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TWO IN THE
Lions Den

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Back Cover Copy

She's been called a witch. She's been called a fraud. Now she's calling on love.

Fiery redhead Sam grew up shunned and teased for her psychic abilities. Now, those powers are making her a success in her very own shop, where she does Tarot readings. But the cards never warned her about Leonidis Stefanos. He thinks she's a fraud and an opportunist, bent on squandering her best friend Toni's inheritance.

Thrown together at a Greek villa Sam and Leonidis thought would be empty, they can't deny the sparks of passion flying between them. But while Leo discovers she isn't the conniver he thought she was, Sam is busy telling herself not to succumb to this formidable, sexy and passionate man.

With a shadowy enemy undermining Sam's reputation, and Leonidis' interest in her threatening the protective shield she's built up around her heart, Sam's life is getting complicated with a capital C!

Content warning: Sensual content.

Highlight

His expression hardened. “I know that you profess to be psychic and you own a store that sells magic spells,” he replied cynically.

He’d mentioned the word psychic like it was a dirty word. Her ire returned. “My customers are aware the magic spells are for amusement only. As for me professing to be psychic, that couldn’t be farther from the truth. I give people hope. I help them with their challenges and show them how to embrace the Light. My readings give them direction and guidance.”

His lips curled sardonically. “Do you honestly expect me to believe you have the ability to foresee the future?”

“Believe what you want. I don’t have to explain myself to you. I know a sceptic when I see one—and the only remedy for people like you is a reading.”

Leo’s brows shot up. “You want to give me a reading?”

Sam gritted her teeth. “I don’t need to give you a reading to tell you how judgmental and narrow-minded you are. I don’t need to look at my cards to see you’re in danger of severing all ties with your sister if you don’t allow her to live her own life.”

Two in the Lion's Den

by

Anastasia Maltezos

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Dedication

To my hero, Richard Pothier...and my beautiful nieces, Michele, Antonia, Zoe, and Effy.

Acknowledgements

Thank you Richard Pothier for believing in me and having the patience to see this through. Thank you Georgia Maltezos for your encouragement and cheer. And last but not least, thank you Angela Salera for your support and wisdom. It was a long road filled with many ups and downs and your faith helped me see it through.

Prologue

“Mom, what time is it?”

“Honey, you asked me five minutes ago. Stop worrying. Your friends will be here shortly. You told them your birthday party is at two o’clock, right?”

Samantha Hope nodded eagerly at her mother, her red curls bouncing up and down, her green eyes bright with excitement. She had been waiting all month for this day and glanced around at all the decorations she had helped her mother and Aunt Zoe hang in the living room. There were streamers, ribbons, balloons and a sparkly *Happy Birthday* banner as well as colourful goody bags on the coffee table. The four girls she had invited from school were going to love their party gifts. Sam grinned, excitement bubbling inside of her.

Sam couldn’t wait to show them her room and play with them, but where were they? She’d been waiting for ages. Running to the window, Sam ignored the concerned look her mother gave Aunt Zoe who sat on the couch, her expression grave.

It was five minutes after three.

Sam stared at the empty drive in front of her home and puckered her delicate brows into a knotted frown.

Aunt Zoe sighed wearily. “Honey, come here. I want to give you your gift now.”

“Later, Aunt Zoe,” Sam said, tossing an anxious gaze over her shoulder. “I want to stay here by the window in case they miss the house. Maybe they’re lost.”

“They’re not lost,” Aunt Zoe replied sadly. “Come here, child.”

Sam didn’t want to go to her aunt because she was afraid of what she’d hear. She gave her mother a tearful look. “Mom, they’re coming. They said they would.”

“I know, honey. I’m going to give their parents a quick call to see what’s holding them up.” She made her way into the kitchen.

“It won’t make a difference,” Aunt Zoe muttered under her breath.

Sam stiffened, hoping this was one time her aunt was wrong. She stared at the empty road and blinked at the prickly sensation in her eyes. Her friends said they’d come.

“Child, come here,” Aunt Zoe said quietly.

Sam rubbed her eyes with the back of her little hands and sniffed. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t. She would be a big baby if she did. Sam was eight years old now. She was growing up. Slowly, she went to sit next to her aunt and took the small parcel wrapped in gold tissue and a red bow.

“Thank you, Aunt Zoe,” she mumbled politely.

She unwrapped the gift and pulled out a familiar set of cards. They were the same cards she had seen her aunt play with on many occasions. Sam eyed her aunt questioningly.

"They're called Tarot cards, honey. And I'm going to teach you how to read them."

"Read them? They're pictures."

Aunt Zoe smiled. "Yes, but your special gift will help you see beyond the pictures and discover the truth. The future."

Sam pursed her lips. She hated her gift. For as long as she could remember, her Aunt Zoe had been telling her she was gifted, psychic, blessed, but all that got her was being called weird, odd and strange at school. What was so special about knowing things, feeling things, seeing things others couldn't if all it gave you was children snickering behind your back?

Her eyes stung and she blinked away the tears. Last week, her foster brother, John, had told her after she had slipped off her bike and scraped her knee that big girls didn't cry.

"Aunt Zoe?"

"Yes?"

"Why do all the kids at school hate me?" she asked in a small voice.

Her aunt placed a tender hand on Sam's cheek. "They don't hate you, sweetheart. They don't understand you. You're special."

Sam struggled to find her voice. "Last week, when I told Amie to make sure her dog was tied, she called me a witch at school the next day when her dog ran away. She...she blamed me."

"You're not a witch. And one day, you're going to realize how valuable your gift is. You're going to make a lot of people happy. And not just big people. You're going to make a lot of children happy, too."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Sam looked down at her new cards. "Aunt Zoe, how did you know my friends wouldn't come to my party?" Sam glanced at her mother returning to the living room. She noticed her distressed expression and her foster siblings, John and Melanie, trailing behind, their expressions equally troubled. Something was wrong.

Zoe took her niece's hand. "I knew they wouldn't come to your party because I read your cards last night."

Delicate brows shot up in surprise. "And you saw they wouldn't come?" Sam whispered.

Zoe nodded. "But I also saw other things. I glimpsed your future, honey. You have a big purpose in life and your gift will help many people. Don't be sad today because those girls didn't come. They weren't your real friends." She placed a loving hand on Sam's new cards. "These will be your friend. Your cards will be your confidant and they'll never hurt you. Trust this special gift God has given you because it will never let you down."

Sam stared at her cards and wondered about what her aunt had just said. She was going to help people, she thought. She was going to be able to see the future.

"Sam, Mom just told us your party plans changed," John remarked casually. "Wanna go to the movies with me and Mel?"

The movies! Sam smiled at her older foster siblings. “Oh yes!”

Zoe shot them all a grateful smile and put away the cards. “That’s a great idea, John. There’s plenty of time for Sam to learn the wonderful charms of the Tarot.”

Chapter 1

Seventeen years later

Samantha Hope couldn't wait for the next two weeks. Two more weeks and her busy but orderly life would be restored.

She parked her car and stepped out into the warmth of the morning sun. It was going to be a beautiful day and Sam found herself whistling in response to the birds' songs. She glanced up at her shop's red and gold sign.

The Crystal Ball.

Sam loved her quaint curiosity shop. She especially loved unlocking her doors to greet her customers, whether they wanted a reading in the private parlour at the back of her shop or needed something special—aromatic candles, soothing stones, massage oils.

Now, her shop was a mess. A freak electrical fire had destroyed the left side, charring her lovely inventory of antique lace shawls, old books, and scrolls containing magic spells. Sam couldn't wait until all the renovations were done and her quiet, neat little life was back to normal.

"Good morning, Sam," Mrs. Stokes said as she passed a quick broom in front of her bakery, located right next door to The Crystal Ball. "You want the usual this morning? Bagel and cream cheese?"

Sam returned the older woman's smile. "Yes. I'll be over in a minute."

"I just took out a fresh batch, dear."

Sam hurried inside and deposited her purse under the counter by the cash register, trying hard not to look at the corner that was dark and grimy now, empty of all her beautiful merchandise that had perished in the fire. Disappointment stabbed at her heart as she thought of the destroyed CDs of Celtic music she had recently added to her inventory. She pursed her lips. She couldn't think about that now.

Her nine o'clock appointment, the Kelsing sisters, would take up most of her morning and Sam was dying for a strong cup of coffee. Her body still ached from the last of the scrubbing and cleaning she'd done in her shop the previous evening and it had been well after midnight when she had finally crawled into bed.

She glanced at her watch and relief coursed through her veins. It was eight thirty and Antonia Stefanos, her sister-in-law, would be arriving any minute. Sam would have ample time for her coffee and bagel.

Still, she worried her lower lip. She hoped the Kelsing sisters wouldn't stay past their allotted two-hour appointment. Yesterday it had taken her all of three hours to convince them their cat, Pettigrew, wasn't going to die. Sam was booked with readings all day and she couldn't afford to cancel any new customers because she was running behind schedule. She wanted to expand her clientele, not diminish it.

Besides, it didn't take a psychic to know their cat was lethargic because it was obese, not deathly ill.

Psychic. Sam tried to keep that word as far away as possible from her vocabulary. Sam was gifted. Intuitive. Spiritual. She wasn't psychic. She was a master Tarot reader who uncovered the past, present and future with stunning accuracy and clarity. She possessed an uncanny instinct. And she could feel people's energy and see their aura, whether it embraced the light or the darkness.

Some people called it being psychic. Sam called it being blessed.

Aunt Zoe had been right all those years ago. Sam grew up embracing her gift, trusting it, respecting it. She guided many people who struggled to find balance and harmony in their lives. What her aunt had omitted to tell Sam, however, was how her gift would affect her love life. A tidbit Sam eventually learned first hand.

Men were an open book. Any lies, deceit or insincerity was inevitably exposed. And she had learned the hard way how her gift had its downfalls.

Her first love in college was a man she wanted to marry. She loved him deeply and envisioned a bright and happy future with him—until she'd read the cards. All she had wanted to do was see how many children they'd have, what kind of home they'd live in, how happy they would be, but the cards had shown her a different path. At first, Sam hadn't believed what she'd seen, but a few days later after he'd mentioned he needed to study and couldn't see her, she decided to check with her cards again. Ten minutes later, she had been in her car, driving to his apartment. Fifteen minutes after that she found him in a compromising situation with another woman.

Her second boyfriend had been a year later, and he too had resulted in a breakup. She'd discovered through a late night reading his appreciation for alcohol would lead to a serious addiction.

Sam pursed her lips. It didn't matter. Being single wasn't that bad. In fact, it wasn't bad at all. Sam had everything she needed.

Her front door chimed and Sam smiled as she watched her sister-in-law enter her shop. "Morning, Toni. I'm going to pop in next door for my usual. Do you want anything?"

Toni shook her head. "Actually I wanted to continue our talk from yesterday."

Sam stifled a sigh, realizing Toni wasn't going to waste any time. "Can't it wait? The Kelsings are in this morning and I'm booked all day. Tomorrow's not going to be any easier."

"Cancel all your appointments for tomorrow. I'm here on behalf of my husband with specific orders and we're not taking no for an answer."

Sam opened her till. She was going to have to get some rolls of quarters on her lunch break, she thought. "Toni, I don't have time for a vacation." And dimes, she noticed.

"Make time then. You're closing shop for the renovations and I'll be here to take care of anything that comes up."

"Nope. Can't. I was looking forward to spending more time at Grangers with my time off."

Toni sighed with exasperation. "You've been working yourself to the bone and this is the perfect opportunity for you to go away. It's just two weeks, Sam. Look, I know the kids at the orphanage are going to miss you, but I also know they'll be happy for you." She grabbed Sam's hand and stopped her from opening another roll of nickels. "Your brother and I are worried about you. No one faints out of the blue for nothing, Sam. You run your shop seven days a week. Five nights a week you volunteer at Grangers Orphanage. And any extra time off you have, you're babysitting or giving readings. You don't know how to relax and that little episode you had last month was an omen." She pursed her lips. "No one just faints out of the blue like that. You're not superwoman, you know. Sooner or later, all this is going to catch up to you—it is catching up to you."

"I'm not going to spend two weeks in your summer home in Greece. Out of the question. I'm not exactly your family's favourite person. Besides, I've started a new project at the orphanage—art class—and I already have twenty-three kids signed up. Why don't you go to Greece? You never went on a honeymoon."

Toni shook her head. "Your brother's too swamped at the clinic, and I'm not the one who fainted last month."

"You're not going to give this up, are you?"

"No. Have you looked in the mirror lately? You've lost a lot of weight and you're as pale as a ghost. By American standards, with your gorgeous red hair and green eyes, you could be a model, but by my culture's standards, you could stand to put on ten pounds."

Sam gave her a halfhearted smile. "Spoken like a true Greek."

"Will you take me up on my offer?" Toni repeated. "And stop worrying about the shop. You hired me to work here as your assistant. And that's what I want to do—assist you." She paused deliberately. "Leo won't be there, if that's what you're worried about."

Sam froze. Leonidis Stefanos, Toni's brother, was the last person she wanted to see. Spending two weeks at his villa in Greece was akin to a deer jumping right into the lion's den. No thank you, Sam thought. She didn't want any complications in her life.

"Sam? You're not still thinking about the phone conversation you had with him, are you? I'm sure Leo's forgotten it."

Although Sam attempted a look of indifference, the rising heat on her cheeks told a different story. "Of course I'm not thinking about it. Why would I think about a three minute conversation I had with a man two months ago?" She felt the heat of an immediate rush of guilt. She had just lied to her friend.

Sam had been thinking of her conversation with Leo often in the past two months. And every time she had sat down to do a reading on him, she had come up with nothing. The cards had revealed zilch. It unsettled her now just thinking about it.

Her aunt had been no help, she thought. She recalled calling Aunt Zoe to ask her why Sam had drawn a complete blank on her subject and all her aunt had said was that sometimes the gift hid because the Universe was intervening. Instead of revealing the answers, the Universe wanted Sam to experience destiny.

Sam curled her lips in frustration. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

“For one,” Toni said, interrupting Sam’s train of thought, “you called my brother an overbearing, heartless boor.” Toni grinned for the first time since she entered the shop. “No one’s ever spoken to him like that and I think you knocked him down a peg or two.”

“You seem to forget why I said those things,” Sam interjected, her tone dry.

Toni’s grin sobered. “How can I forget? I’ll never forgive him for refusing to give me his blessing. I’ll never forgive myself either for allowing you to take the call. I should have faced my brother myself.”

“Maybe so,” Sam replied. She couldn’t shake the picture of Leo she’d seen in a photograph at Toni’s apartment. That sixth sense of hers was working overtime and she didn’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Whatever the Universe had in mind, Sam didn’t like being left out of the loop.

She recalled dark, sooty eyes from the photograph, staring at her from a tanned, handsome face. A mouth that held a hint of arrogance and an abundance of sensual promise, his lips curled into a half smile. When she had first seen the picture, Sam had had the oddest feeling that he was really looking at her, seeing her.

Perhaps Toni was right. Maybe Sam did need a vacation. Idle fantasies were never her style and she wondered if she was beginning to lose her mind, thinking about a photograph in three dimensions.

“Who am I kidding?” Toni asked suddenly. “If I had taken the call that day, I don’t think I would have ever gone through with the wedding. As much as I love John, my family can be very imposing. They would have tried everything under the sun to make me return home and marry the man they handpicked for me. God, they make me so mad, I could scream. He was old enough to be my father. My family’s so old fashioned and backward sometimes. I can’t believe they thought I would agree to an arranged marriage—all for the sake of status and class.”

“They love you.”

Toni’s face fell. “I know. I miss them terribly. I also know I made the right decision marrying John and I’ll always be grateful to you for introducing us.” She sighed heavily. “I still love my family, no matter how impossible they can be, and I want them to love John.”

“When was the last time you spoke to them?”

"Last week. I was going to tell you about it, but with the fire and everything, I didn't want to bother you with my problems."

"You could have come to me. Don't you know how dear you and John are to me? Who did you speak to?" Sam asked.

"Leo. He invited John and me to go see him next month. I know Papa will love John, but it's Mama and Leo I'm worried about."

Just the mere mention of his name made Sam skittish again. "Toni, you need to stop worrying. Everything will turn out fine. You'll see."

"How can you be sure? You don't know my family, Sam."

"I'm certain because of what you and John have together. A love like that can withstand anything. Never question what you two have."

Toni sighed and pushed a dark curl from her face. "John is wonderful and—" Her eyes widened, slowly and deliberately narrowing as a wry smile formed about her mouth. "There you go again, Sam. Here we are discussing me when we should be taking care of you. It's just like you to think about the other person in your own time of need. How did we get off the subject, anyways?"

Sam remained silent as she reached for a fresh bag of hard candy to put in the crystal bowl she had on the counter for her customers.

"Oh yes," Toni continued. "We were talking about my esteemed brother."

Silently, Sam cursed the telltale flush on her cheeks and tried to stop thinking about that day in Toni's apartment two months ago. She failed miserably as the memory of Leo's deep voice penetrated her mind.

A week before Toni and John were going to stand in City Hall and exchange vows, Leonidis Stefanos had called. Once he had realized it was Sam who answered, he had proceeded to blast her through the phone line, his fury and contempt evident with each cutting word. It had been the first and only time Sam had spoken to him and although Leo never met her, he had assumed the worst, calling her and John conniving opportunists and frauds bent on ruining Toni's life.

He had shown a fury Sam had no wish to meet face to face. And even though she had matched his anger with a lashing one of her own, her protective instincts surging forth to defend John's honour, she hadn't been able to deny the thrilling effect his rich, deep voice had had on her.

"Sam, he won't be there, if that's what you're worried about. Besides, Leo's got his hands full with Katina Spanakis. Believe me, he doesn't have time to worry about who's staying at the house. Mama told me he should be announcing his engagement soon. To tell you the truth, I was surprised at the news. Katina's not the kind of woman I see him with—Sam? Sam, are you all right? You look like you're going to faint."

"I'm fine. I just need some water."

The truth was she didn't know what had come over her, but at the mention of Leo's impending engagement, Sam felt curiously light-headed and weak, as though the oxygen was being drawn from the shop.

She shook her head again. "I can't go anywhere right now. Billy's looking forward to my art classes and I've started to make a lot of progress with Elizabeth. She's not afraid of the dark anymore and if I'm not there to tuck her in, her nightmares might return. And then there's Frankie. You know how hard it's been for him since he turned twelve. It's harder to get adopted as you get older."

Toni narrowed her dark eyes. "Fine. You asked for it." She turned around and marched to the front door.

Confused, Sam stared at Toni's back and her stomach dropped to the floor. "Toni, you can't leave. You're turning this into too much of a big deal."

Toni ignored her as she opened the front door. "All right, kids. Come in," she called loudly.

And the children did come in. All ten of them, with Elizabeth, Frankie, and Billy leading the pack. Sam froze staring at their grins and Bon Voyage balloons and flowers they carried. The head mistress from the orphanage followed them in, caught Sam's eye, and gave her a shrug as if to say, 'I couldn't stop them.'

Sam watched the children surround her and she shot a very pleased Toni a 'that's not fair' look. Toni shrugged casually. Children were Sam's weakness and Toni had definitely called in the right troops to convince her to take this much needed vacation.

Five-year-old Elizabeth, pretty in pink, took Sam's hand and peered up at her with concern etched on her sweet, angelic face. "Sam, I promise I won't have bad dreams until you come back."

* * * *

Two days later, Sam was flying over Greece. She peered out of her window and her breath caught at the vast beauty below her. The coastline along the Ionian Sea was striking, with immense stretches of sandy beaches and emerald waters. Picturesque coves and rocky inlets drew her fascinated gaze and she sighed at Greece's exquisite turquoise sea and scenic splendour.

The seatbelt light went on and the plane started to descend. Within the hour she landed in Athens international airport and took a connecting flight to Corfu. She went through customs and collected her luggage. Excited, she looked around for a woman who carried a card with Sam's name on it. She bit back her disappointment as she scanned the busy airport and came up empty.

"Maria Vasilakis, the villa's caretaker, will pick you up," Toni had explained. "She'll meet you at the Corfu airport and take you to the house. The ride's about a half hour. There's a beach walking distance from the villa, but if you want to shop you'll need to go to Corfu Town which is about a thirty minute drive."

Toni had also supplied a description of Maria, and Sam glanced around for a short, middle-aged woman, stout with brown hair and lively dark eyes. A few women resembled this description, but they were not alone.

Sam stared at the crowds around her, watching people hug and cry, while others showed increasing signs of irritation with the heat. At least it wasn't humid, Sam thought, running a hand down the back of her neck.

Still, the heat was getting to her and she wished she had tied her hair up in a ponytail. She should have gone with common sense and worn something loose and airy for the ten hour flight instead of the fitted navy halter dress she wore. It was too warm for this heat. Who was she kidding? She wore the navy dress because she felt pretty in it and wanted to make a nice impression on Maria.

The entire Stefanos clan disapproved of her because of her hand in bringing John and Toni together, and having one person—even if Maria wasn't a blood member of the family—like her would make Sam feel like less of an outcast.

A trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face and she swiped a hand along her cheek. So much for making a good impression. Her makeup had long since evaporated, her feet had swelled making it uncomfortable to walk in her new sandals, and her stomach was beginning to make all sorts of objectionable noises, urging her to fill it with food. She regretted turning down the airplane meal.

Her impatience mounting, she glanced at her watch for the tenth time. Maria was late.

And then it hit her: She could have been at Grangers painting with the children. Having fun with them. Inspiring them. What was she doing here? Thousands of miles away from where she really wanted to be? She inhaled a sharp, irritated breath. "What a mistake this was," she muttered under her breath.

She scanned the crowds again, annoyed, tired and hungry all at once when a man spoke from behind her.

She stiffened.

The deep, sexy drawl was all too familiar and for a split second she stopped breathing. Slowly, she turned around and faced the man who had haunted her dreams on many occasions. The man who had voiced his dislike of her in no uncertain terms, and yet whom she could not get out of her mind. The man who made all her senses scream at her to leave well enough alone, and yet to whom she felt inexplicably drawn to.

Leonidis Stefanos—in the flesh.

"We finally meet, Miss Hope."

Her first impression of him was his energy. Powerful. Confident. Commanding. The second thing she noticed was his size. He was a huge man, six feet three inches, towering over her, making her five feet six inches seem insignificant and small. Sam stared at his black silk shirt and slowly raised her gaze past the strong, tanned column of his throat up to his face.

Her breath caught.

His picture hadn't done him justice. In person, Leo's pure, male energy enveloped her as she stared into a face that looked more ruthless than handsome. Dark hair curled a little past his collar and was sexily rumpled, as though he'd been running his fingers through it. His nose, straight and long, flared slightly and his mouth, curled into a sardonic smile, held a hint of sensuality and cruelty, suggesting pleasure as much as it did pain.

Sam released the small breath she was holding. Slowly, almost fearfully, she looked up at his eyes and nearly drew back at the full impact of his dark, unwavering gaze. From the photograph in Toni's apartment, Sam had thought his eyes were black, but now, up close and in person, she noticed they were the darkest of blues, midnight blue, and all she could see in them was contempt.

"I've waited a long time to finally meet the woman who called me a heartless boor and suggested I get my head out of—what were the exact words—ah, yes, the medieval clouds I was pompously floating in," he drawled, deliberately sliding an insolent gaze down the length of her and back up to her startled face. "I must say, I've thought of our conversation often the past two months and since my sister emailed me wedding pictures and I saw you, one thing hasn't ceased to amaze me. How a woman as innocent-looking as you could have the tongue of a sailor."

A bucket of cold water over her head couldn't have been more effective in bringing her to her senses. She snapped out of her reverie and flashed him a haughty look.

"I didn't travel twelve hours to be insulted, Mr. Stefanos."

He raised a dubious brow. "If it was kindness you were hoping for, perhaps you should have thought about that before you insulted me and my family two months ago."

Sam tensed, recalling their telephone conversation. "You were being unreasonable trying to call off Toni's wedding," she replied hotly.

Another trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face and she brushed it away, wondering ridiculously if he had a built-in cooler in his clothes. He stood tall, proud, and completely dry as though the heat dare not affect him. And to top it all off, he was dressed in black trousers and a black shirt—a deadly combination in this weather for any other person.

He flicked a derisive scrutiny over her. "Americans have no tolerance for our weather. Come," he ordered suddenly. "The car is air-conditioned. You look like you're ready to drop and I notice you've gotten thin. Food will make you feel better."

"You don't need to concern yourself over me, Mr. Stefanos." Sam saw him bend toward her luggage. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Leo lifted a mocking brow as he straightened with a bag in each hand. "You don't have much of a choice."

She tore her gaze away from his and searched the crowds for a woman who fit Toni's description of Maria. "My lift is running late."

"That is an understatement," he said dryly.

"What do you mean?"

His expression darkened with impatience. "Your lift is not showing up. I am your lift," he replied with an arrogant curl to his lips. "Maria notifies me whenever someone will be staying at the house and as I have some work in this part of the country, I decided to pick you up myself and stay at the house until I've concluded my business—which should, incidentally, take about two weeks."

Sam's stomach lurched. There was no way she was going to spend two weeks with him. "No... I mean... I don't want...to impose, Mr. Stefanos."

"Leo, please," he supplied in a cool, measured tone as he smiled briefly, showing a perfect set of white teeth, a startling contrast to his tanned face. A smile, Sam noticed, that did not reach his eyes. A shiver ran down her spine in spite of the scorching weather.

"Mr. Stef... Leo," she began, flustered and nervous. Damn it! She had to get herself under control. "Perhaps it would be best if I remained here and took the next available flight back. I... Toni said no one would be... I don't want to impose myself on you," she repeated, watching his expression harden as she spoke.

"Ah, but you've already imposed yourself on me, haven't you, Miss Hope?" he commented softly. "When my sister married your American John, you indirectly broke the agreement between my family and the Giannakis."

Was he bringing up the arranged marriage again? Sam couldn't believe it. What era did this man live in? A rise of indignation welled in her throat and she bristled under his haughty glare. "I can't believe you live in this day and age and still believe in arranged marriages. Toni didn't love Christos Giannakis, or did you already know that and just didn't care?"

"Love would have come in time," he said, his deep voice laced with a dangerous undercurrent. "My sister could have been very happy with Christos."

"Your sister is happy with John, or have you forgotten she's already married?" Sam was appalled at his insensitivity. Was this man serious? She had never met anyone who was in such dire need of an aura cleansing.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "No, I haven't. As for her being happy, time will tell, won't it?"

Sam scanned the busy airport. She wanted to look at anything other than this man. Her frustration was mounting, her ire rising, and suddenly she was peeved with Toni as well. Toni had forced Sam into this vacation. She'd thrown Sam straight into the path of Leo, the last man she wanted to meet.

The airport was bustling with activity, but that was nothing compared to the activity ready to burst from within her.

"We seem to be repeating our telephone conversation all over again," she said, annoyed.

"Evidently," he replied dryly. "The only difference is this time you won't be able to hang up on me."

"You were rude and I had Toni's welfare to think about. How could a brother bind his sister to a loveless marriage? It's no wonder she ran away to the States last year. At least there she has freedom of choice. Here, you're still stuck in the Middle Ages when women were sold off like cattle and—"

"Enough," he snapped, his face glinting with anger. "We will not discuss this here. Come. We must go now."

Come. Go. Stop. Who did this man think he was? Tarzan? Sam almost laughed at the ridiculous state of her situation. Almost, but not quite. She wondered what wrong she had done in a past life to deserve this form of karmic retribution. For as long as she remembered, she'd always tried to be a good person. She'd always tried to help people. Even when people had been mean to her—back in her days in grade school—she had still taken the path filled with Light and forgiven them. Bless and release, she'd always said.

So why was she standing in the middle of an airport arguing with a man who disliked her for no apparent reason? "I told you before," she said hotly, "I'm not going anywhere with you. It's obvious I'm not welcome. I'm an American, Mr. Stefanos, and Americans have the choice to marry whom they please. We also choose our friends and acquaintances. And I," she added decisively, "choose not to be with you. Now let go of my bags so I can go back home."

Home. She couldn't believe she'd passed up on the chance to spend more time with the kids at Grangers to be here. But she hadn't had much choice, had she? Toni had definitely called in the right troops. Moreso because the kids worried over Sam. She had fainted in front of them at the orphanage last month after a week of too much work and not enough food. Sam would never forget the distress on their faces when she had come to.

Sam's whirling thoughts went to Elizabeth's sweet face. What if her nightmares returned? What if she cried herself to sleep? An overwhelming sense of love and sympathy for the little girl filled her with desperation and her eyes welled with hot tears.

Embarrassed, she turned her face away from the man who was the source of all her aggravation.

Her breath caught as she felt his fingers on her chin. He was surprisingly gentle as he turned her face toward his. She stared up at him, noticing the firm set of his jaw, the slight narrowing of his eyes and the tense set of his mouth as he watched a solitary tear slip down her cheek. Then their gazes meshed and locked.

"Tears, Samantha? Some men may weaken by the sight of them, but I do not. Please do not waste your feminine wiles on me. I am immune to the games women like you play."

