”

She stared at him. “Grandfather?” She started jabbering away to the two women beside her and he realized these were her daughters. They didn’t realize he spoke fluent Greek and he was dismayed they had no interest in embracing their long-lost relative by marriage.

“Ask him what he wants,” one of the women said.

“If he wants money, tell him we don’t have any.”

“The old man said he was dead. How do we know this is the grandson?”

“Look at his face. He looks just like him.”

“Same blue eyes.”

“What does he want?”

They all stopped talking and looked at him.

“*Pianoun ise?*” the first woman asked him. Translated into English it meant, whose are you, as in family. It was not a familiar expression in English, but he understood it all right.

“I am Tracy Costantino, Papou’s grandson from New York. My father Yianis was his son.”

The women said nothing. They just continued to stare at him. The bakery door opened and a family walked in, the two children rushing around pointing out pastries they wanted to buy.

Tracy realized how hungry he was. He eyed the fragrant, crusty loaves. He’d helped Papou bake when he was younger. In fact, it had been the biggest complaint he and Sharla had had as kids—that they spent their summers working. They both came home fat after their Greek sojourns. Now, he was grateful for the invaluable hours in the store. He knew how to work to deadlines and he never panicked under pressure.

He watched the kids leaving with fresh cream buns in their

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hands. The store emptied again and Tracy spoke once more.

"I used to come here every summer with my twin sister, Sharla."

"That was a long time ago," the first woman said sharply.

"I worked here. I bet the machines I used to clean are still here. Yes, it was a long time ago, but he is still my grandfather."

"*Ti thelis?* What do you want?" It was rude, and Sharla had encountered a similar, unfriendly reaction when she came here last year, but Tracy was determined to get past the wall of women and communicate with his grandfather.

"I don't want anything— except to speak to my grandfather. My sister is pregnant. She is expecting a baby—"

"We have no money."

"I don't want money. I want to speak to him."

The women just stared at him again. He realized his efforts were futile and he left the bakery. When he stepped outside into the shimmering heat, his grandfather, he noted, had vanished. He was angry now. He pushed open the door, and the women, evidently laughing and pleased with their efforts to shut him out, stopped talking.

"I understand every word you're saying. I *can* speak Greek, you know. You tell the old man my sister and I have nobody left. Just him and Aunt Sia, in New York. Shame on you. All of you."

The women looked stunned.

"You tell my Papou that I'm not my sister. I won't give up. I'll be back. You tell him I said that."

His voice cracked on the last statement and, fighting tears he'd held back for too long, he walked back up the hill to his moped. He called Sharla, who was asleep until he woke her. He told her about the entire conversation.

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“You really said that?” she said over and over again, repeating everything to Max. They helped Tracy decide he would spend the night in the area and he would try again the next day.

“He told his wife I was dead,” Tracy said.

“I know,” she said quietly. “Sweetie, I’m so sorry.” She immediately changed the subject. “There’s a very nice hotel a couple of miles back toward Thessaloniki, called the Sun Beach Hotel. Very clean, very nice and there are some wonderful little *tavernas* right along the beachfront. Call us and let us know when you get settled in there, okay?”

He took his family’s advice and rode back along the coast road until he saw the sign for the hotel. He roared up the driveway, found parking easily and strolled into the lobby. He detected a lot of German and British accents. He seemed to be the only American.

“We’re a little off the beaten path,” the desk manager told him.

Tracy was glad he’d listened to Sharla and Max. He had a wonderful room overlooking the ocean and, as he kicked off the painful sandals, the room service crew quickly brought him champagne, a covered dish that turned out to be a swordfish *gyros* and a plate of freshly sliced peaches topped off with the gorgeous Greek yogurt he had come to crave.

He discovered this was courtesy of Sharla. As he called her, he checked his room, dazzled by his private, beachfront balcony and the huge amount of space. The bathroom was tiny, but he didn’t care. He had Internet access and this thrilled him.

Sharla and Max were delighted. “Don’t leave your laptop or anything valuable in the room when you go out to eat,” Sharla advised. “Theft is big business over there.”

She suggested he stick to the local beach for a post-lunch swim.

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"It's lovely. The water is amazing. They'll give you towels at the hotel to take with you and cocktails as soon as you return. Then tonight, you should pop along the coast to the next town Peraia for dinner. It's really wonderful. There's a seafood and pizza restaurant, the best one in Greece. What's it called, Max?"

"The Minoan Café," came the response.

Now why was that name familiar?

Tracy took their advice and grabbed lunch at the first *cafenion* he could find. He wondered how Marjo and her dad were doing and he resisted calling to check on them. Benoit had Tracy's phone number and would call if they needed him. The thought saddened him a great deal that they didn't need him.

He returned to his room in the late afternoon and gave in to the indolent urge to have a siesta. In the early evening, he showered, threw on fresh clothes and his favorite, comfortable tennis shoes and rode the coastal path to Peraia.

It was a lively, lovely town dotted with bright, colored lights, and he found the Minoan Café.

Parking the moped, he slung his messenger bag over his shoulder and almost knocked down a waitress carrying a tray of drinks.

"I know you," he said.

"Of course you know me," she said, and he realized it was Despina, his seat buddy from the plane.

"Well," he said, pleased to see her. He couldn't tell her his visit here was an accident.

"Papa," she yelled. "My *gambro* is here!"

Tracy stared at her. *Gambro* meant husband.

"Just kidding," she said, with a braying laugh. "Say, you're just in time. We just took some fresh shrimp off the grill. You like

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some?”

“Sure,” Tracy said.

“There should be a table opening up outside,” she said. “Oh, yeah, there’s a party leaving now.”

She pointed to a table out front, and he was shocked to see Benoit and Marjo. He wanted to leave on the spot, but they beat him to it. Benoit apparently hadn’t seen him. He was counting out euros and talking on his cell phone. He took little Marjo by the hand and they left.

“Sexy fucker, isn’t he?” Despina asked, nudging him. “Grab a pew. I’ll bring you the menu.”

As if on cue, the man who haunted his days and nights turned around and looked at him.

Tracy was certain his heart skipped a beat. Or else it had taken a temporary leave of absence and gone fluttering down to his shoes. Benoit wasn’t looking at him, though. He was looking at somebody who rose from the table.

Dimitri.

Benoit gazed at Dimitri the way he’d looked at Tracy, briefly, on the plane. It was devastating.

Tracy took a seat at the table outside, choosing the chair vacated by Benoit. It was still warm. Despina cleared off the table, and Tracy glimpsed the look of fury from three people who obviously didn’t like a single diner making use of a table they could otherwise fill.

Despina ran inside and returned with a sizzling platter of grilled seafood. “I wish you’d come during the day when I’m not so busy. You like red wine?”

Without waiting for a response, she plonked down a small glass of it. It was identical to the one Benoit has been using.

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"I'm so glad you came. You know, when I invited you on the plane, I was certain you weren't listening to a word I said." She laughed. "You want ice water?"

He nodded, and she continued, "Fancy you coming all the way from Athens to see me!"

Tracy wanted to correct her, but she never stayed long enough to do more than deposit delicious food. She brought him coffee in a battered *brika*. It was wonderful paired with the generous slice of *galatouboureko* she brought him.

"You told me it's your favorite," she said, racing off again. Now when had he mentioned that? The night darkened, but did not cool off. He was looking at the grand Aegean Sea in all its splendor and he wondered what Benoit was doing now.

The *galatouboureko* was perfect. The milk pie was soft and sweet, but the custard was firm, the way it should be. The phlo pastry dissolved on his tongue. He had a sudden flash that Marjo might actually like it. *Marjo*. He'd missed her today, but he was glad she hadn't been there to see his grandfather ignoring him.

Despina waved away his money and said, "You owe me dinner now."

He'd have to set her straight about his sexuality, but they exchanged phone numbers, and he walked along the beach, past the outdoor cafés lining the boardwalk and he heard music. Some of it was canned and some of it live. He came upon a café where the musicians sat in chairs out front and played.

What did they call these? That's right, rembetadiko.

He stopped. He recognized the melody of the flute. Dimitri was here. Then he saw him. Benoit was right beside him. They played with two guitarists—Benoit on a mandolin this time—and the song was intoxicating.

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Tracy hung back a little, watching the way Benoit played his mandolin with such passion and precision. His eyes opened in the middle of his musical reverie and Tracy knew Benoit had seen him.

His employer looked away, in spite of the spark of recognition and shouted, “*Opa!*” as a woman got up from the table beside him and started an impromptu dance. Benoit closed his eyes. Once again playing, he seemed totally transported. His friend Dimitri played the *duduk* flute and the music was haunting...lovely...and yet it had the kind of kick to it that Greek people craved. The dancing woman soon had a companion, then another. As one song stopped and another started, Benoit laughed, sipped his wine, lit one of his tiny cigars and played on. Only one time did his gaze stray to Tracy, and Tracy was certain Benoit must be able to see how mesmerized he was.

The songs kept coming and a waitress brought the musicians coffee and *ouzo*, and it seemed to Tracy that Benoit watched him now through half-closed eyes. He downed his coffee in one gulp and his gaze moved fully to Tracy. He smiled as if seeing him for the first time, but he kept playing, flirting with the women and the men crowded around him. He kept catching Tracy’s gaze, though, like he wanted to make sure he had Tracy’s full attention.

Benoit is showing off a bit for me, Tracy thought, then ridiculed himself for such fanciful notions. It was past midnight when Tracy saw the crowd of people was only getting stronger and he left. He’d parked his moped around the corner and he walked to it, marveling at how Thessaloniki was alive and hopping at this late hour. He wondered where Marjo was and missed her badly. He adored her laughter and hugs. He was about to get on his bike when he heard Benoit calling his name.

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He turned and Benoit was right there.

"I can't let you go." His eyes glowed as if burnished in the dark, and Tracy thought he would never forget those five wonderful words.

He could smell Benoit's wonderful, woody scent. He couldn't help but fall into the man's arms. He tasted the coffee on his breath as Benoit's mouth moved over his. Benoit sucked the breath out of him, and Tracy groaned when he felt Benoit's cock rigid against his belly.

Benoit took his mouth from him. "What are you doing here?" Before Tracy could respond, he said, "Where are you staying?"

"Not far."

"Let's go."

Tracy hesitated. "Where's Marjo?"

"With her grandpa. He's babysitting for me."

"I could have come and babysat..." Tracy bit off the words.

"Well, this is more fun, though, isn't it? I can't fuck you with my father and my kid right there."

Tracy was convinced he was imagining this entire conversation, except that Benoit hopped on the bike and Tracy became nervous as he moved in front of him. Benoit was so close and he kept feeling Tracy up.

"Cut that out," he said, feeling feeble.

Benoit kissed the back of his neck. "I can't." He hung onto Tracy's muscular body as they rounded the corner and roared up the hill. Benoit was a good motorcycle passenger. He went with the flow and didn't resist any turns. His hand slid to Tracy's crotch, and Tracy almost flew over the handlebars he was so shocked and turned on.

They reached the Sun Beach Hotel and parked. There was a

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wedding reception in progress, and Benoit insisted on joining in the dancing. Tracy was stunned how good Benoit was at the traditional *hasapico*.

He laughed as Benoit led one string of dancers out of the hotel reception area and down to the beach.

What a ham, Tracy thought. *He might be French, but he has the soul of a Greek in him.*

Benoit once again was all about the music, and Tracy was all about Benoit, who seemed so turned on by the music that Tracy wanted to scream. He was eager to get to the room and fuck, and besides, Benoit had been manhandling him. His cock was still hard.

Damn it. He's my employer. He doesn't really care about me.

This last, bleak thought seemed to break the spell the music had on Benoit. Just as suddenly as he'd embraced the dance, Benoit strode toward Tracy and muscled him out of there.

"Where's your room?" he asked in French.

Tracy led him to it, and although Benoit took a good look around, he seemed to show no interest in how they'd both wound up in Thessaloniki. Tracy wanted to ask a million questions, but Benoit reached for him and started undressing him.

Benoit's inquisitive fingers ranged over his body. "I've never seen you without clothes on...except a couple of times when I spied on you at the beach with my daughter. I knew you'd look like this."

"I want you. I want your skin against mine," Tracy said.

"You'll have it." Benoit push him to the bed and tongued Tracy through his boxer briefs as Tracy went mad on the bed. Benoit had a famished expression on his face as he peeled off the tiniest, sexiest black underpants Tracy had ever seen. The biggest,

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thickest, uncut cock sprang out.

"I knew you'd look like this." Tracy's voice sounded clear and confident to his own ears in the near darkness. "Please let me lick your cock."

Benoit ignored him, reaching down to pull up Tracy's feet and push his legs back and up, swabbed his ass hole with his tongue before moving to Tracy's cock head and licking that, too.

Tracy's hands managed to grasp that massive cock, but only for a moment

"I want to fuck you, Tracy. You got rubbers?"

Tracy shook his head.

"I can't wait and I'm clean. I know you are, too. I've seen your medical records."

"Yeah, that's right," Tracy gasped out as Benoit rubbed against his hole, his hard, insistent cock throbbing. He could feel it.

Benoit's eyes looked right into his as he pressed against his ass, seeking entry. He began a litany of "Please, please, please," almost as if he was begging Tracy to let him fuck him.

Tracy grabbed his cock and demanded Benoit give it to him, and he did. The pleasure-pain engulfed him and both men made so much noise as Benoit entered him that Tracy was grateful there was a wedding reception going on underneath the open windows, drowning out their impassioned cries.

"Fuck, your ass is so hot," Benoit muttered.

I feel like we've been lovers forever, parted and never to be separated again... Tracy longed to say the words. *I have never felt this way with anyone...*

Benoit's eyes gleamed as he bent down and kissed Tracy. "It feels so good to finally fuck you. You have no idea how many times I wanted to come to your room."

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Tracy laughed, holding Benoit's face in his hands. "You're my fantasy man."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I swear I'm not."

Benoit's body was hard and hot, his mouth roving over Tracy's throat and shoulders in such a proprietary way it thrilled Tracy.

"You're my fantasy man, too," Benoit whispered. "Do you know you always take my thoughts right out of my brain?"

"No."

"Do you know how nice it is that your cock is hard as I fuck you like this? It tells me you like what I am doing to you."

Tracy couldn't respond. He couldn't speak anymore. He was on the verge of a huge orgasm and he felt it raging through him like liquid fire.

"Oh, man," Benoit cried out. "Oh, thank God."

He fell on top of Tracy as their orgasms raged. Tracy came all over his chest and belly, Benoit's hand snaking between them to hold his shaft.

"That was even better than I expected," he said, kissing Tracy's mouth hard.

Outside, the *rembetiko* started, a somber dance for one. Lonely men danced this song, showing their pain, their unrequited passion to the world.

"How apt," said Benoit. "That is usually my song."

He pulled out of Tracy and lay on his side.

"My song, too," Tracy said, about to snuggle into Benoit, who raised himself on one elbow. Somehow, his precisely bound hair had escaped the confines of the black band he always wore and he looked like an ancient Greek warrior-god. Tracy grew hard again.

"Look at this." Benoit's hand moved to Tracy's cock. "I don't

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understand. Are you alone? You have no lover?"

Tracy didn't know how to respond. "Apart from you, no."

Benoit looked surprised. "Why not? You're so sexy. You should have a string of men limping after you."

He laughed. "Limping?"

"Yeah, from you having to kick them in the balls all the time to keep them away from you."

Tracy laughed again and reached up for a kiss. "How about you? You got a guy?"

"Would you care?"

"Yeah," Tracy admitted. "I would."

"I'm bisexual. Well, I was. I am more interested in men now...one in particular. But I don't disclose my...feelings...my relationships."

"Ah...like your music. Nothing on record."

Benoit's smile was dazzling. "Something like that. Can you live with it?"

Tracy was stunned. Was Benoit saying Tracy was the man he was interested in?

"I had a relationship a long time ago with a man. I always wanted children, but he didn't. We decided he would have his lover, and I could marry a woman and have a child. Well, I told my wife everything. She became very vindictive, even though we agreed I could see him on a limited basis. I saw him at most, once, twice a year. That was hard. I loved him. He was my passion, my heart."

Tracy swallowed hard. It was painful to hear that Benoit had these feelings for another man.

"Believe me, I tried so hard with my wife. I never lied to her, never hid anything from her. And then we had Marjo and my wife,

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well...you know, she fell into drugs...she was a mess. I tried everything I could to help her. We're divorced and she has offered to sign her rights away as Marjo's mother...if I stop seeing men."

Tracy absorbed all of this. "Can she do that?"

"I must protect my daughter. Her mother..." He seemed on the verge of tears here and he pulled himself away from Tracy. "Her mother abducted her once and they were gone for three weeks. She sold my baby to a crack house!"

"Benoit...I can't believe it."

"Believe it. "

"Does Marjo talk about it?"

He shook his head. "She doesn't remember it, but she's had her little eating disorder ever since. It's been difficult. She has times when she's fine and then times when I worry she'll starve to death."

"Benoit, I am so sorry."

"You're the first...outsider I've admitted this to. It's hard for me."

"Since she has done all these terrible things, no court would give her custody, Benoit. Do you really need to have her give up her parental rights since you have full custody already?"

"I don't want her to sell my child to another crack house. Marjo saw her recently...her mother joined some church that believes they can pray homosexuality away. I believe she wants to take Marjo from me to wash away the taint of my sexuality."

"Oh, my God." Tracy reached for him, but Benoit jumped off the bed as if he'd been touched by a live wire. "She is threatening to expose my relationship with my ex-lover. Yes, he is an ex. My ex-wife is so crazy he couldn't deal with it any longer. Not that I blame him. He has a man who is everything he wants."

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“You are everything I want,” Tracy blurted.

Benoit looked at him, a range of emotions crossing his strong features. “How is it you are still single?” he asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

“I was in a relationship for a long time. It didn’t work out. I want children; he doesn’t. It isn’t enough for me just to teach them. I want to be a father.”

Benoit nodded. “How interesting we should both have this same experience. Are you sure you can handle me, though?”

“I think so. Hey, I even love the crazy way you play the piano late at night, so that’s saying something,” Tracy joked, wishing his lover would just come back to bed.

Benoit stared at him, shocked. “What do you mean...*crazy*?”

Tracy mentally slapped himself silly. He should never have said that. Now he’d gone and wrecked everything. “I’m sorry—”

“No, no. You’re right. It’s crazy. Only it’s not me!”

Tracy sat up on the bed. “Not...you?”

Benoit shook his head. “I’ve heard it, too. I...ah...I went to the piano room the other night when it was happening. The playing was so loud the door was vibrating. I put my hand on the door and I could feel that music. It was horrible...angry. I opened the door and it stopped.”

“Stopped?”

Benoit nodded. “Weirdest thing. I am not a big believer in ghosts, but that house we’re staying in...I’m certain it’s haunted.”

Tracy absorbed this for a moment.

“Does anybody else hear it?”

“Marjo’s never said anything to me. Has she said anything to you?”

Tracy shook his head.

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“I asked Toula, but she hasn’t heard anything either.”

The two men looked at each other, and Benoit finally smiled. “Maybe my madness is contagious. Sure you want to be this close?”

“I’m sure.”

“It could be bad, you know. This could be like Hansen’s Disease...or...”

Tracy laughed. “Hearing weird music in the middle of the night I can handle. You slugged me and I still like you.”

Benoit looked stricken and crawled across the rumpled bed to kiss him. He allowed Tracy to hold him and their passion intensified once again.

When his lover rolled on top of him, Tracy thrilled at the feeling of the body he already craved and missed every moment.

“God,” Benoit said. “I want you all the time.”

“You can have me all the time,” Tracy whispered.

“I don’t mind being labeled as gay, but I do mind my child being dragged through mud. So you must understand. If we do this, it’s on my terms, when I wish it. When I don’t, you must respect that.”

Run. Run! Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Just keep fucking running!

“All right, Benoit,” he said instead. “I just...want to be with you.”

CHAPTER 6

“*Kali mera....*good morning, Papou.” Tracy braced himself to be ignored and he wasn’t disappointed. Well, he was disappointed, but not surprised.

His morning had already started in a weird, unsettling way. Benoit had left him after making love to him twice and then rising with the sun, kissing his fingertips.

“See you at home,” he’d said. “Don’t be late for dinner.” The imperious Benoit had returned in that comment and Tracy sweated now. Nothing in his life felt secure. His post-coital languor had allowed him to oversleep. He’d had just enough time to race to the ferry port, but he had to try one last time with Papou.

The old man ignored him and marched up and down in front of the store around him.

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Tracy glanced inside and saw the women watching him. Fuck them all, he told himself and stormed off to his moped. Why in the world did he want to keep scrubbing at this emotional stain? Why had he agreed to be Benoit's secret lover?

Why do I always choose people who reject me?

He had no immediate answer to this piece of insight, but jumped on his moped and raced to the ferry port.

* * *

"You're late."

As he unlocked the front door and stepped inside, Tracy glanced up. His sexy, impossible lover stood there glaring at him, then broke into a wonderful, child-like smile.

Benoit's gaze never left his face. "Marjo, look who's home."

The little girl came from her room, peering through the iron bars of the staircase. "Tracy!" she shrieked and ran down to him.

He dropped his bags and ran to her, kissing her hair as he swept her up into his arms. "I missed you," he said, hugging her.

"I missed you, Tracy." She hugged him, wrapping her arms and legs around him, making him laugh.

He glanced at Benoit, who smiled back at him.

"What's in the shopping bags?" Marjo asked, looking over Tracy's shoulder.

"Presents."

"Presents? I adore presents."

"Marjo," her father protested, "you assume too much."

The little girl blushed. "Did you bring me a present?"

Tracy laughed. "Of course I did."

Marjo laughed. "Can I see?"

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She clattered down the stairs with Tracy.

"I bought you some new books. Here's one on all the birds of the island."

"Cool!"

"And I bought us a candy making kit, a jewelry making kit. I bought some chocolate for Toula. Oh, and this..." He opened the last remaining bag. "You give this to Daddy, okay?"

She glanced up at her father, who was still staring at them. "What is it?" she whispered dramatically.

"You'll see. You tell Daddy this is from both of us, okay?"

"Okay." She ran up the stairs with all her new things and thrust the bag into Benoit's hands. "Here, Daddy."

Benoit laughed as his daughter charged off to her room.

"She will find special places for all those things. She's the one child who appreciates all her treasures," he told Tracy.

Tracy's voice was quiet. "I know."

"You shouldn't have done it. You spent so much money on her."

"My choice. Hey, open your gift."

Benoit grinned. "It's heavy." He opened the shopping bag and removed a small, soft black carry case from it.

"This is what...a ukulele?" He didn't wait for a response. He unzipped the small bag and retrieved a red ukulele with a pretty dolphin bridge.

"It's a Makala, isn't it?" Benoit looked astonished as he strummed it.

"Yes, it's perfect for you to teach Marjo. She wants to learn the ukulele. Red is her favorite color, too."

"Yes, I know it is." Benoit gave him a hard look. "It's a soprano. Where did you find it?"

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“From a store down at the beach. They had three left.”

Marjo came out of her room and stared at the ukulele. “Daddy, is that your gift?”

“Actually, it’s your gift,” Benoit said. He knelt beside her. “Tracy and I think I should teach you how to play.”

“Really?” She took it from his hands. “Can I sleep with it, Daddy? Can I?”

“They do keep tune exceptionally well,” Tracy said.

Benoit laughed. “I see you’ve thought this thing through.” His voice dropped. “It doesn’t play itself in the middle of the night, does it?”

Tracy laughed. “Not that I know of.”

They all had dinner that night, except for Benoit’s father who was on the other side of the island apparently dining with friends. Though Benoit paid no special attention to Tracy, he wasn’t mean. Tracy felt the man staring at him a few times and when Toula brought ice cream to the table, Benoit traded bowls with Tracy.

“You must try the pistachio ice cream,” he said.

Tracy grinned. “Another island delicacy?”

“No. It’s just my favorite.”

He didn’t stay to see if Tracy liked it. He took Marjo off to the piano room for her first ukulele lesson, and Tracy was pleased to see his small charge looking so excited.

“You did a nice thing,” Toula said as he helped her clear the table.

“Now, you try some *ouzo*,” she insisted when they finished loading up the dishwasher.

Outside at the table, they sipped the liqueur from tall-stemmed glasses. They could hear Benoit becoming frustrated with Marjo.

“Fathers shouldn’t teach their children how to drive or...how to

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play the ukulele,” Toula observed. She seemed in a melancholy mood.

“Everything okay?” he asked her.

“No! No, Marjo. Like this.” It was Benoit’s voice. The little girl strummed again. Tracy thought Benoit was being awfully hard on her.

“My father, his legs ache,” Toula said. “He won’t walk. We bought him a donkey, but the donkey stumbled so he punched him in the face and knocked out his eye. Now the donkey stumbles all the time,” Toula said and poured herself another drink.

This tale of flagrant animal abuse so shocked Tracy that he just stared at her.

“I know,” she said. “Poor donkey.”

Marjo came out to them, looking less than overjoyed with her first lesson.

“You did great,” Tracy said, holding his arms out to her.

Her bottom lip wobbled. “How do you know?”

“I could hear you. You were wonderful, Marjo.”

His little words of kindness seemed to unglue the little girl and she ran into his arms, sobbing.

Toula left them alone at the table, and Tracy tried to soothe Marjo’s hurt feelings.

“It’s okay,” he said, holding her on his lap.” He glanced at the piano room and saw Benoit watching them. When he glanced away, Benoit closed the window with a snap.

“Daddy’s mad at me.”

“No, he’s not mad at you,” Tracy assured her.

“He gets mad at me all the time. He got mad at me when we went to Thessaloniki.”

She told him a jumbled tale torn straight from the heart of a

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wounded, confused six-year-old.

He assured her with kisses and hugs and suggested she pick a book for them to read together.

“Can we make jewelry tomorrow?” she asked him.

“Sure thing.”

After her bath and reading with Tracy, Marjo fell asleep with the scent of thyme and roses drifting in through her open window.

The black-and-white kitten slept curled in her arms, and Tracy tiptoed out of the room, leaving her door ajar, the way Marjo liked.

He showered and threw on clean boxer briefs and lay in bed, clean and daisy fresh, hoping Benoit would come to him.

Benoit didn’t and after an hour, he heard noises outside. Toula was back at the table with the *ouzo* so Tracy threw on shorts and a T-shirt and went out to join her.

They drank in companionable silence.

“The family is going away next weekend,” she said in the darkness. “You’re welcome to come and have Sunday lunch at my family’s house.”

Tracy didn’t think he wanted to meet Toula’s donkey-punching father. “Thanks, Toula, but I think I’m going to go visit my grandfather.”

There, he’d said it. Why he wanted to throw himself into the fire again he didn’t know, but in spite of everything, he loved Papou. He wanted Sharla’s baby boy to know his Greek ancestry. He wanted Papou back in his life.

“I didn’t know you have family here.”

He smiled. “Not on Lesbos. My Papou lives in Thessaloniki.”

She shrugged. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

“I’ll do that. When are we buying you some new clothes?”

“You sound like my mother,” she said, pouring another drink.

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“I have no good reason to yet.”

“‘Yet’ is promising.”

“‘Yet’ is a long time coming. Here’s mud in your eye.” She downed her drink in one gulp.

She got up from the table and, taking her own glass inside, left him at the table. He pondered the darkness, the island night sky with its myriad stars and felt an odd mix of peace and loneliness. His heart ached for Marjo. Her father adored her, but alternately pushed her away, then pulled her in very close again.

He poured himself one more *ouzo*, wondering what Benoit was doing. He wasn’t in the piano room, which was dark. He wondered where Benoit was going for the weekend and his eyes began to drift shut. The liqueur spilling down his fingers from his glass woke him and he licked them.

A movement from the house surprised him. Benoit came out quietly from the kitchen and the two men stared at each other in the dark, faintly illuminated night.

Benoit reached out to him, grabbing him from his chair. Their kiss was deep and impassioned.

Tracy yearned to say, “I missed you,” but Benoit’s mouth roamed his face and throat now as if in memory, and all thoughts of revealing his growing emotions collapsed in Tracy’s mouth. He wanted this man again, badly. He wanted Benoit to fuck him the way he had last night, as if he was the only man in the world for him.

Benoit tugged at the Velcro snaps on Tracy’s shorts. No, Tracy wanted that beautiful, uncut cock in his mouth. He would not be denied this time.

Tracy stepped back, and Benoit plucked at his shorts. Tracy stepped forward again and surprised Benoit.

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His fingers reached for Benoit's button-fly jeans. Oh, man, the guy was commando underneath those cool brass buttons. He knelt down and grabbed Benoit's cock with his lips. Benoit tried to pull back, but Tracy had a tight hold on him with lips and tongue. Along with his hands gripping the man's ass, his fingers digging into his skin. Benoit gasped with surprise and a little pain. Tracy was unused to sucking foreskin and realized he was bringing his man great pleasure tugging the skin down over the glistening head with this lips and a tiny grip of his teeth.

Benoit tried pulling away again. "Please let me fuck you."

Tracy would not let go. He stood and threw Benoit on the table on his back. Benoit's body stiffened for a moment, then his eyes closed as Tracy tugged down the jeans a little more, letting his mouth speak for him. Benoit's hands moved through Tracy's hair. Tracy was certain his new lover wanted to hold his head, but was afraid to be too aggressive. Benoit groaned. Tracy had no clue how their noisy love-making hadn't woken Toula and Marjo...or the neighbors for that matter.

Benoit's feet scraped the ground. He moved and the *ouzo* bottle went flying. He caught it, but some of it spilled on his hands and chest, and Tracy quickly lifted his head and lapped at the filmy liquid. Even in the darkness, he could see the wild desire in Benoit's eyes as Tracy's tongue licked at his fingers.

"Put your mouth back on me," Benoit demanded.

Tracy refused to rush. He wanted this to be the best blow job Benoit had ever received. When his head moved back to the Frenchman's raging cock, Benoit's hand involuntarily jerked, knocking Tracy's *ouzo* glass to the ground. Tracy heard the glass shatter, but he couldn't stop. The house lights came on, and Benoit gasped.

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“Let me go.”

There was not a chance Tracy was going to stop. He didn’t care who caught them. Benoit sighed, one hand moving to Tracy’s head.

“Jesus,” he said. Poor Benoit still held the ouzo bottle in his left hand as he flooded Tracy’s throat with hot come.

He thrashed around on the table and left as soon as his eruption ended. Tracy remained on his own as Benoit darted off into the bushes. Toulas came out in a scary, purple negligee that revealed more than he ever wanted to see of the housekeeper.

She found Tracy looking dazed.

“What happened?” She rushed back inside and returned with a dustpan and broom.

Tracy was still in hog heaven and smiled. “A little accident,” he said and lowered his head, hoping she didn’t notice his big, sloppy grin.

* * *

Benoit avoided him after that night. Not in a mean way, he was just unavailable and gone from the house for hours at a time. The house was very empty without him, and Tracy and Marjo leaned on each other for attention.

They developed a routine of writing and reading in the morning before and after breakfast. They tooled around different beaches immediately afterward. They began to favor Skala Erresos for its soft sand and a lake at the very end where they could watch turtles swimming. It seemed in the late afternoons, families brought hordes of children to this particular beach because it was clean and the waves gentle. Old grandmas frolicked in the shallow end of the

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ocean, their colorful bathing caps like bright, bobbing apples dappling the water.

With her father skipping several meals with them, Tracy kept Marjo out of the house and they found tons of places to eat, often returning after watching the sunset with the other families down at the beach.

After four days of this, Marjo began eating less, diminishing her repertoire again. She would cry when her father missed dinner with her and bedtime became impossible. When Tracy waylaid him one morning to mention it, Benoit snapped.

"I'm taking her away for the weekend. I'll have plenty of time for her then."

"Her eating has regressed. She won't eat apples, cheese or even eggs now. She eats a tiny piece of bread, and if I'm lucky, half a glass of milk."

Benoit glared at him. "Oh, all right," he barked out, as if he were doing Tracy a huge favor.

I miss you too, Tracy wanted to say and let Benoit storm past him down the stairs. Sigh... *I just had to go and be gay....*

Marjo was so overjoyed to see her father at breakfast that Benoit seemed to melt under the adoration.

"Daddy, I can't wait to see you play at the castle tomorrow night," she said, squeezing her arms around his neck.

The castle. Tracy had forgotten the event was so close and felt very bad now that he was taking Benoit's retreat so personally.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Very," Benoit admitted. "I always get nervous."

He spent a half hour coaxing Marjo to share a handful of grapes with him and engaged in doting conversation with his daughter. He drifted off to his piano room again, Tracy gazing longingly at the

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man's fine French butt.

Benoit turned and locked eyes with his. *Thank you*, he mouthed and continued on his way.

There was great excitement the following day as musicians started to roll up to the house. It looked as if Benoit had assembled an astonishing array of talent from all over the world. Drums, flutes, bongos, lutes...so many instruments competed in the piano room and finally spilled onto the terrace. The sound drifted across their little hill, and Tracy and Marjo became caught up in the excitement.

Toula and Benoit huddled, Toula glancing in Tracy's direction. He already knew without her telling him that Benoit wanted Marjo out of the way.

"Would you like some ice cream?" he asked Marjo.

"I would love ice cream," she said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Oooh, let's go to the Sea Horse. I love the Sea Horse." Marjo strapped on her red helmet before they were even out of the house.

"Be back by six," Toula whispered to Tracy. "He wants us to drive with him."

"No problem."

Tracy and Marjo zipped down to the beach and after he parked the bike and turned off the engine he got off it. Marjo waited for him to unbuckle her seat belt, and he accidentally dropped his keys. When he bent down to pick them up, he heard a car swerve right beside them, kicking up gravel in his face. A man in the back of the car opened the door and impossibly, unbelievably, reached out and snatched at Marjo.

"Hey!" Tracy roared. The little girl was still buckled onto the moped, and the man, dressed in black with black sunglasses

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shielding his face, realized the little girl was not moving freely. He emanated cold fury as he slithered back into the car and slammed the door shut.

The whole thing was over in less than a minute.

“Wow,” said Marjo, as the car veered off in a haphazard way. “That man tried to steal our bike.”

Tracy’s heart thumped in his chest as he unbuckled the little girl and took her into his arms.

“Are you all right, baby?” He held her tight.

“Everything okay?” a woman sitting at one of the tables asked.

“That man tried to steal our bike,” Marjo said, wide-eyed with shock.

The lady looked like she was going to argue, but Tracy pulled out his cell phone.

“Everything okay?” the woman asked again.

Tracy nodded. But everything was not okay. He had checked the license plate of the car. It was a black BMW, and he was certain it was the same number of the vehicle that had tried to run Benoit and Marjo off the side of the mountain the previous week.

He resisted putting the little girl down on the ground, fearing another snatch attack.

Who would do something like this?

Benoit answered his cell phone. “What is it?” he snapped.

Tracy quickly told him as Marjo climbed out of his arms and over the railing to grab a seat at their favorite table.

“Don’t call the police. The local island cops deal with lost sunglasses and traffic, not with an almost bike theft.”

“But Benoit—”

“They must have really wanted the bike,” Benoit said. “If Marjo thinks so, I think so.”

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“But—”

“Look I’m really busy now.” Benoit seemed to wait for an agreement, an indication Tracy would not call the cops.

“See you when you get back here.” Benoit ended the call.

Marjo seemed convinced the man was a thief after the bike. She told her dad and Toula all about the funny man in the back of the car trying to steal the moped. Tracy knew better and completely rattled, struggled through the family’s early dinner.

Toula confronted him in the kitchen, rattling off rapid-fire Greek. “You look upset.”

“I *am* upset. That man didn’t want my bike.” He glanced out the kitchen door to make sure they couldn’t be overheard. “He wanted Marjo.”

Toula opened and closed her mouth. “Why?”

“I have no idea.”

She looked troubled, too. “Should we call the police?”

“There’s no need to call the police.”

A voice from the doorway made them jump. Benoit’s tone was icy as his gaze moved from Tracy to Toula.

“Now if you two have finished gossiping, I have a car out front.”

They headed off to the castle.

Somebody had tried to run down Benoit and then tried to steal his daughter. Why was he brushing it off?

Tracy was determined that once the concert was over, he would bring all these things up to Benoit. Now, as they arrived at the castle, a crowd formed and Benoit pointed to a row of seats marked off with a long white ribbon.

“You three sit there,” he snapped at Tracy, Toula and Marjo.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Tracy couldn’t resist.

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Benoit's mouth quirked into a smile. "Captain. I like that."

Oh, brother, Tracy thought as they took their seats the massive outdoor courtyard, and Benoit rushed off to the interior of the castle.

Hard, wooden white chairs were set all around a roped-off section of the courtyard. People sat on the ground or perched on the stone walls. Tracy marveled at the different languages and the overflowing joy of all those present. Marjo huddled close to him, watching other children playing. She went from her own chair to Tracy's lap again and again in her mounting excitement and then red and white lights flashed.

The crowd burst into applause as the evening's festivities began with a one-act play featuring a group of local children. The narrator was a woman who alternated between Greek and English, talking about the five princesses who'd once inhabited the ancient castle.

"Princess Mithymna, for whom our town is named, was once abducted by a faraway king who wanted her for his own!"

A crash of cymbals from somewhere made the audience jump, and a little boy rode into the courtyard astride a black pony. He had a little trouble getting his princess on the back of the horse, requiring a leg-up from the narrator, but once they rode off, the audience whooped and clapped in appreciation.

"But we here in Mithymna will never forget her. Long live Mithymna!"

After a short break, a man in black took the microphone and spoke to the crowd.

"Thank you for coming here this evening. As a reminder, we ask that you please refrain from taking pictures during the performance and absolutely no recording of this evening's

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performance will be permitted. Any camera phones, cell phones, digital cameras and other recording devices observed recording this performance will be confiscated until the conclusion of this event. Thank you.”

A few people who'd been taping everything up until now grumbled and groaned, the crowd murmured and then blue and white lights came on. The audience went berserk with the realization these are the colors of the Greek flag.

Benoit Seguin materialized in a smoky spotlight, standing in a stone archway, his long dark hair brushed out and flowing. He was dressed in white pants and a white tunic, barefoot, with a blue-and-white *bouzouki* in his hands.

That was the moment Tracy realized he was in love with this man. With all his moods and quixotic secrets, Tracy loved him.

Marjo squeaked, “Daddy!” over the mountainous applause and she leapt into Tracy’s lap.

Deep blue lights, reminding Tracy of the color he always thought of as love, grew bright and glowed, shimmering in the sunset as Benoit’s head bent forward and he began to play. There was, as the song goes, “A Kind of Hush” as he began an incredible acoustic version of the Herman’s Hermits classic. Other musicians in other hidden crevices around the castle soon joined him and then a young tenor emerged from the castle door, apparently a popular Greek artist, and one song morphed into another.

Tracy noticed a few cell phones being confiscated and he glanced at Marjo’s entranced expression. He hugged her, and her hand reached for his. His heart swelled with love for the little girl when she did the thumb thing again. She was a sweet, precious little thing.

For two hours, her father enchanted the audience. The

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musicians he'd gathered from all over the world were astounding and he seemed in his element.

"Man, I'd give anything for the CD of that," Tracy heard somebody grumble when the show was over.

Benoit took endless bows thanks to the stream of performers accompanying him and blew a kiss to his daughter, retreating into the castle. Tracy's cell phone rang.

He checked the readout. "Benoit! You were wonderful. Marjo—"

"Take my daughter home. Tell her not to wait up for me." He ended the call.

"Didn't Daddy want to talk to me?" Marjo's little face looked pale and sad in the moonlight.

"Yes, I'm sure he did. It was a bad connection." Tracy was angry Benoit had hung up on him and he called Benoit back, ready to go to war. Voice mail.

Marjo snatched the phone out of his hands and left her dad a message.

"Can we go for ice cream?" Marjo asked in the middle of a long-winded, but hysterical critique of the evening into the cell phone.

"Sure," Tracy said. "Let Daddy know."

"Okay!" Marjo hung up on the phone.

Toula laughed as Tracy called a second time and relayed the information.

The driver who had brought them to the castle waved to them. "I am to take you home," he said in Greek. He didn't argue about stopping for a treat on the way home, but as they snaked down the path in the flow of other vehicles and a heavy parade of pedestrians, a car edging past in the opposite direction suddenly

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veered right over, running them off the road and into a ditch.

The car startled people and cyclists, and everyone ran for cover.

People came running as the driver crossed himself in the Greek fashion.

Tracy unbuckled Marjo's seatbelt and snatched her to him.

"Panay eh mou... oh, my God!" Toula screamed.

She exchanged glances with Tracy. She knew. *"Ixera? The same?"* she asked as Tracy held a now-frightened Marjo in his arms.

"He tried to hurt us," the little girl shrieked, and Tracy once again called Benoit.

Toula started spitting on Marjo.

"What are you doing, you crazy woman?" Tracy yelled and suddenly remembered his Yaya doing this. Spitting combated the evil eye. He stopped yelling and a freaked-out Toula began crossing herself, too.

The car that tried to hit them had disappeared. Tracy wondered where it could have gone. They all jumped as it came back, speeding down the mountain, narrowly missing pedestrians and other vehicles.

Benoit's phone rang and rang. Tracy aware his heart was thumping in his chest.

When he got voice mail, he tapped the driver on the shoulder.

"Take us to the police."

CHAPTER 7

“You had no right,” Benoit ground out for the fifth time.

Tracy was indignant. “I had every right. Twice in one day this crazy driver came after Marjo.”

“It was an accident.”

“No accident,” Tracy said.

“Mr. Seguin, there were witnesses,” said the Mithymna tourist police officer, Papandriou, tapping his clipboard with his pen. He was a big, burly guy, very Greek, with unruly eyebrows and curly black hair. He was very hairy. So hairy, even the backs of his hands looked like carpeting.

“Several people were injured after that car swerved and went right after the vehicle carrying your daughter. There was a moped driver injured, too. Broke his wrist.”

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Benoit ran his hand through his hair. “Jesus, I can’t believe this is happening.”

Officer Papandriou glanced at Tracy. “Nobody look familiar?”

Tracy shook his head. He had spent an hour studying photos of known criminals who had crossed into Greece, scattering to various islands in the last six months. None of them with any good in mind.

It boggled the mind how many criminals there were in the world.

“Not one of them looks like the guy from this afternoon,” Tracy said.

“You are making too much of that,” Benoit snapped.

“We received a report of an attempted abduction today at the Sea Horse. The woman in question said she saw the whole thing.” Officer Papandriou glanced at Tracy. “This is the incident you mentioned? She verifies your story. I wondered why you didn’t report it...”

Benoit pounded the table. “It’s impossible. Nobody knew which car she was in. I deliberately hired an unmarked car after what happened today.”

Officer Papandriou’s intelligent eyes gleamed. “So you admit there’s a problem.”

Benoit raged, pacing the small interview room for a moment. He had changed from his show costume, now dressed in his customary jeans and long-sleeved shirt.

“My ex-wife tried to abduct my daughter a few months ago.” Benoit’s granite stare fell on Tracy. Tracy knew this was more information than he wanted Tracy to have. “She’s succeeded in the past.” Benoit looked anxious now, and Tracy knew he was remembering the crack dealer incident.

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“And where is your ex-wife now?”

“I have no idea. We are in the middle of a bitter...legal dispute.”

“Over the child?”

Benoit snorted. “Over money. Over music. We used to perform together.” He closed his eyes. “She forged my signature to documents giving her sole rights to my work for seven years. She’s made it impossible for me to record music for the next five years. She owns legal copyright to all the music we made together.”

Tracy was stunned. He’d had no idea of any of this.

“She cares nothing for our child. Only for hurting me.” Benoit’s eyes flashed in fury. “I haven’t seen her and I find it hard to believe she’s on this island.”

Officer Papandriou tapped his notes again, and Tracy tried to absorb this new information. Benoit refused to be recorded because of these legal woes? How cruel this was for a man of such immense talent.

Officer Papandriou looked up. “We have a trace on the vehicle, but one matching its description left the island tonight by ferry. The number plate was different, but it was a black BMW. Ferry operator said the man gave him a hundred euros to get him on just as the ferry was leaving.”

“Where are they headed?” Tracy asked.

“Chios, but by the time we reached the port of Chios, the BMW had driven off the ferry. The driver had paid for passage to Pireaus. We checked with the ferry captain and the BMW was not on when it got there.”

All three men let this news wash over them, then Officer Papandriou touched Tracy’s hand. “Was the driver of the car you saw today a man or a woman?”

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"I never saw the driver. Only the man in the back seat. You know, now that I think of it, the driver's windows were tinted."

"Yes, they were," agreed Benoit. "Man...it never occurred me it could be her."