She jerked her face away from his disturbing touch and brushed a furious hand over her cheek. "Good for you. I didn't know we were playing. Now if you don't mind, I'll just take my bags and be on my way," she added, her voice breaking.

"All flights are booked going back for the next two weeks, but rest assured you'll be safe with me. Granted, you are attractive. You are not, however, my type."

Her face burned with humiliation, but she held her chin firm. She had dealt with enough insults growing up and she had learned to harden herself against them. "And what part of 'I'm not going anywhere with you' didn't you understand? I'll camp out in this airport for the next two weeks if I have to."

"Yes, you can, but that would be ridiculous. Even though a few interesting adjectives come to mind for you, ridiculous is not one of them." He shot an impatient glance down at his wristwatch. "Come. We've wasted enough time. I have other business to take care of and I do not want to spend anymore time arguing with you."

"Since you find my company so bothersome, don't you think it would be wiser if I didn't come with you?"

He cursed under his breath and dropped her bags to the floor. Satisfied, Sam watched him run his hand through his dark hair.

"You are even more infuriating in person than you are on the phone."

She made a move for her bags. "Don't let me stop you from leaving."

"Leave them," he ordered abruptly. "You're coming with me."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, my little witch, you are."

Sam gasped her outrage. Forget the aura cleansing, she thought. This man needed a complete spiritual overhaul! "No wonder Toni ran away from her family. And if the rest of the Stefanos are anything like you," she added distastefully, "it's a wonder she lasted as long as she did." Determinedly, Sam bent toward her luggage and reached for the handles. Leo swore roughly under his breath and reached for the bags at the same time. Their faces collided and her cheek grazed the corner of his mouth. Sam jumped back in shock. A strange headiness overcame her and she pursed her lips as she tried to maintain her composure.

"I said leave them," he said brusquely as he straightened with a bag in each hand, his nostrils flared, his expression grim and dark. Sam opened her mouth to voice her indignation and he added an abrupt, "Don't be a fool, woman. You're creating a scene."

She looked around her and saw a group of three young men who were glancing curiously from her to Leo. She stared at the man wearing a baseball cap with a Yankees logo on it. He inched his way slowly toward them and she could see fear surfacing in his eyes as he darted a nervous look at Leo.

"Is this man bothering you, Miss?"

Sam forced her attention back to Leo and tensed. She immediately sensed a dangerous current emanating from him. He stood eerily still, his face a mask except for a telltale vein pulsing at the side of his throat. He was regarding her silently, almost tauntingly. Sam shivered. Of course the young man was nervous. Leo's energy was almost predatory, contained by a whisper of a thread, ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

She looked at the young tourist. "N...no. He's not." He's only irritating the hell out of me, she thought. Irritating *and* aggravating me.

"We could call the cops," the young tourist persisted, his tone braver as he glanced to something behind her.

Sam turned around and saw an airport policeman making his way toward them, one hand hovering by his gun while the other brought his two-way radio to his mouth. Sam panicked, realizing things were definitely getting out of hand. It was one thing to wipe Leo's arrogant look from his face and another altogether to have him arrested.

Bless and release, Sam chanted silently. Leo was a domineering, stubborn fool, not a criminal. "No, please. Everything is fine," she told the young man.

"You heard the lady. She said everything is fine," Leo commented softly, calmly.

Sam tensed. She heard the menacing edge in his voice and shot him a nervous glance. He met her gaze briefly, but the meaning behind his eyes was clear: Don't be a fool. Her anger flared up again at his audacity. What was wrong with him? Was he itching to get arrested? She clamped down on her jaw and turned away, muttering, "We'd better get going."

Before she turned her back on Leo, Sam caught a light of satisfaction on his face and she clenched her jaw as she walked stiffly toward the exit. She passed a small crowd of curious onlookers and an older woman whispered something in Greek to the man beside her. Sam didn't speak Greek, and it was just as well because she would have died of embarrassment if the older woman had said "A lover's quarrel."

Ten minutes later, her bags were tucked in the trunk of a black Volvo and she strapped on her seatbelt. Moments later, she watched him weave effortlessly through the small winding roads of the airport to take her—where?

Sam didn't want to think about what was in store for her the next two weeks. She only hoped his business would keep him away from the house for the most part, and with any luck at all, their paths wouldn't have to cross.

Leo was silent as he drove and Sam didn't need to have it spelled out for her that he wasn't up for any conversation. She leaned her head back against the burgundy leather headrest and turned her face away from his rigid profile. She stared at the countryside rolling by her window—the olive groves, the tourists on *pedalos*, the busy *tavernas*—as the soothing purr of the Volvo's engine calmed her.

Sam closed her eyes and a weariness so profound overcame her, she fell deeply and soundly asleep, oblivious to everything around her.

* * * *

For the first time in years, Sam was at total peace. The comfort and security flowing through her veins, calming her, prompted a sigh from her lips and she nestled her head deeper into her pillow. Mmm, so relaxing, Sam thought, and she released another tiny sigh as she drifted in between the states of dreaming and awake.

She heard a deep voice say something tenderly, but she couldn't make out the words. They were foreign. Greek. She did, however, like the sound of it. It sounded warm, soothing.

Suddenly, her bed swerved and a piercing honk penetrated her tired mind. The voice said something again, but this time it didn't sound soothing—it sounded hard.

Her eyes flew open and she stared at the ultra-modern dashboard.

It took her a few seconds to gather her bearings and she glanced down at her hand lying on a black-trousered thigh. In a mortified flash, her confusion fled and she lifted her head from Leo's shoulder, struggling to compose herself.

Straightening in her seat, she shot Leo a quick, sideways glance and their gazes met briefly. Her face burned as she caught the light of amusement on his face and something else—something she couldn't define. Had it been warmth? Sam wasn't certain. She gave him another quick look and noted his cold and distant profile, making her wonder if she had seen any warmth at all.

Chapter 2

“I must have been more tired than I thought.”

“Yes,” he offered casually.

Sam glanced at Leo and he met her gaze briefly. She felt the full impact of his indifference and she diverted her attention to the road, thinking the warmth she’d seen earlier had been misplaced.

Right from the start, two months ago on the phone, Leo made his feelings for her perfectly clear. He disliked her and there was no reason to think his feelings had changed. Her Tarot cards were in one of her bags in the trunk of the car and she decided to have another go with them once she settled in the villa. Frustration welled in her breast. It should have been so easy to read her cards and discover why he thought the worst of her and John, but try as she might—and she had made a few attempts the past few weeks—she couldn’t make anything out. The man was a total mystery.

And that’s what irked Sam most about Leo. Men had always been an open book to her and Leo was the one man immune to her gift.

What made him different? All she wanted to know were two things—why he disliked her and how she could change it. If he liked her and they became friends, wouldn’t it help his family accept John?

Her thoughts shifted to Toni and John’s marriage and she thought about her own love life. It had taken Sam years to reconcile with the fact love wasn’t for her. How could it be when she didn’t trust men because all they did was let her down? When all her expectations had led to the same results? Hurt, disappointment, regret. And if love wasn’t for her, then sex certainly wasn’t. Her mind sped back to her college days when she had been so close to consummating her relationship with her first love and she silently thanked the stars above for her gift. If it hadn’t been for her abilities, she would have remembered her first time with a two-timing jerk.

The irony wasn’t lost on her that Leo thought she was a conniving, unscrupulous woman. What had he said? That she should spare him her feminine wiles and use them on someone else? She would have laughed if she wasn’t so depressed. Leo had been berating a twenty-five year old virgin.

At least she was able to discover one thing about him, she thought. He wasn’t cruel. Hadn’t he ignored the fact she’d slept on his shoulder? He could have mocked her, but he hadn’t. His deep voice broke into her thoughts.

“Look over to your right. Past the hill.”

She peered through her window. They were winding down a small private road and Sam watched the hill slip away to reveal what was, in her mind, the most beautiful house she'd ever seen. It was more like a castle with a wide, wrap-around veranda and olive groves surrounding the grounds giving it a secluded, private air.

The two-story villa was made up entirely of white stone with a square tower in each corner. Arched windows and huge balconies decorated the front, with floral vines and multi-coloured flowers in gold pots peppering the entrance. Sam glanced at the spacious green surrounding it and spotted a white gazebo draped in roses. It was lovely.

She drew in a deep breath of appreciation and looked at him. "It's beautiful," she said, smiling.

Quickly, he gave her a swift sideways glance and Sam saw something flicker in his eyes as he stared briefly at her mouth. And just as quickly, he lowered his lids, masking his emotions, and turned his attention back to the road.

This was a first, she thought uneasily. She hadn't had a lot of experience with men, but she was perceptive enough to know when a man found her mouth interesting. It left her feeling curiously pleased.

Her stomach fluttered. This was no good, she thought. She didn't even like him.

Her thoughts veered to her future and the kind of man she saw herself with. Someone handsome and kind. A man of integrity, honour, passion. A man who would make her feel safe and secure in his arms. A man she could trust.

Sam shrugged mentally and looked at the scenery around her. She was happy alone. She had her shop, helped people with her readings, and had her children at Grangers. And now she had Toni. Her first true friend.

Yet, Sam wasn't blind to the challenges she had in her life. She may have had all she needed, but she knew could be a little less opinionated, a daunting feat because her ability to read the future was always dead on.

"Stop playing with those cards," her mother used to say. "Sam, don't you have anything better to do? Why don't you go outside? It's a beautiful day."

"No. I want to see who's going to ask me to the prom."

Her mother's face had darkened with concern. "Sam, you can't read the cards for every little thing. You need to learn how to live."

But Sam had lived. Very nicely with her shop, her customers, and all the kids at Grangers. Sam was content with the choices she had made and they were all due to her cards. Yes, her Tarot had served her very well indeed.

She glanced briefly at the silent Leo and her mind veered to more disturbing grounds as she found herself wondering what kind of woman he dated. Curiosity made her steal another look at his detached, unsmiling profile. What kind of woman was his type? Probably someone in the supermodel variety...or a movie starlet. Sam grimaced and willed her thoughts to take another turn,

but they didn't. She wondered about Katina Spanakis, the woman he was supposedly announcing his engagement to soon, and pictured a dark, sexy, voluptuous Mediterranean heiress with limpid eyes and pouty lips.

He touched her arm and she jumped in surprise. "What... Sorry, what were you saying?" she asked, her face flaming with embarrassment.

He shot her a curious frown. "I was asking you if you ride. You can't see it from here, but we have a stable at the back of the house."

"Oh, sorry. I was a million miles away."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Ride."

"When I was younger, back home at my parents' ranch, but it's been so long, I don't know if I remember how anymore."

"It will come back to you."

They fell into another silence. Sam wanted to disappear, wondering what he must think of her. Women didn't jump when men touched them. Sam didn't know whether she was coming or going from the moment she met him and she was beginning to resent her lack of control.

Leo veered the Volvo onto the circular drive in front of the villa and parked at the entrance. Without saying a word, he got out of the car and walked toward the rear. Sam felt a curious sense of disappointment he hadn't bothered to open her door. Quickly, she unbuckled her seatbelt and was reaching for her purse lying on the floor next to her feet when she heard her door open. She looked up and saw Leo extending his hand to her.

Silently, she cursed the warm flush on her cheeks. Taking his hand, a strange awareness where their skin met quickened her heart. His touch was firm, gentle and oddly thrilling. "Th... thank-you," she offered politely, drawing herself up beside him.

"Leonidis! *Yassou!*"

Sam turned and watched a plump, older woman dressed in a floral dress and white apron bustle toward them. She had a huge, beaming smile on her face and her hands were flailing in the air. "Leonidis, *kalos eerthes.*"

"Maria, *apo etho eene* Samantha Hope," Leo began smoothly once the woman reached their side. "Samantha, this is Maria Vasilakis."

Sam smiled shyly at her at the older woman and Maria rushed forth to take Sam's hands.

"Maria, this is Toni's guest," Leo added in English.

Sam's smile froze. She wasn't sure, but had he just intentionally tried to hurt her by reminding her she wasn't welcome? That she was here as Toni's guest and not his?

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Maria" she offered in English. And then she recalled the Greek phrase Toni had made her practice and prayed she didn't make a mess of it. "I'm so excited to be here," she said in her broken Greek. "Toni has told me so many wonderful stories about her youth here in the summers."

Maria's smile disappeared. Sam tensed and glanced up with concern at Leo. There was a curious mixture of amusement and admiration on his face.

"Although I applaud anyone attempting to converse in a language not their own," he said dryly, "you told Maria you look forward to your eternity here, and Toni told you to feel free and sprout anything you need."

Sam's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh." She cast an embarrassed smile at the older woman. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid my Greek needs more work."

Maria's kind smile returned. "You try and that counts, no?"

Sam lifted her brows in surprise. "Oh. You speak English."

Maria shrugged, her dark eyes sparkling with pleasure. "Not very good, *koritsimou*. But I am like you. I try."

"Yes," Sam said, returning her smile, feeling an immediate ease with the woman.

"But one favour, *separakalo*," Maria continued. "We will speak only English. I want to practice for my trip to America when I visit my sister next month. She move there when she was a young girl and she likes to speak English now. I am afraid her Greek is not very good anymore."

Sam laughed softly. "All right."

"Very good." The older woman beamed.

Sam's spirits lifted. She felt welcome for the first time since she set foot on Greek soil. The older woman's aura was warm and friendly, filled with pink and yellow hues. "Toni's told me many wonderful stories of her childhood with you. She sends you her love."

Maria pulled Sam toward the house. "Toni was a good girl. In Greek we say, *kalo koritsi*. She still is," Maria added with a touch of graveness. "I am very pleased she found happiness."

Sam could sense Leo's displeasure behind her. Sam hid her surprise. It seemed the housekeeper was not as opposed to Toni's sudden marriage to John and Maria had no qualms voicing her opinion.

Maria paused at the entrance and turned to Sam. "And I am very pleased you are staying here, too."

"You're very kind, Maria. Thank you for making me feel welcome."

Sam heard the sound of the trunk slamming shut and involuntarily directed her attention to Leo. She narrowed her eyes against the glare of the bright sun and watched Leo's stride, his long, muscular legs devouring the ground between them. Sam's stomach lurched.

How was she going to spend two weeks with this man? He riled her, infuriated her, and interested her all in one breath. She reluctantly acknowledged her mounting curiosity in him and she thought about the Tarot in her luggage, praying the cards would finally give her some insight on him.

Sam always had some control over her destiny because her Tarot always revealed it to her. She avoided the pitfalls and embraced the positive. Her cards had always paved the way for her and for the first time she was uncertain of her future. She had no way of knowing what was in store for her and that disturbed her.

Leo's confident strides were closing the gap between them and he shot her a compelling look. She turned abruptly to Maria.

The older woman smiled. "And you, my girl? Such a beautiful woman as you has a husband, no?"

"No. I'm not married," she said, flattered Maria thought she was beautiful. A disturbing little voice in her head wondered if Leo thought she was beautiful, too.

Maria made a face. "No? A boyfriend?"

Sam could only shake her head. She felt uncomfortable. More dauntingly, she worried Leo could tell what she was thinking.

Maria made a surprised sound. "That cannot be." As the older woman's attention went from Sam to Leo and back to Sam again, a slow smile slowly formed on her lips. "Maybe you will find love soon, no?"

Sam couldn't speak. Maria's meaning had been blaringly clear; surely Leo must have understood it. She cast him a quick, sideways glance and noted his stern profile, his solid, towering stance, his tense mouth. Damn it! She couldn't sense anything! She couldn't even see his aura. The man lived behind an impenetrable wall.

Leo cleared his throat abruptly. "I think we should take our guest inside instead of keeping her out here under the hot sun."

"*Malista, Leonidis. Ehis thikos*" Maria agreed, her gaze skimming over Sam's fair skin. "You will burn, my dear. You are very pale. Pretty, but pale, yes?"

Sam was drawn to Maria's friendly disposition and she wondered how a woman as gracious and sociable as Maria could work for someone as cold and distant as Leo.

She followed them into the house and almost immediately, Maria left them to finish her work. Sam's unease returned. Trying to ignore the man standing silently at her side, she stepped into the front hall and looked around with deep appreciation. Slowly, her misgivings fled as the pure magnificence of the villa overwhelmed her.

The hall's high ceiling was topped by a massive chandelier, two huge brass doors stood on each side of the entrance, and a long spiral stairwell of dark wood wound its way up to a landing that had a corridor on each side, no doubt leading to more rooms.

"My great grandfather built this house. It's been in my family for generations."

"My goodness," she said, turning to him. "Toni never mentioned her summer home was spectacular."

Leo narrowed his eyes. "Surely you must have known the extent of Toni's legacy. You have been her closest friend the past year and yet you expect me to believe all this is a surprise?"

Her shackles rose. "Yes, that's exactly what I expect you to believe. And frankly, I'm beginning to resent your implication that John and I are in cahoots to squander your sister's money." She watched him raise a haughty brow. When she spoke next, her voice was taut with strain and frustration. "I knew Toni was well off, but I never knew to what extent. Not that I ever cared to know. Contrary to what you may think, Mr. Stef—Leo, I'm not interested in your sister's bank balance. It's her friendship I value."

"And her husband?" he asked softly, but Sam could see the glint of anger in his eyes. "Where do his interests lie?" His gaze roamed slowly and deliberately over her body, making her skin tingle where his look trailed.

"What are you implying, Leo?"

"He is an ex-lover, perhaps?"

Sam's composure snapped in two and without thinking, she raised her hand and swung it toward his face. With lightning reflexes, Leo caught her wrist in a grip that almost made her cry out.

"Let me go," she choked out.

"Perhaps there is truth to what I said?"

She jerked her hand from his grasp and took an unsteady step back, her heart pounding in her throat as adrenaline pumped through her veins. She could handle his insults directed at her, but she wouldn't have him attacking John's dignity. For one horrifying moment she felt the back of her eyes prick with tears and she swallowed hard. She wasn't going to break down in front of him. Sam hadn't cried in years and she wasn't going to start now.

She drew her shoulders up and met his dark glare with an icy one of her own. "I will not stand here and listen to you insult my brother. Unlike you, John is a man of deep integrity and unsurpassed kindness. You, on the other hand, are a rude, offensive man and...and I can't believe you and Toni share the same genes."

Her words stilled him as a strange quiet fell over him. He stared at her with an odd expression. "Your brother?"

"My foster brother. My family took him in when he was eight years old." Sam paused, her anger momentarily spent. Confusion drew her delicately winged brows together. "You didn't know?"

"No."

She pursed her lips. "Well, it's no wonder Toni didn't tell you, is it? You never gave her the chance to tell you anything about us, did you?"

His expression hardened. "I know that you profess to be psychic and you own a store that sells magic spells," he replied cynically.

He'd mentioned the word psychic like it was a dirty word. Her ire returned. "My customers are aware the magic spells are for amusement only. As for me professing to be psychic, that couldn't be farther from the truth. I give people hope. I help them with their challenges and show them how to embrace the Light. My readings give them direction and guidance."

His lips curled sardonically. "Do you honestly expect me to believe you have the ability to foresee the future?"

"Believe what you want. I don't have to explain myself to you. I know a sceptic when I see one—and the only remedy for people like you is a reading."

Leo's brows shot up. "You want to give me a reading?"

Sam gritted her teeth. "I don't need to give you a reading to tell you how judgmental and narrow-minded you are. I don't need to look at my cards to see you're in danger of severing all ties with your sister if you don't allow her to live her own life."

"Enough. You're in no position to tell me how I should deal with my family. You don't have the facts."

"Perhaps I should give you a reading then, to get all the facts."

He seemed both annoyed and amused. "I don't think so," he replied dryly.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing." Clenching his jaw, Leo picked up Sam's luggage. "Your room is this way. Follow me."

Sam stared at his back, contemplating taking the front door and never looking back, but she couldn't do that, could she? Sam's passport and return ticket were in one of the bags Leo carried.

What about a motel? Sam wanted to hit herself on the forehead. Of course! She could book a motel. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

Her heart raced with hope. With her first opportunity, she would make a few calls and find a motel. Sam took a deep breath and followed him up the stairs, down a long corridor to a door. Leo placed the luggage down.

"This is where you'll be staying. I hope you find it satisfactory." He opened the door.

Sam went past him, making certain she didn't brush his chest with her shoulder, and stepped into the room. There was something intimate about Leo showing her where she was going to sleep and she felt the same familiar flutters she'd been experiencing from the moment she met him at the airport.

Her uneasiness, however, fled as she glanced around. The room was exquisite.

On the left stood a mahogany vanity set with a gold-trimmed mirror and a crystal vase brimming with yellow tulips. The balcony doors were ajar, trailing their white silk curtains on the thick burgundy carpet. And in the center stood a four poster bed, raised on a six inch platform, its cream satin bedspread gleaming under the shaft of sunlight streaming in from the outside.

She turned to him with wonder in her eyes. "Are you sure this is my room? It's lovely."

"All the rooms look like this," Leo drawled.

Sam almost flinched at his rebuff. Humiliation scorched her face as she watched him enter the room and deposit her luggage on the floor by the bed. As he bent, her gaze, having a mind of its own, went to his muscular shoulders, taut and sinewy through his black silk shirt. She looked away, annoyed with herself.

"There are some things I need to discuss with you, Sam," he began brusquely, his tone prompting her to look at him. "I'll give you time to freshen up and I would like to see you in my office. Maria will come and collect you in thirty minutes."

Sam nodded. With a curt bow, he strode from the room. Just like that, she thought resentfully. No offer to let her rest first. No concern for the fact she hadn't eaten a decent meal. Only a curt command to see him in his office.

At least he had given her thirty minutes to make herself more presentable, she thought wryly. She went to the floor length mirror by the dresser and grimaced when she caught her reflection. Her hair was a mess, tumbling down her shoulders in a mass of unruly waves, her dress was wrinkled, and her face was hauntingly pale with a pair of green eyes staring back at her, a hint of lavender beneath them suggesting her fatigue.

All in all, she looked and felt terrible. Booking a motel for two weeks would definitely cause a gap in her finances, but that was a price she was willing to pay. Spending two weeks under one roof with Leo was out of the question.

A half hour later, she stood in front of the big, brass door that led into Leo's office. Sam's stomach was unsettled. Granted, she looked better after her shower and fresh change of clothes, but inwardly she was a mess. Not only was the prospect of a discussion with him daunting, the jet lag she suffered made her head throb and her hunger pains had grown with persisting force, making her weak-kneed and desperate. She hoped whatever unpleasantness was in store for her would be over quickly so she could return to the privacy of her room. After a short nap, she'd go into the nearest town, grab a bite, and find a motel.

Sam smoothed her hands over her white Capri denims and tugged the hem of her yellow wrap-around top. The sooner she went in, the sooner she'd come out, she reasoned, and tapped lightly on the door.

No response.

She tapped again, harder this time.

Again, no response. Sam frowned, overhearing a sound from within and gently opened the door with one hand, while her other hand went up to the clip that secured her riotous red mane in a precarious bun.

Leo's office was huge and it took her a few moments to find him. She found him seated behind a desk at the far right of the room, his head bent over a pile of papers in a blue folder. He seemed intent on what he was reading and for a moment she felt like she was intruding.

Delicately, she cleared her throat. "Mr. Stef—Leo, you wanted to see me?"

His head snapped up and he put the blue folder down. His gaze glided appreciatively over her appearance. "Come in and sit down," he said, his words sounding more like an order than a request.

Sam walked into the room and took the seat in front of his desk. Bracing herself, she clasped her hands on her lap and felt not unlike a schoolgirl in a principal's office. She watched a slow, sardonic smile form on his face as he regarded her silently. Damn him, she thought. He knew she was nervous and he was doing nothing to put her at ease.

Sam bristled. "What did you want to discuss?"

He leaned back in his seat, his hands palm down on his desk and he remained silent for a few more moments. Sam thought her nerves would snap when he finally spoke.

"It seems I am in a predicament, Sam. My sister, whom I have finally made peace with, has decided to let you stay here, much to my disapproval."

A foreboding feeling overcame her as she tried to comprehend where this was leading. "That's no surprise, Leo. I already told you I'm willing to leave."

"And I already told you that is not possible. This is the busiest time of year and even if you were able to take a flight back, I'm afraid I could not allow you to go."

Her blood chilled. "Excuse me?"

"Motels, I'm afraid, are also out of the question," he continued, ignoring her comment, "as everything is booked."

Sam's eyes widened. "I don't understand. I thought that's what you wanted. I thought you wanted me to leave."

"What I want," he said coldly, his expression hardening, "is for my family to make peace. Toni's marriage nearly tore us apart and now that we've all finally begun to talk with her, I do not want you returning home earlier than expected and running to her with lies about how inhospitable I was. Make no mistake, Sam," he added, his tone dropping dangerously, "I will not have you jeopardizing the family reunion I have scheduled next month."

Sam's stomach dropped. "Do you really think I would do that? I wouldn't dream of ruining Toni's hope of introducing John to her family."

"That is not a chance I'm willing to take. You might tell Toni how I threw you out and she would pull another tantrum and refuse to come next month. Our mother has gotten ill over this and my father cannot stop blaming himself for allowing the situation to have gotten as far as it has."

Sam shook her head vehemently. "I wouldn't—"

"Please, let us dispense with your pleas of righteousness, shall we? You shall remain here and profit from our glorious weather, beaches and food—provided you follow some ground rules."

Sam's patience snapped, and she rose abruptly. The sudden movement made the blood rush from her head and a dizzy spell overwhelmed her. Her hand shot out and grabbed the edge of the desk to steady herself. She felt her face pale and was too upset to analyze the sudden concern darkening his face, his body drawing forward sharply in his seat.

"I think this has gone long enough, Leo," she said tightly. "I'm not a villain and I resent your rude, condescending attitude with me." The air had gotten thick in the room and she drew in an unsteady breath to calm herself. "You've had this preconceived notion about me from the start and, for the life of me, I don't know what I've done to deserve it. The only thing I'm guilty of," she continued, her voice rising as she fought for control, "is bringing two people together. They love each other and they're happy—why is that a crime?"

"I must say, Sam, you play the innocent convincingly. You almost had me believing you for a moment. Almost, but not quite." His smile did not reach his eyes. "You may have pulled the wool over my sister's eyes, but I know exactly who and what you are."

Confusion and fatigue melted away her anger and fearing her legs would give way, Sam sunk into her seat. "You don't know the first thing about me."

Leo's brow rose and he drawled, "Oh, but I do, Sam. I do. I know all about you," he added, tapping the blue folder he'd been reading when she'd first walked into his office.

Before she could ask him to explain his peculiar comment, the phone on his desk rang and he answered it. Almost immediately, his expression softened as he spoke to the other person on the line in Greek.

"Malista... Ke ego... Tha se tho se ligo, Katina."

Sam felt an odd lurch in her stomach. His girlfriend, soon to be his fiancée, she thought. She looked down at her hands and willed her heart to stop hammering in her chest.

When he put down the phone, he didn't waste any time. His voice was hard and uncompromising and she lifted a weary gaze to him. "About those ground rules," he said.

"Yes," she replied, defeated and spent.

Leo was right, Sam conceded silently. Even if she did find a flight back, she couldn't go home now. Toni would undoubtedly find out her brother was at the house and she would form her own opinion, not unlike the one Leo had accused Sam of spreading. And—Sam realized with sinking trepidation—Toni would inevitably refuse to come next month.

Sam couldn't have that on her conscience, no matter how much she disliked the idea of being in this house with Leo for two weeks. It was imperative Toni and John visited the Stefanos clan next month so everyone could see what a wonderful man John was and how happy he made Toni. Sam gritted her teeth. She wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize that.

She held Leo's gaze, refusing to waver under his displeasure. For a moment, she thought she detected a strange flicker on his face, like a puzzlement of sorts, but it disappeared so quickly, Sam decided she must have imagined it.

"Breakfast is served at eight," he began brusquely, "lunch at noon, and dinner at six. If you are not present at those times, you will have to fend for yourself. Maria has enough to do without having to cater to your every whim." He paused, almost as though he expected Sam to voice an objection. She maintained her stony silence and he continued, unaware of the whirlwind

of emotions in her. “The library is at the door on the left in the hall. You may borrow any books you wish to read, but I want them returned where you found them. You may also visit the stable and ride one of the mares. The stallion, however, is off limits, Sam, as is the rest of the house.”

“Will that be all?”

“No. Don’t expect me to entertain you while you are here. There’s a beach down by the cove and the markets and shops in town are only a fifteen minute drive. I can lend you the Volvo parked in the garage if you prefer to drive.”

Sam kept a tight rein on her emotions. “If there’s one thing you can be certain of is that I will not be seeking out your company.”

“Good. Then we’re perfectly clear with each other, but be warned, Sam. Break any one of my rules and you’ll have me to answer to.”

“I don’t like being threatened.”

A haughty brow went up. “On the contrary, Sam. As long as you abide by my rules, I don’t see why you shouldn’t have an enjoyable stay here. The cove offers sailing and boat rides, you can rent *pedalos* to get around the island, and we have many *tavernas* that offer excellent food. As well, Corfu has many historical and archaeological sites you can visit. The Grave Monument of Menekratis is not far from here and it was constructed in the sixth century BC.”