"You think it was her?" Tracy asked.

"Or somebody she hired. She got a lot of money out of me. She could hire people."

Officer Papandriou checked his notes again. "You said she goes by Lys Seguin. No other name?"

Benoit shrugged. "Not to my knowledge."

"Eventually, the car will have to leave the island again...or the driver will strip it, dump it...burn it..." He shrugged. "The important question is what about your daughter?"

"I don't know," Benoit said. "Look, I have stayed off the Internet. I have never announced a schedule. All the musicians I booked are loyal to me. Nobody off this island knew of my concert here."

"Somebody knew to come after you last week," Tracy said.

Officer Papandriou agreed. "Somebody in your...loyal party is not to be trusted." He waited a beat. "Do you have a photo of your ex-wife?"

Benoit blew out a breath. He retrieved a small snapshot from his pocket. He hesitated before handing it over to Officer Papandriou, who immediately passed it to Tracy.

"Have you seen this woman?"

Tracy looked at the picture. She had Marjo's open, pretty face, but her eyes were cold, her hair long and straight. He shook his head. No, he'd never seen her before.

"I am going to have this photo scanned and copied, pass it around to our other agencies," the policeman said, lumbering away

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from his desk.

"Marjo takes after her in some ways." Benoit's voice was soft.

"What are you going to do?" Officer Papandriou asked him, a look of sympathy on his face when he returned.

"I am going to take my daughter away for the weekend, as I planned. I will decide our next move." He glanced at Tracy. "I'll let you know where to join us next."

He swept out of the room, and Tracy quickly followed.

Officer Papandriou came, too, as Benoit picked up his sleepy daughter who had been huddled with Toula in the front office, filled with people drinking coffee, laughing, talking, watching some American game show on an overhead TV.

Tracy noticed a frisson of...something between the burly cop and Toula. She shook her head when he showed her the photo of Lys Seguin. No, she'd never seen her.

He held her hand in both of his, and she had two bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"Keep in touch," the policeman said and returned to his office.

Outside, Benoit held his daughter in his arms. "Thank you, Toula...Tracy. Thank you both."

He opened the door of his blue Volvo, buckling Marjo between Toula and Tracy in the back seat. Marjo's head moved to Tracy's chest, and he slipped his arm around her.

"You guys still want that ice cream?" Benoit asked, and Marjo came to life.

Tracy decided he wanted to go wherever Benoit and Marjo went. At an outdoor café by the beach, he left Marjo with Toula and followed Benoit inside as he went to get menus. The place was packed, and Benoit seemed nervous.

"Don't take her away from me. Take me with you," Tracy said.

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"No. I need some time alone with her."

"Please," Tracy begged.

"One more word and you can pack your bags and head home to New York tomorrow. Now just stop whining like a girl."

Benoit grabbed some menus and headed back outside. Marjo and Toula were talking to Mark and Jenny, the English tourists he and Marjo had befriended.

"I thought you two were heading back before this," Tracy said.

"Change of plan," Jenny said. "We're leaving tomorrow." Her gaze fell on Marjo, and an uneasy feeling crept over Tracy.

Benoit was less than engaging with the couple, even after Tracy introduced them. In fact, he was so rude Jenny and Mark abruptly left the table.

"Daddy," said Marjo, "they're nice. You were so mean."

Benoit shrugged. "Daddy gets mean when he doesn't get his ice cream."

He reached down and tickled his little girl until she laughed.

Tracy and Toula remained silent. Tracy felt that, in spite of the brightly colored lights, the comforting crash of ocean waves, the scent of flowers still blooming in the night and the happy sounds of people laughing in a thousand different languages, evil waited and watched. Way too close.

* * *

"*Kali mera*, Papou."

"Humph."

Tracy sighed. So much for his subterfuge. He had carefully parked the moped around the corner and walked to the bakery, thinking the art of surprise might stir his grandfather into talking.

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No such luck. The old man grunted and kept up his parade in front of the entrance.

Squaring his shoulders, Tracy walked into the bakery. He was shaking with nerves and kept remonstrating himself. It was a free country. He was entitled to buy bread, same as anyone else.

There was only one woman behind the counter this time, the woman his grandfather had married. Tracy supposed she was his step-grandmother, but realized she was only about ten years older than he, and probably wouldn't appreciate being called Yaya.

"Yes?" she said, as if she'd never clapped eyes on him before.

Tracy gave her his best smile, though it was the last thing he felt like doing. In perfect Greek, he asked for a piece of *galatouboureko*, and she grudgingly cut him a slice, sliding it into a Styrofoam box.

"Anything else?"

"How about a smile?"

She stared at him.

"Hmmm...okay, what about some *loukoumathia*?" *Man, what is wrong with me? I don't like loukoumathia.*

"How many?"

"I...er...wait....I see you have spoon sweets."

She blinked.

He read the list of current offerings. "I'll take the kumquat...instead of the *loukoumathia*."

She sighed. "You still want the *galatouboureko*?"

"Sure, yes. Thank you."

He paid his euros, and she glanced at him, a wary look in her eyes as she rang the register.

"You want the kumquat here?"

"Yes, thank you."

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She looked really mad then, but handed him the *galatouboureko*, now in a paper bag, and waved him over to a small, rickety, glass-topped table. He was buying time. Maybe Papou would come in and talk to him. *Maybe—*

His step-grandmother came to him, carrying a small tray. She deposited a tall glass of water with an angry clatter, followed by a tiny white dish with the preserved kumquat in the center, a spoon beside it. It was a generous portion.

She turned and walked away before he could do more than thank her.

He couldn't resist. "Thank you, Yaya," he called out to her retreating back.

She stiffened, but kept walking.

The sweets were far sugary than he remembered, but the fruit easily consumed in two mouthfuls. He polished off the entire glass of water and pondered his next move. There was no point coming back here anymore. Papou had rejected him, and playing games with Papou's wife was not much fun. He walked out with his bagged milk pie and bumped into a woman walking into the bakery.

"Desi!"

It was his pal from the plane, Despina.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him. "I can't believe you're back here and didn't call me."

He shrugged. "I just arrived. I was going to call, I promise."

"Yeah, right." Her laughter was infectious. "What are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I always come here for my *galatouboureko*."

"Really?" She peered inside. "I like the *loukoumathia* myself. Hey, wait for me, I won't be long."

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“No, let me buy some for you.”

She slapped his arm. “It’s going to take more than a few pastry puffs to make it up to me for not calling me.”

“Well, how about I also take you to dinner tonight?”

She jabbed a finger at him. “That’s a good start.”

“How many *loukoumathia* you want?” he asked when they reached the counter.

“Will you think less of me if I order six?”

“No, why should I?”

“Oh, I’m a cake whore. You should know this.”

Tracy laughed and ordered the *loukoumathia*. He would have to tell Desi he was gay, with no possibility of being able to swing in her delightfully scented direction.

He was trying to pinpoint her perfume. It came to him finally. Ma Griffe. An old-fashioned perfume and the formula had changed, but he recognized it all the same. God, he thought. *I am so gay*.

Tracy was so lost in thought he didn’t even realize they’d left the bakery until Desi spoke.

“That woman acted so weird...almost...frightened.”

Tracy didn’t say anything.

“The old man doesn’t help. He’s been pacing that bakery front for years. I’ve only lived over this way for a couple of years, but people say he’s gotten worse.”

Tracy stayed silent, happy he wasn’t the only one to experience his grandpa’s grumpiness.

“So I’m a cake whore, which explains what I’m doing here. What about you?” Desi’s face was covered in honey and nuts.

“I’m a bit of cake whore, too.”

Her tongue flicked around her lips. “Never would have

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guessed.”

“So, are you working today?” he asked.

“Nope. Day off. Want to go to the beach or something?”

He checked his watch. “Sure.”

“Late for something?”

He laughed. “No, I was thinking about the last ferry out of here. I can hang with you until then.”

“Are you kidding? You’re buying me dinner. Remember?”

“Oh, right.” He had no desire to remain in Thessaloniki with his grandfather no closer to being approachable. “I’ll need to check into a hotel, then we can go to the beach.”

“Don’t be silly. I have an apartment. You can spend the night with me.”

“Desi, I think you’re great and everything, but you should know I’m gay.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Shit, that’s why you’re so nice.” She tossed her empty bag into a garbage bin on the corner.

“Did you drive here?”

She pointed to a red Volkswagen. “Follow me. You’re on your moped, right?”

“I really think I should check into a hotel.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I have a sofa that opens into a very comfortable bed. It’s yours for the taking. Besides, I don’t plan on letting you get much sleep. I feel like dancing tonight.”

She shook and shimmied, her large breasts bouncing, and Tracy laughed in spite of his concerns. He got to his moped and put a call through to Benoit. He wasn’t surprised to reach his voice mail. He was only surprised how desolate it made him feel.

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“Hey, it’s Tracy. I really miss you guys. I hope you’re having fun wherever you are.” He paused, emotion roiling in him, making him feel nauseous. He took a deep breath. “I can’t wait to see you and Marjo again. Take care.”

His biggest fear was that Benoit would change his mind about taking Tracy to their next port of call. Early that morning, he’d encountered Benoit in the hallway of the house in Molivos.

Toula was to stay for Benoit’s instructions.

“What are your plans for the weekend?” Benoit asked, then before Tracy could tell him, he’d pointed to the doorway. “Take what you need for the weekend and leave everything else here. I haven’t decided where we’re going next. I’ll call you.”

Feeling dismissed and discounted, Tracy had watched Benoit storm off and vent his rage on the piano. He smiled at the controlled beauty of his music.

“He plays so nice...even when he’s mad,” Toula had once observed.

Tracy had left his suitcase and laptop packed and in the front hallway along with everybody else’s things. He loved that house in Molivos. He would miss it. He’d been there only a few short weeks and it felt like home. Benoit said when he figured out their next move, Tracy would have all the details.

In the meantime, he was welcome to stay and enjoy the house with Toula. Of course, Tracy had taken the opportunity to go to visit his grandfather one last time.

A car honked and, as he pocketed his cell phone, Desi waved to him. He fired up the moped and followed her about a mile very close to the hotel he’d stayed at last time, when he’d shared a wonderful, sexy night with Benoit.

He shook the memory from his mind. Benoit had warned him

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things would be on his terms, but since they'd returned to Molivos, their only sexual encounter had been on the terrace. He grinned. Neither man would forget that intense experience in a hurry.

Desi's apartment turned out to be a sunny, warm box. Very Greek. Huge, borderline-ugly pictures of ancient Greek heroes lined the walls. She even had a statue of Hercules in the middle of her dining table.

"My father made it," she said, "out of clay and he had it bronzed. He's so proud of it and I see a lot of him. Otherwise, I'd get rid of it."

Stray cats and a small stray white dog lived in the garden, but seemed quite well fed. The neighbors in her building had dragged a television into the front courtyard.

"*The Bold and the Beautiful* is on," Desi shouted and ran outside, flopping down on the grass to watch.

Tracy didn't want to watch the show, but joined her. She cracked open a can of Croatian apple soda and offered it to Tracy. It was surprisingly delicious. The sad-eyed dog, lurking under a geranium bush, sighed and closed his eyes. Tracy knew how he felt.

For thirty arduous minutes, he endured the show. The others quickly caught him up on the lurid plotline and he remained in awe at the big hair and outlandish clothing the women wore, allegedly in the middle of the day. Even in bed, after some torrid love scenes, their make-up was heavy and perfect, their hair unmussed.

The acting...the acting... He cringed at how Desi and her neighbors hung on every shallow word. At last, she proclaimed they could go.

They grabbed towels and lotion and went down to the beach on his moped. Desi seemed to hold him extra tight, and he put it down

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to nerves. Once they'd splashed around in the surf for a while and returned to their towels, she turned out to be as much fun as he first thought she was. She asked about his job, and he kept it brief, saying he was tutoring a little girl, but changed the subject to ask about her work at the *taverna*.

"Oh, I work there for money. The wages are okay, the tips are pretty good, but I want to be a pastry chef." She told him all about a school in London she wanted to check out. She'd already decided New York wasn't for her.

"I'd be lonely there. In London, at least I can travel through Europe and I can come home on the weekends."

Their day was unhurried and relaxing. He realized, for the first time in weeks, he was not on guard, not worried about being vigilant with Marjo. Not that he resented his responsibilities to her. Far from it. He adored the little girl, but not having to worry for just a day felt great.

His cell phone rang and he was pleased to find it was Sharla. Tracy left Desi on the sand to talk to her in private. She wasn't surprised to hear that their grandfather still refused to talk.

"Are you going to give up?" she asked.

"I'm heading back to Molivos in the morning. I'll give it one last try."

She told him about life in New York and the surprising success of her titty huggers.

"Bloomingdales ordered five thousand of them, far more than I can make. QVC wants to sell them. A couple of celebrity pitch people want to promote them, so I outsourced them."

Tracy was in shock that anybody wanted to order the ugly little creatures and wondered which celebrities could possibly want to sell them. He kept his doubts to himself and made all the right,

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excited exclamations of support.

Sharla was off a new tangent. "I'm now into making spoon sweets. I woke up this morning craving them. I thought to myself, nobody in New York is marketing good, old-fashioned Greek spoon sweets."

He told her about the kumquats at his grandfather's bakery and how, once again, their thoughts seemed to be in sync.

"I bet you'll do a wonderful job," he said.

"Yes, if I don't eat all the inventory."

She blew him a kiss across the universe and they ended their call.

"Everything okay?" Desi asked him when he returned to her.

He nodded. "My sister. She's very pregnant...craving spoon sweets."

Desi rolled on her belly and pushed her sunglasses down from the top of her head, shielding her eyes. "She's your twin, isn't she?"

"The best twin."

"You miss her, I'm sure."

"She's due in a few weeks, and I plan to go back for the birth. Say, where can we get some great *mezedes* around here?"

"Now you're talking. Follow me."

They curved along the shoreline, hobbling over a rough portion of pebbly beach that was typical of many Greek beaches, to a cluster of cafés on the breakfront. She seemed to know her food and it knew her because they soon had an array of *mezedes*, or samplings of wonderful food. He tried everything—chunks of feta cheese, marinated calamari chilled to perfection and ripe, aromatic tomatoes sliced into bite-size portions. He couldn't get enough of the olives and fresh anchovies. The waiter brought them *tdzaziki*, a

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very crisp, cool yogurt-and-cucumber dip, and Tracy's favorite *taramasalata*. Everything came served with fresh, warm bread.

"I'll tell you, that bakery might have some mean folk running it, but they do know how to bake." Desi tipped a little olive oil onto a dish. "This is their bread. It's the best."

She broke off a chunk, dunked it and swallowed, moaning in ecstasy.

They drank coffee and cool glasses of water, and he felt fortified.

Their evening was fun and light. She was very silly after a couple of glasses of *retsina*, and he stayed sober so he'd be able to get her home okay.

They returned to her now stifling apartment just after midnight, and he took the sofa bed. Within minutes of drifting off, he awoke, unable to breathe. He was suffocating.

His eyes flew open and he was shocked to find Desi on top of him. She was naked and her tongue moved like an electric eel into his mouth. The more he resisted her, the more her tongue worked like a suction cap over his nose and mouth.

Tracy couldn't breathe and began to panic. She was strong. Man, he had to fight to wrestle her off him.

She cried when he managed to push her off him.

"Why don't you like me? Why don't you want me?" she wailed.

Tracy knew he had to get out of here. The more he tried to calm her down, the more hysterical she became. She threw the Hercules statue at him, but it bounced against the wall. He finally got her to stop sobbing and he coaxed her to have a glass of water.

"I think I should leave."

"I think you should, too," she said. "You led me on."

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“No, Desi, I did not. I told you who I am.”

“I didn’t think you were telling me the truth.”

He didn’t know what else to do but get dressed and leave. He felt sad for the little white dog he couldn’t see, but knew was somewhere in the garden. He felt sad for himself. He started up the moped and left, shaking with exhaustion and anger at the mere suggestion he’d led her on.

He motored along the coast until he found his hotel, the Sun Beach. Yet another wedding reception was in full swing and he feared not finding a vacant room.

As he hustled across the terrace, he heard footsteps behind him and turned.

Benoit.

“I’d almost given up. I was sure you were here. I—”

Tracy barreled into his arms and Benoit laughed, holding him.

“Why do you smell of...perfume?”

“Long story.”

“Make it short.” Benoit pushed himself away from Tracy, his expression dangerous. “Why do you smell of a woman’s scent?”

“A bad mistake.”

Tracy told him about the evening with Desi.

“That is so wrong. You would never lead her on. Poor thing. She wanted to convert you.”

“Too bad. I’m not convertible.” He closed his eyes remembering the woman’s tongue trying to invade his mouth.

Benoit smiled and took him in his arms again, this time kissing him.

“I think we should go somewhere else and be stupid, don’t you?” he asked at last, taking his mouth from Tracy’s.

“If they have any rooms.”

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“We have a room. I checked in a few hours ago. Didn’t you get my voice mail?”

“No,” said Tracy. This upset him until he realized Benoit was here. Benoit wanted him.

They ran to the room, not the same one as last time, but Tracy didn’t care. He was anxious to be alone and naked with his French sea god.

They fell on top of the bed, wrestling the clothes from one another’s bodies, Benoit between Tracy’s open thighs before his shirt was even off his arms.

They fucked fast and thirstily, their cries seeming to rise over the *hasapico* playing downstairs.

Benoit laughed on the brink of orgasm, bringing Tracy over the rise with him.

Tracy’s legs wrapped around Benoit’s body, pulling him closer, and both men moaned.

Benoit kissed him with passion and a surprising gentleness. “I was crazy to stay away from you so long.”

“How did you know I was in Thessaloniki?” Tracy asked, unwilling to let the man’s body from his.

Benoit moved from him, but lay beside him, that gorgeous cock, still hard, resting on Tracy’s thigh.

“Yeah, my cock loves you, too,” Benoit said.

The word love hung between them and Tracy reached up for another kiss.

“Toula told me.”

“I didn’t think you cared,” Tracy said, regretting those words as soon as he said them.

“Oh, I care. I got your message today and I went on the hunt.” Benoit smiled at him, raising himself on one elbow. “How hot you

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are. Do you have any idea? Even women desire you. You don't present yourself as gay, so no wonder she thought she might get lucky."

"Yeah, well, I'm gay. Want me to prove it?"

Benoit's eyes flickered with merriment. "Yeah, show me, baby."

Tracy threw himself on top of Benoit's hard body, making him laugh again.

"I brought champagne," Benoit managed to say between kisses. "Would you like a glass?"

"No, I wouldn't like. I want you. The champagne can wait."

Benoit grunted. "I thought the first time with you was a fluke. Fuck, you are the hottest man I have ever met."

They exchanged more feverish kisses before Benoit pulled back. "Champagne. I really want some champagne."

He gently pushed Tracy away from him and rose from the disheveled bed. Tracy felt devastated, but at least Benoit still had a raging hard-on.

His lover opened the mini bar fridge, produced a bottle of Moët and two chilled glasses.

"Wow...you were prepared."

Benoit smiled. "I love champagne. It's the drink to fuck with." He glanced at Tracy as he wrestled with the foil wrap. "Baby, that look on your face. What's the rush?"

Tracy was appalled. "What's the rush?"

Benoit shrugged and negotiated the cork with his thumbs. "We have all night."

"Yes, but I've had to go for days and days seeing you and not being able to touch you and..." Tracy felt his cheeks redden. "Where is our girl?"

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“With her grandfather.” Benoit paused. “He’s figured out I have a lover.”

“You mean me?”

“Yes, you. Who else?”

The cork popped with a minimum of noise and a faint plume of vapor. Benoit poured them each a glass.

Tracy’s mouth opened and closed. “Well...I wondered...”

“What did you wonder?” Benoit held out his glass to Tracy’s, and they clinked. “Here’s to us.” He looked Tracy right in the eye when he said, “And here’s to taking things slowly.”

Tracy sipped his champagne and watched as Benoit walked to the sofa. He became aware of Benoit’s stare.

“My dear Tracy, I don’t have the emotional resources to juggle men. I barely cope with you as it is.”

Tracy tried to form a witty response and failed.

“We did agree it was to be on my terms,” Benoit reminded him in a gentle tone.

“Yes, but you’re sitting in a room naked with me and a bottle of champagne. It’s hardly fair for you to say I should take things slowly.”

Benoit smothered a smile. “This is true. I’m being cruel.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Come here.”

“Nope,” said Tracy. “I’m taking things slowly.” He sipped again, pausing to hold the bubbly liquid in his mouth.

“Tracy, come here.”

“Nope.”

“Suit yourself.”

Benoit put the champagne glass on the coffee table and strode toward him like a huge, hungry cat. His cock, which had been half-

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hard was now erect and ready to rumble.

Oh, boy.

Benoit frowned. "Tracy, are you afraid of me?"

Tracy held his glass to his lips, his gaze faltering. Benoit took the champagne from him and held his face in his hands. "Don't be afraid."

"Oh, but I am. I'm...the cowardly lion when I'm with you. I'm always afraid each time will be the last with you."

Benoit stared at him a moment, his expression unreadable. There was a fresh burst of music from outside, and Benoit swooned.

"Oh! Theodorakis! My favorite." He swayed to the music, and Tracy wanted to scream. When would the man focus on him? Just once, he wanted Benoit to look this way over him.

"Tracy, listen to his music. This is "Zorba the Greek."

"Yes, I know. I've danced it a million times. Do you know as a kid my biggest disappointment wasn't finding out there is no Santa Claus but learning that Anthony Quinn was Mexican."

Benoit, who was sipping champagne, laughed so hard champagne came out his nose. "Theodorakis took this music from an ancient Cretan dance. He was the voice of his people."

Tracy watched as the naked Benoit moved to the song, his cock swinging in front of him. Outside, the wedding guests would get an eyeful if they cared to look up to their open balcony window, but for now, Benoit was lost to the beat.

"Did you know he exiled himself in France when he opposed the Greek junta in the seventies?"

Tracy shook his head.

"He did a thousand concerts...just popping up all over the place. Concerts for the people."

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“You need to lure him out of retirement. I’d love to watch him play with you.”

“I want to play with something else right now. Come here,” Benoit said. “I want to suck your cock.”

He downed the rest of his champagne, then tossed the glass onto the sofa. His eyes were alive. Oh, Tracy had never seen him like this. Benoit pushed him to the bed, his tongue moving slowly over Tracy’s entire crotch area.

“I like that you shave, but leave a tiny patch of hair,” Benoit said, tugging the patch with gentle teeth.

Tracy almost said, “My ex liked me to do that.” But mentioning his ex wouldn’t be a turn-on for sure.

“Wax or shave?” Benoit asked, his lips and nose moving up and down Tracy’s yearning, straining cock.

“Ughh...wax.”

“Mmm...nice. You have a beautiful prick.” Benoit licked the tip now, holding the shaft in the crook of his index finger, clubbing his mouth with it, toying with it, lapping up pre-come as it oozed from the head.

He thrust Tracy’s legs open wider, his fiery tongue moving down to Tracy’s ass as his fingers continued to play with the rigid shaft.

I’m his new musical instrument. Tracy was delirious at the way Benoit sucked him. Benoit moved from Tracy’s ass to his balls, his tongue laying flat against the base of his shaft. Tracy couldn’t move or speak. His body just twitched with each new lick, each tiny, lovely nip of those gentle teeth.

Benoit gazed up at him, apparently liking what he saw in Tracy’s eyes because his smile was wide, satisfied, as his lips closed over the head of Tracy’s anxious cock. He sucked with

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abandon, closing his eyes as if savoring every second.

A hiss escaped Tracy's lips. It had been a long time since he'd had such great head and he'd never expected it from his Adonis, not in a million years. He felt relaxed for the first time in being with Benoit and his fingers moved under his own ass. He stroked his asshole and perineum, and Benoit's eyes flew open.

With a grunt, he brushed Tracy's fingers aside, stroking his ass himself. It was a glorious moment when Benoit's thumb slid inside Tracy, as if holding him still, keeping him close as Tracy's cock gave in to the hot, sucking mouth. He came harder than he could ever remember, Benoit holding Tracy's pumping shaft in his mouth long after he'd erupted. He seemed reluctant to release him, but gave Tracy's cock head a sweet, swift kiss as he took his fingers away from his ass and moved up to kiss him.

Tasting himself on Benoit's tongue was pleasure in itself. Benoit seemed in no hurry to leave him. He seemed to want more and more...it was a beautiful drowning...he saw blue every time he closed his eyes. He felt peaceful and content, until Benoit started licking him again.

"My turn," he said, moving between Tracy's welcoming thighs.

* * *

Tracy awoke from a long night of lovemaking to the tune of a guitar strumming. Sunlight streamed through the windows, bouncing off his half-opened eyes. Man, the wedding was still going on. An arm reached across him and Benoit grabbed his cell phone. The guitar music stopped.

"Hello?" Benoit rasped into the phone.

Luxuriating in the rare bliss of waking up in his lover's arms,

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Tracy turned over and found Benoit smiling at him.

Hmmm...morning wood. Tracy loved a hard man first thing in the morning.

Benoit's arms closed around Tracy. He kissed his forehead.

"No, baby...Daddy's coming home this morning. Yes, I'm going to call Tracy and ask him to be there, too." Benoit's glance at Tracy seemed embarrassed.

"Let me talk to Grandpa, sweetheart."

Tracy took advantage of the break in conversation to move down his gorgeous man's body. Benoit jumped when Tracy's tongue touched his left nipple. As Tracy ran a smooth path along the middle of his chest down to his groin and finally met its target, Benoit pushed him away. Climbing out of bed, he went to the bathroom and shut the door.

Funny. Tracy liked to pee in private, too. A few minutes later, the bathroom door reopened.

"We have to get moving."

Tracy sat up and stared at Benoit, watching him towel-dry himself. "You took a shower?"

"Bien sûr."

"Without me?"

"Water rations aren't so severe here," Benoit said.

"That's good because you're about to get all messed up again."

Benoit dropped his towel. "You expect me to get all wet again?"

"I want you to fuck me in the shower. And I don't want to pretend to drop soap. I want you to take me and I want you to do it now."

"Well, when you put it so...poetically..." As Benoit strode toward him, the guitar music serenading them from his cell phone.

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“Need to answer that?” Tracy asked, his heart thudding as his hot, hung lover picked him up in his arms.

“No, I need to fuck my boyfriend. The one who doesn’t like soap.”

Tracy laughed as they entered the still-steamy bathroom. Benoit deposited him on the tiled floor as he ran the taps and when he judged the temperature to be right, he picked up Tracy and carried him into the shower. Their hard cocks collided, happy to be in one another’s company again. As water sprayed over them, Benoit stroked their cocks in one hand, holding Tracy’s hand with the other.

“Fuck,” he suddenly gasped, breaking off their heated kiss. “All I can think about is taking your ass right now.”

“Then do it.”

Tracy turned around, bracing himself against the cool shower wall as Benoit moaned, stroking his ass cheeks and running his hand along the crack.

He was inside Tracy in seconds. He worked the tip in, using Tracy’s hips as leverage. He moved one hand down to Tracy’s cock and felt its hardness. “Man, you really like what I’m doing to you.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Tracy said.

“You continually surprise me, *mon amour*,” Benoit said as entered him completely. “Fuck, you are all I think about.”

Benoit gave him everything he had. Tracy matched him thrust for thrust and marveled at the way Benoit never quite came out of him and plunged all the way back in again.

They came together, their cries as one.

“What does *mon amour* mean? I never heard the word *amour*,” Tracy said when he recovered his senses.

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“My lover...the most intimate form.” Benoit kissed the back of his neck. “Thanks to you, *mon amant*, my cock will be hard all day now.”

Tracy’s cell phone rang as they rushed to get ready. He checked the readout. Oh man, it was Despina.

“Problem?” Benoit asked and rudely snatched the phone out of Tracy’s hand.

“Who’s Despina?” before Tracy could respond, Benoit said, “Ah, my love rival. Talk to her.”

“I don’t want to talk to her.”

“Yes, you do. A woman scorned is a dangerous thing, my beautiful Tracy. I’ll get the shower started. You make her ruffled feathers feel a little smoother. Just as long as you don’t make arrangements to do the smoothing for her.”

Benoit gave him such a disarming smile Tracy’s heart gave a lurch. “Oh, man,” he moaned to himself. *I really am in love.*

CHAPTER 8

Tracy followed Benoit's blue Volvo along the wind-whipped coast to the town centre of Thessaloniki. A couple of times their gazes met in Benoit's rearview mirror, and Tracy felt Benoit's erotic intensity all the way to his crotch.

He fought hard not to think about how distraught Desi had been on the phone, begging his forgiveness, pleading to see him to apologize.

"I can't," he had said. "I'm working today."

She'd been relentless until he promised that on his next weekend off he'd call her.

Benoit had made fun of him. "Of course she wants to make up with you. However, I think she sounds like a nut."

Right now, as Tracy rounded the tiny street corners in the heart

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of the old town Thessaloniki, he knew he would never call Desi again. She *was* a nut. On Proxenou Koromila Street, they circled the block a couple of times until they found parking.

Squeezing the moped close to the Volvo made Tracy feel closer to Benoit.

“They look snug, don’t they?” Benoit asked, as if reading his thoughts. He touched Tracy’s back lightly as if steering him to the sidewalk.

Proxenou Koromila was a stylish, elegant street with well-heeled people walking in and out of restaurants and wine shops. This was upscale Thessaloniki and it surprised Tracy when they entered Clochard, a Greek-French restaurant that would have been at home in New York’s Upper East Side.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” Tracy whispered.

“Wait until you taste the food. It’s the best restaurant in Salonika. Ah, Max, how are you today?”

Tracy started. Max was his brother-in-law’s name, but Benoit was smiling at a waiter who showed them to a table where Benoit Senior and Marjo waited for them.

Benoit Senior looked grumpy, in spite of a pleasant greeting to both his son and Tracy. One glance at Marjo and Tracy knew she’d been behaving badly.

Her hair looked like a bird’s nest after an attack by vultures. It had been a long time since she’d played the you-can’t-brush-my-hair game with Tracy. Marjo’s glance for him was reproachful. Her swift glance of anger at her grandfather told him everything. As she threw herself in her daddy’s arms, her grandfather leaned in to Tracy.

“She’s been impossible. Fractious. Won’t eat.”

Tracy nodded, and Marjo gazed at him icily.

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“Can I have a hug?” he asked her, and she shook her head, her lips drawn into a sullen line.

“No?” He tickled her side, and she twisted away from him in her father’s arms. “Boo-hoo, Marjo won’t talk to me. I’m going to cry now.”

“No, you’re not.” She turned around to look at him.

“Yes, I am.” Tracy flung himself into his chair, held his napkin to his face and pretended to cry. *Oh man, I’m making a total ass of myself here. This kid’s gonna laugh in my face!*

“Poor Tracy! Don’t cry. I’ll hug you!” Marjo instantly crawled into his lap and Tracy held her, watching the stunned expression on Benoit’s face.

“Let’s eat,” his father grumbled.

“Sure. Want me to order?”

“No. I want the waiter to guess what we want,” his father snapped.

Benoit gazed steadily at his father. “Somebody needs a glass of wine.”

His father laughed then. “Now you’re talking. What took you so long, anyway?”

“Tracy was late getting off the ferry to meet me.”

His surprising lie seemed effortless, and Tracy felt the old man’s gaze on his face. When Tracy thought about his and Benoit’s fervent lovemaking, he felt his cheeks reddening, his pulse racing.

He was going to be going back to paltry rations again...

Benoit ordered and dishes started arriving fast. Tracy could hardly keep up with the tantalizing tastes. Mushrooms marinated with thyme. Tiny, mouthwatering *tiropitakia*, bite-size cheese triangles dusted with poppy seeds.

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“You know what poppy seeds are in Greek?” Marjo asked him. She picked off every last seed, but devoured six pastries, making the three men at the table smile at each other.

“Yes,” said Tracy. “*Paparounosporo*.”

Marjo laughed and laughed. “You just made that up.”

“No, I didn’t.”

The waiter agreed he hadn’t made it up, and Marjo asked for more *tiropitakia*.

He hurried away and returned with an incredible dish Tracy was surprised Marjo also liked. Made with fresh vegetables, boiled potatoes, eggs and splashed with a tangy Roquefort sauce, it disappeared fast.

Marjo chose the desserts, picking *panacota* and ice cream with hot chocolate sauce. When the ice cream arrived with toasted almonds, she refused to touch it and a second order came out.

“I’ll eat the almonds,” Tracy said, not wanting to waste the first dish.

“You can’t,” Marjo told him.

“Why not?”

“They’re evil.”

“What are evil, darling?”

“The almonds. All nuts.”

“My God.” Benoit put his forehead in the heel of his wrist.

Tracy was dumfounded by the conversation. He tried to keep his voice gentle and unconcerned. “Who told you this, sweetheart?”

“Maman.”

There was silence at the table, and tears filled Benoit’s eyes. He picked up his wine glass and downed the contents, signaling for the check.

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After lunch, he strapped the moped to the rear of his car and the four of them drove along the coast. Tracy sat in the back with Marjo, Benoit Senior sitting in front with his son. As soon as Marjo fell asleep in the back seat, Benoit slapped the steering wheel.

“How does she remember the crap Lys said to her? Why didn’t the hypnosis work?”

Tracy checked Marjo was really asleep. “Hypnosis?”

Benoit nodded, his gaze catching Tracy’s in the rear view mirror. “We’ll discuss this later.”

A half-hour later, they were pulling onto a street that was all too familiar.

“Marjo’s in love with castles,” Benoit said. “These ruins are supposed to be incredible. Come on, darling. It’s time to wake up.”

The little girl was grumpy and disoriented at first, but a cool drink of water and the site of the ancient ruins Tracy had explored as a child soon invigorated her.

She sprinted over the ancient stone blocks like a nimble mountain goat, her father laughing and running behind her.

“Did you really come off the ferry?” Benoit Senior asked Tracy.

Tracy couldn’t lie, in spite of the unexpected question. “No.”

Benoit Senior nodded. When Tracy offered no other answer, he asked, “Did you happen to get a look at the woman he spent the night with?”

Tracy’s heart plummeted to his tennis shoes. “No. No, I didn’t.”

“He’s so secretive about this one. I don’t know...he—” As Benoit glanced over at them, Benoit Senior changed topics. “Youth really is wasted on the young, isn’t it?”

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Tracy shrugged. "I think it isn't if we can enjoy it with the young, reminding them in positive ways every moment of how great their lives are."

He remembered with a pang coming here with Papou and Sharla. Papou would sit on the wall where the great king of Minoa once sat, ruling his prosperous and productive people. He would toss crumbs to the birds and instructions to Tracy and Sharla.

Benoit Senior inclined his head. "Interesting observation."

They both watched Marjo running around from one small space to another.

"Marjo," Tracy called out. "do you know what these used to be?"

She turned and shook her head.

"These were market stalls."

"How do you know that?"

"I used to spend every summer here with my sister and grand—"

He paused. Oh, no. What's the old man doing over there? Tracy blinked. Shit! It isn't a dream. Papou is sitting on the wall watching us.

Benoit followed his gaze. "What's wrong?"

Tracy blinked. Papou was gone. Man, he was seeing things and he was completely sober!

"Nothing...remembering."

"You really used to come here?" Marjo asked, slipping her hand into Tracy's.

"I sure did. My Papou...my grandfather told me all about this place. Come on, sweetie. Let me show you where the King of Phaistos used to rule his kingdom. During the summer, this was his holiday palace."

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"How long ago was this?" Benoit Senior asked, falling into step with them.

Benoit remained behind, sitting on a low wall. Tracy glanced over his shoulder and saw him remove his black notebook.

"Sixteen hundred B.C.," Tracy said. Man, he couldn't believe he remembered all this. "Over here, this was his bedroom, Marjo. See how big it is?"

"I bet he could see the ocean from his bed," Marjo observed. "Do you think he snored?"

Tracy and Benoit Senior laughed.

"Probably," her grandfather said. "That probably destroyed the whole thing." He glanced at Tracy. "What really destroyed it?"

"The Turks invaded in eighteen hundred B.C." He was quiet for a moment. The Turkish invasion was not the small country's last invasion of his family's home country. He held no animosity toward the Turks, but people of Papou's generation still did.

"Over here, Marjo, look at these stairs."

"Way cool," she said. "Can we go down there?"

He was about to respond when the haunting sound of flute music invaded their chatter.

"Wow!" Marjo sprinted over to her father and barreled right up to his knees.

"What are you playing, Daddy?"

Benoit stopped playing, kissed the tip of her nose, making her giggle. "It's a Turkish flute. It's called a *ney*."

"I love it," she said. "Can I play?"

She snatched it out of his hands and took off for the stairs. Benoit chased her and all four of them wound up in the cool, dank room that was a world away from motorbikes, street traffic and modern life.

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“What is this place?” Benoit asked.

“They call it the Court of Shrines. A lot of important Minoan artifacts were found here.”

“Court of Shrines...” Benoit sat on a stone bench, made some notes and held out his hand to Marjo, who returned his flute. He began to play and it was as if the court came to life. Tracy imagined he could see the ghosts of maidens in gossamer gowns, courtly men carrying important documents.

He, Marjo and Benoit Senior seemed lost in thought and time, and when the piece was over, nobody said anything for a moment.

“That was way cool, Daddy,” Marjo said as they all burst into applause.

Benoit laughed and took a mock bow. “You’re all so good for my ego.” He glanced around. “Tracy, I think your ancestors loved music.”

“I think they did, too,” he said as little Marjo’s hand snaked its way into his.

They spent a wonderful afternoon exploring the town, buying fruit from a street seller and heading for coffee at the first *cafenion* they could find. They barreled around a corner laughing and talking and too late, Tracy realized they were in front of his grandfather’s bakery.

“Not here,” he said, realizing his grandfather had seen him. The old man looked especially grumpy, and stopped and stared at them as they entered the bakery.

The place was packed.

“Come on...there’s another one on the next corner,” Tracy said.

Outside, he avoided his grandfather’s gaze and, as they crossed the road, the old man followed them. He shouted at Tracy in

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Greek, "Aren't you speaking to me now?"

"*Kali mera*, Papou," he murmured.

His grandfather shook his fist like a lunatic, muttering the same words over and over and turned back, walking the other way, railing at a family entering his bakery.

"You know that guy?" Benoit asked him.

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"My grandfather."

Benoit looked stunned. "What was he shouting at you?"

"Long story."

"Make it short."

"You're always saying that and it's not a short story."

"I'm sorry," Benoit said. "He's really upset you."

Tracy closed his eyes for a moment. He turned around and his grandfather, who'd been staring at him, went into the bakery and slammed the door. "Yeah."

Benoit let the matter drop as they entered the first *cafenion* that had an empty table by the door.

"What do you feel like?" Benoit asked.

"I know what I want," Tracy said, his boyhood coming back to him in a rush.

Benoit's smile was indulgent. "What's that?"

Tracy smacked his lips together. "A vanilla submarine."

"A vanilla submarine? That sounds so cool!" Marjo squeaked. "I want one, too, Daddy. Please, Daddy, please."

"I don't know what it is, but I want one, too," Benoit Senior said.

"Then we'll all have one." Benoit ordered coffee for the adults and milk for Marjo. The other three expressed surprise when four

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tall glasses of water arrived with tablespoons immersed in them. Each spoon contained a giant white blob.

“To your health,” Tracy said raising his glass and removing his spoon. The white blob remained on the spoon and he licked at it. He caught a smothered smile from Benoit. The delicious, thick vanilla goop was sweet and aromatic. “Oh,” he whimpered. “Just as I remembered it.”

The others followed suit.

“Wow, they give you the perfect amount,” Benoit Senior observed. “One less bite and you’d feel deprived. One more bite and you’d go into sugar overload.”

Tracy nodded. “I’ve been eating this since I was a kid. I love how the vanilla stays on the spoon.”

“Why do they give it to you in water?” Marjo wanted to know.

“I asked my grandfather that once and he said it keeps the vanilla intact, but I think it’s just because it’s so very, very cool.”

Marjo nodded. “I think so, too. Can I have another one, Daddy?”

By the time they left, Benoit had bought a jar of the vanilla concoction for Marjo and he checked his watch. “We need to leave.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” Benoit said.

They drove across town again and arrived at the car rental agency at the ferry port. They removed Tracy’s moped, which Benoit had apparently arranged to turn in, and Tracy felt a momentary qualm about losing his independence.

Benoit’s surprises didn’t stop there. He also turned in the blue Volvo and rented a black Saab. Tracy looked at him.

“Are we going back to Molivos?”

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"Of course we are. I don't intend anyone to scare me away from a place I love." He drove the car onto the ferry and as they all got out, he pulled Tracy aside.

"I expect you and Marjo to stick close to the house. No trips down to the beach. Any outings, the three of us will take together. Understood?"

"Understood."

Benoit glanced over at his father, who was walking across the ferry deck with Marjo. "So what the hell's going on with you and your granddad?"

"Nothing." Tracy felt the emptiness, the futility of his mission blow away like a busted, flat tire. "He doesn't want to speak to me."

"Why?"

Tracy shrugged. "I was in a very bad car accident with my parents several years ago. He's never forgiven me."

"Why? Were you driving? Was it your fault?"

Tracy shook his head. "No. I was a passenger. We were hit by a runaway truck. He hates me because I'm the only one who survived."

Benoit stared at him. "That's...horrible."

"Yeah, it is."

Benoit stared at him. "And you've tried talking to him?"

"Yes. My sister came here last year to see him, too."

"I'm sorry, Tracy, but he's obviously a nut. You don't need that crazy old man in your life."

"He wasn't crazy until my father died. I think the grief sent him 'round the bend and he's...never come back to himself."

"I'm sorry," he said again. "But you don't need him."

"He's all we have."

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“No. You also have me. Me and Marjo.”

* * *

Tracy was to remember those words in the coming two weeks. They were like a fine, silken cocoon wrapping around Tracy and Marjo's activities back on the island. For several days, they obeyed Benoit's demands to stay on the premises. The house was large enough and daily phone calls between the pair and Sharla back in New York gave them new recipes to try. Together, Tracy and Marjo made Sharla's spoon sweets from things they found in the garden.

Toula grudgingly gave them space in the kitchen until she, too, became engrossed in the project. They loved everything they tried, even the sugared rose petals in syrup.

“You two are making me fat,” Benoit grumbled one morning, four days after they had returned to the island.

Tracy worked hard not to feel mounting fury at being ignored again and abandoned in the bedroom.

He's my boss, he kept telling himself. It can't go anywhere. It's better this way. But his feelings were there and he was certain Benoit felt them, too, even if he kept his distance.

The fine silken words Benoit spoke on the ferry gave him a feeling of hope that at times seemed absurd and at times like a lifeline. Tracy felt close to everyone in the house and he managed to fill Marjo's days with activities and fun, but he missed accessing his emails. He missed exploring the island. He didn't say a word until Benoit and his father left Marjo at the house one day and went out to lunch.

Tracy was so angry when he heard the car returning and the

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burst of merriment as the two men entered the house, he asked Toula to watch Marjo for a minute.

Tracy engaged Benoit in the hallway, fury having given over to white rage. “Benoit, I want a word with you.”

The two men stared at him.

Tracy pointed at the piano room. “Now.”

Benoit traded glances with his father, their expressions unreadable.

He inclined his head and led the way to the piano room.

“I do not like your tone,” he said as soon as he’d closed the door behind Tracy. “If you have a problem with my daughter—”

“Fuck my tone.”

“If you have something to say about Marjo to me—”

“My problem is not your daughter. My problem is you.”

A wary curtain dropped over Benoit’s eyes. “Not this...not now. I told you, we’d have fun, but on my terms, on—”

“You arrogant jerk! I’m not talking about us. I’m talking about you keeping us cooped up here for days. You could’ve taken us to lunch with you. You could have—”

He was aware of Benoit’s cold anger at the same time the Frenchman opened the lid of the piano and brought his fist down on the keys.

The resounding silence that followed left both men breathing hard.

Tracy finished his sentence in a calm, quiet tone. “You could have taken your daughter at least.”

Benoit became enraged. “Don’t tell me what to do. She’s my daughter.”

“Oh, good. Now we’re clear on her paternity.”

“Get out,” Benoit shouted.

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“You’re gonna have to get that piano tuned again.”

“I said, get out.” This time his tone was gritty, the rage barely contained.

Tracy left the room and found himself feeling shaky and surprised.

How long before he’d be given his marching papers?

Tracy sighed and returned to the kitchen, where he found Marjo and Benoit Senior eating vanilla out of the jar.

“Boy,” Marjo said, “you look like you need a submarine.” She handed him a spoon.