“You leave me no choice but to stay.” Her voice sounded bitter and cold to her ears.

“Ah, but I do, Sam,” he said softly. “You could always find a way to leave.”

“I wouldn’t do that. Toni would wonder why I returned early and the truth would upset her. You’re right.” Sam stiffened, noting the gleam of satisfaction on his face. “She would probably cancel her trip here next month.”

“Very well, then. I think there’s nothing more to discuss.” Leo pushed back a black silk cuff. “Dinner’s in a couple of hours,” he commented, rising from his seat.

Sam took his cue and rose as well. She had to get out of here because if she spent another minute with him, she was afraid she was going to tell him exactly where he could put and what he could do with his rules and regulations.

“I’m not hungry,” she lied. The thought of eating with him left her cold. “I think I’ll turn in early, if you don’t mind.”

His gaze held hers for what seemed an eternity and for one moment, she thought he was going to argue with her. Instead, his lids came down, hooding the expression in his eyes and he said, “As you wish.”

Without another word, Sam turned on her heels. With her shoulders held high, she strode from his office.

It wasn’t until she was in her room when she remembered she had forgotten to ask him what he had meant when he’d said he knew exactly who and what she was.

Furthermore, she wondered, what had been in the blue folder he had tapped when he said that?

* * * *

Leo ran a rough hand through his hair as he stared at the door Samantha Hope had just taken. He didn't know what was worse, the incriminating contents of her file or how she made him feel like a ruthless bastard.

"Damn it," he swore under his breath.

On the one hand, he had evidence from a highly reputable investigative firm that Samantha Hope was underhanded, conniving and the last person he wanted his impressionable sister to be friends with. And on the other hand, those big, innocent, green eyes of hers, and the proud, honourable air she wore, made Leo feel like he was the big bad wolf.

His gut instinct was working overtime, and he punched a number on his phone.

"This is Jack Brandon. Leave me a message."

Leo swore again. He punched another number.

"Brandon PI," a melodic voice said. "How can I help you?"

"Is Jack in the office?" he practically barked out.

"I'm sorry. Jack Brandon is in Alaska and he won't be back for another two weeks."

Leo grimaced. "Does he have his cellphone with him? I'm trying to get a hold of him."

"Yes, he does," said the pleasant voice, "but the reception is very bad, so you'll need to leave him a message."

"Thank you," he said and hung up.

He dialled Jack's cellphone again and left a message. "It's Leo. Call me as soon as you get this message. Something's not right with the file you sent me on Samantha Hope."

Chapter 3

Sam stirred from her sleep. Even though the cool, satin sheets were luxurious on her skin, her stomach was unsettled. Sam slowly opened her eyes and reached for the travelling alarm clock she'd placed on the nightstand before her nap. She sat up groggily, squinted at the time and gasped.

Midnight! Disappointment flowed through her veins.

Flinging back the covers, she stood and a wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She was utterly and completely ravenous. Hunger gnawed at her stomach as resentment washed over her like a fierce tidal wave. If Leo had shown her a smidgeon of hospitality, she might have been able to have swallowed her pride and dined with him, but he hadn't and now she was starving.

Sam sniffed the air and stiffened. Wait a minute, she thought, smelling the tantalising aroma of food. Was that spices and herbs and chicken? Sam frowned. Or was delirium settling in?

She glanced around her room, the moon casting enough light, and saw the dinner tray on a small table beside an exquisite settee. Sam smiled as she walked over to it and lifted the lid to reveal a delectable meal of chicken, rice, and vegetables. She ate with relish, blessing Maria for having the compassion and kindness to think of her.

Sam ate carefully, conscious not to soil her new nightgown, a sheer, flowing delight she had purchased for the trip. When she was done, she went into her adjoining bathroom—a lavish room with ceramic floors and sunken bath tub—and washed her hands and brushed her teeth.

Her hunger pains sated, Sam felt good for the first time since she'd gotten off the plane. Toni was right, she thought. She should take better care of herself and the first thing on her list would be to stop skipping meals.

Sam looked at the dinner tray. The least she could do was wash the dishes. Maria's show of humanity was so touching Sam didn't want to give the older woman any extra work.

Sam stepped into her slippers and carried the tray down the long, carpeted corridor, making her way down the stairs. She recalled earlier when she had arrived Maria had gone through another corridor at the foot of the stairs, and Sam hoped that led to the kitchen.

It did.

The kitchen was as everything else in the house. Big and elaborate, with every mechanical convenience a homemaker could wish for. She placed the tray on the counter and was about to turn on the tap when she heard Maria's voice coming from an adjoining room. The older woman sounded alarmed and anxious. Sam's instincts flared to life. Without another thought, she followed the sound of Maria's voice.

As she got closer, the older woman's Greek sounded more and more alarmed. Sam opened a door and found Maria standing with a phone to her ear, her face taut and ashen.

"What is it?" Sam asked, gently taking her arm.

Maria turned a pair of stricken eyes on her and without questioning Sam's appearance, said, "*To kiritsi mou*—my...my daughter, Nitsa, is pregnant. Something is wrong. She is in pain. And she saw some blood."

Sam's concern intensified and she inhaled deeply to calm down. "How far into her pregnancy is she?"

"Eight months."

"Has the pain been regular?" Maria looked at her with stricken eyes and Sam took her gently by the shoulders. "Maria, please ask her," she repeated calmly, but her insides were deeply troubled.

The older woman asked Nitsa. She looked back at Sam. "Yes. About every fifteen minutes."

Sam pursed her lips. She recalled the headmistress at Grangers, pregnant at seven months with the same symptoms, had been rushed to the hospital. Spotting blood was a bad thing. "Is there anyone else with her? Can they take her to the hospital?"

Maria's eyes widened. "You don't mean—but she is eight—*Themou!* She is alone. Her husband is coming back from a fishing trip tomorrow." The older woman sobbed into her hand. "*Christomou*, I should have told her to call ambulance. I...I have caesarean with Nitsa and I don't know...I don't have..."

Sam could see the alarm mounting on the woman's face and she made up her mind. "Where is Leo's room, Maria?"

"At end of your hall, on the left."

"Can he get me to your daughter's house in ten minutes?"

Maria nodded quickly, her eyes gathering tears. "She is not far. *Pede*—Five minutes."

"Good," Sam replied firmly. "Tell your daughter we'll be right there and call an ambulance to meet us at her house. I'll go wake up Leo. Meet us outside in a few minutes."

Maria stared back in shock and nodded.

Sam took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right. My brother, John, is a doctor, and he's made me attend first aid and nursing classes. I don't know how to deliver a baby, but I can make sure your daughter feels comfortable until the paramedics get there."

"*Efharisto, koritsakimou*," Maria whispered.

Toni had given Sam a crash course in Greek before she had left and she smiled at the older woman when she remembered *efharisto* meant thank you.

Without another thought, Sam sped back to the front hall. At the foot of the stairs, she gathered her nightgown to her knees and sprinted up the stairs. She didn't have a moment to spare, she thought, as she raced down the corridor, her heart beating wildly in her chest. Without bothering to knock, she flung open Leo's door and squinted in the semi-darkness.

"Leo," she whispered urgently. "Leo!"

She spotted his bed on the far right of the room and ran to it. Sam stopped dead in her tracks and found herself standing above his sleeping form.

What a sight! Sam couldn't help herself as she ran her gaze over him. The white, silk sheets were draped just below his taut abdomen and she felt an alarming sense of awareness as she stared at the sparse, dark hair exposed past the edge of the sheet. His bare, muscular chest was tanned and chiselled as it rose and fell steadily. One sinewy arm was flung carelessly above his face, and she glanced in wonder at his mouth, softer and more vulnerable in sleep somehow. Sam had almost forgotten why she was there.

"Leo," she whispered hoarsely, her throat curiously dry. "Wake up!"

He didn't budge.

She had already wasted precious seconds staring at his male splendour and she wasn't about to waste another one. She thought about Nitsa and grabbed the edge of his sheet, flinging it off him.

"I said wake up!"

Sam froze.

Beneath the sheets he lay completely and utterly naked. Sam felt the blood drain from her face as she stared at his glorious manhood. She'd seen pictures and statues of the male body in her life, but up close and personal, the effect was a little more daunting, a little more thrilling. She tore her inquisitive gaze away from his masculine attributes and looked up at his face. His eyes were wide open. He seemed disoriented and when his dark, fathomless gaze fell on her, he drew himself up sharply from his bed and grabbed her wrist in a vise grip.

"What the devil do you think you're doing, woman?" he ground out, his voice hoarse and deeper in his semi-awake state.

Sam ignored the—oddly enough—thrilling pain his grip on her wrist was inflicting, her only thought to get to the poor woman who was by now overcome with panic and fear.

"Get dressed. I think Maria's daughter's in labour and we need to get there before it's too late." She noticed the glimmer of understanding fall over his dazed expression and pressed on, "She's all alone, Leo. She needs help. I think Nitsa's having her baby."

Realization must have dawned on him because she saw him clench his jaw, drop her wrist and spring out of bed. Cussing softly in Greek under his breath, he reached for his pale blue denims and shoved them on.

"Are you sure she's in labour?" he asked roughly, tossing her a dark look.

"No, but we shouldn't take any chances," she replied, keeping her eyes glued to his face.

A few feet lower and she would have been staring at his—Sam frowned. What was the matter with her? A woman was possibly going into early labour and she was—Sam turned away from him, disgusted with herself, and went to the door.

"Hurry. Maria is waiting for us downstairs. She's already called an ambulance."

Sam turned and watched him throw on a white shirt. He left it loose around his muscular frame as he grabbed a set of keys from his dresser. Her stomach flipped as she glanced at his taut abdomen and finely honed chest. He could have graced the covers of historical romance novels where the hero was an ancient Greek warrior. Sam swallowed hard. Her heart was beating erratically and it was getting harder for her to gain control of her faculties.

She heard him draw in a harsh breath and she shot him a questioning look.

Sam could tell he was shocked as he raked a dark look over her. He was seeing her undressed state for the first time and she watched his eyes narrow, his mouth tense as continued his thorough appraisal of her slender curves draped in silk. She caught the flame leaping behind his eyes as his gaze slipped to her small, firm breasts. She heard a barely discernible sound from his throat, a small, yet perceptible groan and their gazes clashed. Sam felt it in the air. It was faint. Tension. And it ran through the both of them. Nervously, she cleared her throat.

"There's no...no time for me to get my robe."

"Stay here. You've done the right thing waking me up. I'll take over from here," he replied hoarsely.

She clenched her stomach. Sam hadn't come in here to get him to jump to the rescue. She had come in here to get a ride to Nitsa's. She placed her hands on her hips. "Oh? And what will you do if Nitsa's water breaks while you're there and the ambulance hasn't arrived yet? Are you prepared to deliver a baby?" His face whitened. "I'm coming with you," she stated firmly. "I've received years of first aid and private nursing training. John's a doctor and he's always encouraged me to be capable in the event of emergencies. I do volunteer work with a lot of children at an orphanage and being qualified to treat sprains and cuts comes in handy." She turned away from his astounded expression. "Let's go. I've never delivered a baby before, but I'm all Nitsa has until the paramedics get there, and I sure as hell won't allow your ego to stop me from at least trying to help her."

Thirty minutes later, Nitsa was safely secured on a gurney by one paramedic while another one opened the back door of the ambulance. Nitsa's water hadn't broken, but after giving her a quick examination, the paramedics had explained that a baby coming into the world early was imminent.

Maria hugged Leo and Sam before she tumbled her ample body into the back of the ambulance. "Sam, you are an angel. *Efharisto, koritsakimou.*"

Sam felt the excitement of the miracle of life around her. She glanced up at Leo standing silently by her side and noted the quirk in his mouth, the softening of his eyes. It seemed even he was touched by the miracle of life.

A paramedic rolled Nitsa past them, but the young mother-to-be put out a hand and grabbed Sam's arm. "Thank you, Sam. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your help." Nitsa's eyes were bright with tears. "I was so afraid. I don't know what I would have done without you to calm me down. Please, will you come to the hospital after the baby is born? I would very much like you to be there."

“Of course.” Sam placed a soothing hand on the young woman’s face. “You and the baby are going to be fine. I’m so happy and so excited for you.” She smiled, blinking at the prickly sensation in her eyes. “You’re going to be a mommy.”

Nitsa nodded, too overcome with emotion to speak, and the paramedic slid her gurney into the ambulance.

As Sam and Leo watched the ambulance drive away, she released a shaky breath. “Wow. What a night,” she said breathlessly. “Can you imagine if Nitsa’s water had broken and we had to deliver a baby?”

Leo remained silent and she glanced up at him, wondering if he heard her. He had and he regarded her with a mixture of admiration and interest.

“You seemed to know what you were doing when you examined her.”

Sam shrugged self-consciously. “I had to make sure she wasn’t dilating.” She gave him a grateful look. “Thank you for getting me the hot water and clean towels. When you returned as I was finishing my examination I was shaking with fright.”

“Yes, but you didn’t show it, and that’s what counts,” he remarked quietly, deeply. “You never once betrayed your fear to Nitsa. She clung to your serene, calm countenance as though it was a life preserver. You were very brave, Sam.”

She laughed nervously. “Anyone else would have done the same. I did what anyone would do in this situation, keeping the woman calm and comfortable.”

“No. What you did was far beyond normal. You kept checking her pulse, taking her temperature. I must say, I was very impressed by how you handled the crisis.”

She could handle his arrogance and cruelty, but this gentler side of him made her feel out of sorts. “I wasn’t brave. I just told you I was petrified at the thought of having to deliver a baby.”

“Granted, but you were prepared to deliver a baby had the need arisen. And that, my dear, makes you very brave,” he added softly as he took her by the shoulders and gently pulled her toward him.

Sam held her breath and looked up into his eyes. Their gazes locked, hers surprised, his dark with admiration and something else she could only define as desire. Suddenly, the air was charged between them. He flicked an interested look at her mouth and she caught a light of awareness on his face. He was going to kiss her. The thought stunned her and made her catch her breath.

Leo dipped his head a fraction of an inch, making Sam quiver with anticipation. His head dropped another fraction of an inch, bringing his chiselled mouth closer to hers, and her lips parted involuntarily.

“You are a very beautiful woman, Sam. What other surprises do you have in store for me?” he said deeply.

“No. You can’t,” she whispered, his warm breath on her skin as he bent even lower and cupped her face with his big, strong hands.

"I can," he said softly, his deep voice intoxicating her, melting her. "I want to kiss you. And you want to kiss me."

Sam's legs gave way and she reached out and grabbed his shirt to steady herself. Everything around them stilled and then disappeared, making her feel as though they were the only two people left in the world. She was drowning in this man's dark and brooding sense of masculinity. Sam tried to grasp onto any last coherent thought she had as his head dipped further.

Katina Spanakis.

...and her mind raced.

This man was getting engaged soon. And even though Sam was finally able to admit she was attracted to his brand of sooty sensuality and dark passion, she wasn't going to be a short summer fling. She was going home in two weeks and she wanted to return to her life in one piece. Every bone in her body was telling her this was wrong.

Mustering any last shred of strength, Sam brought her hands up to his chest and pushed herself away from him. "No. You're mistaken, Leo. I don't want to kiss you. Now get off me!"

He frowned darkly, his eyes smouldering as he stared at her. He swallowed hard and looked like he was going to say something, but he clamped down on his jaw and remained silent. A telltale muscle twitched along his jaw and Sam could tell he was struggling with something she couldn't define. Was rejection alien to him? Had no other woman ever said no to his advances?

He cursed in Greek under his breath and reached out to take her back into his arms, but her words made him go still.

"I don't know what's worse, you wanting to kiss me while you have a girlfriend or you thinking I'm the kind of woman who goes for short summer flings."

She saw his Adam's Apple bob as he swallowed hard and she held her breath. Slowly, he dropped his hands to his sides, taking a staggering step back as his face darkened in surprise and something else.

"Very well. Let's go back to the house," he said grimly.

He didn't even seem in the slightest bit perturbed at the mention of his girlfriend and Sam wondered if he was accustomed to fooling around. Tall, dark, and handsome Mediterranean men's reputations preceded them and Sam didn't doubt he had a slew of women waiting in line to be with him. This man was probably a walking menace to women's senses everywhere.

And she had best keep her distance as far away as possible from his.

Sam didn't have any time in her life for messy affairs or fleeting romances. She didn't want them. And she wasn't going to have one with Leo, no matter how intrigued she was by him.

They made their way to his car in silence, his brooding, hers decisive, and she shivered slightly in the cool night air. She drew her arms around her for warmth. Without saying a word, Leo removed the white shirt from his shoulders and slipped it around her shoulders.

"No. I'm fine. You need—"

"You're practically naked, or have you forgotten your state of undress?" he said roughly.

She looked down at herself and cringed with embarrassment. He was right. The cool air had made her breasts peak and she wondered, mortified, how long she had been displaying herself. Quickly, she slipped her arms through the sleeves of his shirt and fastened a couple of buttons. The warmth of his shirt settled comfortably around her and Sam shivered again, this time from his scent of musk and woody soap surrounding her.

Leo opened her door and she slid into his car. She watched him walk around the front of the car, her gaze running over his bare, powerfully built torso and his form-fitting denims outlining his muscular legs. Leo was all man, she concluded, and wondered at the havoc he'd wreak if he stepped foot in the little town she lived in.

Eventually he would make a trip to Somerset, Sam reasoned, surely to visit Toni's new home with John. The more distant and uninvolved she kept their relationship here, the easier it would be for Sam back home. Uneasiness filled her at the thought of returning home and not seeing him again for a long time. Sam was going to probe the disturbing thought further, but stopped once the car dipped under his weight. His presence beside her made her all too aware of what had just transpired between them.

She didn't need to turn her head to know he was watching her. She could feel his dark gaze on her and she wrapped her arms protectively around her.

"Are you still cold?" he asked.

"No. I'm fine now. Thanks."

By the time they arrived at the villa, Sam had gotten herself so worked up with anxiety and nerves at their near kiss, she quickly unlocked her door and practically stumbled out of the car in her haste to go inside the house and sprint to the privacy of her room.

Leo raised a dark brow when he reached her door.

Sam tried to hide the nervous twitch from her mouth. "I... Goodness, I'm so tired."

He didn't respond as he led her into the house, but she caught the grim set of his jaw and the hardening of his expression. He turned on the chandelier and a soft glow of light filled the hall. Sam made her way to the stairs, but his hand shot out and he stopped her.

"Why are you acting like this?" he demanded.

"Like what?" she asked, braving a look at him. He sounded angry, but when she saw his face, she was half-frightened and half-excited to see desire still etched on his features.

"Why are you acting as though you think I am going to fling you over my shoulder and carry you off to my bed?"

Sam laughed, but it sounded strained and forced. "Don't be ridiculous. The thought never crossed my mind."

"Then why, as we speak, are you inching your way backward toward the stairs?"

"I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

"You're lying."

"Am not." Sam bristled. "Look, I'm suffering from jetlag," she said, startled to realize she had only met him this morning, "and I'm still reeling from what we just went through with Nitsa."

Leo's brow knotted into a dark slash and he ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I never thought you went for short, summer flings."

Sam waited for him to mention Katina, but he didn't. Was it one night stands he thought she went for, then? "Let's forget it. It was...it was an emotional moment and I was...I was half dressed," she said, reasoning their near kiss.

His mouth tensed and he visibly withdrew from her. "Very well. Goodnight, then," he said brusquely.

"Goodnight." Relieved, Sam turned to go upstairs, but his deep voice stopped her.

"Sam."

Slowly she turned and gave him a guarded look.

"Thank you for helping Nitsa. Maria's like family to me and I am grateful for your help this evening."

She was warmed by his admission, especially since she knew how hard it must have been for him to make it. "You're welcome, Leo," she replied softly.

His gaze flickered over her standing on the stairs in her sheer nightgown and his over-sized shirt, and he cleared his throat abruptly. "Goodnight, Sam."

"Goodnight, Leo," she whispered.

And he turned abruptly on his heels and disappeared into his office.

* * * *

Leo needed a stiff drink. He'd met and bedded a lot of women in his life, but he'd never encountered anyone like Samantha Hope. He couldn't deny his attraction to her, nor hers to him, and he sure as hell would get to the bottom of Jack's file on her.

He went to the bar and poured himself a healthy portion of *ouzo*. The way Sam made him feel, he needed the whole bottle.

Or at the very least, a very cold shower—which he would promptly take as soon as downed his drink.

Leo prided himself on always being in control of his emotions. Especially when it came to women. He didn't believe in wasting time or playing games. When he was physically interested in a woman, usually the woman reciprocated his feelings, and they engaged in a healthy bout of sex.

He was always open and honest with them, and never made them think there was anything more to the relationship than sex.

His mood darkened as he thought about the enticing woman upstairs. She had clearly rejected him, even though his instincts were telling him she felt otherwise.

However, she had saved him the trouble of eventually ending what would only be short lived affair, a satisfying one nonetheless.

Then why the hell was he in such a foul mood? He cursed in Greek under his breath.

Samantha Hope must have had a bit of a witch in her because he'd been bewitched since the first moment she'd spoken to him on the telephone over two months ago, and more so when he'd seen the wedding picture of her Toni had emailed him. And then, when he had met her at the airport, he had felt pole-axed not only by her striking beauty, but by her strength and determination.

He muttered another Greek cuss word and downed the rest of his drink. He needed to take that damn cold shower now.

Chapter 4

The next morning Sam slipped tan shorts and a blue t-shirt over her black bikini. After packing her brown tote bag with everything she needed for her day at the beach, she went downstairs.

Her goal today was to relax and forget about yesterday's events. She hardly slept a wink last night. Thoughts of Leo had kept her tossing and turning all night long. Sam couldn't forget what happened at Nitsa's house when Leo said he wanted to kiss her and her stomach fluttered like a hundred butterflies trying to escape.

Pursing her lips, she decided the only way she was going to find any peace was if she put him out of her mind completely. Sam was surprised to find Maria in the kitchen making breakfast.

"Good morning," Sam smiled at the older woman. "I thought you'd still be at the hospital."

Maria beamed at her. "Good morning, *koritsimou*. I came back very early this morning. The doctor told me to go because nothing is going to happen today. He say I should come back later. My daughter was sleeping when I left."

"I'm so happy she's okay."

"Me, too," Maria glanced at the kitchen clock and frowned.

"Don't worry, Maria. I'm sure your daughter's still sleeping soundly. When are you going back?"

"After breakfast, but I can only stay with her for a couple of hours. I have to come back here to prepare dinner."

"Can I help?"

Maria smiled. "You have already been a big help with Nitsa. My daughter was telling me how much she likes you. So, please sit down. For you, a big breakfast this morning." Maria gave Sam a searching look and slowly her expression changed to one of concern. "You did not sleep well, *koritsimou*?"

The mirror hadn't lied this morning when Sam had noticed the dark circles under her eyes. "No," she replied honestly. "I'm afraid not."

"The bed was not comfortable?" Maria wiped her hands on her apron and frowned. "Maybe you were cold? I will send you more blankets."

"No, no. The bed... The whole room, actually, was very comfortable." How could Sam tell Maria that thoughts of Leo had kept her up most of the night?

The older woman smiled approvingly. "Your room is one of the best guest rooms in the house. I am very pleased Leonidis gave it to you."

Confusion washed over Sam. Leo had told her all the rooms looked the same. Why did he go to the trouble of giving her the nicest one when he had made his dislike of her so apparent? Furthermore, if he disliked her so much, why did he want to kiss her? Inexplicably, Sam's spirits sunk, realizing the answers to both questions.

Leo must have given Sam the nicest room for Toni's benefit. He obviously wanted to ensure Sam had nothing but good things to say about his hospitality.

As for the kiss... Well, Sam mused objectively, Leo was a hot-blooded Mediterranean male and she *had been* half dressed. What reason could there be other than a purely physical male response to an attractive, skimpily dressed woman?

Sam grimaced and stomped on her thoughts. Why was she thinking about Leo again? She turned her attention to Maria. "I forgot to thank you for the dinner you left in my room last night. It was very kind of you, Maria. It was delicious."

The older woman frowned. "Dinner?"

Sam blinked. "Yes. The dinner tray you brought up to my room while I slept." A nagging fear settled in her stomach.

"Oh, it was not me, *koritsimou*. It must have been Leonidis who brought it up to you. When you did not come down to eat, he asked me to make you a plate and leave it in the stove."

"He did?" Sam asked in a small voice, her face tingling with a fresh blush at the thought of Leo standing over her while she slept. Yet, a part of her couldn't help feeling warmed at the thought of him making sure she ate. It seemed he had some heart after all, she thought, curiously pleased.

After she returned from the beach she was going to take another stab at the cards to see if she could pick up anything about Leo. It was important John was welcomed into this family and she knew getting to know Leo would help John's chances for a successful visit.

Maria smiled, nodding. "Of course he brought your dinner, *koritsimou*. Leonidis is a very good and kind man. Yes, on the outside he is cold and distant, but on the inside he is very warm, very nice. The best."

Sam licked her suddenly dry lips. "I...I must thank him." One thing was certain about him, Sam thought. He was a man full of surprises.

"As I must thank you again for last night, Sam. You were an angel sent from heaven."

Sam smiled and took the cup of coffee Maria offered her. "I was happy to help." Her eyes widened at the huge plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns Maria placed in front of her. "I can't possibly eat all of this. I was only going to have some toast this morning."

"Never mind the toast. You need to eat. And you must eat all of it."

Sam was touched by the woman's concern and smiled. "All right, but you can't keep spoiling me like this or I won't want to leave."

Leo strolled into the kitchen and Sam's stomach somersaulted. He actually seemed a little worse off than her this morning, as though he'd barely slept a wink, and she almost felt bad for him. She glanced over his white polo shirt, taupe trousers, and slightly damp hair. Leo gave Sam a

guarded look and she wondered if he had heard her comment about not wanting to leave. His dark, unfathomable gaze went to her heaping plate and Sam detected the brief flash of satisfaction on his face. Abruptly he turned his back and refilled his coffee mug.

Sam stared at his broad, muscular back and her mind returned to last night when she had seen a lot more of him after she'd flung his bed sheet away from him. Her breath caught as she blinked rapidly, trying to fend the memory away. It was no use. His male beauty was right there in front of her and she was never more intensely aware of a man before in her life.

Leo inquired politely after Nitsa's health and Maria happily obliged him with the good news.

"I was just telling Sam," Maria offered heartily, "how lucky we were to have her here last night."

"Indeed we were," Leo drawled, giving Sam another guarded look. She warily met his gaze and braced herself for the sardonic comment that was sure to follow, but none came. Instead, he returned his attention to Maria. "And you're certain you have time to cook dinner for my parents' visit tonight? Wouldn't you rather stay at the hospital with Nitsa?" he asked.

Sam stifled a moan. His parents? For dinner *tonight*? Her stomach dropped at the thought of meeting more of the Stefanos clan.

"It's no problem, Leonidis. I am going to fix something very special for your mother and father. I will come back for a couple of hours this afternoon to cook."

That's what Maria had worried about earlier, Sam realized. Maria's schedule was full with Nitsa and she was tight with time preparing for a dinner party. Sam chewed her lower lip and came up with the perfect solution. She was an excellent cook and knew her way around a kitchen. Surely Maria wouldn't object if Sam offered to cook dinner?

"Very well," Leo said deeply. "And you, Sam? How will you spend the day?"

She struggled to find her voice. "I'm going down to the beach."

"Enjoy your day," he said, giving her a slight, mocking bow and left the kitchen.

Sam released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding and almost sighed with relief. She may not have been able to read his cards or see his aura, but his energy was palpable and it stirred her senses at every turn.

"I think Leonidis is impressed with you."

Sam almost laughed at the thought. "Oh no, Maria. He doesn't even like me," she replied without thinking, and immediately bit her lip, giving the older woman a rueful look. "I'm sorry, Maria. I shouldn't have said that. I know how much you like and respect him. It's just that Leo and I...we...we don't get along."

"I noticed nothing of the kind," Maria sighed as she stared at the door Leo had taken. "Don't blame him, *koritsimou*, for his proud manner. He's changed so much since that terrible woman hurt him."

Sam frowned. "What woman?"

“Catherine Holts. He was engaged to her ten years ago. He was much younger then, softer, more...more—how do you call a man who is too sensitive and influenced?”

“Mmm...I suppose, impressionable.”

“He was more impressionable then. Not the strong, hard man you see today.”

“What happened?” She couldn’t picture Leo as a soft man. Nor impressionable, for that matter. All Sam saw was his arrogance and pride. Actually, after last night, Sam had seen a bit more than that. His compassion and kindness, she admitted reluctantly. Hadn’t he been concerned she hadn’t eaten and had taken her dinner tray up to her room?

“He was in love, or he thought he was,” Maria explained. “And he gave her everything.”

“Catherine.”

“Yes. He buy her jewellery, gold, diamonds, rubies. He pay off her debts. He even buy her clothes. The latest fashions from Paris and Italy. And one day, Leonidis catch her in one of her lies. I don’t know what happened exactly, but he found out she was sleeping with another man. A man as rich as Leonidis. In the end, Leonidis stop the engagement and the result is the man you see today. He became very hard and suspicious in the matters of the heart. He lose faith in love, *koritsimou*.”