Tracy’s hand was still unsteady as he dipped into the jar.

Benoit’s voice was quiet behind him. “Dad, I want to talk to you.”

Benoit Senior avoided Tracy’s gaze as he followed his son into the piano room.

“What’s going on?” he heard Benoit Senior ask.

Benoit’s words hissed out, “It’s that man.”

A chill ran through Tracy’s body. He’d let his emotions get the better of him. Now he’d lose his job and he’d lose Benoit and Marjo.

“My child,” Toula said in Greek, “love bites like a rabid dog, doesn’t it?”

Tracy’s cheeks flamed. So she knew his secret.

Toula smiled. She shook her head, pointing at the little girl. Again, in Greek, she said one word. “*Meta*... later.”

Meta didn’t come. He was working on disassembling some *comboloi*, Greek worry beads, and making them into necklaces with Marjo when Toula knocked on the living room door.

“Mr. Benoit is taking us out for supper.” She glanced at Tracy. “He says you are to stay here. Come on, Marjo. I want to brush

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your hair.”

The little girl dropped everything and went with Toula.

Tracy shook his head as he returned all the tiny parts and pieces to their respective receptacles in the crafts box. He stared at the blue evil-eye beads in his hand. His grandmother believed in curses. Maybe he was cursed. Benoit was taking everybody out to dinner, except him. He put away the container as Toula came into the room.

“We’re leaving. He’s talking about sending you home,” she whispered. “Look, I made some *pasticcio* with turkey meat. It’s cooling in the kitchen. You help yourself, okay?”

“Thanks, Toula.”

She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and he went to the kitchen. The familiar smell of spices and warm béchamel sauce lifted his spirits as he cut a hunk of the noodle-and-mincemeat casserole. He ate at the kitchen table and after pouring himself a glass of juice, took it outside to enjoy the last of the sunset.

He wondered what he would do when he went back to New York. He’d had plenty of job offers before he left and he’d declined them all thinking he’d be gone six months. His cell phone rang. He checked the readout. *Despina*. She was the last person he wanted to speak to. He let the call go to voicemail. Washing his glass and plate in the kitchen, he couldn’t stand being confined anymore. He sought out the bicycle in the courtyard and found it against a wall. He grabbed his messenger bag from his room and wheeled the bicycle out front.

Flat! The front tire was flat. He couldn’t be bothered walking the two miles down to the beach and was afraid to call a taxi service and draw attention to himself. He didn’t want to anger Benoit by leaving the house, but he needed a break from it. It hurt

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to think he kept putting Benoit and Marjo's concerns before his own. Well, that's why he was being paid. He put the bicycle back in the courtyard and was walking back into the house when he heard a noise.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He crept quietly into the piano room, just in time to see a man dressed in black climbing in through an open window.

The man wore a ski mask, but Tracy saw the man's head snap in his direction. They stared at each other.

"Hey!" Tracy shouted and switched on a light.

The intruder vanished through the window. Tracy ran to the front door and saw a moped screaming down the hill. He caught two letters on the license plate, AG.

He called Benoit and then he called the police.

The police arrived at the house first.

Officer Papandriou knocked on the door. "This is getting to be a habit with you," he said, offering his warm hand to Tracy. "Show me where he came in."

Tracy stared at him, running his mind again over the brief encounter.

"I just realized something. I think he was holding a gun."

Officer Papandriou's brow lifted. Two of the uniformed officers who'd accompanied him now made a sweep of the street using high beam flashlights.

Tracy sat, his thoughts agitated, and Officer Papandriou came back to him.

Officer Papandriou realized Tracy was in shock, long before Tracy himself realized it. After he took photos of muddy footprints on the windowsill and asked Tracy some questions, he put his hand on his shoulder. "Where does the family keep their liquor

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cabinet?"

"Hmm? Oh...I don't know."

"You are certain you are of Greek extraction?" Officer Papandriou joked.

He was about to ask him something as a car pulled up and the Seguin family clattered into the house.

"We need some brandy," Officer Papandriou told Toula. "He's had a bad shock."

Benoit Senior bypassed the activity in the piano room. He took Marjo upstairs as Benoit came in, his eyes full of anguish as he gazed at Tracy. "Are you okay?"

Tracy nodded. "Does Marjo know?"

Benoit shook his head. "I told her nothing."

He stopped talking as Tracy's clammy fingers almost dropped the glass of *ouzo* Toula pressed into his hands.

Tracy downed the fiery contents and heard Officer Papandriou's whispering.

"Tracy, the man had a gun?" Benoit rasped. "I don't...I can't believe it."

Officer Papandriou held up a long, woven tube in his gloved hand. "We found this out front. Any idea what it is?"

Tracy stared at it and shook his head. "I've never seen it before."

He glanced up in time to see Benoit's stricken expression.

"That...that belongs to a priceless flute...somebody gave it to me. You found it outside?"

"Just outside the windows," Officer Papandriou told him. "Do you mind if I ask where you keep it?"

"In my bedroom."

The words settled over everybody like sticky dust. A uniformed

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officer searched the rooms as the others remained in the piano room.

"I can't believe he took the flute." Benoit sounded defeated. He watched the policeman turning over the tube in his gloved hands. "Wait. I can hear it rattling. The flute is still in there!"

"But how?" Officer Papandriou seemed stumped. "I see no opening for it."

"May I?" Benoit held out his hand.

Officer Papandriou shrugged. "I can't do anything with it, unless you want me to turn it over to Interpol. We're not really equipped to deal with...espionage over here."

He handed Benoit the tube. He watched as the musician pressed a point on both ends and in the middle and the tube opened up like a flower.

Everybody gasped. Inside was the flute Benoit had been playing in the castle ruins.

"Wow," Officer Papandriou said. "That is something."

"This is five hundred years old," Benoit whispered. "Apart from my daughter, it is one of my few irretrievable treasures." Benoit's gaze remained on the flute. "May I keep it?"

"So that's what he was holding? Not a gun?" Tracy asked.

"Could be," the policeman said, suddenly cagey. "I'd like to take a photo."

He gestured to another of his uniformed officers who photographed the flute in Benoit's hands.

"How many people know about this flute?" Officer Papandriou asked.

Benoit hesitated. "Not many."

"Your ex-wife? Does she know?"

Again, Benoit paused and then shook his head slowly.

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"This is something so unusual, it's the sort of thing you'd have to know was there," Officer Papandriou said.

Toula clapped her hands to her face. "My God, how long was he was in this house?"

"I saw him coming in the window," Tracy said.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps he was actually leaving," Officer Papandriou said.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"Well," Benoit said, sounding very unhappy, "maybe he just was after my instruments."

"Maybe." Officer Papandriou didn't look convinced. "Is it possible somebody is after your instruments all this time? A lot of people came to the show the other night and saw you. Maybe he thinks you have pieces of value."

"I do," Benoit said.

"So, he comes here...except, most people think you left this island, right?"

Benoit couldn't deny it.

"I think this man came here to check if you are still staying in the house."

"But until this evening, we were all home," Benoit said.

"No." Tracy shook his head. "You and your father left for lunch. Toula was in the kitchen. Marjo and I were in the living room. Most of the windows were open. He took his chance and came in."

Benoit blanched. "So, he could have been here all day."

Officer Papandriou held up a finger. "He saw you all leaving and assumed the house was empty, since Mr. Costantino was in the courtyard. You said you sat outside to watch the sunset and then you planned to leave on the bicycle."

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“Yes,” I said. “I got outside and found the tire was flat.”

Officer Papandriou went out to the courtyard, beckoning the others to follow. “Which is your bedroom, Mr. Seguin?”

Benoit pointed and it was obvious the room had a good view of the courtyard.

“So, he comes to snoop around, sees the flute, picks it up, thinking only Benoit Seguin would have an instrument like this. Perhaps he already understands its significance and its disappearance is a message.”

“Oh, my God,” Benoit said, looking pale under his golden tan.

“He leaves, when he thinks Mr. Costantino leaves, only the tire is flat. The intruder doesn’t know this...he comes down the stairs and is almost out of the house when Mr. Costantino catches him.”

Tracy nodded. “It was starting to get dark when I came in and I heard the noise, but I hadn’t turned on any lights yet.”

“He dropped the flute,” Benoit said. “I guess we should be grateful for that.”

Officer Papandriou asked a few more questions and then looked at each of them in turn. “I strongly suggest you leave this house at first light. It’s not a good idea to stay here, regardless of whether this man came after instruments...or your daughter.”

Benoit nodded.

After one final inspection out front, the three police officers finally left them all for the evening. Benoit sat, watching Tracy silently as Toula saw the police out.

“What are we going to do?” Toula asked when she returned.

“I don’t know.” Benoit’s gaze never left Tracy’s face. “But after tonight, I’ve got the message. They mean business. They want my daughter.”

“They can’t have her,” Tracy said. “I swear, Benoit...I never

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heard or saw anyone in here.”

“My friend, I know. I am not blaming you. I can’t believe you chased him. What if he did have a gun? He might have shot you.”

“But he didn’t...” Tracy frowned. “Why was he leaving if he knew—or thought—we were gone? He could have made a call and said he’d found us and waited until we all came home.”

“Bugs,” Benoit said. “He could have been putting bugs in the house. He...” Benoit glanced around.

Toula and Tracy exchanged glances.

“I think I need an *ouzo*, too,” she said, bringing in the bottle and four shot glasses.

Benoit Senior poked his head in the room. “I can’t get Marjo to go to sleep. She wants Tracy.”

Benoit nodded and put his finger to his lips. He grabbed a piece of paper and wrote *Pack everything. We leave tonight.*

CHAPTER 9

There wasn't a single vehicle parked out front when the family came out with their extensive belongings. Marjo nestled in Tracy's arms as he watched Officer Papandriou pull up in a sleek BMW.

"My brother owns the car rental agency down at the ferry port. We want to help. Which way are we going?"

Benoit thrust a piece of paper into his hands and he nodded with approval. "Very nice place. No *tourista*."

He helped Benoit load up the trunk with the luggage. Toula came out of the house with a massive box of food. "I don't think this is enough."

"It's plenty. We'll buy more tomorrow," Benoit said. "Come on, let's go."

Tracy, Toula and Marjo rode with the policeman, who

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reassured them the trip wouldn't be too long, as the two Benois followed in the packed Saab. Even the BMW was now crammed.

"Only one box of food," Toula fretted over and over.

"Sigri's not a wasteland," Officer Papandriou told her. "You'll find plenty of food to feed your family."

They chatted amiably in Greek, and Tracy, sleepy from the stress high, felt certain they were flirting. He kept dozing, hearing snatches of their conversation.

"...we should be going to my family's house," he heard Toula saying at one point.

"They'll probably think of looking there. This is better. Sigri is a good place. You know the name means secure. I like to think of you being safe and secure, Toula. I'm glad you feel you can trust me."

Tracy was completely lost in the darkness as they zigzagged west across the island. There wasn't one road traversing it, so they kept veering down and across, back up and across. He realized he was hungry.

"Did we bring the *pasticcio*?" he blurted out.

Toula and Officer Papandriou laughed.

"Yes," she said. "Now get some sleep."

"What is Sigri? Is it a town?" Tracy asked.

"Yes," Toula said over her shoulder. "My cousin rents houses there. She has one just for a week, by the beach."

"Is it a nice town?"

"Beautiful."

"Does it have a castle?" Marjo wanted to know.

Toula laughed. "A nice, big castle."

Marjo grinned, nestling once more against Tracy's shoulder. She held his hand, doing her thumb thing, and Tracy kissed the top

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of her head. He hated the thought of anyone trying to steal her. He hated the thought she might not be safe and secure.

He caught Officer Papandriou's sympathetic smile in the rearview mirror and returned it.

His cell phone rang and he pulled it out. *Desi again!* He pocketed it. He'd deal with her tomorrow.

The temperature dropped as they plunged down toward the sea town.

"Look, Marjo...there's your castle." Tracy pointed to the massive structure on the edge of a cliff. It wasn't as beautiful as the one on Molivos, but it was substantial.

"It's a Turkish castle," Officer Papandriou said. "It was built by the Sultan Mehmet about two hundred years ago. It used to be a fortress, but now it's a relic."

"Can we go there tomorrow?" Marjo asked, kicking her little feet in anticipation.

"Of course," Tracy said. "As soon as both our eyes are open."

They pulled up to the entrance of a lovely cottage that, even in the darkness, Tracy could see had blue awnings.

It wasn't the sprawling mountain residence in Molivos, but it was beautiful.

A woman in a nightgown and overcoat waved to them.

"I left milk and some *koulourakia* in the kitchen," she said, by way of a greeting as everybody trooped into the house.

The white stone house was typical of a Mediterranean beach residence. Tracy could tell the owners took pride in it. A vase depicting Hercules reminded him of the statue Desi had thrown at him and he determined right there and then he would change his phone number tomorrow.

Marjo ran from room to room, and Benoit picked out the

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prettiest ones for her and Toula and they were side by side. All the rooms faced the ocean. It was a wonderful sound and after coaxing him to join the family for supper, Officer Papandriou took the keys to the Saab.

"I will take this and make sure it's returned to the rental agency in Thessaloniki first thing in the morning. You keep the BMW and when you come back to my side of the island, you return it to me. Here's my brother's card. Nobody will know you have it. Nobody followed us. Your secret is safe with me."

Toula followed him out, and Tracy found himself smiling.

"I think Toula has a boyfriend," Marjo said and giggled.

The three men all smiled, exchanging observations until Toula returned.

"What's going on?" she asked, glancing at them all suspiciously.

"Nothing," Tracy said. "I'm going to bathe Marjo and get her ready for bed."

The beach house was cooler than the one in Molivos and the little girl was resistant to sleeping, but after her bath and having three books read to her, she gave up the fight and closed her eyes. Tracy sat and watched her for long minutes, praying to his mother in heaven to watch over her.

For the first time since the accident, he allowed himself to think of her. He remembered very little of the crash. He remembered waking up and finding himself on the hood of his father's Pontiac and being covered in blood. The impact of the collision had sent him over his parents' shoulders and right through the windshield.

The first paramedics to the scene thought he was dead because he'd been unable to speak.

Once they realized he was alive, they'd taken him to the

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hospital. His mother lay beside him, her breathing shallow. He'd tried to reach out a hand to her, but his entire body was immobilized.

The paramedic who talked to him throughout the entire ordeal, kept saying, "She's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. Stay with me now, Tracy."

But she wasn't okay and nobody told him for days that she was gone. It was Sharla who'd broken the news to him because there were no walls between him and Sharla. She'd also broken the news to Papou, who not only refused to come to the funeral of their parents, but abandoned his grandchildren as well.

He blinked. He'd pushed all these thoughts far behind him. He'd spent so long not thinking about his parents and he wasn't going to start thinking about them now. Assured that Marjo was asleep, he smoothed her covers, checked her windows were locked and tiptoed out of her room.

Tracy was startled to find Benoit watched him from the doorway, beckoning him.

"You are so good with her," he said when they reached the kitchen.

Toula had made coffee, poured out ouzo in shot glasses, and the four adults talked now that the little one was in dreamland.

"Why did they take the flute?" was Toula's first question. "Was it as proof to your ex-wife or do you think she wants to sell it?"

"That's an interesting question," Benoit said. "I keep asking myself the same thing."

"We have the house for a week. Are you going to stay on the island?" Toula asked, "Because I am starting to get very nervous. That man was in the house all day with us."

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“Dad and I talked in the car,” Benoit said, fiddling with his coffee spoon. “It’s too much of a coincidence that this guy broke into our house. I think he came in, searched the rooms and I am pretty certain he took the flute as proof we were there. I’m pretty certain his orders were to report back.”

“And what, he dropped the flute?” His father sounded worried and shook his head. “We need to leave this island, son. We need to leave it soon.”

With those troubled words hanging between them, they all retired for the night.

Though the beach house was less imposing and lavish than the one on Molivos, Tracy much preferred it. He worried about Marjo sleeping alone in her room, but knew she was safe. There was something about the house that made him feel she was protected...it was cozy.

He stripped off down to his underwear, threw back his bedclothes and dropped onto the bed, staring out the open windows at the blackened beach. He listened to the sound of the ocean.

A soft knock at the door interrupted his racing thoughts, and without waiting for a response, Benoit barged into the room, a glass in his hand. Tracy had no chance to pull his blanket over him and he reached to do so as Benoit placed the glass on the nightstand.

“Don’t,” Benoit said. “I want to look at you.”

His dazed eyes fixed on Tracy, who lay on his bed wearing his black boxer briefs.

“Oh, you are sexy,” rasped Benoit, coming to sit beside him.

Tracy’s arms reached for him and the two men kissed. It started off sweet and soft, building in intensity. Their cocks were both hard. Benoit eased off both his underpants and Tracy’s and, as he

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moved between Tracy's legs, he moaned.

"What are you going to do?" Tracy asked, his legs wide open to his man.

Benoit kissed Tracy's arm as it moved up around his neck. "You mean right now? You really need to ask me that?"

"No, I mean after that...tomorrow...about—"

"I'm going to file a report with Interpol. I wish badly to leave the island, but I must report what happened. I have full legal custody of Marjo and I can't stand to think of us all crawling around like we have something to hide."

Tracy nodded. "I understand."

"I know you do, which is why I thought you deserved a little dessert."

"Dessert?"

He laughed as Benoit reached into the glass and produced a long spoon. "I packed the vanilla myself. I fancied a sexy submarine. I thought I would bring it to bed and let you lick the vanilla and then taste some from your mouth."

"Oh, baby," Tracy said as Benoit held the spoon to his lips.

He licked at the solid blob, and Benoit watched him for a moment before bending down to Tracy's cock and sucking it, glancing up to watch Tracy sip a little vanilla water before going back to work.

Benoit grunted and reached up for the spoon, his chin grazing Tracy's cock head. The effect was electrifying. Benoit must have noticed because he immediately ran his face and lips over the tender, leaking slit, smothering it with kisses. Tracy's soul felt like it was turning somersaults. He gripped the spoon, sucking it as he watched his lover enjoying himself.

"Want some of this?" he asked, realizing his voice was thick

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with arousal.

He held the spoon to Benoit's face, but his lover came off his cock and moved up to his mouth, his tongue lapping at Tracy's, sucking, teasing the taste of vanilla from him. Tracy almost came on the spot.

"You taste so good...like maple syrup on snow," Benoit whispered into his mouth and kissed his way back down Tracy's body again. His greedy mouth went right to Tracy's ass this time, and Tracy begged Benoit to fuck him.

Benoit kept his own time, an impresario conducting his own exquisite orchestra, moving back and forth between the cock and ass proffered before him.

"I can't wait anymore," he suddenly said from between Tracy's thighs, his eyes ablaze as he raised up on his knees, entering Tracy hard and fast.

Despite not having had sex for a few days, Tracy's body responded naturally after the initial stab of pain.

God, I give myself away, he told himself, enjoying the sensation of that throbbing cock searching for complete immersion inside him. Benoit's mouth came down Tracy's, his tongue stroking inside his mouth in a persistent, searching way. Tracy had done a good job of licking off the vanilla, the taste still present. Hot and sweet. He and Benoit shared a sticky, sweet, sensational kiss.

Benoit broke off, breathless. He grinned down at Tracy. "God, I love to fuck you. You are so gorgeous when you are getting fucked, you really are."

Tracy smiled up at him, the empty spoon falling from his hand to the now sticky bed sheets.

Benoit fucked him harder now, but Tracy wanted more. He

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wanted communion and as he felt his lover's eruption bubbling inside him, he felt his own release overtake him into Benoit's encircling hand, wrapped around his cock between their hard bodies.

He started thrashing underneath Benoit, his orgasm building and popping like magma, shifting from the base of his spine up through the back of his neck. He lay gasping, his heart pounding as Benoit fell on him, moaning his own incoherent rhapsody.

Outside in the hall, a frightened little voice could be heard.

"Daddy?"

Benoit's eyes flew open in glazed panic.

"Stay here. I'll go," Tracy said. "I'll take care of her."

Neither man wanted to move, but after a brief kiss, Benoit pulled out of Tracy, rolling over on one arm. Tracy threw on shorts and a T-shirt and in the now-chilly, darkened hallway, encountered a shaky Marjo.

Her face brightened as he bent to pick her up in his arms. She wanted a glass of water. She wanted a piece of bread. She wanted another story.

Tracy complied with all her requests as her terror at being disoriented in the new house ebbed away.

"Don't leave me," she begged, just as he thought she had drifted to sleep. It took another half hour for her to finally give in to unconsciousness and by the time Tracy returned to his bed, Benoit was gone.

He lay in his bed, feeling the wet spot seeping into the sheets and in his skin. With a smile on his face he, too, fell into a vague, troubled sleep.

* * *

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Marjo woke him with breakfast and coffee on a tray. "I made it myself. Toula showed me how. Do you like it?"

She was so pleased with herself for making her first *brika* of coffee that he praised her efforts, though he bristled that the little girl should be bullied into such skills so soon. It reminded him of his grandmother forcing Sharla to make coffee on the old family stove. Some things in his grandfather's country didn't change. Greek women learned to make coffee as young girls. But not Marjo. He'd speak to Toula about it privately

"I brought *boo...boob...*" Marjo became upset with herself for not being able to remember the name.

"These are *bougatsa*," Tracy said gently. "There are two here. I hope you'll have one with me."

"Okay," she said, climbing on the bed beside him. Dressed in pink short pajamas covered in hearts and flowers, he felt his heart tugging toward her.

"This is how I think of you," Tracy said, pointing to the pattern.

"That's what Daddy said." Marjo laughed as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

"What did Daddy say?"

Tracy looked up to see Benoit lounging in the doorway, one hand on his hip, the other holding a cup of coffee to his mouth. Man, he was hot, even first thing in the morning.

I'm getting a boner. Tracy shifted under the bedclothes. *Think about something else. Death, taxes...*

Marjo bounded up her father's left thigh and into his arms. Even as he had to balance his coffee and his nimble daughter, his gaze remained on Tracy's face.

"We want to go to the beach. How about it?" Benoit asked him.

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“Sounds great to me.”

“You have five minutes.” Benoit was brief, but his voice was not harsh.

Five minutes later, the entire family was clambering over rocks to reach the lapping waves.

Benoit was dressed in a pair of very brief, sexy black Speedos. Tracy hardly dared look at him. He himself was dressed in long black-and-red board shorts. Benoit’s gaze found his a couple of times and Tracy tried not to think about being alone on the sand with his lover.

They followed a long morning at the beach with a wonderful lunch at Remezzo’s Taverna, right at the end of their stretch of cove.

Tracy realized they were all laughing and enjoying themselves as they started with a plate of *saganaki*. Tracy requested the fried cheese to be made of *kefalotiri*, a choice heartily endorsed by Toula.

“You are Greek,” she said, wagging a finger at him. “That is my favorite cheese to fry.”

They followed this with the house specialty, lobster and fresh fish.

“Wow...weird lobsters,” Marjo said, staring at the massive creature sitting in the middle of their table. “It doesn’t have any claws!”

“It still tastes very good,” her father assured her.

“Do you think so, too?” she asked Tracy.

“Oh, yes,” he said, pulling her close to him.

Benoit’s smile for her was indulgent. Their day was one of the happiest Tracy could remember. The long walk home was

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followed by coffee for the adults and ice cream for Marjo. Benoit drifted off to play some music, and Tracy and Marjo went through some of their books deciding on activities for the next couple of days.

Tracy felt a weird, stabbing pain in his belly. He dismissed it as too much fried cheese.

The pain persisted through the evening and that night. He was grateful Benoit stayed away from him. He tossed around the bed all night thinking he had appendicitis, but he'd had that removed years ago. He dragged himself from the bed around two in the morning and took a quick, cool shower. It only helped for a few minutes.

In the morning, his symptoms were worse, and Toula became worried.

"We're calling the doctor," she said.

"No," he said, wiping dripping sweat from his brow. "It's not me. It's my sister."

He had just realized in that moment, his sister's baby was coming sooner rather than later.

"Are you telling me you're experiencing...labor?" Benoit asked him, looking stunned.

Tracy nodded, panting.

Ten seconds later, his symptoms grew worse and he thought he'd pass out. Then it stopped.

His cell phone rang. He was in no shape to talk, so Benoit answered the phone and passed it to him.

"Congratulations," his brother-in-law squawked across the miles. "You're the uncle to a brand new baby boy!"

Tracy laughed, offering his own good wishes. Sharla came to

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the phone briefly, sounding exhausted but happy.

“You have no idea what this was like,” she said.

“Sis, I’m sorry to say, but I do.”

CHAPTER 10

Sharla didn't want him to fly to New York. She insisted she and Max were fine and in a low voice confessed she was enjoying having her busy husband right by her.

"He's waiting on me hand and foot. He thinks I am the most brilliant creature alive having delivered this gorgeous boy. No, this is good. You look after that sweet little girl. Call me in a few days, okay?"

Tracy called her every few hours, until her cell phone could not contain another message.

Benoit, meanwhile, called Interpol, spending a long time on the phone, his raised voice easily overheard in spite of the closed door. Tracy and Toula took Marjo to the beach, Benoit Senior electing to stay with his son.

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By the time they joined them down at the water, Benoit seemed to be no calmer.

He drew Tracy aside as soon as Marjo became consumed with building a sandcastle with her grandfather.

“My ex-wife has disappeared.” Benoit raked his hand through his hair. “She could be anywhere. All the numbers I had for her, the address in Monchy-Humiere, the little town just outside Paris...all dead.”

“So you’re saying she could be in Greece?”

Benoit flicked a glance along the beachfront and back at his daughter, who shrieked with joy when a wave touched the walls of her magic castle but did not destroy it.

“She could be anywhere. They have her photos. I know she has no idea we are here and I do love this place, but we can’t stay long. I worry that word will slip out.”

“Nobody knows except the cop and he’s smitten with Toula. He seems like a good guy, Benoit.”

“I’m anxious, Tracy. This is my baby we’re talking about.”

Tracy longed to touch him, to reassure him with hugs and kisses. He had to settle for a quiet, “I know.” Then, watching how happy Marjo seemed, he asked, “Where do you want to go?”

He shrugged. “I need to stay on one of these islands...I have another concert coming up next week. “

“At the castle in Molivos?”

He nodded. “Will you travel with us, wherever we go?”

“Of course.”

“Even though your sister—”

“I will stay with you and Marjo no matter what.”

Tracy’s gaze fell again on the little girl, who patted the bottom of her pink bucket, pleased with the perfect formation of her castle

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addition.

“I want to find shells,” she said suddenly. “Tracy!”

Her voice carried over to him, hitting at his core. He immediately ran to her, taking her sandy little hand in his. Her thumb worked its way into its favorite place and they walked the shoreline.

“I want only white shells,” she instructed, her hair falling across her face.

From the distance, a moped zoomed down to the beach coming right at them. Tracy stopped walking and, as Marjo bent down to examine a shell, he snatched her into his arms and ran into the ocean.

The moped veered off, never coming near them. Tracy realized the rider was just a young kid as the vehicle skidded, hurtling right into the water, a few feet away from him and Marjo. The kid fell on the sand hard, smashing the castle.

Benoit picked up the young rider, who coughed and spluttered. His bike, the engine now just a dull, futile whine, stuttered and finally stopped as it submerged, sinking into the ocean.

“What’s the matter with you?” Benoit ground out as Tracy kept edging away, an open-mouthed Marjo staring at her destroyed work of art.

“My castle!”

The kid coughed again. “I lost control,” he said in Greek.

“Are you okay?” Tracy asked him.

The kid nodded and the two Benois helped him retrieve the moped.

“My father’s gonna be pissed,” the kid bemoaned in Greek. He struggled with the now-dead bike and wheeled it across the sand, leaving it against a huge rock.

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“Let’s get out of here,” Benoit Senior said, galvanizing the family into action. They walked away from the beach as one.

“Thank you,” Benoit said to Tracy as they grabbed fresh towels, hats and shirts inside the house.

“I thought he was after Marjo,” Tracy whispered back.

“Yeah. Me, too.” Benoit’s fingers briefly touched Tracy’s lips. “You were fantastic. You just...thank you.”

“I didn’t even think about it. I just ran with her.”

Benoit’s hand brushed Tracy’s cheek and he moved away again.

Toula cornered him in the kitchen.

“Tracy...that...you...” She couldn’t finish her sentence. She just hugged him. It was only when he saw the tears in her eyes as they parted that he realized she, too, thought their little girl had been in jeopardy.

Determined to make the most of their idyllic vacation spot, Benoit asked Marjo what she wanted to do.

“Can we visit the castle, Daddy?”

The castle, on a small island accessible by foot, was very impressive. Tracy thought its alternating red and white stone in its stark Arabian style was quite different from the romantic Grecian castle in Molivos. Marjo thought so, too.

“I like the one in Molivos better,” she said. “I don’t feel any princesses at this one.”

Her father laughed. “Yes, there is a princess here. You’re the princess, Marjo.”

She liked that. She enjoyed exploring the ancient fortress and didn’t seem to notice the adults all took turns holding her hand. Nobody let her out of his or her sight.

After lunch at a small *taverna* in the shadow of the castle,

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Toula suggested they visit the petrified forest.

Marjo was utterly absorbed by the twenty million-year-old ruined trees that looked and felt like ancient stones. She and Tracy made up a story about how the trees were beautiful princesses who became frozen in time from an old witch's curse. Benoit, listening, began composing a song based on their tale.

He hummed it out as Tracy and Marjo danced. Toula and Benoit Senior sat on a stone bench watching them.

"Hey!" said a voice, and everybody turned to look. Tracy was shocked to see Jenny and Mark, the English couple he and Marjo had met in Molivos.

"We're visiting all the castles on the islands," Mark said, glancing at Benoit.

"We met you with Tracy and Marjo...after the concert. Down at the *cafenion*. Do you remember—"

"No, I don't," Benoit said.

Jenny tried to cover the awkward moment with, "We're such huge fans, Mr. Seguin. There's another concert coming up, isn't there?"

Her hopeful expression faltered as a stone-faced Benoit picked up Marjo and carried her back to the car, the others following.

"Nice to see you," Tracy said, waving goodbye to Jenny and Mark.

Back at the car, Benoit fumed, turning on him. "How exactly did you meet them?"

"On the way to the castle in Molivos. Marjo and I met them. I—"

"How did they find us?"

"We don't know that they did find us." Tracy felt like their safe harbor no longer was. It was an awful feeling. "They're castle nuts."

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Maybe it's a coincidence."

"Right."

Benoit's mood darkened as they headed home. Benoit Senior drove, Toula sitting beside him. Marjo nestled in the back between her father and Tracy.

Tracy tried his sister's number again and Max's. Both voicemail boxes were full.

"Well, maybe it was a coincidence, maybe not," Benoit said. "I think we should move on."

"We can go to my father's village," Toula insisted. "Nobody will ever find us there."

"No," Benoit said. "We'll find someplace else."

Returning to the beach house, they found Officer Papandriou waiting for them. He held a bunch of white daisies in his hands. He looked like he'd combed his hair and his eyebrows looked trimmed.

He held the flowers out to Toula, who melted, inviting him in for coffee.

Tracy ran a bath for Marjo, who splashed around in the tub. He left her with the door ajar as, in the kitchen, the policeman listened to the story about the kid on the moped and the British tourists at the castle.

"I'm not sure either incident is...a concern, but put together, I can see why you would be worried," he told them all. "What do you want to do?"

"Move somewhere fast," Benoit said. "I'm thinking maybe Santorini."

"Santorini?" Officer Papandriou shook his head. "That is a tourist hot spot. And please, I want you all to call me by my first name, Stavros." He snapped his fingers. "I know exactly where to

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take you. Come, let's go."

Tracy dried off Marjo and he and Toula scrambled to pack. Once again, they were on the move. Marjo was excited as they headed back toward Molivos, but they passed it, detouring down a steep dirt road near Petra. Pine trees lined the lush landscape, snatches of ocean visible between the towering giants.

For almost an hour, they continued down this path, which suddenly opened up to a quaint sea village. For a moment, the occupants of the two cars stopped and stared as a turtle waddled across the road in front of them.

Tracy couldn't explain the feeling, but as his eyes met Benoit's in the rearview mirror, he felt like he was home. This little village felt good. It felt right.

They were in the ancient fishing village of Skala Sikaminias.

"There are no hotels, no castles, but eleven *cafenion*," Stavros told them.

The two Benois accompanied him to a small *cafenion* where Stavros knew the owner and said he would find them accommodation.

"They rent beach houses. We will find you one," he said, sounding confident.

Tracy and Toula remained by the cars, watching the turtle, which snapped when Marjo bent to touch it. It lumbered over grass and stones.

"He is so handsome, isn't he?" Toula sighed. "So...sure of himself."

Marjo scrunched up her nose. "Who? The turtle?"

Tracy and Toula laughed.

"Watch me!" Marjo called out as she stepped over large stones. Tracy nodded and, smiling, he glanced at Toula. "Stavros likes

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you. In fact, I'd say he's crazy about you."

"You think?" She bit her lip. "He told me he is a widower. He has one boy...his parents look after him."

"Maybe he and Marjo can play together," Tracy said as the little girl picked wildflowers on the side of the road.

She thrust them up to Tracy. "Smell."

Toula glanced at the little girl as Tracy dutifully sniffed.

"How is it going with you know who?"

Tracy had so far avoided any discussion of Benoit. He found his heart swelling with emotion just thinking about the man. Benoit emerged from the *cafenion* with a set of keys and saved him from having to respond.

"We've got a house. I just saw the photos. I think it's perfect."

He showed them all a snapshot. It was a large white stone house with geraniums growing profusely from buckets on the ground and out of hanging baskets on the walls and shuttered windows.

"I like it," Marjo proclaimed as they climbed back into the two cars, taking the mountain road to the sprawling house above the village. Built into the mountain, overlooking the ocean, the heavy wooden front door was difficult to open, but inside, it was comfortable, with the salt air and heavy scent of oranges and wild thyme on the air.

"This is my favorite house of all!" Marjo threw her arms open wide on the sun-kissed terrace. "I can hear the ocean, but I have the mountain, too."

Benoit was playing music in the living room on his mandolin before they even finished unpacking.

"Do you like it?" Stavros kept asking, darting from room to room. Once again, the family had new digs and he seemed pleased

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that everybody liked it. “Come, we celebrate.”

They walked down to the village square, Marjo’s hand in her father’s. There was something about this village that charmed them all.

“It is not a famous village, but I think a prettier one you will never find,” Stavros said, his gaze on Toula’s flushed face.

At a café called Platanos, meaning plane tree, and apparently in reference to the gigantic plane tree standing beside the restaurant offering picturesque shading, they ate fish and *mezedes*.

Stavros regaled them with stories of fishing here as a child. “I always caught the little fish. My father made me throw them back.”

Local musicians turned up at dusk, and Benoit’s eyes gleamed as he watched them play familiar Greek songs.

Somebody lent him a *bouzouki* and he joined in for a couple of songs, earning the family free dishes of *rizogalo*, rice pudding.

“I need to hang out with you more often,” Stavros said as he swiped the check from the plastic tray.

“Please, you have done so much for us already,” Benoit insisted. “Please let me pay.”

Stavros shook his head. “If you want to do something good for me, you can give Toula the weekend off. I’ll come for her Friday afternoon. We’ll have an early dinner together, I’ll bring you a new car and she and I go visit my family. Yes?”

Benoit laughed. “Okay, yes.” He smiled as the policeman drove off in the rental car, leaving his own Volvo behind for the family to use.

“Toula...you have my approval,” Benoit said. “I like this guy.”

* * *

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When Tracy thought about the next few days, it was a memory that always brought smiles. He would think of bees making honey in the hills beyond the house, the warm scent of their labors filling the afternoons as the couple living behind them emptied the honeycomb. He would think of orange and lemon trees bowing down over the balcony until he and Marjo picked the fruit. He would remember the sound of the ocean and how each night, for brief, snatched moments, Benoit would come to his bed.

Their lovemaking was quiet, yet frantic, their deep kisses silencing their helpless cries as they erupted together. On their third night in the house, Benoit stayed until dawn, wrapped so tightly around Tracy sleep was impossible, yet it was the best night of Tracy's life. Having Benoit so close for so long was a gift he would never forget.

Tracy and Marjo loved the village and explored it each morning. They visited the statue of the Madonna, leaving her flowers. Tracy was thrilled when one of the waiters at the Internet café gave him a beaten-up copy of the book *The Mermaid Madonna*, by Stratis Mavrilis, written in 1922 and set in this very village.

"Here," he said. "I just finished reading it. You probably won't find it anywhere else. Enjoy."

Tracy and Marjo asked if there was a real statue of the Mermaid Madonna as described in the book, but nobody had ever seen it.

"She must be the local version of the Loch Ness monster," Benoit said, turning the book over in his hands. "And why did this guy give you the book?"

"Oh, I think he was just being nice." Tracy was certain Benoit was jealous and the thought thrilled him.

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Tracy and Marjo started their days swimming in the ocean and picking up fish, vegetables and fruit for the day's meals at the local market.

Benoit holed up in the living room, obsessively rehearsing. He spent hours on the phone canceling jam sessions previously planned.

"We're going to have to wing it," he told Tracy on Thursday evening as Tracy and Toula prepared baked chicken with orzo.

Benoit inclined his head, asking him to meet him out on the balcony. Tracy followed him.

"My father is taking Marjo away Saturday night. He has friends visiting Agia Paraskevi. It's a little village in the hills. He is keen to take her and I trust him, of course. I trust them, too, because they never liked my ex-wife." He paused. "We've never been on a date, a proper date, I mean. I'm wondering if on Saturday night, you'd like to have dinner with me?"

Tracy opened and closed his mouth. "Yes," he said, when his voice started working again.

"I can't wait," Benoit whispered and returned to his music in the living room, closing the door behind him.

Tracy tried calling his sister, but her cell phone was still full. He tried Max next and his brother-in-law answered the phone, professing his wife and newborn son to be fine.

"I'm at the office. Just came by to check messages. I'm on paternity leave for the next two weeks. Did Sharla tell you we picked a name?"

"No," Tracy said. "I can't get hold of Sharla."

"Oh. Well, we picked Wyatt."

Tracy was silent a moment. *Wyatt*. He swallowed a stab of disappointment that she hadn't chosen their father's name, but he

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said all the right things, and Max suddenly asked about Benoit and how everything was going.

“Great,” he said.

“I heard you had some problems with the guy in the beginning. Everything okay now?”

Tracy was stunned. “You heard that? Who from?”

“Well, the father... no... the son... called asking me a bunch of strange questions.”

Tracy felt a chill run down his spine. “What kind of questions?”

“Oh... I can’t remember...about your driving experience... where you were licensed.”

“That’s weird.”

“Yeah. I thought it was, too. He asked if you had an international license, and I told him to ask you.”

“How did he react?”

“He hung up on me,” Max said. “Like I said, it was weird.”

They ended the call, and Tracy pondered Max’s words. He knew Benoit had been angry when he found out Tracy was a man. That day seemed so long ago. A part of him wanted to bring it up to him; a part of him wanted to forget. *Move on. I have a date with Benoit!*

He found himself smiling constantly, wondering what they would do, where they would go. He wished he could buy something new to wear for his first official hot date with his man, but they were in a seaside village, miles from anywhere. Benoit had seen all his clothes.

Oh, well, who cares? He wants to spend time with me. Me. I can’t wait.

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* * *

Toula, Tracy and Marjo prowled the village market square Friday morning, both to stock up the house for Tracy and Benoit, but also for Toula to take local delicacies to Stavros's family. They split fresh bread loaves dotted with olives and rosemary and a gigantic *galatouboureko* between the house and Toula's gift basket. Fresh sardines bought from a small fishing boat docked in the harbor, a salt rub from the fisherman's wife and oranges and lemons from the trees in the garden completed Toula's generous offering.

"Now, about your clothes," Tracy said, as Benoit ate an orange over the sink.

"What about her clothes?" he sputtered, the juice running down his chin.

"Not very sexy," Tracy responded.

"Yah," Marjo said, dragging a chair to the sink so she too, could eat an orange, fruit she would never normally touch. "Beyoncé would never wear that skirt."

"Hmmp. Beyoncé. I have better legs than her," Toula insisted. She was not pleased when Benoit and Marjo laughed.

"I have a blue-and-white striped top," Toula admitted.

"To wear with what?" Tracy asked.

"Jeans."

"You have jeans?" Benoit asked, looking stunned.

"Yes, I have jeans."

"Put them on and let me have a look at you," Tracy said.

"I'm not a fish in an aquarium." She huffed.

He pointed to her room. "Go."

When she came out, the three people attacking the

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galatouboureko at the kitchen table were stunned.

“Wow,” said Tracy, rising from his seat. “You do have good legs. Not sure about the top, though.”

“Beyoncé would never wear it,” Marjo agreed.

Toula glared at her. “Beyoncé can kiss my—”

“I know,” Tracy said. “Come with me.”

In his bedroom, he found a white T-shirt he thought would be perfect for Toula.

“It looks tight,” she said.

“Better than what you are wearing.”

“Close your eyes.”

“I’m gay, Toula.”

“I know, but you’re still a man. Close.”

So he did and when he opened them again, the T-shirt was on and she looked fantastic.

He reached out to her massive gold cross. “This can stay inside the T-shirt just for today.”

In the kitchen, Benoit and Marjo applauded.

“Wow,” said Benoit. “If you weren’t already spoken for...”

The sound of a car horn interrupted their conversation. “It’s him,” Toula whispered. “I just *know* it.”

“Down, girl,” Tracy said. “I’ll let him in.”

It was Stavros all right and he complimented Toula on her outfit. “Is that *galatouboureko*? I’m a *loukoumathia* guy myself, but I never turn down dessert.”

Tracy was pleased when Marjo ate a second piece, just to be polite. Her cheeks were filling out and she had become braver in her food choices since they’d come to settle in Skala Sikaminias.

Stavros ate everything in sight, but Toula seemed too excited to eat. She watched him like a lascivious hawk and made coffee for

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him.

"I'd like some, too," Benoit told her, but she ignored him.

Tracy made coffee after Toula spilled the entire pot, and after his second cup, Stavros said they should be leaving.

Toula hugged Tracy and Marjo hard and her face shone as the policeman buckled her into the passenger seat of his car. He'd left a new rental car, a white Saab Benoit immediately detested but did not contest since Stavros had gone out of his way to help them.

"It's small," he said. They left it at the house that night, walking down to the village for ice cream after dinner.

Marjo bounced along the street. "She's so happy," her father observed. "It makes me feel good to see her like this."

Over ice cream, they listened to the local musicians who gathered and played. Benoit and Marjo joined another father and daughter in some Greek dancing and then the little girl, up way past her bedtime, fell asleep in her father's arms.

The music went on long after the two Benois and Tracy walked back up the hill.

"I think we've found a magical place," Benoit said, grinning at his father and Tracy as Marjo slept in his arms. Benoit tucked his daughter into bed as Tracy lay in bed reading *The Mermaid Madonna*.

Nothing much had changed in the village since Mavrilis wrote the book. Tracy listened for every sound, disappointed when Benoit did not come to his room. He heard him in the living room, heard the faint plunk of the guitar.

Sighing, Tracy tried to tell himself his lover was conserving his energy. He closed his ears to the music, hoping he wasn't hearing the house ghosts, and awoke in the morning to the ocean crashing against the beachfront down below, a boat's foghorn alerting the

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island to fresh fish.

He stepped into the kitchen, surprised to find that Marjo and her grandfather had already left for Agia Paraskevi in the rental car.

“I need to work today,” Benoit said, hardly glancing at him. “Dinner tonight?”

“Absolutely. I might go down to the village, check my emails.”

“Sure...have fun.”

Benoit, studying a sheet of music, sipped at his coffee in an absent-minded way.

Wow, not how I thought we'd be spending our first day alone.

He walked back into the hallway in time to see Dimitri, the flutist, coming out of Benoit's bedroom in a pair of board shorts.

“Hey, Tracy,” he said, raising a hand in greeting.

Tracy mumbled a hello, his heart plummeting in his chest. He couldn't believe Dimitri would have spent the night with Benoit...but he was here, wasn't he? Suddenly he didn't want to leave the two men alone. He spent a miserable day listening to them play music. His reasoning was if they played music, they weren't fucking.

All day, he bargained with God not to let Dimitri be the cause he and Benoit couldn't be together. He alternately dreaded learning the two men were lovers, then remonstrating himself because he had no proof they were lovers.

Around four o'clock, Benoit came into the kitchen and looked around.

“What are you making for dinner?” he asked, lifting the lids of empty pots.

Tracy, who had been making rough road of his thesis, looked up from his laptop. In the space of five hours, he had typed two

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bad paragraphs. Now things were taking a turn for the worst.