Sam couldn’t help but feel compassion for him. “How awful for him.”

“Yes, but it worked out for the best. It was better he found out her true character before they got married. We heard Catherine married the other man and divorced him. And she took half of his money.”

“I don’t understand. How could she sleep with another man if she had L—” Sam coughed and sputtered. Mortified, she lifted her coffee cup to her mouth to hide her embarrassment. Her lack of sleep had given her a loose tongue, and she dared a look at Maria. The older woman was regarding her with approval.

“Catherine was a terrible woman, Sam. Yes, she was beautiful, but only on the outside. Leonidis was a young man, only twenty-four when he met her. She came to Greece for a short holiday and met Leonidis at a party. He was not the experienced man you see today. He simply lost his head with her beauty.”

“She was an American.”

“Yes, but do not compare yourself to her, *koritsimou*. You are a beautiful woman inside and out.”

“Oh, no. I’m not... I wasn’t—” Sam sputtered her incoherent thought. Had she been comparing herself to Catherine Holts? Did Leo dislike her so much because she was an American? “I was just wondering why he’s always so... Why he doesn’t...” she trailed off, unable to put reason behind her jumbled thoughts.

“You want to know why he seems harsh with you.” Maria smiled kindly. “Don’t confuse Leonidis’ fear of you with hate. He has closed himself from feeling anything for so long, he does not understand the emotions you are bringing up in him. You have a kind soul, *koritsimou*, and

you are much more beautiful than Catherine ever was, or even Katina. I suppose you heard the rumour he will be announcing his engagement to her soon? Well, now that you are here, I am not so sure about that.”

Mortified and embarrassed, Sam quickly interjected, “You’ve misunderstood the nature of mine and Leo’s relationship, Maria. He doesn’t even like me.”

“No, you are mistaken. I see the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching him. And every time you are near, I see the way he stiffens and hides behind his mask.”

Sam shook her head. “He’s only keeping an eye on me so I don’t run off with the family silver.”

Maria laughed. “There is fire between you two. I can sense it. It is good. And it has been a long time since I have seen anyone bring fire into Leonidis’ eyes. I am pleased Katina will soon see she has met her match in you. Hmph. I never liked her. She is too cold for someone with Leonidis’ passion.” Maria placed a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice next to Sam’s coffee and smiled. “You must eat now. We have plenty of time to talk later.”

How was Sam going to convince Maria that Leo and she had absolutely nothing going on between them? She saw the older woman stare at the clock again and that same worried frown appeared on her kindly face.

“Maria, go to the hospital and come back at dinner time. I’ll return from the beach at two o’clock to make dinner and set the table.”

Maria looked aghast. “Oh, no. You cannot do that. You are a guest.”

“I’m a friend. And friends help each other out. Besides, I love cooking and I promise to make something special Leo’s parents will enjoy,” she offered, smiling.

“No. You cannot. It would be too much to ask of you.”

“Maria, it will be my pleasure to help you. You’ve been so nice to me since I arrived and I want to repay some of your kindness. Please.”

Maria seemed a bit relieved, but still hesitated. “Are you sure? It would help me so much.”

“I’m positive.”

Maria’s hesitation seemed to melt away and she gave Sam a grateful look. “Thank you so much, *koritsimou*. That will help me a lot.”

* * * *

A few people were on the beach when Sam arrived. She strolled around, trying to find a good spot and settled for a quiet area, placing her colourfully patterned beach blanket on the white sand. It was only ten thirty and the sun hadn’t reached its peak yet, but she could tell it was going to be a very hot day. There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun was spreading its morning warmth.

She removed her shorts and t-shirt and folded them neatly before putting them in her tote bag. Sam grabbed her sunscreen and applied it liberally over her slim curves. Her bikini exposed quite a bit of skin and she wondered if buying it for this trip had been a smart move. A one piece might have been a better choice if she wanted to avoid getting burned. Sam wasn't like most redheads who freckled, but she did burn.

As she lathered the sun screen over her flat belly and semi-exposed breasts, she glanced at the other people on the beach. She noticed a few families, some couples, and a young boy of about sixteen not too far from her, wearing scruffy jeans and a worn t-shirt. He was sitting directly on the sand. He was bent over a dog-eared sketchpad, drawing what she could tell was the seascape because he kept looking up and squinting directly at the ocean's horizon.

Sam smiled. A future artist in the making. A part of her itched to see what he was sketching and she thought about the art class she had organized back home at Grangers. Unbidden, excitement surged through her veins and she couldn't wait to return home and work with the kids. Sam looked at her watch and tried to figure out the time difference in Somerset. It was late night at Grangers now and she felt her heart constrict for Elizabeth, wondering if someone tucked her in bed and read her a bedtime story. Sam's heart swelled with love for the little girl. God, how she missed her. How she missed them all.

They were all talented in their own way, and if she could inspire them to have a passion for something, the reward would be priceless. Her heart continue to swell as she thought of all the pretty pictures Elizabeth had drawn for her and were now hanging proudly on her fridge door back home. Sam loved Elizabeth and couldn't wait to see her again.

For a long time, Sam's mother had suggested Sam could adopt Elizabeth, and Sam had contemplated it, but how could it work? She was always at the shop, at the orphanage, or giving readings for her fast growing clientele. How could she care for a little girl? Would she have the time? Did she even have what it took to be a single parent?

She lay on her blanket and closed her eyes. Even more daunting, how would she feel once Elizabeth was adopted by someone else? Sam knew the answer. Her heart clenched with dread at the thought. She'd been volunteering at Grangers for over a year now, and she had gotten very close to the children. Every time one of them left to live in their new homes, she felt like she had lost a member of her own family.

Her mother had warned her volunteering at the orphanage wasn't going to be easy, but it would be the most rewarding thing she would ever do in her life. Her mother had been right. Sam would never trade a moment with those children for anything. It even made the prospect of settling down, getting married and having children of her own a difficult one for Sam. How could she turn her back on the kids at Grangers? They needed her.

"As much as I need them," she whispered softly.

Sam sighed. She would worry about that when the time came. If the time came. It wasn't a decision she would have to make any time soon. There were no prospects for husband material in her life now so the subject was moot. An image of Leo's face swam before her and she frowned, her eyes still closed. Did he have to crop up in her mind at the most improbable times?

Leo was as much husband material as she was a...a kettle, she decided, and almost chuckled at the absurd comparison. Too many things pointed against him. The biggest problem on the list being he lived clear across the ocean and there was no way she was going to close her shop, quit Grangers, and move to Greece.

She could feel the heated blush on her cheeks. Wasn't she being a tad presumptuous thinking about Leo in a husbandly way? He had told her he'd wanted to kiss her, not marry her, she thought dryly.

Sam shifted uncomfortably on her towel. She had to stop thinking about him, otherwise her day at the beach would be fruitless. She came here for relaxation not restlessness.

Sam took a deep breath and concentrated on the soothing sounds around her. The ocean, the soft chirping of the birds, the happy voices of the children. She sighed and settled comfortably on her towel. Fifteen minutes later, she fell asleep.

* * * *

Sam stood in a swirling mist, alone and afraid. Her long, sheer nightgown swayed in the slight breeze and she wrapped her arms around herself for comfort. She couldn't see anything except the cloudy haze of the mist. Sam shivered.

"Don't be frightened. I'm here now," said a deep, familiar voice behind her.

Sam felt his arms circle her waist and draw her body close to his. She shivered again, but this time from the heady feeling his touch was stirring in her limbs. His lips were on her neck and she sighed, turning her head to allow him easier access. His hands slid up her small waist and slipped around the front to cup her breasts. Sam gasped.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice hoarse with desire.

She felt his hands move further up to her shoulders and he gently turned her around to face him.

Sam stared up into Leo's face and parted her lips. His head came down slowly...

* * * *

"*Kiria? Kiria?*"

Sam stirred from her dream at the sound of the young voice and squinted at the young boy who had been drawing earlier. She sat up.

He looked apologetic disturbing her nap. "*Signomi, Kiria. Thelo na ksero an borro—*"

Sam raised a hand. "I'm sorry. I don't speak Greek."

The young boy smiled shyly. "I'm sorry to bother you, Miss, but I noticed you have a sketch pad sticking out of your bag. My...my pen ran out of ink and I was hoping you had one I could borrow."

It took her a few moments to collect her thoughts and to stop her heart from hammering wildly. That dream. It couldn't be, she thought. Sam knew the difference between having a regular dream and a special one. And this one was a special one. Was it a look in the future? Or was it just a glimpse of what she secretly wanted?

The hairs at the back of her neck were up and she felt tingly in her legs and arms. Sam took a deep breath. In either case it would be a problem, she decided, and tried to focus on the young boy staring at her.

"Miss, are you all right?"

Sam attempted a smile. "Of course." She rummaged through her bag. "Here. It's charcoal. It will work better for what you're trying to draw than your pen."

He took the charcoal pencil, his expression going from apologetic to interested in a second flat. He gave Sam a curious look. "How do you know what I'm drawing?"

Sam smiled, feeling a bit better. At least he was diverting her from thinking about that disconcerting dream with Leo and what it meant. Besides, she liked the young boy. His aura was sweet and genuine with gentle hues of blues and greens.

"You were drawing only after you stared at the ocean. Can I see?" She gestured to the dog-eared sketch pad he carried.

He shrugged. "Yeah, sure, but it's not very good. Here."

Sam took the pad with one hand and extended her other hand. "I'm Samantha Hope. Please call me Sam."

He smiled shyly. "I'm Alekos Karadimos, but everyone calls me Alek."

"Alek. What a nice name. And you speak English so well."

He shrugged casually. "My mom was Canadian."

Sam waited, expecting him to say more, but when he remained silent she looked down at his drawing and felt a thread of excitement. This kid was talented, she thought. Yes, he needed to hone his craft, but she could see a diamond in the rough. "It's fabulous. You've done a great job capturing the froth where the waves come down. That's very hard to do with a ballpoint pen. Alek, I'm really impressed," she added, smiling up at him. She could tell he was pleased.

"Thanks, but I'm having trouble with the edge of the water and the sky." He pointed to the horizon. "See where they meet? It looks like a streak of silver. It kind of glows and I can't get that." He must have mistaken Sam's intent listening for disinterest because he shrugged self-consciously. "It doesn't matter. It's just a stupid picture."

Sam shook her head quickly. "Oh no. Don't say that. It's lovely. Alek, I know what you're trying to say. You want that shimmery look. Well, I can help you. First, as talented as you are, that's a tough thing to capture with a pen. The charcoal will help, but you'll need to angle the pencil properly." She flipped his page to a blank one. "I'll draw it here and you can use it as a guide. I don't want to draw directly on your picture. You have a very distinct hand."

Surprise lit his young face. "Are you an artist?"

It was Sam's turn to shrug. "I sketch when I can. It's a hobby. Come, sit next to me so you can see what I do," she murmured as she began to draw.

Alek did, and within a few swirls of her hand, a scene of the horizon appeared with the silvery look and feel of the light touching the water.

"Wow. You did that in three minutes. You *are* an artist," he stated, his brown gaze glued to her picture.

Sam laughed softly. "Hardly, but I love art."

Alek looked at her shyly. "Can...can you do that again so I can see exactly what you did?"

"Sure. It would be my pleasure."

And for the next two hours she drew another four pictures for him of different aspects of the beach and Alek asked her tons of questions. All the while, the young boy relaxed and felt more at ease with her.

"Hey, thanks," he said again.

"It's wasn't any trouble at all, Alek." She reached into her bag and took out the two apples Maria had given her to bring to the beach. "Do you want an apple?" She handed him one without waiting for him to reply and she noticed how quickly he ate it. He seemed hungry, and Sam's sixth sense started to rise. She took a closer look at him and noticed his dark hair hadn't seen shampoo in a week and his hands were dirty. "Are you here alone, Alek?" she asked gently.

"Yeah."

"Do you come to this beach often to draw?"

"Only when I can get away."

She didn't want to press him so she backed off a bit. "I'm here on vacation. I love Greece. The weather is remarkable."

He shrugged indifferently. "I guess."

"You must be hot in those jeans. You don't like to swim?"

"I don't have a bathing suit."

Tread carefully, Sam told herself. "Your parents should get you one. I can't imagine living near a beach like this and not owning a bathing suit." Sam crossed her fingers and hoped he'd answer.

He stared at the last picture she drew for him and said quietly, "I don't have parents and I don't live around here."

"I'm sorry, Alek," she said softly, but she had expected that. It was all crystal clear to her, and she wondered why she hadn't picked up on it when she had first seen him on the beach. The only explanation she could come up with was that she had been thinking about Leo at the time, and it irked her to realize he could affect her so much even when he wasn't around. It irked her even more that she hadn't even been able to spot a troubled boy who desperately needed some guidance and attention.

"It's no big deal," Alek said. "I've been on my own forever. I don't need anyone."

He sounded like so many of the kids her parents had welcomed into their family as foster children, and also of the children who came to Grangers Orphanage for the first time. "I have brothers and sisters who didn't have parents either and who said they didn't need anyone," she offered gently.

He frowned his confusion. A reaction Sam had hoped he'd have. "Huh? I don't get it."

"I grew up in a very different environment than most people. My parents fostered many children and they all became my brothers and sisters. A lot of them came to us with nothing and no one in their lives, and a few even said what you just did—that they didn't need anyone. But they did. Everyone needs someone, Alek. Even if it's just a friend they can talk to. Where do you live?"

"In an orphanage not far from here. I haven't been there in over a week. They must have called the cops already. Are you shocked?"

"Not at all. A lot of the children my parents took in were runaways at some point before they came to live with us, and yes, they too had lived on the streets."

He shook his head and broke his gaze with hers. "Meeting you is too much of a coincidence," he muttered under his breath.

She noticed he was getting ready to leave and she took his hand and stopped him from getting up. "There are no such things as coincidences, Alek. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that people cross paths for a purpose."

She thought about Leo and wondered what possible reason their paths crossed other than to annoy each other. Her thought of Leo made her think of tonight and the dinner with his parents and she glanced at her watch. "I completely lost track of time because of all the fun I was having with you. Alek, I have to go." She gave him a careful look. "Do you want to come back with me to the villa where I'm staying? It's not far from here."

There was a tinge of regret on his face. "No thanks. I'd better get going too."

"Alek, you can't stay out here all by yourself," she said gently.

"Maybe I'll go back to the orphanage."

"All right, but promise me you'll come back tomorrow. I'll pack us both a lunch and we can draw some more."

His face lit up again at the prospect of drawing with Sam. "Yeah. Okay."

"Promise?" she asked again, as she pulled her shorts and top out of her bag and put them on. Oh my God, she was running late and she'd promised Maria she had nothing to worry about.

“Promise.”

Quickly, she gathered all her things. “Great. And if something happens and you can’t make it, but want to find me, I’m at the villa just a couple of miles up the road. You can’t miss it. Go down the private road across the street from the taverna with blue tables out front.”

Alek nodded. “Okay.”

She held out her hand. “Alek, it was a pleasure meeting you and I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

His face turned red, but he grinned for the first time. “Me too. Bye, Sam.”

* * * *

Most of the walk back to the villa was uphill and the sun had reached its hottest peak. By the time Sam reached the front door, she was exhausted. Her face was flushed, her t-shirt clung to her perspiration, and she panted as she pushed the door open.

“I can’t believe I didn’t pack a water bottle,” she muttered under her breath.

She stepped into the great hall and nearly collided into Leo. A dark frown appeared above his brows as he took in her state.

“Yes. Water would have been a wise choice,” he remarked, taking in her parched, dishevelled appearance. “And I told you the Volvo was available any time you wanted it.”

Sam tried to smile, but she needed water, and she needed it fast. “Thank you. I’ll be using it next time.”

His expression softened as he gave her an approving look. “A tan suits you. You got nice colour today.”

“Thanks. Toni kept saying how pale I was. Now she’ll be happy when she sees me.”

“I’m on my way out for a few hours. I have a business meeting, but I will be back in time for dinner at six. My parents should be arriving at the same time.” His gaze went to her tote bag. “Leave your bag with me. I’ll bring it up to your room while you go into the kitchen. There’s bottled water and juice in the fridge.”

She nestled her bag more securely around her shoulder. “No, that’s fine. I’ll take it up, but I will take your suggestion and drink something. Thanks.”

“No problem. How will you spend the rest of the afternoon?”

She didn’t want to tell him she was going to make dinner just in case Maria hadn’t mentioned it to him yet. Instead she said, “Nothing too special. I might go into the town and visit the shops.”

He nodded. “Fine. I’ll see you later.”

Sam watched his retreating back as he made his way out the door. If she hurried, she had just enough time to shower, prepare and cook dinner, and set the table.

* * * *

Everything went without a hitch. Sam was in the kitchen with Maria, who had just arrived, and Leo and his parents, whom Sam had not met yet, were in the dining room.

“Thank you so much, *koritsimou*,” Maria said with a big smile. The older woman gave her a look from head to toe. “And you are so pretty. In Greek we say *koukla*. That is a pretty dress and the white colour shows off the colour you got today.” Her hand came up and she tucked a long, wavy red tress behind Sam’s shoulder. “Such beautiful hair. You should leave it down more. No more buns, please. You’re young, not old woman.”

Sam smiled. It had taken her over thirty minutes to tame her wavy mane and she wore one of her favourite sundresses. It was a white, sleeveless frock that had pretty little roses embroidered along the knee-length hem. Gold, strappy sandals complemented her outfit.

“*Efharisto*, Maria,” Sam said.

“You are very welcome. Okay, go now. Present yourself to his parents.”

A small, worried frown appeared on Sam’s brow. She had to make a nice impression—for John’s sake.

“Don’t worry, *koritsimou*. They are going to like you very much.”

“I hope so,” Sam murmured. She did want them to like her. For John, and for herself, she realized with surprise.

On nervous legs, Sam made her way to the dining room. Leo immediately rose from his seat at the head of the table and took in her appearance. His look was thorough, appreciative, and it rested a few moments longer on her hair. Their gazes met and he smiled at her. Sam returned his smile, feeling instantly at ease. She could tell he approved of her appearance.

“Sam, I would like you to meet my parents,” he said deeply, making his way toward her.

Sam looked at the older couple seated at the table and smiled nervously at them.

Leo’s father rose from his seat and stretched out his hand. He was an older version of Leo, with greying hair, and an admiring twinkle in his dark eyes as he smiled at Sam.

“I am Haralambos, but you can call me Harry. It is a pleasure to meet you, Samantha,” he said smiling. His voice was as rich and deep as his son’s and Sam felt an instant connection with the older man.

She shook his hand and smiled up at him. “The pleasure is mine. Thank you for allowing me to visit your beautiful home. And please, call me Sam.”

“Sam,” he said, winking.

Leo’s hand went to the small of her back and he directed her gently to his mother. His touch comforted Sam and for some inexplicable reason, it made her calm down.

His mother did not get up. She sat regally, her back erect as she eyed Sam imperially. She had a grand air about her, very poised and dignified, and Sam smiled shyly at her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Stefanos.”

“Call me Christina,” she said haughtily. “Please sit down.”

Leo walked Sam to her side of the table and seated her on his right, directly across from his mother. He held out her chair and Sam took it gratefully.

"How do you find our weather, Miss Hope?" Christina began as she reached for her glass of red wine.

"Sam, please." She took the wine Leo offered her. "It's lovely. I never realized how beautiful your country is, Mrs. Stef—Christina."

"You've never been to Greece before?" Harry asked politely.

"No. I've never been abroad."

Christina gave her a hard look. "And the plane ride?"

Sam smiled. "It was long, but I read a couple of magazines, finished a crossword puzzle, and took a nap. Toni told me the key to surviving a long trip on a plane is to keep yourself busy."

Christina's face tensed. "She is correct. And how is my daughter, Sam? I trust married life is treating her well."

"Toni is very happy. John is a wonderful husband."

Leo's mother chose to ignore the last comment. "I understand they are living in a small abode and my daughter—" She paused, her tone dropping distastefully, "walks to work."

"Well, yes. Somerset is a very small town. Mostly everyone walks where they need to go. The only reason I take my car is because my home is situated on the outskirts of town, and I'm afraid it would take me an hour to walk to work."

Christina turned to her son. "Leonidis."

"Yes, mother."

"Have you spoken to Toni about what we talked about? That I want to buy her a car?"

"Yes, I have."

A tinge of exasperation darkened his mother's face. "And what did she say?"

"She refused."

Harry chuckled. "No doubt to annoy you, my dear wife."

"Yes, no doubt," Christina murmured and turned another hard look on Sam. "Tell me, Sam—since you seem to be the only person my daughter gets along with these days—how did you two meet?"

Sam could feel the tension mount between them and she realized the warm connection she had with Leo's father was definitely lacking with his mother. "It was during winter and the roads were icy. Toni had just arrived into town and she slipped outside of my shop, *The Crystal Ball*, on the pavement. I took her to my brother's—John's—clinic, and he treated her sprain. We've been good friends ever since. She works in my shop with me."

"So, you are a business owner as well as a matchmaker. My daughter must have filled your head with many stories of her family. Did she paint us all as villains, Miss Hope?"

So much for being on a first name basis, Sam thought regretfully, bracing herself for more of the third degree that was sure to follow. "Mrs. Stefanos, I didn't play matchmaker. My brother treated her sprain and they hit it off immediately."

“Let it go, Christina,” Harry said. “Toni is married now, and from what I hear, she’s very happy. Let us just live with her decision and wish her well.”

“Well said, father,” Leo interjected dryly. He looked up and saw Maria arrive with the entrees. “Mother, Toni and her new husband will be here next month, so you can ask them both any questions you may have. For now, let Sam eat her salad.”

Christina gave Sam a shrewd look. “You’re quite thin, Miss Hope. Are you dieting?” She reached for her wine again, and didn’t wait for Sam to respond. “American women are so obsessed with their weight. All of them are skin and bones.”

Sam was trying hard to be nice, but her shackles were starting to rise, recalling the airport when Leo too had mentioned she’d lost weight. “I’m hardly dieting, Mrs. Stefanos, but I do admit I haven’t been eating all that regularly the past few weeks.”

“And why is that?”

“I have two jobs. Well, one isn’t really a job. It’s volunteer work. I work at an orphanage back home five nights a week, and I run my shop seven days a week.”

Christina’s imperious air cracked a bit. “Did you say you volunteer five nights a week at an orphanage?” She tossed her son a silent, questioning look before she added to Sam, “And you do this for free?”

Sam smiled gently. “Yes. I love the children. They’re like my extended family. I don’t think I would accept a salary if it was offered to me.”

Leo’s mother remained silent for a few moments and Sam could tell the older woman was collecting her tangled thoughts. “I must say that is very commendable of you. It is very good these children have a place to go, people to look after them. I’m afraid the reverse is not so certain.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When the parents get old, the children need to take care of them, but that is not the case with most families. I know my Toni will not be there for me since she will be remaining in America.” Christina gave Leo a pointed look. “The responsibility now rests on my son.”

Sam glanced at Leo. He was silent as he reached for his wine, but as he brought the glass up to his mouth, his gaze met hers. Sam offered him a small smile. His brooding expression transformed as his eyes softened. Slowly, he returned her smile. Sam felt a thread of warmth between them and she looked away, overcome with shyness.

Leo struck her as the kind of man who would take care of his elderly parents. Regardless of the wrong foot their relationship had started with, the more she got to know him, the more she realized he was a proud man whose family came first. She couldn’t fault him for that. Didn’t she love her family as much? Wouldn’t she do anything for her family if the need arose?

Harry cleared his throat abruptly. “Stop with the sordid talk of old age and being too incapacitated to fend for ourselves, woman. We are both in perfect health.”

"Are we?" Christina gave her husband a sceptical look. "I'm not so sure. I feel not at all well lately. I have flutters in my chest and aches in my body I've never had before." She glanced at her son. "It's very important Leo marry well. He must marry a woman I can look to as a daughter. Not like that horrible American woman, Catherine." Her expression grew determined. "He must marry a Greek. Mediterranean women are more family-oriented. And speaking of which," she added in her domineering tone, fixing a hard look on her son, "I've invited Katina and her family for dinner tomorrow night. Make arrangements with Maria to put out the good china and to prepare a special dinner."

"Mother," Leo began in a dry tone, "I won't add to Maria's duties. She has enough to do on a daily basis without me having to add to it with your dinner parties."

Maria chose that moment to enter with a cart laden with the dinner plates. Sam held her breath. The last thing she needed was Leo's mother to criticize her cooking skills.

Harry smiled as he made a show of sniffing the air. "Mmm. That smells wonderful, Maria."

The older woman smiled at everyone. "Yes, it does, but I did not cook it. Sam was very kind to help me. I was at the hospital with Nitsa all afternoon and Sam offered to cook the dinner."

A silence fell through the room as everyone looked at Sam in surprise.

Leo was the first person to break the silence. "Sam, that was not necessary."

Sam's gaze wavered under his thoughtful, dark look. "Nonsense. I love to cook." She glanced around the table, embarrassed. "Really, it was no trouble at all. I hope you all like it. It's roast beef, scalloped potatoes, and string beans."

Maria placed the plates in front of everyone and Christina looked at her dinner approvingly. "I must say, Miss Hope, you are a surprising woman."

"Yes, it seems she is, mother," Leo added, his voice deeper than usual.

Sam shot him a quick glance and for the first time, detected pride on his face. The warm connection between them grew. She could tell he was happy and her spirits lifted as she realized he was pleased she was making a nice impression on his parents.

Christina looked curiously from her son back to Sam's flushed face. "Miss Hope, you chose to cook us dinner rather than spend the day shopping or staying at the beach?"

"Cooking relaxes me. Maria did me the favour allowing me to prepare tonight's meal."

Maria sputtered as she placed the last dinner plate in front of Harry. "Oh, no, *koritsimou*. I am still in your debt with Nitsa. If it was not for you last night, I don't know how my daughter would have remained calm."

"What happened last night?" Christina asked sharply.

Maria proceeded to recount the event, leaving nothing out. Sam watched Christina's eyes widen in shock with each passing detail. She looked at Sam in surprise.

"You mean to tell me, Miss Hope, that you would have delivered a baby if you had to? *Themou!*"

Sam smiled. "I'm glad I didn't have to. I was petrified, but I have had years of first aid classes and training in the nursing field."

"Are you a nurse, as well as everything else you do in your life?" Harry enquired politely. Sam noticed the quick look he tossed his son. It was imperceptible, but Sam caught it. It was approval.

"Not quite. I would need to have a license and pass a national exam before I'm qualified as a nurse."

Christina cleared her throat delicately. "Tell us, Miss Hope. What do your parents do?" she asked.

"Both are retired. They still live at the ranch I grew up on. My mother was a grade school teacher and my father was a minister. "

"And your brothers and sisters? Do you have any?" Christina pressed on.

Sam laughed softly. "I'm afraid that would take too long to talk about." She paused. "I have eighteen brothers and sisters, Mrs. Stefanos."

A stunned silence ensued. Harry looked from his son to his wife and back to his son again. He laughed heartily.

"My dear Sam," he began, "I do believe I am witnessing a miracle. You are the first person to have ever left my wife and son speechless." He wiped his eyes as he tried to contain his mirth. "*Themou*, this is the most fun I've had at a dinner party in a very long time."

Surprised, Sam looked at Leo and her stomach plummeted as she took in his expression. The warm connection between them had disappeared and now he regarded her as if she had sprouted another head.

"There is a perfectly good explanation," she said calmly.

"I'm all ears," Leo said dryly, "and I'm inclined to agree with my father. This has been a thoroughly interesting evening."

Chapter 5

“My mother and father were foster parents to a lot of children. I’m their only biological child, but all the children I grew up with became members of our family. They’re all my brothers and sisters and we still keep in touch.” She smiled warmly, thinking about all her nieces and nephews and how much they loved spending time with her. Sam may have not had many friends and boyfriends growing up, but she had realized a long time ago that her family more than filled in the void. “Christmas at the ranch is a big affair. With extended families, husbands, wives, and children—there’s always over eighty people there.”

“Goodness,” Christina said, giving Sam a strange look.

“And you keep in touch with everyone all year round?” Leo asked quietly.

“Of course. Toni’s already met a few of my siblings this year.”

“I must say,” Leo commented thoughtfully, “you have quite a family, Sam.”

His admission warmed her. Was he starting to come around and see that she and John weren’t the unscrupulous sort he’d thought they were? Sam hoped so. Of all her siblings, she felt the closest to John.

He epitomized the perfect big brother and she would never forget how he had turned her eighth birthday from being a total disaster to quite a memorable day at the movies. Now, Sam smiled just thinking about it.

Family was important. Family came first. Somehow she knew that she and Leo shared the same value.

Everyone started to eat and Harry smiled at Sam. “This is delicious, my dear. Christina, we must have our cook call Sam for the recipe. The roast beef is superb.”

His wife gave Sam another strange look as she chewed her food. “Yes, it’s very good,” she said quietly.

Leo gave her an admiring look. “It’s excellent. It must have taken a long time to prepare it.”

“Not at all. I had fun. You have a fabulous kitchen, Leo.”

The meal continued while Leo and his father conversed about day-to-day things, with Christina remaining curiously silent. However, every once in a while she gave Sam a strange look.

Harry lifted his napkin to his mouth. “Son, any word on the Acropole? Is the Spanish investor ready to buy it?”

“We’ve already toured the hotel and he seems very interested. Contracts have been drawn and all that’s left to do is sign on the dotted line. He’s coming here next week for our final meeting.”

Christina directed her attention to Sam. “The Acropole is one of our hotels in Greece. Leo wants to sell it and re-invest the money we make to improve our other property.” She gave her son a pride filled glance. “My son is a wise businessman, Sam. Our family business started with my

dearly departed father's first hotel. Then, when Harry took over the business, we grew to four. Ever since Leo has taken over, we have twelve hotels. They are scattered all over the many beautiful islands of Greece."

Leo smiled politely. "Mother, I don't want to bore Sam with our family history."

Harry laughed, giving Sam a kind look. "Indeed! Somehow I can't see our hotel empire comparing to the generous and charitable life Sam and her parents have lived."

Christina gave Sam another speculative look. "Are you married?"

"No, I'm not."

"Do you have a boyfriend in America?"

Sam laughed ruefully. "I'm afraid not. I haven't had any time for boyfriends the past three years."

Christina's brows rose. "Three years as a single woman?"

The only downfall of her gift, Sam would have liked to say, but she refrained. Somehow, she didn't think his parents would understand how much she relied on her cards when it came to making decisions in her love life. Sam shrugged, beginning to feel a little awkward. She could sense Leo's intent gaze on her. "There was college—I majored in Business Administration and minored in Art—and, of course all the babysitting I had with my younger siblings. Then, I received a small inheritance from my grandmother and I moved away and opened my shop."

"You said you own a shop called *The Crystal Ball*. What do you sell?"

"It's more of a novelty store. I sell antique books, candles, crystals—things like that. And I give readings to my clients in the parlour at the back of my shop." She reached for her napkin. "I'm glad I met Toni when I did because I found I needed someone to run the shop when I was in the back. My customers love her. She has excellent customer service skills." The cards had helped her make the decision to hire Toni and subsequently embrace her as a best friend. The cards had revealed Toni as a warm, kind, generous person, and the rest was history.

"You said you give readings. What do you mean? Do you peer into a crystal ball?"

Sam wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or hide. Christina's questions were starting to make her very uncomfortable because it always made Sam ill at ease when she had to tell someone she read people's futures for a living. Too many people had mocked her, doubted her, and she didn't want to ruin what was turning out to be a favourable dinner with the Stefanos.

Sam took a sip of her wine to buy some time. "No. I read the Tarot cards."

Christina stiffened. "Isn't that some form of the occult?"

"Mother, please," Leo began dryly. "I hardly think Sam is practicing witchcraft. In fact, I did a little reading on the Tarot and it was originally a form of a card game somewhere in Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century. It wasn't until centuries later when devotees of the spiritual world encountered the Tarot cards and found they had some mystical and magical meaning behind their symbols."

Sam expression mirrored her surprise and she gave him a grateful smile. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

He shrugged nonchalantly, but she could see a smile hovering about his mouth. "I actually found myself compelled to learn more about it. I admit I find it very interesting."

Christina broke their locked gazes and asked abruptly, "Are you any good?"

"I...I think so. My clients always come back for repeat business and they've given me a lot of referrals. That's why I needed Toni to come work with me. I've been spending more time in the back of my shop lately than in the front."

"Tell me, Miss Hope," Leo's mother said, her tone sounding weaker and fainter as though she had gotten the winds knocked out of her sail, "is there anything else we should know about you?"

Sam took a deep breath and gave the woman a direct look. "Only that I am honoured to have Toni as a sister-in-law and I am very happy you will finally meet John next month."

"Let's drink to that," Harry announced, proudly raising his glass.

"Once again, father," Leo said, "I find myself agreeing with you."

* * * *

Leo had been in the library for over an hour, his mind going over every detail. It was almost midnight and he stretched out his long legs as he took another swig of his *ouzo*, leaning back on the sofa.

There was no question someone had tampered with Sam's file. The real, live woman sleeping in one of the rooms upstairs wasn't anything like the woman Jack had described.

Leo grimaced as he thought about the incriminating contents in the attachment Jack had emailed him a couple of weeks before Toni got married.

Swindling old people from their savings, credit card fraud, identity theft, prostitution.

When Leo got to the bottom of this, he was going to make sure the culprit paid for all the hell he had put Sam through. Remorse flowed through his veins as he recalled how ruthless he had treated her on the phone when he'd called a week before the wedding and again yesterday when he met her at the airport. Sam hadn't deserved any of it. Worse, how was he going to tell her the truth—that he had hired Jack to investigate her?

But who could have meddled with her file?

He remembered the day he had received the email like it was yesterday. It was his mother's birthday and there were only a few people in the house. His parents and Katina's family. Leo had placed his mother's gifts in his office and when it was time to cut the cake, Katina had offered to bring the presents in. Thinking back, Leo remembered wondering what had been taking Katina so long and when she had returned, he had noticed she had looked unnaturally pleased. At the time, he had decided she had just been happy she'd been able to help.

Now he wasn't so sure.

He narrowed his eyes as he took another swig of his drink. His gut tightened. He recalled another day when Katina was over for dinner and how she had arrived early and found him in his office staring at the wedding picture of Sam he'd just printed. Katina had stared at the picture for a long time.

"So this is the Sam I've been hearing so much about. The American woman who is Antonia's new best friend. Finally a face behind the name. I was beginning to think she was a ghost," she had commented stiffly. "You and your mother going on and on about her as though she had some power over your sister."

Could he put it past Katina to do something like that? To alter Sam's file? Leo knew the answer to that. Katina was as cold and calculating as she was beautiful.

But why would she do that? Why did she want to ruin Sam's reputation? Katina knew their relationship could never amount to more than it was. Their relationship was open, without ties, no commitment, no promises. Leo had been honest with her from the beginning.

Leo's face turned grim. Lately, Katina had begun to display some very unappealing possessive traits with him. Leo couldn't glance at a woman without Katina accusing him of being attracted to her. Was envy the motivation?

Leo grimaced. Did Katina's envy run so deep that she feared a new woman in Leo's life who lived clear across the ocean? A beautiful new woman, he corrected. Sam looked as fresh and sweet as a flower in spring, but her thorny disposition made him realize there was a lot more under the surface than met the eye. And when he found out the details of her family life tonight, any remaining doubts he had about her disappeared. Sam was kind and loving and incredibly sexy, and he didn't think she was even aware of the latter. Whereas Katina was selfish and vain and artificial. Sam was giving and kind. Katina was jealous and envious.

"Dammit," he swore roughly. He should have broken things off with Katina a long time ago.

Leo rose. Thank God for technology. All he needed to do was to see if any changes were made on the file that day. He was about to stride from the library and go into his office when he looked up and saw Sam open the door. His gaze roamed over her slim form wrapped in a long white silky robe, and he stopped dead in his tracks. Her hair was down, her face glowing from the colour she received today, and he couldn't find his breath.

All he wanted to do was come clean with her and take her in his arms.

But he stopped himself.

Somehow, he thought dryly, that would be the worst thing he could do. The last time he'd tried to kiss her, she had nearly vaulted ten feet from him. No, Leo decided. He'd have to go slow with her. Even if it killed him, he would get her to admit she was attracted to him because something told him she was one woman he wanted to keep around for a long time.

* * * *

Sam smiled nervously at Leo. "Oh. I'm sorry. I...I came down for a book. I couldn't sleep."

"Me either," he said. "Please, help yourself. You'll find I've had the books catalogued and alphabetized by genre. I'm afraid the romance section is the smallest, but we do have a few books in that genre that Toni and my nanny collected over the years."

Sam walked over to the floor to ceiling shelves and smiled. She couldn't believe how many books were here. She devoured all the titles before her. What wonderful reading material, she thought. "Oh, you have a great selection on royalty. Mmm. I haven't read this one yet," she said glancing up at him. For a man so big, she couldn't believe how quietly he moved because she was startled to see him standing directly beside her. Her heart began its erratic flutter again. "I love to read romances, mind you, but I try to read other genres as well, both fiction and non-fiction." She glanced back at the shelves. "Mmm. Rembrandt. Renoir. Do you have any other books on Impressionists?" she asked, her green gaze fastened on a soft cover book of Renaissance artists. Michelangelo was one of her favourites.

"Yes, we do." He walked down a few feet to another shelf. "You might find this interesting," he added as he handed her a book.

The book weighed a ton and as she flipped through a few pages, she marvelled at the beautiful Monet paintings. Sam smiled up at him. "Great. Thanks."

Leo's gaze flickered to her mouth. "You mentioned you minored in Art. Do you paint?"

"I dabble, I'm afraid."

His eyes softened and Sam's breath caught at the tender look he gave her. "You made quite an impression on my parents, Sam. Especially my mother, which, I might add, is saying a lot."

"Your family seems very close."

"We are. Like your family. It seems we have something in common."

Sam couldn't hold his captivating gaze. Something was different about him tonight. He seemed warmer, gentle, and an undeniable awareness flowed between them. She cleared her throat delicately. "Your parents speak English very well."

"They teach English in Greek schools. We also have a few relatives who moved to the States a few years ago and visit us often. My parents try to converse in English as much as possible. With the hotel business it helps to know the language. Most of our tourists speak English."

"Your parents work in the hotels?"

"No, but they tour them and like to converse with the staff."

"You must love what you do if you've expanded so much since your father ran the business."

She felt a tingle, a familiar sensation in the pit of her stomach. Sam grew still. Could it be? She stared up at him and sensed more than saw the myriad of colours around him. His aura! She could see it. Sam tried to pay attention to what he was saying as she caught glimpses of yellows and reds and purples. Relief flowed through her veins. A veil had been lifted from her eyes and she could see clearly for the first time. Did this mean she could draw her cards and see something this time?

“Yes. My grandfather started the business with one hotel and, as my mother mentioned, the business was passed down to each generation.” He paused and took in her interested look. “I actually think we’ve gotten too big.”

“Too big? Has service suffered?”

“No, but I do feel we’ve gotten to a scale where we’ve lost my grandfather’s values. Our hotels were more personal, more catered to our clientele. We’ve become just another hotel chain now.”

“Do you blame yourself?”

Leo shrugged. “Partly, but it’s of no consequence, I suppose, as I’m in the process of selling.”

“So you want to downsize your business to increase and improve quality control.”

Leo nodded, smiling. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Sam frowned delicately. “Won’t you feel responsible when your employees lose their jobs with the sale? Don’t new owners usually replace most of the existing staff with employees of their own?”

His smile glimmered with admiration. “You’re right. They do. That’s why I’m making sure that doesn’t happen. I’ve set up a contract that will forbid it for the first year after the sale. After the first year, the property can be converted into another business. At least that will give everyone time to plan for themselves.”

“Do you have to sell this hotel?” Sam asked quietly, her mind racing.

“If not him, someone else will be interested.”

“Of course, but what I mean is do you have to sell this hotel at all?” She took a deep breath and gave him a direct look. “Your grandfather had a vision. ‘A home away from home’ ideal. Could you turn the hotel into another type of business that could be just like that vision—maybe even more—a business that could actually help the community and...and children?” She held her breath.

Leo gave her a curious look. “How did you know my grandfather’s vision? He used to say his hotel was a home away from home.”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t know. I felt it,” she said quietly.

How did she know anything that just popped up into her mind? Sometimes she sensed things—specific things—and other times, she saw things—scenes and images with dialogue, like the one she just had of a kindly old man who spoke of his hotel in a gruff voice.

She braced herself as she waited for his cynical reply. Instead, Leo offered quietly, “I see.”

Sam looked up into his dark, fathomless eyes and tried to detect any doubt, but she couldn’t find any. Her confidence returned.

“Children, you say? What did you have in mind?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes,” she replied, offering him a small smile. “Specifically, a shelter for homeless children.” She held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t scoff at her idea. Somehow, she wanted Leo to understand her. He didn’t have to agree with her and actually do what she said, but she did want him to understand her. He remained silent. “You’re wealthy, aren’t you? I’m sure you donate to charities

every year. Couldn't you move those donations to the maintenance and operations of a shelter? You could have teachers and nurses live there. And there could be weekly therapy sessions for the troubled teens, and keynote speakers coming in monthly from different professional industries raising interest in the children's minds at all the opportunities they have before them."

"That certainly is an interesting idea," he remarked quietly, giving her another curious look. "I suppose growing up in your household and your subsequent volunteer work would make you come up with this idea. This altruistic idea, I might add," he remarked deeply, quietly.

"I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn," she apologised. "I have no right telling you what to do with your business or your money."

"Perhaps, but somehow I have the feeling my grandfather would have been quite interested and pleased with your suggestion."

Sam swallowed. He was taking her seriously, she thought. "A lot of the older kids I've met at Grangers have had some tough stories to tell. After eight years old it's very hard to get adopted and the only other recourse is foster care, but sometimes the system fails them, and they run away. That's why I mentioned turning the Acropole into a safe house for these types of kids. They need a sanctuary, a haven that could at least give them a fighting chance at life. My parents knew this, that's why their foster care was effective. John was one of the lucky ones."

His expression was thoughtful, pensive, as he glanced down at her moist eyes. "A shelter for homeless children," he murmured. "I don't think I've ever seen a homeless child around these parts."

"Leo, they're in every city, in every country. People just don't look for them, but once you do, you can see them every week. I...I actually met one this afternoon on the beach."

He appeared shocked. "You did?"

"Well, he's not exactly homeless, but he's been living on the streets for a week. He ran away from his orphanage."

"Tell me about him," he said, his voice curiously hoarse.

His concern was palpable and it touched a cord deep within Sam. "His name is Alekos, but everyone calls him Alek. He's about sixteen years old and he left the orphanage a week ago. He just left without having any place to go. He seems lonely and afraid, but he has courage and strength, and I can see there's a part of him that will survive all this. He loves to draw and he has a strong passion to learn."

"Why did you not invite him to come tonight for dinner?"

She smiled at his compassion. "I did, but he refused. And I didn't want to press him because I had already gained some trust from him."

"How did you do that?"

"I told him about my brothers and sisters and how similar he is to them and how they used to think. I also spent a couple of hours helping him with his seascape painting. I told him I'd meet him tomorrow and I would bring lunch. My plan is to get him to come back here with me." She stopped abruptly, worried and apologetic all at once. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't even ask you if it would be okay."

He was already brushing her worry away with his hand. "Of course it's okay."

Relief flowed through her veins, warming her. "Thank you, Leo. That's very kind of you." She looked at him shyly. "I think you'll like him. He's very sweet."

"Anything I can do to help, Sam."

The warmth in her veins mounted as their gazes locked. "You've already done enough," she said, her face breaking into a smile. "Do you want to see what he looks like? After dinner tonight, I sat in my room and drew him. I can go get the picture. I left it on my nightstand. It'll only take me a few minutes."

"I'll come up with you. I was going to retire anyways, and your room is just down the hall from mine."

Sam hugged the two books on royalty and Impressionists closer to her chest. "Okay," she said quietly, hoping her face didn't betray her attack of nerves.

His eyes didn't miss a thing, and his face hardened. "Let's go."

She followed him up to her room and he politely opened her door. She placed her books on the bed and handed him her picture of Alek. "Here."

Leo visibly stiffened as he regarded the picture in silence. Sam knew she had captured the young boy's fear and vulnerability, pride and strength. Leo gave her an admiring glance.

"You're a remarkable artist, Sam," he said gruffly.

"Thank you. It was easy to draw him. Alek has a very expressive face."

"It's done, then," he said abruptly. "We'll have him here for dinner tomorrow night."

Dinner. Sam felt a tinge of remorse. "Leo, I forgot to thank you for bringing my dinner to my room last night. It was very thoughtful of you."

"Was it only yesterday I met you?" he murmured.

A warm pool of tension settled in her belly as his dark gaze bore down on hers. He was standing so close to her, she could sense his male energy all around her. It was strong, solid, secure. The colours, light, and energy around him intensified and she was dazed, her green-eyed gaze startled.

This time his aura was all red and purple with blinding streaks of white and she took an anxious step back as his passion hit her like a ton of bricks. It frightened her. Sam wasn't ready to explore this new rush of emotion and she backed away from him.

"Why are you frightened of me?" he asked, his tone laced with frustration.

This man was too astute for his own good, she thought. She tried to compose herself. "I'm... I'm not." She inched her way back, away from his energy that started to consume her. Overpower her. Weaken her. How could she tell him she was frightened because for the first time she had no way of knowing anything about her future? That she felt lost and out of control? That her cards hadn't been there for her, to help guide her with her developing emotions for him?

A small part of her was afraid to look at her cards. Sam was afraid of what she might see because she didn't want another disappointment, she realized.

Slowly, he withdrew. "It's late. I should let you get some sleep. Good night, Sam."

* * * *

Leo had noted her quivering lips, her faltering gaze, her small yet imperceptible retreat, and his gut clenched, his mouth tightened.

Making her his was going to take longer than he thought, so he bade her goodnight and retired to his room, his thoughts remaining on the lovely, red-haired woman who seemed to be fighting him every step of the way.

Chapter 6

For the first time since she arrived in Greece, Sam woke up in good spirits. With the exception of the mounting attraction she was experiencing for Leo, Sam knew yesterday had marked a very good day between them and she was finally confident everything was going to turn out well.

Toni and John's visit here next month was going to be a success. Sam could feel it and she could feel a few more things, too. Things about Leo that told her he wasn't the hard, cold, insensitive man she had thought he was. He was kind, compassionate, understanding, and he had a nice family, she decided, thinking about his parents. Yes, his mother had seemed a tad standoffish at first, but wasn't that understandable? She loved her son and daughter, doted on them, and it was normal for her to be protective over them.

Sam had firsthand experience with a doting, overprotective relative. Her Aunt Zoe. Hadn't her own aunt over the years deterred Sam from forming attachments with friends who were deemed inappropriate? So why should it be different for Leo's parents, or Leo for that matter? Whatever reasons Leo had for disliking Sam, she was certain he didn't have them anymore. He had gotten to know her and she was positive he liked her. And that meant he would like John, too.

Now if only Sam could control her raging hormones every time Leo was near, the rest of her vacation would be perfect.

She thought about last night when they were in her room and her stomach somersaulted. Leo had wanted to kiss her again and her sixth sense was telling her that slowly but surely she was losing the battle. She couldn't deny her feelings any longer. She genuinely liked him. She was attracted to him. But that's where it ended. She was going home in a week and a half and falling for someone like Leo would have devastating effects. She thought about what she'd seen in her Tarot last night after Leo had left her room and her heart felt heavy. She'd seen the good and the bad. The read hadn't been all that detailed for her, but she'd seen enough. And one thing was certain. If she chose to embrace the developing attraction between them and succumbed to their mutual passion, heartbreak and pain would fall upon her. She had even caught a glimpse of herself collapsing on the stairs in despair and grief.

Sam frowned her frustration. She wished she had been able to see more. What would cause her knees to buckle with such overwhelming pain that she would collapse on the stairs? She had tried to see if Leo would say or do something specific to hurt her, but she had come up blank. All she had seen was that soon after their passionate embrace, her heart would feel wrenched from her breast.

And that had spoken volumes for her.

'Stay away from Leo,' had been her cards' message to her.

Sam showered and changed back into her black bikini and a yellow cotton sundress. She ate breakfast by herself because Maria was at the hospital and Leo was nowhere to be found.

After she rinsed her plate, she borrowed the Volvo and drove into town to buy Alek a bathing suit, but one thing led to another and she ended up buying a whole slew of things she imagined a young boy would need and like. She couldn't wait to see his reaction when he opened his bag. An hour later, she was sitting on the beach.

It was another beautiful day, and she stretched out on her colourful beach blanket and closed her eyes. What a glorious day. The birds were in full form with their cooing and singing and the sound of the ocean was hypnotic, soothing.

A shadow fell over her face and she frowned. She opened her eyes and gasped. Startled, Sam looked up at Leo standing over her, wearing faded jeans and a black t-shirt. He was carrying a big, shiny department store bag.

Sam sat up abruptly. "What...what are you doing here?" She knew wearing a bikini wasn't exactly being naked, but she couldn't help feeling exposed.

His dark gaze roamed lazily over her slender form. "Maria's been calling the house all morning to see if you returned. I knew you'd be here."

Concern drew her brows together. "Is Nitsa all right?" she asked, immediately shelving her modesty.

"She's fine. She's having the baby tonight and she's been asking for you."

"Oh." Sam glanced at her watch and chewed her lower lip.

"Alek hasn't turned up, has he?"

Sam shook her head. "He was supposed to meet me here a couple of hours ago." She glanced at her tote bag. "His...his lunch will go bad and I...I bought him a bathing trunk," she added quietly, looking at the shopping bag by her feet.

Leo flicked an amused glance at her full bag brimming with items. "That seems like an awfully big bag for a bathing suit," he said, trying to hide a smile.

Sam shrugged self-consciously. "I...I bought him a few more things. Some t-shirts, a few pairs of shorts, a couple of books on the art of drawing."

Leo handed her the bag he carried. "Here. You can give him this as well," he said, his tone gruff. "It's a paint set."

Surprised, Sam peered into the bag and gasped. "This is more than a paint set, Leo. This is what real artists use. My goodness, you have oil, water, acrylic paints, and amazing brushes here. And all that lovely, soft canvas! Alek's going to love it," she added, smiling brilliantly at him, his expression embarrassed.

Her eyes shone with warmth as she smiled up at him, catching him blink a couple of times.

Leo cleared his throat abruptly. "You can call the orphanage and find out if he's there. There's only one in Corfu." He gave her the name of it and the street it was situated on. "If Alek is there, we'll go pick him up. In the meantime," he added decisively as he sat down beside her, "I'll wait with you for a bit longer in case he turns up."

"You'd do that?" she asked, surprised.

He gave her a wry look. "Of course. Contrary to what you may think, I am not an ogre, Sam."

"No. Of course not," she exclaimed, trying to put him at ease. "I never... I didn't... Never mind," she ended lamely, giving him a sheepish grin. She reached over to him and touched his arm. "The paint set was a very thoughtful gift, Leo."

He stared at her hand and tension immediately flared between them. Sam withdrew her hand as Leo's gaze slid to her shoulders and lower to her exposed breasts. The look he gave her was hooded, dark. "You're going to burn. You should put more sunscreen on."

Sam looked down at her pink, flat belly and frowned. "You're probably right." She reached into her tote bag and pulled out her tube of sunblock.

"Allow me," he offered politely. "I'll do your back."

The raw tension between them mounted. "No. Thank you. That's not necessary."

"Sam," he began, his tone firm, "you can't reach your back and if I don't apply it, you'll suffer tonight." His face darkened grimly. "I'm going to apply some sunscreen on you, not ravish you on a public beach."

Sam blushed. She knew he was right. And she had to stop acting like a frightened rabbit every time he was near. "Okay."

"Turn around."

She did, and the moment his hands slid the cool, soothing lotion over her back, she relaxed. His touch was like heaven, satin, and excitement all rolled in one.

"How did you come to work at an orphanage?" he asked quietly, his hands dipping lower to the small of her back.

"Mmm? Oh, a couple of reasons, really. I love children, and my parents always instilled in us the importance of giving back to the world. Most of my siblings do some form of volunteer work." Sam was having a hard time concentrating because his touch was so hypnotic. She almost sighed. "My parents are still very active in the community. Just last month, they welcomed another young boy into our family."

"Like John," he said quietly.

"Mmm-hmm. I was four when John came to live with us. He may not be my biological brother, but we're family in every sense of the word. He taught me to ride my first bike, he helped me with my homework, and he was there for me when I had a hard time in school with the other kids." She paused and wondered if she should say more. "Kids can be very cruel. I...I never really fit in growing up."

"Why not?" he said gently.

"I was different. I...I knew things."

"What kind of things?"

She gave a small shrug. "Things. Who would get hurt in the playground, when school would be closed because of freak weather, which girl liked which boy and vice versa. Things like that."

"And you knew these things because of your gift."

"Yes." She tensed. Sam didn't want to ruin this nice moment with him by giving him the opportunity to call her a fraud or a fake. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm an adult now and I have control over who can and can't hurt me."

"How long have you had your gift?"

"For as long as I can remember. My Aunt Zoe is gifted, too. She gave me my first set of Tarot cards on my eighth birthday. She taught me how to read them." And Sam still had the same cards. Seventeen years of reliability, she thought.

"Do you only read the cards for clients or do you read them for yourself as well?"

"Both. They've helped me make some very important and sound decisions in my life."

"Have you based most of your decisions on your readings?"

"Yes. They've never let me down." His hands were soothing her and she felt very calm. "Most people had friends growing up—I had my cards. I guess the turning point for me was my eighth birthday party. I had invited four girls and no one showed up. When I went to school that Monday, I was in the bathroom and they all walked in. I overheard them saying how they would never go to a witch's birthday party. And then they laughed. I...I left the stall and walked out of the bathroom with my head held high. Since then, I've been very careful who I let into my life." In spite of his soothing touch and the comfort it induced, she still felt a twinge of hurt after all these years thinking about that day.

"Is that why you're still single?" he asked quietly.

"You could say that. I broke up with my first boyfriend because I found out he was cheating on me. And I broke up with my second boyfriend because I saw he would turn into an alcoholic."

"And your third?"

She shook her head. "No third. I stopped dating after that. What was the use?"

"So you've based your decisions on love on what you read."

"Mmm," she murmured. His touch was putting her to sleep. "What do you base your decisions on?"

"Facts. The truth. My gut instinct."

Sam smiled. "Hmm. How very male of you. Most men do."

"Isn't it possible you may get it wrong one day? That what you see may not be the best decision?"

"No. I've never been wrong yet."

He paused for so long, Sam wondered what he was thinking. "And you read Toni her cards and told her she would fall in love with John," he said.

“Mmm.”

“You predicted to her they would get married.”

Despite the sun’s warmth and Leo’s soothing touch, Sam grew cold. “Yes.”

“Before or after she met him?”

Her idyllic moment with him snapped in two and she swung around, flashing him an angry look. Nothing had changed between them. “What are you implying, Leo? That I conned your sister into marrying John? That I influenced her?” She made a move to grab her bags. “I think I’m done here. I’ll call the orphanage when I return to the house.”

His hand shot out and stopped her from rising. Her heated glare dimmed under the sincerity softening his ruthlessly handsome face. “Sam, I was not implying anything. Please believe me.”

She remained silent, sensing his honesty.

Leo gave her a rueful look. “I was merely stating a fact. My sister has had a long string of poor judgement behind her. She jumps into water without testing the temperature first. A couple of years ago, she was in love with a man who was a notorious rake. When I suggested a prenup in the event of a marriage, he bailed, leaving her heartbroken.” He shrugged. “I guess I was trying to find out if she fell in love with John because of John or because of the romantic influence of a reading.”

And it hit her. Leo was just like John. He was very protective and caring to his younger sister and Sam couldn’t fault him for that. “John and I love Toni. And you need to stop forming all these preconceived notions about us. You don’t know me, Leo.”

He nodded slowly. “I know and that’s something I’d like to rectify,” he added, watching her intently. He reached for her bags and rose. “Let’s go, Sam. We’re alone tonight. I’ve postponed the dinner my mother had planned tonight with the Spanakis family and Maria is staying at the hospital. We’ll have ample time to get to know each other.”

“Your parents left?” She would be alone with Leo tonight. Somehow that didn’t make her feel any calmer.

“First thing this morning. They’re returning tomorrow night and we’ll have her dinner party then.” He smiled at her. “My mother is quite intrigued by you and my father couldn’t stop talking about that delectable meal you made.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile too, even though a part of her was uneasy with the knowledge she would meet Katina for the first time tomorrow. “I like your parents. Their aura is very warm and generous. Protective and loving. Very family-oriented.”

“You don’t say,” he said, his mouth quirking as though he was trying to hide a smile.

“Yes.” She rose and slipped on her yellow sundress over her bikini. Leo’s gaze flickered approvingly over her slim curves. A warm blush settled on her cheeks.

“And you?” he asked casually. “Are you family-oriented? Do you want your own children one day?”

"If the right man came along," she replied. And he wanted to live in Somerset, she thought morosely, and he didn't mind her busy, active life. But that was the problem, wasn't it? She doubted any man would make that kind of sacrifice for her. "In any case, it's a little difficult for me to fall in love when men are an open book to me."

Leo stiffened. "And am I an open book to you?"

"Not entirely. You're one of the few people I can't read completely." She didn't want to admit to him that she'd been trying to read him for two months and she'd managed to finally catch a small glimpse last night after he left her room.

"Well, then," he said firmly, his hand reaching for the small of her back to guide her from the beach while his other hand carried their bags. "Since we'll be alone for dinner tonight that will give you ample time to figure me out."

Sam laughed nervously. "Perhaps tonight would be an ideal time for me to give you a reading."

He flashed her a seductive smile. "Actually, I'm not as adverse to that idea anymore."

"You're not? I thought—"

"People can change their minds, Sam. It's done, then. After dinner you will give me a reading. Somehow I get the feeling the experience will be very entertaining."