"Dinner?" *Am I hearing things right?*

"Yes, dinner. I thought you might be cooking, since Toula has the weekend off."

Tracy's gaze intensified. "I thought we were going out."

Benoit glanced at him then. "What do you mean?"

Tracy kept his voice low, in spite of his scrambled emotions. "You asked me out on a date for tonight, remember?"

"Oh." Benoit scratched his chin. "I forgot Dimitri was coming. We'll all go out...okay?"

Tracy felt devastated.

"This show's important. Dimitri is important."

Exactly what that meant was a mystery, but Tracy didn't say another word. He hated how Benoit was blowing off their date. It was cruel, he decided. Benoit hadn't forgotten. The man was a nut bag. One minute he was the most romantic man alive, the next he was a total jerk.

But I love him. I was the one who said I just wanted to be with him.

"Okay," he said, though the words felt like he was cutting his own organs out with a dull knife.

Benoit's expression changed. He relaxed now. Tracy wondered if this was some kind of test.

"Around eight, all right? We're right in the middle of things." Benoit didn't wait for a response. He returned to the living room.

As he closed the door, Tracy heard him say something. He didn't hear the words, but heard the raucous laughter following it and he felt his face stinging. This was a slap. *No, worse than a slap.* Sometimes laughter, exclusionary laughter was the worst, most hideous thing in the world.

CHAPTER 11

Tracy watched Dimitri eating a plate full of *sardeles* paste and felt sickened. The local sardines arrived as an appetizer, whole and fresh, lightly grilled, and he ate them with a ton of salt and lemon, head first, bones and all, dropping just the tails on the plate.

The waiter at the Medusa Restaurant, which was crowded with it being a Saturday night, brought a bottle of *ouzo* to the table. Tracy had also ordered fish, which came dressed with lemon and fresh oregano.

He watched Dimitri and Benoit getting increasingly loopy as they downed their sardines and slammed *ouzo* shots.

Dimitri nudged Benoit. "I think your friend is not very happy," he said in a loud voice.

Benoit shrugged. "Leave him alone. He's just having a bad

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day.”

Tracy couldn't stand it anymore. “No, my day is just fine, thank you.”

“When are you going back to New York?” Benoit asked.

Tracy felt his cheeks flaming. “New York?”

“Yes. Dimitri is here now. It's better if you leave before Marjo comes back from her little...*volta*.”

Tracy felt a second slap thanks to Benoit's use of the Greek word for visit. Was Benoit really done with him? Would he really send him away without a goodbye to Marjo? “You want me to leave?”

“I thought this was understood.” Benoit rolled his eyes in a dramatic way, making Dimitri laugh again.

“You only had to say, Benoit.”

“So, I am saying.” Benoit glanced at Dimitri, and they fell into shared, cruel laughter.

“Then I will leave first thing in the morning.”

“Sooner would be better.”

Tracy couldn't believe his ears. Maybe it was the booze talking, but how was he supposed to get off the island before morning?

“Benoit,” Dimitri said, “now you are just being horrible. The morning will do fine.”

Tracy felt a chill run through him that egged him on to stand and leave the table. “*Now*, he is not happy,” he heard Benoit say.

“You expected a scene. The man was gracious,” he heard Dimitri respond.

Outside in the cool night air, Tracy pondered his next move. He had no idea why Benoit was being so nasty. He hadn't deserved it. He wondered how he would get from this middle-of-nowhere town

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back to Athens, but in the morning, he would find a way.

He ran into the waiter from the *cafenion* who'd given him the book *The Mermaid Madonna* and asked him point-blank if there was a local taxi service that would take him to the ferry dock.

"Spend the night with me and I'll take you."

Tracy tried to laugh it off, but then an older man said, "I'll take you. Fifty euros. Meet me here at seven o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," Tracy said, wondering if the man would really show up. He climbed the road back to the house to pack his things.

At two o'clock in the morning, he heard voices and gritted his teeth. They were still laughing. What was so funny anyway?

He heard a door slam, then another. He supposed he should feel happy that the two men were not sleeping together, but he didn't. He quietly took his belongings and left the house. For a long time, he sat on the balcony wondering where it had all gone so wrong. The sky was the exact color of blue that he loved, real and true.

From the living room, he heard flute music. A bittersweet dirge. *How apt.*

He climbed down from the balcony wall into the thick underbrush surrounding the house. A small animal scurried away. He wondered what it was and smiled to himself. *Not a turtle.* He remembered the way Marjo had thrilled at the turtle crossing the road. He hated leaving her, especially this way. He'd promised Benoit he would stay, only to be rejected, dismissed...laughed at.

Juggling his possessions into a more comfortable position, he walked down to the village. He was grateful he hadn't added much to his swag. He was still traveling light. The party was still happening in the town, much to his astonishment.

"*Yasou.*"

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Tracy's head swiveled toward the voice that greeted him. It was the waiter again. He was sitting at an outdoor table of a café that was in the early stages of closing.

"*Yasou*," Tracy responded, managing a smile.

"You're a little early. Manos will still be sleeping," the waiter said.

"That's okay."

"Come on and take a seat. I won't bite."

Tracy hesitated. He was sort of on the run, not by his choosing. He hated leaving Marjo and, with each step, felt like he was abandoning her to certain danger. He tried to ease the thought from his mind. He could hardly force her father to accept his presence here if he no longer wanted him around.

"You want coffee?" an old man asked from the doorway.

"*Parakalo*, please." Tracy put his belongings at his feet. He looked at the waiter. "I have your book. Do you want it back?"

"If you're not going to fuck me, yes."

Tracy tried hard to hide his shock. What was going on with the men around him? He dug in his messenger bag and returned it.

"I was kidding," said the waiter.

Tracy shrugged.

"Where are you going?"

"Home." The word twisted like a knife in the ribs.

"And where is that?"

"New York."

"I'm from Athens myself. Here for the summer. That French guy you hang out with interests me."

"Oh?" Tracy asked as his coffee arrived in a typically battered *brika*, a small twisted *koulouri* nestled in the saucer.

"He's a wonderful musician, but moody as hell. One moment

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he'll say hi, almost...flirtatious; the next, he ignores you."

Tracy didn't respond. It was true, but he didn't want to talk about Benoit.

"I enjoyed the book," he said.

"I did, too. I like the romance of it."

Tracy sipped his coffee and nodded. His gaze moved to the waiter who was thumbing through the book. He must have been in his mid-twenties, very Greek, attractive. But he wasn't Benoit.

"You been to Mantamados?" the waiter asked.

"No."

"You're missing the cheese capital of Lesvos," the waiter grinned. "Cheese and pottery. You should stay."

Tracy shrugged. "I have no choice. I have to leave."

The waiter said nothing. He picked up the book and with a slight lifting of his hand, walked off along the road toward the houses lining the beach. Tracy was relieved. He was all out of polite conversation.

"Hey."

He glanced up to see a panting, shaky Dimitri towering over him. "He's going crazy because you left the house."

"What?"

"Don't ask questions. Just come back."

"I'm not coming back. He's mad."

"Mad about you? Yes, he is." Dimitri bent to pick up Tracy's messenger bag.

"Leave that alone."

Dimitri stood. "Don't you see? If you leave, he'll be impossible."

"He doesn't want me here."

"Yes, he does. He..." Dimitri seemed to be hunting for words.

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“He’s a proud man, a man who doesn’t easily love. He’s a man who can be a great big pain in the ass.”

“You’re right about that. He is a pain in the ass.” Tracy yanked the bag out of Dimitri’s hand. “If he wants me to come back, he has to ask me himself.”

“He won’t do that. He—”

“Then I’ll be leaving.”

Dimitri sighed. “Suit yourself.” He walked away, obviously angry.

Tracy watched him head up the hill and sorted through his emotions. Benoit must have gone looking for him. Should he go back? No, the man had been intolerably rude. He sat waiting until daylight came, the coffee shop closed and people straggled home. Lights went on and off, and Tracy waited.

He was both relieved and dismayed when Manos, the man who’d offered to drive him to the ferry showed up.

“Ready?”

Tracy nodded, glancing up the hill, hoping beyond hope that Benoit would run down the hill and claim him, but he did not. For one wild minute, he contemplated going back to the house, but instead, climbed into the passenger seat, and Manos took off along the road leading back to Molivos and to the ferry port.

It was with a sense of unreality that they arrived forty minutes later and Tracy managed to buy a ticket he didn’t want for the ferry he didn’t want to take back to Thessaloniki.

Within minutes of boarding, the ferry left the dock. Tracy stared in mounting horror as the space of water between him and the island of Lesbos increased. One word from Benoit and he would jump into the sea and swim back to shore if necessary.

He felt hysterical as the ferry took him away from the family he

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had come to love. He did what he should have done hours ago. He called Benoit's cell phone and laughed into the hot, morning sun when he got voicemail. He called Sharla, who had cleared her voice messages, and left her a long, rambling account of what had happened.

His cell phone rang and his heart leapt in anticipation, hoping it was either his sister or Benoit.

It was Despina.

He ran his hand through his hair. He had intended changing his number and hadn't. He closed his eyes as she apologized sweetly, saying, "I can never get hold of you in person."

"I've been working," he said, turning his back on Lesvos. He wanted to get Despina off the line; he wanted to mull over his next move.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, I mean, where are you working?"

"I'm no longer working. I'm heading back to New York."

"You're going and I don't even get a chance to say goodbye?"

Tracy had to bite his tongue. "I'm sorry," he lied. "My plane is boarding."

"But—"

He hung up on her. The closer he got to Thessaloniki, the more worry overwhelmed him. He knew, without a doubt, that something was wrong with Sharla. Talking to...dealing with Desi crossed his wires. He tried to focus on his sister and felt her fear. Something was really wrong. He called her again and once more got her voicemail.

For the five hours it took to cross the sea to Thessaloniki, he felt bereft, helpless.

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When he arrived on dry land, he received two phone calls.

The first was from Benoit, telling him that Marjo was back and was hysterical because Tracy had left.

"You must come back," Benoit said.

"For you or for her...or for both of you?"

"For my daughter."

His cell phone rang a second time and he saw it was Sharla.

"Benoit, please hold on. It's my sister. Just give me a moment. I want to talk to you."

Benoit was silent as he clicked over.

Sharla sobbed when she heard Tracy's voice. "Max just left me. He's been having an affair."

"Jesus." Tracy didn't know what to say. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," she screamed.

"I'm on my way home, sis."

"I...wish I was dead," she wailed.

"No, you don't. You have a baby to think about. Sharla, I'm on my way. Hang in there, baby."

When he clicked back over, Benoit was gone. He called him back, got his voicemail and ended the call. It was better this way. Benoit didn't want him. Sharla needed him. He stepped onto the street and looked for a taxi.

He didn't know what to expect when he arrived at the city airport, known as SKG, but he found it frantic, the high pitch of dozens of different languages buzzing in his ear.

Tracy was able to get a Swiss Air flight out to New York's JFK via Athens. An arduous eighteen-hour haul. His existing ticket was non-negotiable since it had been purchased with Benoit's frequent flyer points. Tracy wasn't happy to shell out the equivalent of eight hundred US dollars for the ticket, but his sister was the most

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important person in his universe.

He snatched the ticket after checking his suitcase and marched to his departure gate.

* * *

The city's garbage handlers were on strike when he arrived in New York on a sweltering morning. Tracy rode silently in his taxi wondering what the driver had been eating to warrant such horrendous breath. He inched the rear passenger window down a little, in spite of the AC blasting. The taxi was a nightmare of macramé, and he willed the driver forward as the man bopped along to flute and violin music. Tracy's thoughts flew to Benoit and the way he laughed when he was happy. He was certain if he put his hand to his rib cage, it would come away bloody.

It was physically agonizing to be away from Benoit and Marjo. Tracy sat against the seat wondering what was digging into his back. When he leaned forward to glance over his shoulder, he saw a face made of beads. It made him think of Sharla's titty hugger and he wondered now where it was.

The driver pulled up outside Sharla's apartment on West Street, all the way downtown. He'd tried to talk her out of living here. He'd tried to make her see reason that Battery Park was a ghost town after working hours were over. The gigantic hole that was once the imposing twin towers of the World Trade Centre was visible as he stepped out of the taxi. Max had wanted to live here and Sharla had gone along with it, even though Tracy tried to dissuade her. He knew she'd be alone with the baby a lot. He knew she'd have to climb a steep set of stairs to get to one subway and down another set of stairs to the other.

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A doorman barred his entry.

"I'm Sharla's brother, Tracy Costantino."

"Sorry, sir, but she hasn't left instructions to admit you."

Tracy swallowed hard. He couldn't believe it. After losing almost an entire day of his life to get here, she wasn't home and he couldn't get inside her building. He tried calling her cell phone and got her voicemail.

He noticed a coffee shop a few doors down and popped in. He was able to buy a bottle of water, but there were no tables and he felt vaguely like a vagabond as he stood outside Sharla's building, downing the chilled contents.

There was a grocery store inside Sharla's building and the doorman, who answered his cell phone call, wasn't looking. Tracy took his chance and sneaked inside. Several people were waiting to purchase things, and he joined the line. The doorman peered outside the building and kept talking on his phone. The second his back was turned, Tracy ran to the elevator bank and took the first one available to the twelfth floor.

He could hear her talking loudly as he walked toward her apartment. He banged on the door.

"Shit," he heard her say. "Who is it?"

"It's me."

Sharla threw open the door. She looked dreadful.

"I've just been reading the doorman the riot act. How the hell are you?" She threw herself into Tracy's arms and began to sob.

"What happened?" he asked, which just made her cry harder.

He shuffled his way into the apartment. It was a mess. New boxes of baby stuff, half-packed suitcases and stacks of mail littered the large table in the living room, which overlooked the park and Ellis Island from one side, and the entire financial district

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from the other.

The Statue of Liberty gleamed in the distance. Yes, she was beautiful and always took his breath away, but he did not want to be in New York. He brushed thoughts of sunshine, *ouzo* and olives from his mind.

Sharla needed him. He set her down gently on the sofa.

The baby was squalling in his luxury crib in the bigger of the two bedrooms. Sharla's bed was in disarray, the pillows bunched up on one side.

Tracy picked up his brand new nephew and looked down at his dark lashes. He had the Costantino looks and temperament. Tracy had never seen anything so wonderful or delicious in his life and he started to cry.

Mom, I wish you were here...he is precious.

"Oh, Tracy." Sharla came and put her arms around him from behind. From outside the window, Lady Liberty held her torch high. Love, life, the pursuit of happiness. Happiness would be theirs. He and Sharla deserved it.

"I'm in love," Tracy whispered.

"So is he. He never stops crying for me."

Tracy held his nephew, dancing a little jig to keep him happy as his sister ranted about her husband's affair with another stockbroker in his office.

"She called me and told me everything. After she twittered...or is it tweeted about it. Can you believe it?"

"The woman blurted it out on Twitter?"

"Yes. Her account is down now. She got into a world of trouble for it, but thousands of people saw it. She wrote it for my benefit. Like I have time to get online and twit with a newborn baby!"

Tears fell down Sharla's pale, thin face as she recounted the

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nightmare conversation.

“What does Max say about it?” he asked as his sister handed him a bottle to feed the now-fussy Wyatt. Tracy glanced down at the mini-wonder in his arms. He was a perfect being, his face and tiny fingers artfully formed. For a wistful moment, he thought about Marjo and how he wished he’d known her as a baby.

“He says...he says I wasn’t attentive to his needs.”

Tracy glanced at his sister. “Why? Because you couldn’t fuck him the last two months of your pregnancy? I’m gonna kick his ass, Sharla.”

She laughed until she began to hiccup. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“Mind if I take a quick shower?”

“No,” he said.

“I can’t remember the last time I had one.”

“That’s not a good sign. Wyatt here digs me, so take your time. Wash your hair.”

She stared at him, her eyes glazed. “Wash my hair? Oh, Tracy, you’re the most wonderful man I know.”

Wyatt started bawling as soon as his mom was out of the room. Nothing Tracy did would work. He noticed a baby bath in the kitchen and ran a lukewarm bath. Within seconds, his nephew’s screams turned to happy sounds. Then he was hungry again.

Maybe it was a good thing he’d missed this phase of Marjo’s development after all.

He found the baby’s formula...well, he assumed it was formula in the fridge and heated it up. The baby sucked furiously on the nipple as Sharla came into the kitchen, looking a little less frazzled.

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“I see you two are getting along fine.”

“Is this formula?”

She shook her head. “Breast milk. He bites hard on me...doesn’t like my tit. Like father, like son, eh?” Her eyes reddened and she started sobbing again.

“He likes your tit just fine. He can’t get enough of it. Neither can his son. Come on, you, and get into bed.”

“No. I hate that room.”

Tracy nodded. She’d shared it with Max. She probably hated the entire apartment right now.

Sharla lay on the sofa, and Tracy gave her the baby to hold. She fell asleep, and he removed Wyatt, burping him and putting him in his crib. The apartment was hot so he opened a window. The sea breeze coming from Ellis Island was a Godsend. For a moment, he stared at the ocean. He was so far away from where he wanted to be.

He threw towels and sheets in the washing machine, bagged old newspapers for recycling and dumped the full Diaper Genie into the garbage chute in the hallway. Wyatt slept fitfully. He would awaken at the same moment Sharla did. Sharla alternated between being sweet, funny and coherent to being a total mess.

Tracy was appalled to find no food in the house and waited until she awoke a third time.

“I’m going out to buy groceries,” he said.

“There’s nothing down here,” she said. “I’d kill for some Chinese. Let’s just order in tonight and tomorrow the three of us will go shopping.” She sat up on the sofa. “Where are the suitcases I started packing?”

“In the other bedroom. You’re packing Max’s stuff, right?” At her nod, he said firmly, “That can wait. Looking at it all the time

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won't help you."

"But where will you sleep?"

"I'll manage."

He ordered Chinese food from his favorite downtown restaurant, Fuleen Seafood in C-Town. He ordered all their favorite dishes—stir-fried spinach, Chinese parsley and sliced fish soup, pan-fried squid and little fish. He paused when he ordered that. He was missing Greece more and more each moment.

"I want the steamed flounder with ginger and scallions," his sister said, downing what little milk was left in a carton in the fridge.

Tracy was incensed that Max would leave his wife and son this way. When the food arrived, he made sure his sister ate and she expressed more milk for the baby.

"When did Max call you last?" he asked.

"He calls every five minutes."

Tracy's chopsticks hovered over his fish. At least, that's what it was supposed to be. Everything tasted like cardboard to him. "What does he say?"

"He wants to come home. I don't know what to do, Tracy."

"I think you should talk, but obviously, this is—"

"No. I will not talk to him. He cheated on me, Tracy."

"I know, sweetie." He watched as his nephew started to stir. "Every time you get upset, he gets upset. I want you to relax."

"Relax? Are you kidding? Max keeps trying to get in here. He even pretended he was you a few of hours ago!"

"He did?" Tracy smiled. "Sharla, the man loves you. I'm impressed he's trying so hard."

"He cheated on me," she said again.

Tracy sighed. She was having a hard time chewing on that

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particular piece of gristle.

"You have two choices, baby. Keep harping on that, or let Wyatt have an intact home."

"I..." She stopped speaking. "Do you think Dad cheated on Mom?"

"No, I don't think he would have. I think..." He drew a deep breath. "They're gone, Sharla. It's just you and me. We're not perfect people, but we're loving people, and I know Max loves you. I hate what he did, but if there's genuine remorse, you need to give him another chance."

She sniffed. "I'm not ready yet."

Tracy handed her the baby and picked up his bag. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to take a quick shower."

"Oh, God, sweetie, I'm sorry. I've been so selfish."

"No, you haven't. Give me five minutes."

When he came out of the bathroom, his sister was asleep on the sofa, the remote in her hand. He gently extracted it and covered her with a throw. He picked up Wyatt, asleep on her chest, and put him into his crib. He made sure the baby monitor was working and marveled at the clear video reception the hand-held device delivered.

This had been his gift to Sharla, as well as the Diaper Genie. He returned to the living room with the monitor and sat beside his sister, curling up on the end of the sofa. Tears pricked his eyes as he thought about the Seguin family. He had no idea what time it was, but the city grew dim and the lights came on. He stared out the unadorned windows. Number Nine Rector Place opposite them had lights blown out. It struck him funny that the letters now read, *I Rest*.

He dreamed of Benoit, who waited, just on the other side of

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dream, fate bathing him in a soft golden light.

"I love you," Benoit said, a flute in his hand, blue *comboloi*, Greek worry beads, in the other. Benoit handed him the *comboloi*. "They mean something," he said, staring deeply into Tracy's eyes. "They are like love. Our love is a circle with no ending. I love you."

Tracy awoke in tears, his stomach in agony. The baby started fussing, and he ran to the bedroom and picked him up. Wyatt settled right away and his little mouth reached for the bottle as soon as it was ready. Tracy fed him, burped and changed him and put him back in the crib.

Sharla lay on the sofa, so still he was worried until he saw she was breathing. He shut his eyes, but an hour later, the baby started crying and Tracy went through the feeding process again.

An hour later, he had to wake his sister to feed him, but the baby refused her breast.

She expressed milk into more bottles as Tracy walked the hallway with the baby. He fed him and put him down again as Sharla slept, a leaky tit exposed to the world. She had stretched out on the sofa, leaving him no room, so he threw himself wearily into the armchair and slept. Some instinct woke him and he ran to check on the baby. He was sleeping. Fear and separation anxiety, not to mention good, old-fashioned jetlag kept him awake until the fresh day dawned.

Life, he thought, looking out the window. It's so...daily. Like the *comboloi*, round and round, never ending. It's like a turnstile and each day they let me pass.

An hour later, there was a flurry of activity at the door.

"Don't let him in," Sharla shrieked, rising up from the sofa.

Tracy ignored her, opened the door and saw his disheveled,

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red-eyed brother-in-law standing there trying to fit a key that no longer worked into the lock.

"I really, really want to kick your ass," Tracy said. "But I'll settle for you coming in and talking to your wife. I'm going out to get us all some food."

He took the keys dangling from the inside of the door and brushed past Max, who still hadn't said a word.

By the time Tracy returned from the shop downstairs, Max was feeding the baby and Sharla was sitting on the sofa, weeping.

Tracy brokered Max's return to the apartment. Max seemed humbled by his misdeed and kept apologizing.

"I can't believe you flew out from Greece," he said.