She saw his car parked behind the Volvo she had taken earlier to shop. "Since Maria won't be in, I'll make us dinner," she offered.

"As it happens, I will be the one cooking tonight. Nothing fancy, mind you. I thought I'd cook us a couple of steaks and grill some asparagus." Sam's expression made him raise his brow. "Surprised to find I know my way around a kitchen, Sam?"

"A little."

"Well, it seems now you're the one who's formed a preconceived opinion of me. Tonight we will remedy that. We have all night long to get to know each other better."

Politely, she smiled at him, but inside she felt like running.

"I'll follow you up to the house," he added smoothly.

* * * *

It was almost six and she wasn't even dressed yet. Sam stared at the clothes she had placed on the bed. She wanted to wear something special, but she didn't want to make it look she was trying hard.

She stared at the black, mini dress with spaghetti straps and chewed her lower lip. Too sexy, she thought. If she wore it, Leo would think she was telling him 'come and get me'. *Next*, she decided, and shifted her gaze to her following selection. The red dress was frilly and long, and the bodice had a snug, empire cut that lifted her breasts and gave her more cleavage than she had. Wrong! If the black dress said 'come and *get* me', this one said 'come and *take* me'.

She glanced at the clock and sighed. She would just have to go with her original choice, she thought, and looked at her white, short sleeved silk top and black, A-line skirt that fell softly around her knees. Her pretty black and gold sling back sandals would be the finishing touch.

Quickly she dressed and dabbed a little perfume behind her ears.

She was nervous as she wondered why this felt like a date. She gave herself one last check in the mirror, and was pleased with her appearance. Her tan gave her a healthy glow and her hair behaved, falling in thick, lustrous waves down her back.

Gingerly, she left her bedroom and went downstairs. She had reached the halfway point on her descent down the stairs when she caught sight of Leo coming out into the hall.

"Whatever you do," she muttered under her breath, "don't fall."

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked up at her as she made her way down. She smiled nervously at him, her stomach fluttering a mile a minute. He didn't smile back as he stared at her intently. Sam felt like she was going to faint, and when she reached him, she saw his throat working with emotion.

"Did you know you talk to yourself?" he murmured deeply.

"I know. Bad habit."

He drew in a deep breath and his nostrils flared slightly as he raked a dark, smouldering gaze over her face. "You look beautiful, Sam," he finally said, his tone curiously husky.

"Th...thank you," she whispered.

He wore a violet silk shirt that looked so soft she wanted to touch it. The colour brought out his dark hair and dark eyes, and she almost blurted out how gorgeous he looked. A nervous giggle escaped her, and she cleared her throat to cover up the sound. His slacks were a soft black and seemed tailor-made to fit his muscular physique. Sam's nerves grew. This man was going to be the death of her, with all the flutterings and tension she kept experiencing around him.

"Relax," he said softly, and gave her his hand.

She took a steadying breath and smiled up at him. She took his hand and immediately felt better. What was it about this man's touch that calmed her? The irony was his touch both calmed and excited her. She followed him into the kitchen.

"I thought we would eat here. It's much more personal than the huge dining room. Is that fine with you?"

"Perfect," she said.

She saw he had set two place settings on the kitchen table. He walked over to the stove. "The steaks and asparagus are done." He prepared two plates and brought them to the table.

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked politely.

"No, thank you. Everything is ready." He opened a bottle of red wine and poured it into two crystal wine glasses. Slowly, he picked up the glasses and turned around to look at her where she still stood near the entrance. His gaze held hers as he made his way slowly toward her.

"To getting to know each other," he said quietly, handing her a glass.

Sam smiled. "Yes. To...to getting to know each other."

They chatted for a bit about day-to-day things—the weather, how she enjoyed her trip so far, good stores to visit in town—and all the while, Sam knew Leo was trying to make her feel comfortable and relaxed.

The steak was succulent. Sam finished every morsel and smiled her appreciation at him. She complimented him on his cooking and he returned her smile with pride.

She was also surprised to learn that Leo had a couple of homes in addition to this summer house. He had a home in Athens and another one in England. He had been thinking of buying a home in New York or Boston, but told her he was still deciding where to place his American roots.

"Our twelve hotels are scattered all over the Greek islands. I was thinking of expanding to the States before I realized we had gotten too big. This villa is my place to get away from it all. I come here almost every summer."

"You travel a lot."

"Yes, but I would like to put roots down one day and start a family."

Sam thought about Leo with a family and living in a beautiful home with his children playing in the backyard while his wife made dinner and she felt a tightening around her heart. She gave him a contemplative look.

"I think you'd make a fine father one day," she said, speaking her thoughts out loud as she recalled his kind gesture when he bought Alek the paint set. As soon as Sam voiced the words, she was embarrassed.

He smiled. "I do want children, but I'm afraid I haven't been around many the past few years."

Their light, easygoing conversation turned to their childhoods and Leo shared some interesting stories of him and Toni growing up. An hour later, Sam was giggling at a story Leo had just told her about Toni and him attempting to roller skate for the first time when they were kids.

"True story." He chuckled. "I ended up underneath the parked car and Toni went sailing into the gazebo. Our mother nearly had a heart attack. She thought we'd broken every bone in our bodies."

Sam wiped her moist eyes. "Oh. I shouldn't be laughing. Your poor mother. I can imagine how she must have felt when she saw you careening under the car." She tried to stop another giggle. "You just reminded me of some of the predicaments I used to get myself into."

"Like what?" he asked.

She grinned. "I was always getting into trouble. I remember one time, I think I was about nine, there was a rainbow and I wanted to catch the pot of gold, so I took off after it. I walked for hours until a storm broke out and I had to wait under an elm until it stopped raining. My father showed up on horseback and the whole ride back to the ranch I got lectured about the importance of safety and common sense."

"Were you scared when you were caught in the storm?"

“No. I was more afraid of my mother’s lecture when I got home.” She smiled and took another sip of her wine. “Leo, I had a really nice time tonight. The dinner was fabulous and your company was great. Thank you.”

His face turned serious. “You were nervous at the beginning.”

“A bit, but not anymore.” She placed her glass down. She already had three glasses and was starting to get tipsy. “I think the wine helped. I’m not much of a drinker.”

“The night is still young,” he said holding her gaze.

“Yes, it is.”

“I have an idea about what we could do now.”

Sam felt her heart skip a beat at the deep look he gave her. “Oh?”

He smiled. “You could give me my reading now. We could go into the library.”

Relief flooded through her veins and she returned his smile. A part of her wondered if he knew where her mind had gone. “That’s a great idea.” They both rose.

“I’ll clear the plates later,” he said.

“I can help you do it now if you like?”

He glanced over her attire and shook his head. “I wouldn’t want you to soil your pretty outfit.”

He took her hand and led her out into the hall. He paused and glanced down at her. “Don’t you need your cards?”

“Oh! You’re right.” She smiled sheepishly and regretfully let go of his hand. She liked his touch. “I’ll only be a minute.”

He smiled. “I’ll be waiting.”

She returned in no time and found him in the library settled comfortably at a two-seater, round table by the window. He caught her eye and smiled. Her heart tripped at the familiar look he gave her. Anticipation made her stomach somersault. The start of this evening had felt like a date because it was a date, she realized. Leo was wining and dining her. Was that why he had postponed the dinner party his mother had planned? To be alone with her? The thought gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling in the pit of her stomach. How far was she willing to go, she wondered? She had no doubt where he wanted the evening to end up. Did she want the same thing? Was she ready to lose all her inhibitions with this man and explore the passion that simmered beneath his dark, smouldering gaze?

A touch of nerves attacked her and she took her seat across from him. Sex was the one thing she had never gotten around to exploring in her busy life, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to start with Leo.

She knew making love to someone as devastatingly handsome and irresistibly sexy as Leo would leave her in a stupor for weeks and she wasn’t ready to lose the disciplined control she had carefully carved out in her life. Besides, the cards had told her to stay away from him and that’s what she intended to do.

Sam placed her Tarot on the table and without any sense of vanity, she put on the dainty, black wired reading glasses she had brought downstairs with her. She gave him a self-assured look. "Short-sighted, but I can spot a fly on a wall a hundred feet away."

He smiled. "You look like a school teacher."

"I feel like a school teacher when I wear them."

"A sexy school teacher."

"Oh," she said, breaking his seductive gaze as she proceeded to shuffle the cards. Flustered, she tried to focus on what she was doing. She heard him chuckle softly. It was an attractive sound and she half smiled.

"I make you nervous, don't I?" he asked.

She tossed him a sharp, green-eyed look. "Not at all."

"Why do my compliments make you look like you want to run away? I thought women liked compliments."

"We do." She laid the cards down in the pattern of the past, present, and future.

"Don't men compliment you? Why does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Yes and I don't know," she replied firmly, answering both questions in unison. She looked up at him. "Now, I'm ready to read your cards."

Chapter 7

“Hmm. Curious.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes, I’m picking up a lot of colors around you. Red and blue. The red signifies...er... passion and love, which is in the process of coming into your life now, and the blue is something very secretive. I think deceitful is a better word. It symbolizes something that is false in your life.” She frowned and looked up at him curiously. “Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes. Go on,” he said, his expression revealing nothing.

“Let’s see. I’m picking up a name. A first name and this person, a male, has a lot of dark energy around him.” She gave him another look and this time it was alarmed. “Leo, this person must not be trusted. Who’s Carl?”

Shock fell over his face. “Did you say Carl?”

“Yes,” she replied, noting him clench his hand on the table. Something had changed about him. He was no longer the man trying to wine and dine her. A veil had fallen over his face, making him appear guarded and cautious.

“It’s actually Carlos. Carlos Ventura, but I’ve heard his associate call him Carl.”

“That must be him, then. That’s who I see.”

His face tensed. “You *see* him?”

“Not completely, but I can give you a general description.”

“Go ahead,” he said in a grim tone.

Sam could feel the scepticism pouring out of his stiff posture, but she continued with the reading because she was used to his reaction. Mostly everyone she read to for the first time responded like this. People got spooked and she couldn’t fault him for feeling the same way.

“He’s six feet tall,” she continued calmly, “lean, with dark short hair, but it looks greasy and stringy, as though he puts too much gel on it. And I see a mark below his left eye.”

“It’s a scar,” he offered coldly.

“That must be it, then.”

“What is it about him you don’t trust?”

“I see him as an unscrupulous man. He has no regards for the feelings of others and he takes what he wants at any cost. Odd,” she added under her breath as her ears tingled. “I don’t know why, but I keep hearing ringing and bells.”

“That’s enough.”

Sam looked up at him sharply. “Excuse me?” “

“Who did you get this information from? Tell me,” he demanded, his tone harsh.

Sam knotted her brow in consternation. "Leo, I don't know what you mean. I've never heard of this man before now." She paused, but he remained silent, immovable. She pursed her lips. "Oh my God, you don't believe me," she added quietly. Her date with Leo was obviously taking a turn for the worst and the realization flooded her with disappointment.

He gave her a pointed look. "I'm a little hard pressed to believe you just gave me the name and physical description of the man I'm here to do business with. Carlos Ventura owns casinos—that's the ringing and bells you...ah...heard."

Sam took a deep breath, trying to remain calm. "Leo, it's okay," she said softly, noticing his eyes flicker when his gaze dropped to her gentle smile. "A lot of people receiving a reading for the first time get a little nervous and have a hard time believing what they hear."

"I'm not nervous."

"No, of course you're not, but you're having a hard time believing that what I told you is what I've just seen, heard and felt. We aren't even three minutes into the reading and you're already accusing me of lying."

"What else do you see?" he asked slowly.

"Are you sure you want me to continue?"

"By all means."

"Okay." She looked back down at the cards and focused on their images. "Well, I can see you love your family very much and you worry about Toni." She paused as the hair at the back of her neck rose. "I...I need to caution you, Leo," she said raising a pair of startled green eyes to his intent face. "There's a woman in your life who's in some kind of danger."

"Is it Toni?" he asked abruptly.

"No, but she's very close to you. I don't feel as though it's your mother either. You have a strong connection to this woman and she may be in grave danger if she's not careful. Strangely enough, I see animals all around her. I can't make out what kind of animals, but I know their fur is sleek and shiny. Brown and black. But I don't want to alarm you," she added quickly when she saw his expression shift to worry. "You're going to save her. And if...if it helps you any, I see a lightning bolt."

"I see," he said quietly, thoughtfully.

Sam looked at the cards again. "Your parents are going to live a long life and I see them with—no, this can't be."

"What is it?"

Her expression was odd. "I see them with a lot of grandchildren."

"What's so unusual about that?" he asked, the first glimmer of a smile appearing on his otherwise austere expression.

"Leo, I see them with fourteen grandchildren," she said quietly. "Isn't it just you and Toni?"

He seemed amused. "Somehow, I cannot see myself and Toni with six or seven children each."

Sam grew still, frowning. The cards never lied to her. She looked at them again, perplexed. "Maybe I'm reading them wrong."

"More than likely, you are. Unless I marry Mother Goose."

Her gaze snapped to his face, but she quickly recovered once she saw he regarded her with no mockery. He appeared relaxed, almost amused. At least he wasn't accusing her of lying anymore, she thought with relief.

"Please, do continue," he added. "Speaking of marriage, who will I be with?"

Sam was surprised he asked her that question since he was supposedly marrying Katina Spanakis. Was he humouring her? She didn't think so, she thought. She looked back down at the cards. "Hmm. It's not that clear." And it wasn't because all she could see around her was a thick mist covering two roads. "Your love life has two paths. The end is still to be determined."

"What do you mean?"

She gave him a careful look. "Your happiness depends on choice and sacrifice. To be with your one true love, you need to decide how much you're willing to sacrifice. One road leads to her and the other one doesn't."

"What does she look like?"

Sam was beginning to feel uncomfortable talking to him about his love life and she dreaded reading the cards in case a clear image of Katina popped into her mind.

"Don't stop now," he said dryly. "This reading is just getting very interesting."

She controlled her scrambled thoughts and looked down. "There is that mist again," she murmured. "I can't make her out." Frustration welled in her throat. Goodness, she had never had so much difficulty giving someone a reading before. She gave Leo a regretful look. "I'm so sorry. I can't. There's all this mist surrounding her and I can't make her out." She stopped talking as a familiar awareness seeped through her bones. "Hang on a minute," she murmured and looked back down. "Wait. I can see some character traits, if that helps. She's generous and compassionate. Strong yet vulnerable. And she has a pure spirit. Unshakable and brave." She was relieved at finally having had some breakthrough. For a moment she was worried she was losing her gift. Sam raised her face at Leo. "Does she sound like someone you know?" she asked curiously.

His mouth quirked, as if he was trying hard to hide a smile. "Perhaps."

"Good," she smiled. "I was getting nervous. I thought I was losing my touch."

"What is she afraid of?"

Curious question, she thought, and glanced back down at the cards. "Hmm. Funny you should ask that. This woman's life revolves around her biggest fear. She's afraid of not being accepted. She's afraid of rejection. Hmm. That's all I can see. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more about her."

A tell tale nerve pulsed alongside his strong jaw. "You picked up on Carl's name. Can you tell me hers?"

Sam drew three more cards and concentrated on them. "Just an initial, I'm afraid. S. Could be her first or last name." She stiffened. Katina's last name was Spanakis. The realization didn't make her feel good.

His lids came down, hooding the expression behind his dark eyes. "S, you say."

"Yes, but if it's any consolation, I can see you will be very happy—as long as you choose the path that leads to her."

Leo cleared his throat abruptly and held her gaze. "I must say, this has been a very intriguing reading. How do you do this?"

Sam shrugged, embarrassed. "I'm not sure. It just comes to me."

"Does it come to you when you want it?"

"No. It doesn't work like that. I can't turn it on or off, but if I stare at my cards and concentrate I can see and feel things."

"Fascinating."

Sam shrugged. "For others, but not for me. It's like my sixth sense. I don't find something fascinating that's as familiar to me as smelling or hearing."

"Well, this has been entertaining, to say the least. You've given me quite a lot to think about, Sam."

"I'm sorry I couldn't read more details for you, Leo. I usually pick up more details than this."

"One last question, if I may."

"Sure."

"I'm in the process of finalizing an investigation. What do you see?"

Sam looked down and an immediate flash of blue filled her vision. "The color blue is all around you again. The truth will be revealed. And Jake, no, Jack will help you."

Leo remained silent and brooding.

Sam pursed her lips. "You think I'm making this up again, aren't you?"

His expression revealed nothing. "Not at all. You wouldn't have any way of knowing about Jack. He's been my close friend for over twenty years, and as it stands, I'm hoping he will help me uncover the truth."

Sam smiled her relief. "So I wasn't off." She laughed softly. "I can't believe how difficult this reading was for me."

"And after all you've told me, I must say, I'm impressed. You are definitely gifted, Sam."

"Thank you, Leo."

"And I have a feeling I've grasped more of this reading than you have," he murmured, giving her a curious look.

Sam didn't understand what Leo meant by that cryptic comment and she was about to ask him, but he rose, glancing at his watch. She noticed his tense mouth.

"I'm afraid I've taken up a lot of your time this evening, Sam. I want to thank you for an enjoyable time. Thank you for sharing your gift with me."

Sam hid her surprise and rose as well. Was the date over? “The pleasure was all mine.” She was a little baffled by his abrupt change of mood.

She removed her reading glasses and collected her cards. Sam followed him out of the library. At the foot of the stairs, he turned to her and said, “Oh, and Sam. I don’t want you near the stables without me.”

She frowned. Where did this come from, she thought? “I’m a very good rider, Leo.”

“I’m sure you are, but please do as I say and stay clear of the horses.”

“Fine.” She made her way to her room and wondered what had changed him back to being cold and distant again

* * * *

At eight o’clock the next morning, Sam heard a knock on her bedroom door.

Quickly, she finished buttoning her light, denim shirt and went to answer it. She felt a curious mixture of hope and apprehension in her chest. She hoped it was Leo because she was looking forward to seeing him again, and worried it might be Leo because after the way their date had ended last night, she wasn’t sure what to make of him. He had been warm and friendly with her all night, but right at the end of the evening, he’d been distant and aloof. And she couldn’t for the life of her figure out what she had done wrong. What had set him off?

She opened the door and saw Maria standing there with the phone in her hand. Disappointment flowed through Sam’s veins. It wasn’t Leo.

“*Koritsimou*, it’s Toni on the phone for you. I’m going to the hospital now and will be back this afternoon.”

Sam smiled at the older woman and took the portable. “I’ll see you later, Maria. Send my regards to Nitsa.”

“I will,” the housekeeper replied as she ambled away.

Sam smiled as she put the phone to her ear. “Toni, how are you?”

“Great. You?”

“Great. I love it here. Your summer home is spectacular.”

“I knew you’d love it. Listen, Sam. I need you to do me a favour. I need you to take a quick peek at my cards.”

Sam frowned. It must have been important if Toni had called all the way from the States for this. “What about?”

There was a slight pause on the phone. “Remember I was telling you I wanted to buy a bike? A motorized bike to get around town?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me if it’s a good idea. John thinks it’s too dangerous and he said I should accept my mother’s offer for the car she wants to buy me, but you know how much I’ve always wanted a motor bike.”

“You want me to read your cards *now*? What time is it there?”

"Late. Early. Depending on how you look at it. Yes, please tell me now. I want to pick it up today, before John gets back home from the clinic. There's another customer who's made an offer to the sales guy, but since I saw it first, the sales guy told me he'll give me until today to counter-offer. If you tell me it's okay, I'll buy it, and when John sees it, I'll tell him you didn't think there would be any problems. You know how much your gift spooks him because you're always dead-on."

Sam laughed softly. Toni was right. John did believe in her gift. And he was just as spooked as Leo had been last night with her accuracy. "All right. Hang on a minute."

She got her cards from her night stand and brought them to the table by the dresser. "You there?" she asked after she lodged the phone in the crook of her neck and shoulder freeing her hands for the cards.

"Yeah."

"Okay. Gimme a second to draw them." Sam placed the Hermit, the Chariot, and the Fool before her. "Well, I can see you've been doing a lot of thinking about this purchase. I can also see you'll reach a specific goal. You're determined to get this bike and nothing is going to stop you. Discipline is the key here. You need to abide by the rules. Helmet, no speeding, traffic signs. And don't take any difficult routes to work until you feel safe and secure enough on the bike. All in all, it looks fine." Sam paused. "Wait. The Fool doesn't belong here for you. It's meant for someone close to you who'll make a foolish choice. Hmm. A rash decision."

"You think it's John?"

"Possibly, but don't worry. I don't see doom and gloom. Just keep your eyes open on this one. If someone close to you asks you for advice, think it through for them very carefully."

"Okay? So can I buy the bike?" Toni asked, jumping back to the reason she called.

Sam smiled, nodding. "I don't see why not. Just be careful, Toni. You know those bikes can be just as dangerous as motorcycles."

"I will. Listen, I have to go. Love you. Thanks a bunch!"

Sam stared at the phone. Toni was in one of her moods. When her mind was set on something, nothing veered her off course. Sam hadn't even gotten the chance to tell her she'd met Toni's entire family. It didn't matter. Sam would give her a call tomorrow.

She went downstairs and drank a strong cup of coffee before she went out to the back of the villa toward the stable. She wore a comfortable pair of jeans, boots, and a soft denim shirt—the perfect attire for taking one of the mares out for a morning ride.

She only wanted to meet the mares and then go back in the house and wait for Leo. He had made his wishes very clear last night when he had said he didn't want her going anywhere near the horses without him, but what harm could there be if she just popped in the stable to say hello to them? None, she decided.

As Sam neared the stable she felt a thread of excitement. She couldn't see them, but she could hear the horses' gentle whinnying as she approached the entrance.

She was just going to stay with them for a while until Leo returned. The last thing Sam wanted to do was upset him. In spite of the abrupt end to their evening last night, they had had a pleasant time and Sam didn't want to do anything to ruin it.

Sam made her way into the stable and breathed in the fresh, musky smell of hay. It brought her back to when she was a child and she realized how much she missed her parents. Her next visit back home was at Christmas and she couldn't wait to spend time with her family.

The two mares were lovely. They were standing side by side in one of the stalls, whinnying softly as they ate from the same bale of hay. Their coats gleamed a rich, warm brown and their bodies were toned and muscular. Sam approached them tentatively, careful not to startle them, and they both lifted their heads in unison to look at her. Their heads bobbed up and down, almost nodding their approval of her and she smiled. They were beautiful.

A low, guttural sound startled her. Sam turned around and drew in an awed breath as she stared at the beautiful beast. She hadn't seen the stallion when she had walked in because he was encased in another enclosure at the far end of the stable.

Slowly, she made her way to him, her eyes widening at his majestic strength. The stallion was bigger and more muscular than the mares, his coat black and sleek, shining with a richness that stemmed from long hours of grooming. It seemed to her he watched her intently as she walked to his side of the barn.

There was a dark, brooding quality about the stallion and it made her think of Leo and how his opaque, mesmerizing gaze followed her every move, making her feel flushed with awareness and anticipation.

Sam smiled, realizing she had to stop comparing Leo to animals, first the proud and powerful lion and now the dark and sleek stallion.

Still, there was something about the horse that touched Sam. She could feel his loneliness, his despair as he lowered his head and made another guttural sound. At that instant, she knew he was the horse she would ask Leo to allow her to take out for a ride.

She approached the fence around him and placing her hands on the top plank, she leaned forward, bringing her face closer to him. "Can I take you out for a ride, boy?" she asked gently.

The stallion whinnied as he approached her, lessening the space between them to a couple of feet. Sam wanted to touch him. She placed her foot on the lower plank and raised herself up.

Within seconds, the stallion's nostrils flared and he rose on his hind legs, thrashing his forelegs mere inches from her startled face. Stunned, Sam froze at the stallion's violent display of aggression and she felt the blood drain from her face. Then, almost in slow motion, she saw a thick hoof descend on her. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as a sickening wave of terror welled in her throat.

A pair of steel bands circled around her waist and pulled her back so sharply, she almost cried out.

“*Prosohy!*” Leo’s voice exploded from behind her. “You could have gotten yourself killed, woman.”

She felt his hands bite into her shoulders as he spun her around to face him. The sound of the stallion still thrashing about in his stall dulled her senses and she gazed, white-faced, up at Leo’s thunderous expression.

“I told you not to go near the stable without me. I thought I—” He bit back the rest of his words and gave her face a searching look.

Slowly, his anger dissolved and concern flooded his drawn-in features. Her knees buckled and he muttered a sharp curse word in Greek as he bent and lifted her up into his arms. She turned her face into his neck and closed her eyes. She inhaled his musky, outdoorsy scent and without thinking, she brought her arm around his neck, her other hand on his strong, powerful chest. She could feel his strong heart beating and she licked the moisture forming on her upper lip.

Her body began to react treacherously to him and the horror of what had just happened with the stallion disappeared as a more significant development arose. His hands seared her skin through her denim and she became achingly aware of him. She bit back a small whimper, frightened and unsure of what was happening to her.

“It’s all right, Sam,” Leo murmured deeply, his tone gruff and curiously strained. “You’re safe now.”

Was she? Sam doubted it. Being with Leo, close like this, her breasts crushed against his chest, made her realize how *not safe* she was. She felt the warm pressure of his hand on her back and she arched her back slightly to put whatever distance she could between them, but all that accomplished was to bring her breasts closer to him and she felt a thread of tension course through his body.

Alarmed, she raised her head from his shoulder and looked at him. His gaze dropped to her lower lip caught between her teeth and he gave her a smouldering look that sent an involuntary rush of heat to her face.

“Leo, please...please put me down. I’m...I’m fine now.”

Without saying a word, he carried her from the stable.

Sam bristled in his arms. “Leo, I said put me down,” she said more firmly. She squirmed and wiggled in his arms. “I’m too heavy,” she added inanely because he carried her as though she weighed no more than a sack of air.

Leo halted his steps and gave her a hard look. “You’ve just had a brush with certain death and you’re worried about your weight?” he remarked dryly. “Sam, you never cease to amaze me.”

“I’m happy for you,” she quipped. “Now put me down.”

“No.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m not a helpless waif. For heaven’s sake, I grew up with horses. I know how temperamental they can be.”

"I said no," he replied calmly and he continued to carry her into the house through the back door that led to the kitchen. "And for the record," he added dryly, "the term 'helpless waif' has never crossed my mind about you. You should not have disobeyed my orders."

Sam gasped. Disobeyed? Orders? She shot him a sharp look. "I didn't realize I needed to report to you. How dare—"

He held her gaze and a curious mixture of anger and excitement flowed through her veins. One look from his compelling, dark eyes and she almost forgot her head. Almost, but not quite. She wiggled furiously in his arms. "Will you please put me down?"

Without answering her, Leo strode to the foot of the stairs in the main hall and paused at the stairs. Her startled gasp was met with a curt, "Do not alarm yourself, Sam. I have no wish to ravish you after what you've just been through."

Her face flamed with embarrassment and she stared at the neat, little nerve pulsing at the base of his throat. "It...it never crossed my mind."

"You lie. You thought I was going to take you up to my bedroom."

"Of all the arrogant, conceited—"

"The library or your bedroom, Sam?" he asked abruptly.

"What?" she asked momentarily nonplussed.

He raised a sardonic brow. "You have a choice. I can put you down in the library or your room. Which do you prefer?"

"The...the library."

"I thought so," he commented dryly and proceeded to go through one of the doors in the main hall.

Leo carried her to the settee and placed her gently on the soft, floral print before he strode to a bar at the corner of the room and reached for a crystal decanter filled with clear liquid. He poured some into a glass. Sam tore her gaze away from the wide breadth of his back and surveyed the room. She loved this library. The floor to ceiling bookshelves; the green, leafy plants; the warm atmosphere of panelled wood. She decided if she lived in a house with this room, all her extra time would be spent in here.

What treasures, she thought, picturing herself reading from one of the small collection of children's books to a little girl. Elizabeth came to her mind and she smiled. Elizabeth loved stories being read to her more than she loved to draw, and Sam felt an ache in her heart, longing to hold the little girl in her arms again. Some of her most precious moments at the orphanage were tucking Elizabeth in bed and watching her drift into a peaceful slumber as Sam read her stories about castles and princesses and magical kingdoms.

Her thoughts changed abruptly when she saw Leo striding toward her.

"Drink this," he said as he offered her the glass.

"What is it?"

"Something that will make you feel better."

"But I told you I'm fine."

"Granted you're not in shock, but your nerves are on edge and this will help calm you down."

Her nerves were on edge because of him, she thought testily, and took the glass. His fingers brushed hers and she pulled away sharply almost spilling the clear contents. Leo gave her a slow, lazy smile as he settled casually on the settee beside her. Sam's heart beat erratically and she shakily raised the glass to her mouth, taking a deep gulp. Big mistake.

The drink burned her throat as it went down, like liquid fire, and she sputtered and coughed as her eyes pricked with tears.

"What is it?" she gasped, her startled gaze flying to his face.

"Ouzo. It's a Greek liqueur. I gather you've never tasted it before."

"No and I don't care to again, thank you very much," she replied tartly. She caught a glimmer of a smile on his face as he took the glass from her hand and placed it on the coffee table before them.

"Now," he said sombrely, as he brought his dark gaze back to her face. "Why did you approach Lightning? That was a foolish thing to do after I warned you against it."

She remembered the reading she had given him and the lightning bolts she'd seen. She must have been the woman she'd seen would be in some type of danger. She tried to ignore the tantalizing effect his nearness had on her. "If it's an apology you're looking for, I apologise, Leo. I'm sure the last thing you want is an accident. How would you explain that to Toni?"

His face hardened. "Precisely. I want you returning back home in one piece."

Sam tensed. Were they back to square one? Was Leo worried she would lay the blame on him to Toni? Her spirits dropped. After the nice day they had spent together yesterday, she had thought things had changed between, but now she wasn't sure.

"Why do you dislike me, Leo?" she asked suddenly.

He slid a sultry look over her flushed features and lower to her breasts as they rose and fell in anticipation to his response. He glanced lower to her lap and Sam knew he could tell she was nervous because of the white knuckled clasp of her hands.

"Do I?" he asked. His chiselled lips twisted into a tight smile. "On the contrary. I find you a very attractive woman, Sam. All your lovers must attest to your desirable qualities."

Lovers? Sam almost laughed. "I thought you said I wasn't your type?"

"When did I say that?" he asked.

"At the airport."

"As it happens, I find you very attractive and I've wanted to kiss you since we went to Nitsa's house and I discovered you were a woman of compassion and strength."

"Oh." Sam lost her voice. No one had ever said that to her before and she was warmed by his admission. Warm and nervous, she decided. "Well, that...that won't do. A kiss would serve no purpose." She rose to put as much distance between them.

He rose as well. "And the more I get to know you, the more I want to kiss you," he said deeply as he took a couple of steps to bring him directly in front of her.

Sam looked up into his eyes and a myriad of emotions went through her. Confusion, excitement, fright. "Yes, well," she said, hearing the catch in her voice as she took another nervous step back, "I'm flattered, but considering I'll be leaving in a week and a half, sharing a kiss would be fruitless. Not...not to mention you have a girlfriend."

He took a step toward her, his eyes growing darker. "I don't have a girlfriend."

Sam frowned. "Katina?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "We see each other from time to time. That is all."

He meant they sleep together from time to time, she thought with an uncharacteristic stab of jealousy. "Oh," Sam said quietly and dropped her gaze to his black shirtfront. She felt his fingers on her chin and he slowly raised her head. Her jitters grew and she delicately cleared her throat as she took yet another small step back.

Leo visibly stiffened. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Pull away."

"I don't."

"You do." He ran a rough hand through his hair, his expression unfathomable. "What did they do to you?"

"Who?"

"The two men you dated. You mentioned them on the beach. The two men who hurt you."

Sam drew her shoulders up. "No one hurt me. I broke up with them."

"Ah yes, because the cards told you to."

"Yes. What's wrong with that? And what makes you think the reason I don't want to kiss you has to do with a broken heart?" She drew her arms around her. "I just don't want to kiss you, Leo."

His lids came down, hooding his expression. "The lady doth protest too much. Perhaps we should put it to a test?"

Sam blinked. "What do you mean?" she asked, knowing full well what he meant.

"Maybe I should kiss you and if you don't respond, I'll never bring this up again."

Sam gasped softly. "That has got to be the most ridicu—*Oomph!*"

Her body went still as his lips covered hers.

Leo's hands crushed her body to his. He kissed her with a passion that chilled and thrilled her at the same time. Sam couldn't move. She'd been kissed before, but never like this. His mouth was firm and warm as it tantalized and coaxed her lips apart. Her limbs thawed as his hands ran over her back and lower to press her body up against his hard arousal. She whimpered against his mouth and was dangerously close to fainting. Then, without warning, her body reacted to the passionate onslaught of his mouth and she slid her arms up around his wide shoulders up to his head.

Leo groaned against her lips and she opened her mouth. His tongue meshed and mingled with hers and she clung to him for dear life. An alien part of her couldn't seem to get enough of him and she felt an ache in the lower regions of her body as she returned his kiss with fervour. This was where she wanted to be, she thought in a daze. In his arms, close to him, experiencing all these wild emotions she had never faced before. She was losing control and her neat, orderly life was unravelling before her eyes, but she didn't care. She felt beautiful and whole and safe in his arms, and the depth of her desire for him frightened her.

Sam moaned softly against his mouth as he dug his hands in her riotous mane, bringing her head closer to his. He groaned again and drew his mouth away from hers, his forehead resting on hers. They were both breathing hard.

"Before this goes any further, we need to talk," he said hoarsely. "Sam, there's something I need to tell you and you may not like it."

Sam was dazed. She didn't want this moment to end. She wanted the kiss to go on, but something in his tone made her look up into his handsome face. She could tell he was as deeply aroused as her. Was this where she was going to get her heart broken? Was this where she was going to collapse on the stairs because she was stricken with grief? The reading she had done on him the other night alone in her room came tumbling back and she tried to ignore it.

"What is it?" she asked.

He grimaced and a small hint of regret shadowed his dark features. "Do you remember I mentioned my friend Jack when you gave me my reading?"

"Yes," she said huskily.

"He's a—"

"Ah, *se vrika*, Leo."

The cold, hard voice made Sam jump out of Leo's arms. She turned to the door and saw a beautiful, dark haired woman wearing a pink, daring dress that exposed her deep cleavage. Her dark, exotic eyes shot daggers at Sam.

"We just arrived. My family's in the drawing room with your parents," she said in English. "I see you have a guest, *agapimou*. Care to introduce us?"

Leo shot the woman a cold, annoyed look. "Sam, this is Katina Spanakis."

"Pleased to meet you," Sam said in a small voice staring at the woman she dreaded meeting.

Katina walked into the room, her venomous expression making Sam cringe. "The pleasure is all mine, Sam," she replied coldly.

Sam felt the hatred pouring out of the woman and she stifled a choke as she gave Leo a quick look. "I...I'm going. I have to..." she said brokenly, making her way to the door.

Leo's lips thinned. "Don't go. We need to talk," he said hoarsely, throwing Katina another irritated glance.

Sam shook her head. She had to get out of there. Katina's dark energy was choking her. "We can talk later." She glanced at Katina who was watching them in smouldering, simmering silence. "Nice...nice to meet you, Katina."

And as she made her way on shaky legs out the door, she heard Leo say abruptly, "Actually, you and I need to talk, Katina. Now."

Chapter 8

Sam trembled as she made her way to the kitchen. Leo's devastating kiss had shattered any lingering resolve she may have had. Her inhibitions had fled, her doubt had disappeared, her connection to him had left her reeling.

She felt a sharp jolt in her stomach as she recalled how perfectly his mouth fit with hers, and an involuntary whimper escaped her lips. God, what he must think of her, she thought. He must have thought she was a lovesick schoolgirl the way she had clung onto him.

Sam took a deep breath as she opened the two-door stainless steel fridge for a bottled water.

"I'm such an idiot," she muttered and took three gulps when she realized she wasn't alone.

"*Eese edaksi?*" said a young, feminine voice from behind her.

"What?" Sam said as she spun around, startled at the unconventional sight before her. She stifled a gasp.

"I said, are you all right?"

The young girl must not have been more than fifteen, with jet black, short, spiky hair, thick black kohl around her eyes, and black lipstick. Sam cast a surreptitious glance at her attire and noticed the ripped jeans attached with huge safety pins, black tank top, and thigh high, grey army boots. This girl was making a serious fashion statement, only Sam didn't know what it was.

One thing was certain, though, Sam instantly picked up her insecurities, fears, and loneliness, and for some strange reason, she felt sad.

"Er... yes. I'm fine," she said after collecting herself from her initial shock.

"Why are you an idiot?" the young girl asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I heard what you just said to yourself. Why are you an idiot?"

"Oh." Sam pursed her lips. "Because I just did something really stupid. I...I always talk to myself when I do stupid things." And this was a big one, she thought. According to her cards, heartbreak was just around the corner now. She pictured herself collapsing on the stairs and wondered ridiculously if she could avoid taking them for the remainder of her trip.

She stifled a sigh. "I'm Sam."

"Elena. I'm here with my family."

"Oh, you must be Katina's sister." Beneath all that make up and rough attire, she could sense the young girl's sweetness and Sam was astonished how different the two sisters' energies were. "It's nice to meet you, Elena."

The young girl shrugged. "Whatever." She gave Sam a speculative look up and down. "Has my sister met you yet?" she asked suddenly.

Sam nodded. “Uh huh. I... I met her in the library just now.” Sam tried to block the memory from her mind. She could still feel Katina’s hatred pulsating on her skin.

“I gather she wasn’t too pleased meeting a gorgeous woman in Leo’s house.” Elena seemed smug. “She’s been so crazy lately. She was even jealous with Nitsa. Well, dinner should be interesting,” she murmured.

Sam could tell there was no love lost between the sisters and nearly hugged Maria for choosing that moment to make her bustling entrance.

“Ah, there you are, *koritsimou*,” she said, beaming at Sam. “I am going to the hospital to see Nitsa and the baby. She gave birth to a healthy seven pound girl. Would you like to come with me?”

Sam’s spirits lifted at the prospect. She had to get out of this house. “I’d love to.” She turned to the brooding Elena. “I’ll...I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Can’t wait,” the young girl replied with a small twitch on her mouth that resembled a smile.

“Maria,” Sam said, “before we go, I need to make a call. Do you have a telephone book? I need to look up a number.”

“Of course, *koritsimou*. I have one here in this drawer.”

Sam looked up the number to Alek’s orphanage and jotted it down with the pen and paper Maria handed to her.

The older woman smiled. “You can use the phone in the hall.”

Sam smiled. “Thanks. I’ll only be a minute.”

Her call to Alek ended up being fifteen minutes. First she had to locate him, and then she spent ten minutes talking to him. He was such a sweet boy, Sam thought. And it warmed her heart how happy he was to hear from her.

Everything was settled. After the hospital, she would take the Volvo and pick him up. Alek mentioned it would be easier if she picked him up at the main intersection near the orphanage and she took his suggestion because she didn’t know her way around here. She described the grounds of the villa to him and mentioned they could capture the scenic splendour on canvas before dinner.

Alek couldn’t contain his excitement, especially when she mentioned there were horses they could sketch.

Sam put the phone down and went out to meet Maria. Spending time with Alek would take Leo off her mind—and after that soul-shattering kiss, her mind, body and spirit needed the break. She’d never felt like this for a man and she wondered if it was pure lust or if she was in danger of falling in love with him. Her face flamed as she stepped out into the warmth of the mid day sun.

* * * *

The trip to the hospital was wonderful. The baby was adorable and Nitsa was so pleased when Sam held the infant.

Sam and Maria stayed for an hour and just before they left Nitsa’s husband took Sam’s hands and thanked her again for helping his wife. Sam was touched at the heartfelt gratitude on the young man’s face.

Two hours later, Sam was sitting with Alek in the gazebo on the villa's grounds. He had just opened his gifts from Sam and Leo and his eyes were curiously shiny as he thanked her in a gruff voice. The paint set was on his lap and he ran his hands reverently over it like it was a priceless artefact. She silently praised Leo again for his thoughtful gift.

"I'm so glad you like everything. I have a feeling that paint set is going to be put to good use."

Alek looked down at his lap, his expression awed. "It's amazing. I've...I've never had anything so perfect."

Sam patted his hand gently. "You deserve it. To become the artist I know you'll be, you need the right tools. Mr. Stefanos will be very pleased you approve of his gift."

"I have to thank him," he said shyly.

Sam smiled. "You'll get the chance over dinner."

His eyes grew shinier, and he blinked. "Thanks for inviting me, Sam. I'm...I'm glad I met you."

"Me, too."

He lowered his head and Sam knew it was time to change the subject. The moment they shared was getting highly emotional and she didn't know who was going to burst into tears first, her or him. She liked Alek, very much. He reminded her so much of the other young boys at Grangers Orphanage.

"So, how about we start on our drawings," she said briskly, opening her sketch pad to a fresh sheet.

"Sure," he said. "Oh, I almost forgot. I practiced the sea's horizon the way you showed me," he explained as he opened his dog-eared sketch pad. "I tried the same techniques you used for the light on the water. Here," he added, handing her his pad. "Tell me...tell me if it's any good. It was my fourth try."

Sam gave his drawing an objective eye and sighed her appreciation. "Alek, it's lovely." She smiled at him. "It's so much better than mine. I can't believe how talented you are. And you're only, what, sixteen years old?"

Alek's eyes widened. "I'm fifteen and there's no way mine is better than yours. Sam, yours is perfect."

"Well, thank you for your vote of confidence, but trust me when I say, when I was your age, I couldn't draw a square box if my life depended on it."

"I was wondering, do you just draw scenery, or can you do other stuff?"

"I can do portraits, too. I drew your portrait the other evening. Would you like to see it?"

"Yeah."

She flipped her pad to the end where she had placed his picture carefully and showed it to him. "Here. Do you like it?"

Alek remained silent for a few moments as he stared at it. He seemed impressed. "Hey, that's me. Wow, I can't believe all the people on the beach that day and I asked you for a pen. An artist."

Sam laughed softly. "I already told you there are no such things as coincidences, Alek. We met for a reason."

"I wonder what that reason is," he murmured, staring at the picture.

"We'll find out," she said gently, "and I'm sure it's a good one."

He looked at her and smiled, his dark eyes dimming with sadness. "Yeah, but you're leaving soon."

She ruffled his hair. "You are one young man I'm keeping in touch with. And don't you forget it."

"Hey, you two."

Sam and Alek both turned and saw Elena, all decked in her safety pins, army boots, black lipstick, and thick eyeliner standing near the entrance of the gazebo. Sam could have sworn the young girl had thickened her eyeliner since the last time she saw her and she heard Alek stifle a giggle beside her. She shot him an admonishing look.

"Alek, this is Elena," she began, giving the young boy a look the gothic teen couldn't see that said 'behave'. "Elena, this is my friend, Alek."

"Hey," Elena said, her energy belligerent.

"Yeah, hey," he replied.

"What's that?" Elena asked, pointing to the sketch pad.

"A sketch pad," Alek offered cheekily.

"Obviously. Are you two drawing?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I hang out and see?"

"Of course," Sam said quickly, patting the seat beside her. The chemistry between the two teens was bouncing off Sam. "Come sit next to me. Alek, show Elena the beautiful pictures you drew."

He passed Elena his sketch pad and she flipped through the pages, pausing every once in a while. When she got to the picture of the beach, she shot him a surprised look. "Hey, isn't this the beach down by the cove?"

Alek shrugged self consciously. "Yeah. Do...do you like it?"

Sam prayed the young girl would be nice.

Thankfully, Elena smiled, her teeth as white as snow against the black lipstick. "It's awesome. Hey, you're really good."

Alek blushed. "Thanks."

"I draw, too, but mostly superheroes. Wolverine, Cat Woman—things like that."

"Cool," Alek said, relaxing a little. "Sam draws people, too. Real people. Look at the picture she drew of me," he said, handing it to her.

"Wow. Hey, that looks exactly like you." Elena stared at the picture some more and then turned to Sam. "Can you draw me?" she asked shyly.

Before Sam could say a word, Alek chuckled. "Yeah. Draw her."

Sam didn't trust that chuckle and gave Alek another admonishing look, but he wasn't paying attention to her. He was staring at Elena's black make up and spiky hair. So much for that brief moment where she thought they were making friends, Sam thought.

She flipped her pad to a blank page and pursed her lips. She needed to do something fast if she wanted to avoid spending dinner with these two kids sparring with each other. She turned to the young girl.

"I'd love to draw you, Elena. Don't move. It'll only take me a few minutes." She swirled her charcoal pencil across the white page. Sam was careful to hide what she was doing from Alek. Ten minutes later, she put her pencil down and announced, "Done." She handed the pad to Elena.

The young girl's expression was stunned as she stared at the picture.

"Let me see," Alek said.

"Do you like it?" Sam asked gently.

"It's...it's beautiful," Elena breathed softly. "Is that me?"

Sam nodded. "Yes. Minus the spiky hair and black make up. You're very pretty, Elena."

"Let me see it," Alek repeated.

"Here," Elena said.

Alek reacted the same way Elena did and Sam hid a smile.

She had drawn the real Elena. The one without the scary mask that told the world 'look at me, I'm different, I don't conform.' Elena without all the gothic stuff was breathtaking. Her short hair framed her elfin face and feathered her high cheekbones. Her dark eyes, almond-shaped and luminous, projected a young girl ready to bloom into womanhood. And her lips, all sweetness and soft, curved upward into a tiny, secretive smile, as though she said 'look what I've been hiding'.

Elena laughed softly. "It's great, huh?" she asked the still silent Alek.

He peered up at her, squinted, glanced back at the picture, and then back up to her, his brow getting knottier.

"She's pretty, isn't she, Alek?" Sam asked innocently.

"Yeah," he replied, his gaze darting back to Elena. "Why do you wear so much black makeup? Are you into vampires, or something?"

Elena shrugged. "No. I don't know." She looked at Sam. "Do you really think this is me?"

"Absolutely."

Elena gave Alek a guarded look. "Do...do you like it?"

"What a difference," he murmured, staring at the picture. He shot an interested look Sam's way. "Can you draw anyone else?"

"Sure." Sam grinned and thought about those endless nights before bedtime with the kids at Grangers and how she entertained them. "We can play a game. I'll draw someone we all know and you two can guess who it is."

"Cool," Elena said, smiling.

Sam turned to a fresh page and started scribbling quickly along the sheet. She drew Maria, with rosy cheeks, wings, and a halo.

Alek and Elena giggled at the same time. "Maria!" they both yelled.

Sam chuckled. "Right. I drew her as an angel."

"Draw someone else," Alek said imploringly.

"Do Leo," Elena said, grinning.

"Who's Leo?" Alek asked.

Sam gave him a warm look. "Leonidis Stefanos. Mr. Stefanos. The man who bought you that lovely paint set."

Alek grinned. "Yeah. Draw Leo. I haven't met him yet."

"But do it like Maria's," Elena added excitedly. "Make it funny."

Sam chewed her lower lip as she stared at another blank page. Should she? She was a little afraid what her hand might do. When she drew, her creative instincts took over and there was no stopping her flow.

"Please," Alek begged. "I want to see what he looks like."

"Okay," she relented after catching his earnest expression.

Feeling a tad warm around her cheeks, she put her pencil on the paper and drew the first image that came to mind. When she was done, she held up the pad and the two teenagers squealed with laughter.

"And what do you kids find so amusing?"

Startled, Sam turned to see Leo standing a few feet away from her. She hardly noticed that Alek had immediately stopped laughing and was staring up in awe at the imposing figure of Leo. Elena, however, was still giggling into her hand.

Looking at him, all Sam could do was think about the kiss they had shared a few hours ago and her face burned with shame. Their gazes locked and all she could see behind his dark eyes was warmth and something else she couldn't define.

"We're playing a game," Alek offered shyly.

Leo directed his attention to the young boy. A glimmer of a smile hovered above his mouth. "And you must be Alek. It's nice to meet you, young man." Leo took a few strides forward, extending his hand.

Alek cleared his throat and jumped up, offering his hand awkwardly. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Stefanos. Thank you for the gift."

"Please call me Leo. And you're welcome." He turned to Elena. "Your parents were wondering where you went off to."

Elena grinned. "Thank God Sam was here. Otherwise I would have died of boredom."

Leo's gaze locked with Sam's. "You don't say. So, what is this game you're playing and what had all of you in stitches?"

Sam hugged the sketch pad to her chest and shrugged. "It was nothing. I drew a...a picture for the kids."

"Let me see it."

She shook her head quickly. "It's not very good."

"I insist," he replied in his deep, sultry voice.

Sam's stomach flip-flopped. "No, really."

"Sam, I could really use a laugh myself today," he said and put out his hand.

She felt silly. What harm would it be showing him the picture, and if it was a laugh he needed, who was she to deny him the pleasure? She looked up into his face as she handed him the pad and noticed for the first time how tired and tense he seemed. Her heart constricted in her chest and she silently hoped he had a good sense of humour.

Wordlessly, he flipped slowly through her pages and paused at Maria's picture. He chuckled softly and then he paused at Elena's picture and smiled appreciatively. It was when he turned to his picture Sam saw him tense. She had drawn him as a hybrid between a lion and a black stallion. His handsome face was surrounded by a wild mane and his body was the shape of a horse in gallop mode.

He gave her a serious look, but his quivering mouth belied his amusement. "Interesting, you see me as a beast," he said.

"No!" Alek jumped in. "Sam drew you as a...a king and a..."

"A majestic forest animal!" Elena supplied helpfully. The two teens exchanged a secret look.

Leo glanced from Alek to Elena. "Hm. A king and a majestic animal, you say?"

"Yes," Alek replied.

Sam took the pad from Leo's hands, unable to look at him. "I...I didn't mean to offend you. I...I apologise."

Leo smiled, and Sam could feel the teens visibly relax. "On the contrary. A majestic king doesn't sound so bad, does it?" he added, giving Alek a small wink. The young boy grinned. Leo cleared his throat abruptly. "I came here to tell you all that dinner will be served in twenty minutes."

Sam nodded up at him, barely able to look him in the eye. "We'll be inside in a bit."

"Good," he said. "I'll see you all in a little while."

"Okay," she said quietly, and watched him stride away.

"Phew. That man is huge," Alek said. "He's a scary, proud sort of man."

Elena giggled, giving Sam a sly look. "Hmm. And interested... er...I mean, interesting, too."

Sam grabbed all of her things, not bothering to remark on Elena's obvious comment. Was he really so transparent to Elena that the young girl thought he was interested in Sam? Not likely. Sam wasn't even sure he remembered their kiss. He had been cool and collected as though unravelling Sam's life a few hours ago was all in a day's work.

"Come on, kids. Let's go into the house," she said glumly.

* * * *

Once they arrived at the house, Elena disappeared into one of the guest bedrooms and Sam told Alek he could wait for her in the library while she got ready for dinner. His face lit up like a thousand light bulbs when he saw all the books on Art at his disposal. Sam smiled thinking how much she had in common with the young boy.

Back in her room, she put on a pair of white silk dress pants, a pretty floral blouse, and slipped on her black and gold sandals. Sam was touching up her lips with a bit of gloss when she heard a knock at her door.

“Come in.”

It was Elena looking all shy and nervous, her face completely scrubbed clean of all the black make up.

Sam smiled. “You look lovely. And I love what you did with your hair.”

The young girl blushed. “I washed it to get rid of the gel.”

“It’s perfect.”

“Thanks.” Her gaze darted from Sam’s outfit to the few clothes strewn on her bed. “I...I was wondering if I could borrow something to wear,” she added, her hand touching one of her oversized safety pins on her thigh.

Sam was elated. “Sure. We look like we’re almost the same size. Here. I have the perfect dress for you.” And she picked up the white frock she had worn when Leo’s parents had come for dinner a couple of nights ago. “Do you like it?” It was one of Sam’s favourite dresses.

Elena’s gaze went to the pretty embroidered roses along the hem and smiled. “Yeah. It’s pretty. You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. It’s my pleasure.”

Elena took the dress and made her way out the door, when Sam said, “Oh, wait a minute. You can’t wear those boots. Here, I have these pretty red sandals you can wear. You’re a seven, right?”

Elena smiled, looking relieved. “Yeah. Thanks, Sam.”

“I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Okay.” The young girl left.

Sam smiled. Elena and Alek were so much alike. Both needed attention. Both needed love. One needed confidence with his talent, and the other needed confidence with herself and Sam had a feeling confidence was just what Elena was going to get once everyone saw her.

* * * *

After all the introductions were made, everyone took their seats at the table and the young girl made her entrance. Her parents were the first to react as they looked up at her and gasped.

Her mother, Eftihia Spanakis, a formidable looking woman with gold jewellery, impeccable make up, and a salon-styled chignon, smiled at her daughter. “You look beautiful, *koritsakimou*. Where did you get that pretty dress?”

Elena smiled shyly and looked at Sam. “Sam let me borrow it.”

Costa Spanakis, Elena’s father, grinned at his daughter. “You look as pretty as a picture.”

Sam shared a private look with Elena and felt her heart lift with pleasure. "You should keep the dress, Elena. It's lovely on you," she said smiling with warmth.

The young girl glanced at Alek who regarded her silently. Slowly, a small smile formed on his mouth and he said, "You look like the picture."

Elena shrugged, but Sam could tell the young girl was pleased. "Just trying this out."

Leo's mother stared curiously at Sam. "Somehow I have the feeling you are the one responsible for Elena's long awaited transformation," Christina commented, her proud expression softening with a hint of admiration. Sam was touched by the older woman's flattery.

Alek spoke before Sam could say a word. "Sam drew a picture of Elena this afternoon without all that vampire stuff and this is how she looked."

"A striking resemblance to the picture, I might add, Elena," Leo offered kindly.

Sam glanced at him and saw that he wasn't looking at the young girl. Leo was staring at her. Their gazes held and his eyes softened as their kiss flashed before her. Sam nearly jolted from her seat. Quickly, she lowered her attention to the veal Maria placed before her and willed herself to calm down.

"Anything would be an improvement from that awful style you had, sis," Katina's cold voice said, prompting Sam to look at her.

Elena took her seat across from Alek and ignored her older sister. Sam felt compassion for the young girl. Katina needed a lesson on sisterly love.

The meal progressed from there, with the men discussing business and Leo's and Katina's mother discussing the upkeep of their homes. Every once in a while Alek and Elena would toss each other a tiny grin, and Sam remained silent, feeling more and more uncomfortable with Katina's baleful glares.

Sam glanced at Leo from time to time and caught him staring at her with a mixture of interest and admiration. Quickly, she took another sip of her wine and willed her head to stop spinning. She had to slow down on the drinking if she didn't want to make a fool of herself tonight, she thought.

"When are you returning to America, Sam?" Katina asked coldly once there was a lull in conversation around the table.

All eyes turned to her. "Next Wednesday."

Alek frowned. "That soon?"

Elena grimaced. "That sucks."

"Elena!" Her mother admonished her. "*Mi milass etsi.*"

Katina laughed coldly. "You can take the cook out of the kitchen, but you can't take the kitchen out of the cook."

Elena shot her a dark look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Katina reached for her wine. "Your transformation doesn't change the fact that you still have a long way to go before you...clean up."

Elena's face darkened. Quickly, Sam cleared her throat as she raised her glass. "I want to say a toast. To this beautiful country. Corfu is a beautiful island. Thank you, Leo and Mr. and Mrs. Stefanos for your hospitality. I'll never forget it."

And she would never forget him, she thought as she smiled at Leo. He returned her look with amusement and raised his glass as his gaze shifted imperceptibly to the two sisters. He smiled. She realized he knew she had raised her glass to stop any squabble Elena was going to start.

"You must return one day," Leo drawled.

Her heart stopped. She could never return. "One day," she lied gently and quietly ate her meal.

"And what do your parents do, young man?" Katina asked Alek while everyone enjoyed their meal in silence.

There was an uncomfortable pause before Alek replied. "My parents died in a car crash when I was nine years old," he said quietly. Sam tensed with compassion and stifled the urge to get up and hug him. She knew that would embarrass him so she stayed where she was.

"I see. Do you live with relatives?" Katina persisted.

"No. I'm in an orphanage."

Katina arched a dark brow. "No relatives could take you in?"

Alek shook his head and Sam could tell he didn't want to talk about it. She cast Katina a look that said 'drop it' but the Greek woman did not comply. "Why not?"

"I...I have an uncle, but he's...he's in jail." Alek's mouth tensed and he glanced down at his plate.

"I'm so sorry, Alek," Sam managed to say in a surprisingly gentle tone, considering the anger welling in her chest at Katina.

He shot her a morose expression and Sam's anger rose. "I...I didn't want to tell you," he said quietly.

"You can tell me anything, Alek. Nothing will change the way I feel about you."

"You don't think I'm...bad now?"

Tears welled in her eyes for him and she felt another stab of rage at Katina. "Never. Alek, you're not alone. I work with a precious child called Elizabeth back home at Grangers Orphanage and she's only five years old. Last year, she was home asleep and a robber broke into her home. There was a scuffle with her father and the robber shot her parents while she hid under her bed. A neighbour called the police and when they arrived, they found Elizabeth crying next to her parents."

"*Themou!* That's dreadful. *Oh to pethaki,*" Leo's mother exclaimed.

Sam nodded, shooting her a concerned look. "She just stopped having her nightmares last month. I've been there for her almost every night tucking her in and telling her stories so she's not afraid to go to sleep."

"Elizabeth has been very lucky to have you, Sam," Leo offered, his voice gruff.

"I'm the lucky one," Sam said. "I love her like she's my own."

"She didn't have relatives to take her in?" he asked, frowning.

Sam shook her head. "Her parents were only children and her grandmother lives in assisted care." Sam directed her emerald gaze back to Alek who had been listening very intently to every word she'd said. "So you see, Alek, you're not alone. I know a lot of children like you. Children who have had very bad breaks in this world. It's what you do with your life from this moment that counts."