"Of course I did. She's my sister."

Tracy felt anguished when his sister cried on and off that day. The three adults fussed around the baby in a gentle way. In the evening, Tracy cooked pasta and eggs for Sharla, who had a craving for them.

She and Max asked about Greece, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about it. He'd given up his apartment in the dizzying joy of accepting his European assignment. Now that Max was home, Tracy felt he was in the way.

"God, don't leave," Max whispered. "You're our neutral zone."

For two days, he cooked, cleaned, counseled and carried the baby down to the park to look at the swings he would one day ride. Wyatt wasn't terribly interested and moved his mouth around in search of his bottle.

"He's got a one-track mind," Sharla said, when Tracy brought him home.

Max went to work, Sharla fretting about the other woman.

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"You won't know if you can trust him for a long time, hon," he told her.

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

Tracy shrugged. "Find another job."

"But you love Benoit."

Tracy shook his head. "He doesn't love me."

Sharla's face suddenly shone. "Yes, he does. I had a weird dream about the two of you."

"You did?"

"You're going to think it's the weirdest thing. He was holding worry beads in his hand. He kept asking me to give them to you. They were a beautiful blue color."

She glanced at Tracy who was in tears now.

"Go back, baby. Please, I'm okay. Wyatt's okay. I can't bear to see you so unhappy. If you love him, just go. Give it everything. Tracy, I love you. I feel he loves you, too."

"I had that dream," Tracy said, "Of the *comboloi*...the worry beads. I'm so afraid."

Sharla nodded. "I say, be afraid and still do it. Just go."

Tracy debated the issue all day with himself. He was terrified of making a fool of himself, terrified of not making a leap into the unknown.

He might not have taken that leap had he not watched the news that night with Sharla as she nursed the baby, her dutiful husband making them all an early dinner.

There was a news report about wanted fugitives. Sharla joked about how there was a woman at the top of the list. Tracy's face went slack. He hadn't heard a word, but he knew the face of the woman wanted by the FBI for attempted kidnapping and extortion,

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her current whereabouts unknown.

He stared at the TV. The hair was different, the face a little fuller, but there was no mistaking it. It was Despina.

CHAPTER 12

Despina, real name Antonia Carrapis, was a fugitive on three continents. A mastermind thief, kidnapper and art forger, she had escaped custody in Paris on a routine transfer from her court hearing to the Fleury-Merogis prison just south of the city. Her crime? Stealing a child in a custody dispute.

Tracy's blood ran cold. *My God...what if she was involved in the attempts to abduct little Marjo?* He ran through events in his mind and realized Despina could easily have cultivated his friendship in an effort to get close to Benoit.

He tried calling Benoit and got his voicemail. With a jolt, he realized the live show was tomorrow night at the castle in Molivos.

"Call her," Sharla prompted. "Let's see what she says."

Despina was less than thrilled to hear from him. "You weren't

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very nice to me last time we spoke,” she said, sounding sulky.

“Sorry, Desi. I had a lot on my mind. I’m wondering if we can get together?”

“Get together?” She sounded shocked. “I’m afraid not. I’m...traveling...there’s some place I have to be. Are you back in Greece?”

“I’m in Athens,” he said. “I’m on my way back to Thessaloniki.” He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. “I’m thinking I’ll go back to the bakery...maybe visit you.”

There was a significant pause. “In that order?”

“Well, I could visit you first...maybe I could tempt you with some *loukoumathia*.”

She laughed then. “You and me...we really like our pastries, eh?”

“I like you, too, Desi,” he said, aware of Sharla’s intense gaze.

“And you’re really thinking of visiting me?”

“Yes. I can be there tonight. Shall I call you when I’m more certain of my plans?”

“Do that,” she said, seeming to warm up a little. “I look forward to it.”

When he ended the call, Sharla said, “How in the world are you going to be in Thessaloniki tonight?”

“I probably can’t be there, but the police can. I can make a rendezvous with her and have her picked up. Even if she wasn’t involved in trying to kidnap Marjo, she’s a wanted woman.”

“Oh, I like that. I’m going to call Interpol. There’s a number here with the story. Can you believe it? You’ve been hanging out with a wanted woman!” Sharla bit the end of a titty-hugger whose head had seen better days. “I’m also going to call the Thessaloniki police. You get to the airport and call me, okay?”

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He tried Benoit once more time. Once again, Benoit's voicemail insisted he would return his call as quickly as possible. Again, Tracy's anxiety spiked when he received the same outgoing message.

"Go," Sharla insisted. "Just go. I'll keep trying, too...isn't there a police station on the island? The cop you mentioned. Officer Papandriou."

"Brilliant!" Tracy shouted. Then, "I don't have the number."

"Don't worry. I'll call him. You just get on that plane. I'll find the number online."

Tracy threw his belongings together as Sharla scanned the Internet for the cheapest possible ticket to Athens.

"Swiss Air. Six hundred dollars one way, six-eighty round trip."

Tracy swallowed hard. The whole time he'd been tutoring in Cape Cod, his biggest expense had been coffee and donuts. Now he was shelling out for airline tickets left and right.

"Get the round trip ticket if you can keep the return date open-ended."

She couldn't, but she placed the return date for a few weeks away.

"You take this," she said, handing him a piece of paper. "It's your confirmation number."

He kissed her and the baby and ran down the stairs, not even waiting for the elevator. For the first time in his life, he found a taxi as soon as he came out of Sharla's building. The driver seemed as surprised as he was. "I never get rides down here. Where to?"

"JFK. And please, hurry."

He sat back and ran over events in his mind. It was possible

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Desi had nothing to do with the attempted abduction of Marjo. He tried hard to think whether he'd ever given her any hints about his job, his whereabouts. *No, nothing.*

Even if it was a coincidence, she was still a fugitive from justice and he shouldn't feel guilty for reporting her to the police.

At the airport, he picked up his boarding pass to Athens and the connecting to flight to Thessaloniki at the Swiss Air counter. He paid his baggage fee and prayed his credit card wouldn't be declined.

He had two hours before boarding the flight. He called Sharla and got her voicemail. Man, he hated cell phones!

She called him back twenty minutes later as he stood in the security checkpoint line. "I just spoke to the police at Interpol. I really got the run-around. Once they believed you really had spoken to her and that you know her, they insisted on talking to you."

Tracy had to end the call as he went through the metal detector and called Sharla back as soon as he was on the other side and slipping on his shoes again.

She gave him the phone number to call.

He spoke to a man with heavily accented English who identified himself as Detective Figueroa, who asked him a lot of questions about the woman Tracy knew as Despina. Interpol was pleased to hear his report that she was in Greece.

"We heard she was in Athens. She was seen on the island—"

"Lesvos?"

"How did you know?" the detective asked him.

Tracy told him of meeting Despina on the plane and his work for his boss and the attempted abductions of Marjo Seguin.

"Give me Mr. Seguin's number," Detective Figueroa said.

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"I'm afraid that my boss is performing tomorrow night at the Molivos castle. Marjo will undoubtedly be there. A perfect opportunity to snatch her," Tracy said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

Detective Figueroa clicked his tongue. "There's something you should know about the woman you know as Despina."

"What's that?" Tracy asked.

"She is a ruthless woman, very cunning. I would say she would do anything for money."

"So you don't think it's a coincidence that she's in Thessaloniki?"

"No, I don't, but still, we've been chasing her for a few months. If you are willing to call her and make a plan with her, I can have some men pick her up."

Tracy was only too happy to comply. He didn't know Despina's exact address, but described the street, her building and her apartment as best he could. After giving Detective Figueroa Despina's cell phone number, he waited for instructions.

The cop called back half an hour later. "She hasn't shown up at work yet. I sent a female decoy there acting as a tourist looking for her favorite waitress. She apparently worked late and will be there this afternoon."

"We found the apartment and we are watching it, from a distance. She doesn't appear to be home, but I am keeping my men posted. They haven't knocked on the door. I'm pleased with this progress. I want to get this woman off the streets, Mr. Costantino. She beat a very good police officer in Paris, causing him blindness. There's something else you should know. Her new specialty is kidnapping with ransom monies involved. She's taken children before...a little girl. That little girl disappeared after being

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abducted. Nobody's seen her since."

Tracy shivered. The thought of anything happening to Marjo filled him with terror.

"No child wants to wind up in this woman's custody," Detective Figueroa said. "She is a very dangerous woman."

Tracy called Despina and made a plan to meet her at her café, per the detective's instructions. He prayed and hoped that the police would find her at the café and arrest her. His cell phone rang as he boarded the plane.

It was Detective Figueroa. "The address you gave us is the correct one. The subject is home, but we are going to wait until she shows up at work."

"Okay," Tracy said. "Thanks for letting me know."

As the plane took off, he felt better than he had in days. He couldn't sleep, couldn't read and listened to music, when it didn't irritate him. For eight hours, he stressed about the activities in Thessaloniki. He used the plane's airphone to call Benoit, but his mailbox was full.

Once the plane landed and he could use his phone again, Tracy checked his voicemail. A message from Detective Figueroa said, "Call me."

The next was a message from Despina.

"You little shit," she said. "You arrogant little prick. You think I can't smell a trap?" She chuckled. "I'll have that little girl off the island before you can even set foot on it again. Tell her father thanks to your clumsiness, your stupidity, he will never see her again."

CHAPTER 13

Detective Figueroa said all efforts made to capture Despina, AKA Antonia Carrapis, had been futile.

“What went wrong?” Tracy wailed.

“She is not dumb. I think she has friends...powerful friends willing to help her. Somebody at the restaurant must have tipped her off. She never showed up.”

“I thought you were watching her apartment!”

“We were. She got into her car and drove to work...or so we thought. We saw her parking around the corner...and then she vanished.”

Tracy couldn't believe his ears.

“She must have sensed something. A couple of waiters kept coming out, looking around. She never showed up. She's a lot

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more clever than I thought. In the meantime, I tried contacting Officer Papandriou in Molivos. I guess they're all getting ready for that concert tonight. I've left messages."

"Have you spoken to my boss?"

"No. And according to people in the town of Skala Sikiminia, the family is no longer there."

Tracy thought he would explode with the stress he was carrying. He boarded his flight to Thessaloniki, arriving at ten o'clock in the morning. He was too late for ferries. He had no idea how he was going to get back to Lesvos. Then he remembered there were small, local flights.

He called Sharla and left her a message. Benoit's cell phone was still full and so was Benoit Senior's.

Tracy roamed the airport looking for the carriers that flew to Lesvos and found one airline that flew out twice a week. This was not one of those days.

Stranded. He could not possibly be stranded here.

He called Detective Figueroa and told him his predicament. "I need to be at the castle. I need to protect Marjo. Nobody else in the family has seen Desi, only I have. I know what she looks like and I'm certain she's on her way there."

"Mr. Seguin hasn't canceled his performance, but the organizers have been unable to contact him. They say he's often unreachable and they are proceeding as planned. I'll help you get there, Tracy. Just give me some time."

Ninety minutes later, with his nerves shredded and his cell phone battery failing, he received a call from Detective Figueroa.

"I'm having you flown there. Meet one of my men at Hangar Fourteen. Get directions from the airport staff."

The phone died before he could hear any more instructions. He

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found his way to the hangar. He had to trust that God and all the Greek deities who protected little girls were on his side. He had to get to Marjo. He had to protect her. No matter what.

He met a fine Greek gentleman, Georg Sandino, at the hangar. He was a large man whose constant jokes unnerved Tracy.

“Here,” he said, handing him a flight manual. “Read me the instructions. Speak slowly.”

Tracy’s expression made the man laugh for the entire thirty-minute flight. They landed at Mytilini Airport.

“You are to call Detective Figueroa and let him know you’re here.”

“I can’t. Cell phone’s dead.”

“Not much of a co-pilot, are you?” Georg made the call and handed Tracy the phone.

“We still haven’t found the family,” Detective Figueroa said. “You know your voicemail is full?”

Tracy found a payphone and emptied his messages. Nothing important. Sharla wanted news. She’d have to wait. There were a lot of hang-up calls. He wondered who they were from. He took a taxi to Molivos and sighed when he reached the beach town. People were already starting to turn up at the castle, even though the musical performance was still a few hours away.

He was pleased to see Georg Sandino show up. A curt nod in his direction, but otherwise the cop acted like he didn’t know him. Tracy paced the courtyard and finally walked all the way down the hill to the Internet café he’d visited on his first day here. He found an outlet, plugged in his cell phone battery and switched on his laptop. He treated himself to a frappé, for his troubles, he told himself, and he fired off a long email to his sister.

With his nerves a hopeless tangle, he packed up everything and

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headed back to the castle, hoping for the best.

An hour before the event was to start, the crowd was huge, bigger than last time. Tracy's brief phone charging hadn't worked. He now had no juice left. He prayed and hoped for the best. Tracy was devastated that the Seguin family was nowhere to be seen. He'd been holding seats it now became impossible to keep and then, just minutes before the show started, Benoit Senior arrived with Marjo. The show began with Tracy struggling to get to them as the local children started acting out their story of the castle's mythical princesses. A woman came in on horseback to abduct the princess. The little girl portraying her waited for the rider to pick her up, but the woman turned the horse around, her sights on Marjo.

Marjo gazed up, entranced, as the woman reached down to her.

Tracy recognized Despina and broke through the crowd, screaming Marjo's name. The horse reared, the rider flew off and Tracy's arms encircled the dear little girl he loved.

Marjo clung to him as cops descended, Benoit running from the castle.

"I've got her," Tracy said, as the police picked up Despina from the ground.

The crowd roared. Some seemed afraid; some thought it was part of the show. Despina screamed as the officers led her away, and Benoit's arms moved around Tracy and Marjo. Tracy could hear his lover's heart thundering...skittering.

"Wow, Daddy, that was cool!" Marjo screamed.

The crowd screamed their support.

And the show went on.

* * *

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Hours after the performance, in which Benoit played, pushing past his nerves with a wonderful set that included many more musicians than last time, Tracy settled Marjo down to sleep. The family was back in the house in Molivos. He hadn't thought to look for them there.

As he left the little girl in her room, Benoit was waiting for him. Tracy had barely had a moment alone with Benoit but discovered he, too, had frantically tried calling Tracy. They exchanged a lot of kisses, but words would have to wait.

"I told Dimitri he can stay the night."

Tracy smiled.

"You know there's nothing going on with him, right?"

Tracy took Benoit's face in his hands and kissed him. "I do now," he said.

They went down to the kitchen, arm in arm. They had a lot of company. Toula had quit working for the Seguins, but happily made coffee for everyone. She told Tracy she and her husband-to-be, Stavros Papandriou, were going to open a new restaurant together since her family disapproved of her marrying a cop.

"He's quitting the force for you?"

"Tonight was a big victory for him, working with the international police, capturing a dangerous criminal. He's leaving on a high note. He'll never have another day like this." She smiled. "Thanks to you."

Dimitri and Benoit Senior were waiting to hear Stavros's version of the events.

As Marjo slept, the whole story of Despina and her amazing kidnap plot finally came to light over coffee, cakes and *ouzo* in the courtyard.

Stavros enjoyed his moment in the moonlight. "Tracy, as you

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know, Despina befriended you on the plane. She knew you were working for the Seguins.”

“How?” Tracy asked. “It was a complete accident when I ran into her at her restaurant.”

“Yes, but she had tried to follow you. She followed Benoit in New York. She saw your meeting with Benoit Senior. On the plane, she saw you meet Benoit in the uh...restroom.”

Tracy was mortified, but Benoit laughed.

“I couldn’t keep my hands off him.”

“But she didn’t know I was working for you,” Tracy insisted.

“No, but you told *her* you were going to tutor a little girl,” Stavros said.

“I did? But I didn’t tell her the name.”

“No, but she sees you with him...puts two and two together, but increasingly becomes frustrated. I guess the cell phone bug didn’t work. You come into her restaurant, when she sees you again, she plants another bug on your moped. She plants a stronger bug on your phone. She tries hard to be a part of your life.”

“Did she tell you she tried to seduce him?” Benoit asked.

“Yes, she claimed he was gay...I never had any idea before...and now...” His gaze shifted between Benoit and Tracy.

“She told you all this?” Tracy asked, incredulous.

He nodded. “She’s proud of her efforts...Benoit went to a lot of trouble to keep your whereabouts private. She said she only knew you were in Lesvos after she planted the bug on the bike. She knew when you were in Thessaloniki.”

Tracy shook his head. It had been no accident when she showed up at the bakery.

“So, she had the bug in your cell phone. Only thing is, somewhere along the way, you got rid of the bike in Thessaloniki.

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She had an army of people searching for you,” Stavros said.

“Were the English people, Mark and Jenny, involved?” Tracy asked.

“No, I don’t think so. She had a couple of guys working for her...not very competent. She came to the island a couple of times, but she was unsuccessful in her efforts, especially after you moved, so she hired out.”

“And then she lost track of me,” Tracy said. “She must have realized I was no longer in Greece, even when I was making plans to meet her.”

Stavros nodded. “She gave up Lys Seguin easily enough. Lys is in Paris. She was waiting for her daughter and getting more impatient each day.”

After the others had left and Benoit Senior retired to his quarters, Tracy was alone with the man he loved.

“What now?” Tracy asked.

“What now? Now, we make love. Now I make it up to you for ruining our date and you make it up to me for leaving me.”

“But—”

“No buts. I want you, Tracy. I know now that I can never be with a woman...or any other man. My father knows I love you. My daughter knows I love you. Nobody has ever gone to the lengths to protect her like you did.”

“I love her,” Tracy said.

“And her father, do you also love him?”

“Very, very much.”

“That’s good because her father can’t live without you.”

For a long time, they kissed each other, Tracy wondering how he’d gotten through the last few days without Benoit.

Benoit tired of the fully-clothed kisses and carried Tracy up the

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stairs to his bedroom.

"I've never been in here before," Tracy whispered.

Benoit kicked the door shut. "I hope you're going to like it, since you will be spending a lot of time in here."

Tracy laughed, feeling like the sound rang out through the house.

"You won't leave us again?" Benoit asked, undressing Tracy with impatient hands.

"You won't tell me to leave again?"

"No, never. I hope never to repeat my mistakes."

Benoit's kisses started at Tracy's chin and roamed his whole body.

"For God's sake, fuck me." Tracy groaned, but once again, the maestro was in charge of the instrument in his hands.

The piano playing started downstairs.

"Listen," Tracy whispered.

Benoit raised his head. "It's happy music." He smiled. "Welcome home, baby."

* * *

Sharla and Max arrived on the island a few days later. As he'd hoped, Marjo was enthralled with baby Wyatt and it gave Tracy such joy to see the gentle way Benoit held him.

"Does he like music?"

Sharla laughed. "He *loves* music." She seemed ecstatic to meet Benoit and her beautiful hands fluttered to Marjo's face.

"You are even more gorgeous than Tracy said."

Marjo beamed. "You're pretty. I like your hair."

Sharla bent and hugged her, and they all climbed into the rental

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car and drove up the mountain road to Molivos.

"There's your castle," Sharla sighed. "It's so pretty."

"It's lovely here," Max said. "I can't believe we're really here."

"Are you going to visit your granddad in Thessaloniki?" Max asked Tracy.

"Of course," Tracy said. "He has two new grandchildren to meet. Maybe they'll wear down the old goat's resistance."

As they got out of the car and walked into the house, Marjo took Tracy's hand in hers, her thumb finding its special place. "Can we go to the castle this afternoon, Daddy?"

"Of course we can."

Marjo and Tracy showed Sharla the bedroom selected for their stay.

"It's perfect," she said, hugging the little girl again. "Oh, I smell olives."

"That's from my trees in the courtyard," Marjo said. "We have chestnuts, oranges, thyme, basil and tomatoes, too."

"Will you show me?" Sharla asked. The girls went downstairs, hand in hand. Tracy watched as, downstairs, they passed a smitten Benoit standing in the hallway, Wyatt giggling happily in his arms.

Benoit gazed up at Tracy, smiling.

"He looks like you, baby."

Tracy couldn't speak he was so happy.

Benoit handed the baby back to his father and mounted the stairs two at a time. Tracy didn't wait. He ran into the room he shared with Benoit, who closed their door and advanced on him, erotic intent in his eyes.

He wasted no time unbuttoning Tracy's shorts, his mouth finding Tracy's warm and open. He pushed Tracy against the wall. Tracy's cock leapt at his lover's touch. He was helpless to stop

DEEPER BLUE

him. He waited for the thrilling moment Benoit pulled out his cock. Benoit removed his mouth from Tracy's for a brief moment. Too long. Groans escaped them both as Benoit rubbed his hot, leaking cock against Tracy's ass.

Tracy's legs wrapped around Benoit's waist. His lover pressed him harder against the wall to help support Tracy's weight. Tracy had to stop himself from crying out as Benoit stuck it straight into him.

"You are so strong," he muttered.

"I want to be so deep inside you," Benoit murmured. He did not stop moving in and out of Tracy, his lips still moving across his lover's face and chest. With an impatient cry, Benoit carried him to the bed.

"Fuck...not close enough to you."

Their dance began again, Benoit moving against Tracy's body, which writhed underneath him. Benoit reached for the nightstand and picked up a *comboloi*, a brilliant blue, just like the one he'd seen in his dream.

"It's not a wedding ring. It's a promise. I promise to love you and treasure you always. You know what a *comboloi* is?"

"A circle."

Benoit nodded. "'Round and 'round, never ending."

As Tracy felt his lover coming inside him, his own bliss bubbled inside him. This was their shared *rembetiko*. The ultimate dance of men, except they were two men together. Two men in love, no longer alone, pining for communion. As Tracy took hold of the *comboloi*, gripping it in his sweaty hands, he knew he'd found it...the love he'd been looking for.

He'd found the color he wanted...the color of love, love of a deeper blue.

A. J. LLEWELLYN

A. J. Llewellyn divides his time between California and Hawaii. Bags of Kona coffee in the fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep him refueled when he is on the mainland.

A. J.'s passion for the islands led him to writing a play about the last ruling monarch of Hawaii, Queen Lili'uokalani. He has written a non-erotic novel about the overthrow of her kingdom—in diary form from her maid's point of view.

He never lacks inspiration for his male/male erotic romances and has to force his fingers from the computer keyboard to pursue his other passions: collecting books on Hawaiiana, surfing and spending time with his family, friends and his animal companions.

A. J. Llewellyn believes that love is a song best sung out loud. To find out more about A. J., email him at aj@ajllewellyn.com or visit his website:

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