Alek nodded slowly as he crumpled his napkin in his hand. "I wish you didn't have to leave so soon."

"I'll give you my phone number and my email and we'll keep in touch. I promise."

"Me, too!" piped in Elena, giving Sam a beseeching look.

Sam laughed softly. "Of course."

Sam caught Leo staring intently at her as she reached for her wine and froze. His eyes were darker than ever and his mouth quirked as though he was trying to control some deep, dark emotion. Sam felt a thread of electricity run through them and she tore her gaze away from his. His energy had taken her breath away and she wondered what he had been thinking about.

Maria arrived to take away the dinner plates and placed a salad in front of everyone. Sam caught Alek's confused expression as he stared at the two small forks around his plate. He picked up the desert fork and Elena cleared her throat delicately. He watched her motioning slightly to the other fork next to his plate and he gave her a look that was both grateful and embarrassed.

"I gather the orphanage doesn't teach culinary skills to the children," Katina remarked under her breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Sam choked on her rage and opened her mouth to give Katina a piece of her mind when, from the head of the table, Leo said very calmly, "I'm sure they have better things to teach the children, Katina, than which fork to use." He gave Alek a wink. "Personally, I still get confused. If I had it my way, we would use one fork and one spoon."

Elena giggled and her older sister shot her a venomous look.

"Sam," Leo's father said, directing all attention to him. "I was speaking with my wife and son earlier and we want to donate to a charitable organisation this year. Specifically, an orphanage. Do you have any recommendations for us?" He smiled kindly at her and she was touched by their selfless thought. "I'm afraid you made quite an impact on us the other day, you and your family, and we would like to contribute."

Sam was more than touched, she was honoured. For the remaining course of the dinner, she gave them some recommendations.

At one point Katina murmured scathingly under her breath, "Sam, the philanthropist."

All but one ignored her.

Christina, Leo's mother, gave Katina a hard, uncompromising look and said, "No, she's not a philanthropist. She's a giver, her whole family is, and that's more than I can say about us. They have not only given their money, they have given their time and love as well. *Dropi*, Katina."

Startled at having Leo's mother defend her, Sam shot her a grateful look and was surprised by the warmth and kindness emanating from the older woman. Sam returned her smile and cast a quick glance at Leo. He, too, was smiling approvingly at both his mother and Sam.

Chapter 9

Sam was relieved the dinner ended with no more innuendos or barbed comments from Katina. After a couple of aperitifs in the drawing room, Leo's parents and the Spanakis family bade everyone good night.

Sam wasn't oblivious to Katina's snub as the Greek woman sauntered passed her through the front door without saying good night. Elena, however, hugged her and promised to have the dress returned tomorrow.

Sam smiled. "No. Please keep it. You look very pretty in it."

Elena smiled her gratitude. "I'll treasure it." She glanced at Alek. "Hey, it was fun. Maybe... maybe we could get together sometime and draw."

Alek shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure."

Sam hid a smile. "Maybe the three of us could meet for a picnic. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Both teenagers nodded casually, but Sam could tell they were pleased by her suggestion.

"Mind if I join you?" Leo asked casually.

Alek's expression transformed instantly and his face lit up. "Yeah. Sure."

Sam looked up at Leo. "I'm going to take the Volvo and drive Alek home."

Leo nodded. "I'll come with you."

Fifteen minutes later they were winding down a small road. Alek was silent in the back seat and Sam peered out into the night. "Where's the orphanage, Alek?"

"You didn't pick him up directly in front earlier?" Leo asked.

Sam shook her head, giving him a sideways glance. "I met Alek on the main road. He thought it would be easier for me."

"It's the last building on this road," the young boy replied in a small voice from the back seat.

Leo drove to the front of the orphanage and put the car in park. He and Sam stared up in silence at the dark, sad, neglected building. Sam glanced at Leo and caught his grimace. Her heart softened at his compassion and she turned around to face Alek.

"Did you enjoy yourself tonight, honey?"

Alek nodded. "Thanks for inviting me." He collected his bags and opened his door. "Thanks again for the paint set, Mr. Stefanos."

"Please call me Leo. And I'm very pleased you like it, young man."

Alek nodded and got out of the car. Sam's heart constricted as she watched him make his way slowly up the steps in front of the building. He paused at the top and turned around. With shoulders slumped and a shy, sad expression on his face, Alek waved good bye.

She blinked away the threat of tears and smiled at him as she waved back.

Driving away, Leo cast a solemn look at the very silent Sam and commented, "He's a great kid."

She nodded, unable to meet his gaze. "I hope he's okay."

"He's going to be fine. You're right. That boy is a survivor. If I had a son, I would want someone like Alek."

They drove in silence to the villa and once inside, he turned to her at the stairs, his expression enigmatic. "We still need to talk, Sam. Would you like to have a drink with me in the library?"

Sam was too emotional and decided against it. So many things had happened to her the past few hours, so many emotions to deal with, she couldn't think straight. "Could I take a rain check? I...I think I'll just turn in." She thought about Alek, her heart welling with concern, and Leo's comment of wanting a son like him. Sam was all jumbled and confused inside, and having a drink with Leo wouldn't make her feel any less bewildered. Sam realized tonight she had a whole other issue to resolve. An issue she'd only now begun to face.

Sam was afraid she was falling in love with Leo.

He nodded slowly, his dark gaze unwavering. "Fine. We'll talk tomorrow. I'm meeting Carlos Ventura, the man interested in buying the Acropole. He's coming over for our final meeting at six. We can talk tomorrow night after he leaves."

Sam nodded, unable to shake the tingling sensation she felt at the back of her neck at the mere mention of the casino mogul. "Good night, Leo," she said softly.

"Good night, Sam," he said, his gaze dipping to her mouth.

Sam turned and went up the stairs before she did something foolish like fling herself into his strong arms and beg for his soothing touch.

* * * *

It was just as well, Leo decided as he poured himself a drink, his thoughts on Sam and the worry and sadness weighing on her shoulders. He felt his gut tighten with concern for her. He could tell she genuinely loved Alek, and he wished he could do something to make her feel better.

And yet, he knew if they were alone he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her. And right now, he knew she needed to be alone and sort out her thoughts.

Leo's face was grim. She was leaving next week.

He couldn't let that happen. Something had happened to him, since the first moment they met, and he realized he was as charmed and beguiled by Sam's magnetic energy as everyone else was. Everyone except Katina, he thought angrily, recalling how she had flat out denied meddling with Jack's file on Sam. His thoughts veered to the email he'd received this afternoon from Jack with Sam's original file and Leo's anger flared. The evidence and facts had been there. Everything about Sam had been altered and Jack's original file depicted the real Sam Leo had grown to admire and respect.

So much time had been wasted because of Katina. He'd missed his sister's wedding because of her. Worse, he'd been rude and downright mean to Sam from the first moment they spoke. Leo grimaced. But it was over. He'd ended it with Katina before dinner and he'd replied to Jack's email and filled him in on all the details.

Leo closed his eyes, his mouth drawn in a tense line, and thought of the beautiful woman getting ready for bed upstairs. Everyone was drawn to her. Children loved her. His parents loved her. Alek and Elena loved her. He loved—

An invisible hand punched him in the gut.

He swore softly in Greek and took a deep swig of his drink.

He loved her.

* * * *

Sam spent most of the next day alone as she went to the beach and stopped in town to do some shopping. She carried her bags up to her room and smiled as she thought about all the toys and souvenirs she had bought for the kids at Grangers.

She had even found a beautiful, silver bracelet for Toni and a very stylish pair of sunglasses for John.

Sam knew she spoiled the kids at Grangers. She pictured Elizabeth opening her gifts, squealing with delight at the pretty clothes and dolls she bought her and Sam grinned.

She was packing away her gifts when Maria came to the door.

The older woman smiled as she waved the portable phone she carried. "Toni is on the phone for you, *koritsimou*."

Pleased, Sam took the phone. "Hi. Twice in a couple of days. I'm touched. How are you? How's John?"

"We're both great and we miss you," Toni said, her tone sounding strange. "Are...are you enjoying yourself?"

Sam grinned. "It's so beautiful here, Toni. Your summer home is spectacular. Hey, you never mentioned I'd get lost in this house."

Toni laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Did you see the library?"

"I love it." Something was wrong. This wasn't the Toni she knew. "Hey, it must be past midnight there? What are you still doing up?"

"I wanted to tell you to check your email. Elizabeth drew a picture of you lying on the beach and she asked me—begged me, actually—to send it to you right away. I scanned it and sent it to your email."

Sam's spirits soared. "Okay. And please give Elizabeth a big hug and kiss from me. Tell her I miss her and can't wait to see her. How's she doing, Toni? Did the headmistress fill you in?"

"She's great. Don't worry. No nightmares, no nothing."

Sam was relieved. "That's great."

"Um, Sam? There's something I need to tell you."

“Okay,” Sam replied slowly, tensing. She knew something was wrong.

“I bought the bike and...and...”

“Toni, what is it?”

“Sam, I had an accident. I just got back from the hospital. I’m...I’m wearing a cast on my arm for two months.”

Her blood rushed from her head. No, it couldn’t be. Her cards were never wrong. “Toni, I’m so sorry,” she whispered tremulously. “Are...are you all right?”

“Hey, this isn’t your fault. I was being careless. John was okay when I bought it, but when I called him from the hospital he hit the roof. He...he just got off the phone with Leo.”

Sam froze. “What?”

“Oh, Sam. What a mess I’ve made of things,” Toni wailed. “I’m so sorry. John called to speak to you because he was upset you told me to buy the bike and Leo answered the phone. They got to talking and John told him everything.”

Sam couldn’t speak. Oh my God! Leo must think she was the most irresponsible, careless, stupid woman alive. How was she ever going to make amends with him now? She was the one directly responsible for placing his sister’s life in danger.

“Sam, are you there?” Toni asked tremulously. “Anyways I called to warn you. I know how my brother can get. If it’s any consolation, I think John and Leo bonded.”

“Yeah, they have me in common and they’re both mad at me,” Sam said miserably.

“Sam, it wasn’t your fault. You even warned me to be careful.” Toni paused, sighing wearily. “Okay, now that we have that out of the way, I’m dying to know how Leo turned up at the house. I thought no one was going to be there.”

“He’s staying here on business for the two weeks. He picked me up at the airport.”

“Is he...is he being a beast to you?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Not at all.” But he will be, she thought miserably. “He’s actually been very nice. We had a rocky start, but after getting to know him, he’s not a bad guy, Toni.” She paused. “Your parents are great, too. I met them twice. They came over for dinner and the second time they came with Katina, Elena, and their parents. And I met a wonderful boy on the beach. He’s fifteen and loves to draw.” There was silence on the other end of the line. “Are you there, Toni?”

“I’m here. Did that witch say anything rude to you?”

Sam knew who she was referring to. “I don’t think I was Katina’s favourite person. Elena is a different story, though. She’s a gem. I really like her.”

“And my parents?”

“I think your visit here next month will be a success. I told you that you didn’t have anything to worry about.”

“Sam, thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being you. I’m sure when they met you they must have realized John couldn’t be that bad.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and John got on the phone. “How’s my girl?” he asked in his warm, friendly voice.

Guilt flooded through Sam. “John, I’m really sorry about Toni. I shouldn’t have encouraged her to buy the bike.”

“I know you are and I’m sorry I called you. Leo was quite upset about it. He said something about you placing too much credibility on those cards. I hate to say it, sis, but I tend to agree with him. I remember you consulting your cards for everything growing up.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and relieved that John forgave her, Sam put down the phone. Now she just had to find Leo and apologise to him for her carelessness.

She recalled what Toni had said about the picture Elizabeth had made for her and she reminded herself to ask Leo to use his computer. Sam couldn’t find him anywhere and went into the kitchen and asked Maria where he’d gone.

“He went to run a quick errand, but he will be back in ten minutes. Do you want to have dinner with me in the kitchen? *Kirio* Leo will be having his meeting in his office at that time.”

“That would be great.” She paused, chewing her lower lip. “Maria, do you think he’ll mind if I ask him to use his computer?”

The housekeeper chuckled softly. “*Koritsimou*, I don’t think Leonidis will deny you anything.” Sam blushed and remained silent. “I’ll have dinner ready for us in twenty minutes. Do you like pasta?”

Sam smiled. “Love it. I’ll get ready and meet you in here.”

She went up to her room to freshen up. Sam spent a couple of hours with Maria and ate with relish. The Mediterranean climate had opened her appetite and she was certain she had gained a couple of pounds. Afterward, she helped Maria clear the table and wash the dishes. She went back up to her room around eight and waited for Leo.

She lay on the bed with a worn copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and read, trying to concentrate on Elizabeth and Darcy’s dilemma, when she felt her eyes droop. She had eaten too much over dinner and was having a hard time staying awake.

She closed her eyes and, shortly thereafter, fell into a deep sleep.

Sam woke up three hours later, disappointed when she glanced at the clock. It was too late for her to go downstairs. She reached into her luggage for her nightgown and she saw her Tarot lying next to her tops.

She was curious about this Carlos Ventura, the casino mogul here to do business with Leo, and she carried her cards to the bed. She was almost afraid to draw them after what had happened with Toni, but in her defence she had cautioned her friend to be careful. Slowly, she drew her cards, focusing her thoughts on Carlos Ventura.

Fifteen minutes later, Sam was a mass of fear, nerves, and worry. She had to see Leo and tell him what she'd seen! She chewed her lips, wondering if she should wait till morning, but alarm weighed heavily around her heart and decisively, she went to her door. She couldn't wait till morning. Sam needed to talk to Leo now.

She tried his office and saw it was empty. There was only one another room she could try. Sam went into the library and found him asleep on the settee. Her steps faltered as she thought about Toni's accident. She still felt guilty and was worried how Leo would react. She walked over to him and looked down at his sleeping form. Even in sleep he seemed a formidable man and it made the task of apologising to him and saying she was wrong more daunting.

Sam looked at his face and felt something squeeze at her heart. He seemed peaceful and vulnerable and she looked around for a blanket to keep the night chill away from him. She found one draped over the arm of a leather chair and gently placed it over him.

Sam didn't have the heart to disturb him so she started to turn around. As if sensing her presence, he slowly opened his eyes and stared up at her. His pupils were so black they looked opaque and he reached out and took her hand. Slowly, gently, he pulled her toward him and Sam's knees nearly buckled. Without saying a word, he raised his head and began to kiss her. Not an earth-shattering kiss like earlier, but soft, feathery pecks that melted her limbs and made her senses flame to life.

"I...I was looking for you. I need to tell you something," she whispered against his mouth.

"It can wait," he said huskily as he continued to kiss her.

Sam had almost forgotten why she was there and she gently pushed herself away from him.

"It's important, Leo. I need to talk to you about Carlos Ventura." He looked tenderly into her eyes and she lost her train of thought. "And...and I need to apologise for advising Toni to buy that bike. I should have told her she should discuss it with John. I'm sorry, Leo. My reading was off and I was too proud and blinded by my belief in my cards to realize the risks."

He remained silent for so long, staring at her mouth, she wondered if her words registered. "So you admit you're not always going to find the answers with your Tarot?" he asked quietly, his dark gaze meeting hers. "That some things are left for logic and common sense and pure faith?"

She nodded slowly, ashamed. "Yes." She recalled how her Aunt Zoe had said the same thing. How sometimes it wasn't about the cards. It was about faith. "You're...you're not mad at me?"

"No. I realized a while ago you care for my sister and wouldn't do anything to hurt her. I spoke to her husband. I feel your brother and I will get along."

Relief flowed through her veins. "Thank you."

"For what?" he asked with a hint of a smile.

"For not being mad."

"I was angry for a time, but I'm not now. If you had come to see me a few hours ago we may not have been having this conversation now."

Sam frowned lightly. "Oh."

"It is forgotten. Come here," he said huskily, drawing her closer to him, his expression darkening. "I want to continue what I had in mind."

But she had more to tell him, and the alarm she had experienced in her bedroom returned. "Wait. I...I read the cards this evening in my room after dinner because there was something about Carlos Ventura that bothered me." She closed her eyes as he brushed his thumb tenderly against her lower lip. This was hard, she thought. She couldn't think straight. "Leo, you can't do business with him," she said in a rush, dangerously close to flinging herself into his arms. "He's into loan sharking, and money laundering. His casinos are a front. The man's in the mafia." She took a deep breath as he cupped her face gently and ran light kisses over her. "Not to...not to mention the horrible things that will happen to families in the area when people develop a gambling addiction."

He stared at her hair and took a lock in his hand. "So beautiful. Like fire silk," he murmured. Then, he brought his aroused gaze to hers and said, "I'm not doing business with Carl, Sam. I called it off tonight."

Surprise lit her features. "You did?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Something on her face must have told him this was important to her because he slowly drew away and took a deep breath. "I've been doing a lot of thinking the past few days. I've been thinking a lot about you, your family, what you suggested I do with the Acropole, Alek..." he offered quietly, his voice trailing as he looked at her mouth.

She placed her hand on his arm. "And? What did you decide?"

"I discovered you make a difference in people's lives, Sam. You and your family. That you believe in something. Your passion to help people is contagious." He smiled. "Alek is a great kid. I like him. And you're right. He does deserve a chance at life."

"What are you saying, Leo?" she asked softly.

He took another deep breath and sat up, running a hand through his hair. "You were right. I am a wealthy man. A very wealthy man. Instead of turning our family business along the same lines as the Hiltons, I can do something more important. Something more valuable." He paused and held her unwavering, earnest gaze. "I want to turn the Acropole into a safehouse for children. I want to make a difference in their lives, like you and your family do. I haven't spoken about this to my parents yet, but I'm sure they will back my decision. My parents really believe in your family's cause."

Her spirit soared with delight. Her eyes immediately welled with tears of joy as she stared at him with all the love and happiness she felt in her heart.

"Leo, this is great news. You won't regret this. Your whole life is going to have so much more meaning. I'm so in—" She froze. *What* had she been about to say?

"You're so what?"

“I’m so incredibly excited for you,” she said instead of the stunning realization that had just dawned on her. She loved him. She loved this incredible man who shared her dreams and passion. Free and uninhibited, she flung herself into his arms and hugged him close. She heard him chuckle into her hair.

A second later, she realized what she’d done and pulled away, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

The look he gave her made her stomach somersault. “I’m not. You had the right idea,” he said, his tone husky and deep.

He pulled her back into his arms and held her close. “Let’s go up to my room, Sam,” he murmured deeply into her hair.

Sam closed her eyes and nodded slowly. She knew what he was asking her. And she was okay with it. She wanted it. She also knew their relationship would never go anywhere, but at least she could think back to this moment and treasure it forever. If she was meant to be alone, she would rather be alone with the memory of love than alone with no memory of love.

“Okay,” she whispered.

He took her hand and slowly led her out of the library to the stairs. He paused and looked down at her. Sam swallowed hard. There was something he needed to know.

“You know I would never do anything to hurt you, Sam.”

“I know,” she replied. “I want to do this.”

He seemed relieved and gave her a gentle kiss before mounting the stairs.

Leo led her into his room and closed the door behind him. Sam’s nerves were almost out of control and panic started to settle in.

“Leo, I need to tell you something.”

He stood before her and cupped her face with his hands. “What is it?” he asked huskily, lowering his head to kiss her again.

Gently, she withdrew from his hands and laughed nervously. She couldn’t look him in the eye. “Leo, I...I should tell you something before you... Before we...you know,” she ended nervously, glancing at the king sized bed.

“Before we make love,” he said deeply.

“Yes. That.” She took a deep breath, hoping she didn’t turn him off when she told him she was virgin. “Leo, I’ve never... I haven’t... I’m a...”

First he frowned, and then his expression changed as the dawning realization hit him. He stiffened. “*Themou*, Sam, are you trying to tell me you’re a *parthena*? A virgin?”

His stunned expression made her want to cry. She nodded, looking down at his muscular chest. His touch was gentle as he raised her face with his hand. The possessive, proud look in his eyes made her melt. “I’ll be very gentle, Sam. We’ll go very slow.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Sam, I won’t lie to you. It’s going to hurt a little, but I’ll go very slow and I won’t do anything to make you feel uncomfortable.”

She nodded up at his tender expression. She trusted him. "Okay. What...what do we do now?" she asked.

"We get undressed."

Leo started to remove his clothes and a tremor ran through her limbs. Nervously, she unbuttoned her blouse as she fixed her attention on his hands deftly removing his shirt and trousers.

He undressed quickly, his dark, aroused gaze steady on her face. Sam shivered. The moon cast enough light in his room, defining his chiselled abs and wide, muscular shoulders. He stood naked before her and shyly she glanced down. He was aroused and her breath caught.

Her fingers stopped on the last button of her blouse and she raised a startled green-eyed look to his face. "Leo, I...I don't think I can..."

The slow, lazy smile on his face warmed her belly. "We'll take it slow. Don't worry."

And she realized she wasn't worried. She trusted him. She loved him. And she wanted to be as close to him as possible. She ignored the stab of sadness in her chest when the nagging thought of leaving him surfaced in her mind, and she nodded, unbuttoning the last button on her blouse.

Slowly, she removed it from her shoulders, her gaze on his face, and she saw his mouth tighten, his eyes darken, as she stood before him in her lacy white bra.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured deeply and walked toward her. He cupped her face with his hands and bent his head.

The kiss was gentle and soft and Sam's lingering worries flew away. This was right. She sighed as she tilted her head back and slowly opened her mouth. This was what was meant to be, she realized. His tongue was warm and sweet and she let herself surrender to the passion she now knew she had been feeling for this man since the first moment she heard his voice on the phone all those weeks ago.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and brought her body up against his. His arousal pressed against her stomach and she felt a warm pool of tension gather in the lower region of her body. Leo groaned softly against her lips.

"You'll be the death of me," he said hoarsely as he drew away. "Take off the rest of your clothes, *agapimou*."

Agapimou? Sam recalled from her crash course with Toni that *agapi* meant love. Had Leo just used a term of endearment with her? Her heart raced.

Leo's hands slipped around to her back and within seconds her bra was lying on the floor. He made a deep, strangled sound in his throat as he stared at her breasts and brought his hands up to cup them. Sam nearly collapsed by the sheer pleasure his touch invoked. He bent his head and placed a feathery kisses on her breasts and she whimpered at the agonizing ecstasy of his mouth.

He helped her take off the rest of her clothes and she stood naked before him. Leo stared at her body long and hard, his jaw clenching. Sam watched the muscle working maddeningly along his jaw and any last, remaining thread of her doubt disappeared.

He wanted her. He desired her, and the thought left her breathless. Leo slipped his hands around her and lifted her off the ground. Gently, he carried her to his bed and laid her down on its satin sheets.

He lay down beside her and lowered his head, trailing hot kisses along her shoulders, her arms, her breasts. And when his mouth clamped down over one hot peak, Sam gasped in sheer pleasure. His tongue laved each peak and heat darted from Sam's breasts to the ache pooling in her belly. Arching her back in response, she ran her hands down the beautiful length of his strong back. Leo groaned against her breast as he ran his hand down the length of her side. Sam moaned softly. His touch was like heaven.

"Soon," he said hoarsely against her breasts. "I have to make sure you're ready."

She didn't know what he meant and didn't bother asking him because she was too crazed with mounting passion and desire. She wrapped one of her legs around his narrow hip and turned her body to meet his. She wanted to feel every inch of him on her skin. Leo sucked in a harsh breath and moved his big body over hers, resting his weight on his elbows beside her. Sam gasped as she stared up at his face. His expression was tortured and strained, as if he was trying hard to control himself, and she felt one of his hands slip down to where her legs met. He touched the most sacred and personal part of her body and she cried out, stiffening in response.

Slowly, carefully, he slipped a finger in her warmth and she arched her back violently. His touch sent a spasm of shock and need through her body as his fingers played with her core. Sam convulsed with pleasure.

"Leo," she whispered hoarsely. "What are you doing to me?"

"Making sure you're ready," he said huskily.

Sam arched her body and bit him on the shoulder as waves and waves of pleasure rocked her to her core. At that instant he positioned himself against her and held her face in his hands.

"This will hurt only for a moment," he murmured deeply before he brought his mouth over hers and entered her body in one quick stroke.

The pain was instant and fleeting, and she tensed under his weight. "Wait."

He looked into her eyes, his expression dazed and grim. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Just...just don't move for a second."

"*Agapimou*, I don't know if I can hold off any longer. I know I promised you I would go slow, but now I don't know if I have control. You intoxicate me." He kissed her gently. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said breathily.

"The worst is over. Let me finish this for us."

Confusion drew her brows together. There was more? He had already made her body convulse with pleasure, what more could there be, she thought. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around him and blinked at the pure, unadulterated satisfaction on his handsome face.

Leo withdrew and entered her body slowly.

Her breath caught at this newfound pleasure. She met and matched his movements, their tempo rising as an indefinable need pooled between her legs. Her body tingled, her flesh throbbed, her heat mounted and Sam arched her neck as she rose to meet him. She was flying, soaring, and close to reaching a pinnacle that would set her free. Leo made a guttural sound from deep within his throat and his pace quickened. Sam was almost frantic with need. She needed to reach that height she instinctively knew her body sought and then, with a strangled groan, Leo plunged forward and Sam cried out in sheer pleasure at the ecstasy coursing through her veins.

They lay in silence for a few moments, their skin sleek with sweat, their breathing ragged, and Sam closed her eyes, basking in the glorious aftermath.

After a few moments, she placed a tentative hand on the back of his head.

"Leo," she said huskily.

"Mmm?"

"You're heavy."

With a deep, low chuckle he slid to her side, gathering her in his arms. "Don't move for a moment."

Completely at peace with herself, she brought her arm around his broad chest. "That was nice," she whispered.

He wrapped his arms tighter around her. "Nice? That was perfect. You're perfect," he murmured.

They lay quietly together for a few more moments until Sam wriggled slightly in his arms. What was she supposed to do now, she wondered. "I should go back to my room."

"No. You're staying here with me. Close your eyes, *agapimou*." He kissed the top of her head. "Let us sleep. Tomorrow we need to talk. There are things we need to discuss."

Sam closed her eyes and felt the same stab of sadness she had earlier. There was really nothing to discuss, she thought miserably. She was leaving next week and that was the hardest thing she would ever have to do.

...Leaving behind the man she loved with all her heart.

* * * *

The next morning, Sam felt different the moment she opened her eyes. There was a little discomfort in the lower regions of her body, but it was more than that. Something inside her had changed.

Leo. She loved Leo and they had made love last night. The thought brought a small smile to her lips and she stretched languorously on the bed, reaching for the man who had changed her life. Who had made her experience ultimate pleasure. Who had opened her heart. Who had taught her not to be afraid.

His side of the bed was empty. Her smile froze. Then she heard the shower running from the adjoining bathroom and she relaxed as she got out of bed and quickly slipped on her clothes.

The shower stopped and Leo, wrapped in a white bath towel from the waist down, strode into the bedroom. He flashed Sam a sexy smile and her heart skipped a beat.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” he asked politely.

In the light of day, Sam felt an attack of shyness as she flicked a quick glance over his long, muscular legs and his trim and tapered abdomen. “Yes, I did. Thank you.”

“Good.” He came up to her and kissed her gently on the lips. Her shyness evaporated and was replaced by warmth and heat. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, but he withdrew. “I was going to ask you to have breakfast with me. I thought we could talk this morning.”

“Sure,” she replied weakly, dread filling her as she looked up into his suddenly serious expression. “I’ll just go into my room to shower and change and I can meet you in the kitchen in half an hour.”

She made her way toward the door and his voice stopped her in her tracks. “Sam, wait.”

She turned around and saw his expression change from grave to tender. “Did I hurt you?” he asked softly.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“It will be better the next time. The first time is always the hardest.”

Sam curled her lips in a sad smile. There couldn’t be a next time, she thought miserably. She was falling more and more in love with him and having a next time would only deepen the wound after she returned home. “Leo, we shared a beautiful moment. I...I’ve never felt like that before in my life.”

His face gleamed with possessive pride and he walked slowly toward her. “But?”

Sam frowned. “I don’t know what you mean?”

Leo’s mouth tensed. “I can hear a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“There is no ‘but’ except the cold facts. We had sex and I’m leaving in a few days. I...I don’t know if it would be wise to do that again?”

His face turned grim. “That’s what we need to talk about, amongst other things.”

Sam knew where this was leading. “Leo, don’t worry about me. As I said, we shared a beautiful moment and I’ll never forget it. I’m... I know this won’t go beyond what it is.”

“And what is it?” he said, his mood chilling.

Sam shrugged, struggling to find the words. “It is what it is. Two adults having sex.”

“That’s the second time you have used that word. Is that what you really think it was? Sex?”

“Wasn’t it?”

His face was working with emotion and he ran a rough hand through his damp hair. “Sam, it was more than that. We need to talk. There’s something I need to tell you and we need to figure out a few things.”

As in where this affair would mostly take place, she thought sadly? In the States or in Greece? It was a dead end issue, Sam decided. Seeing Leo on a part-time basis every few weeks or months would be more than she could bear.

He was right, she thought. They would need to talk. She would just have to tell him it was over and that she didn't want an affair. "Okay. I'll meet you in the kitchen." She turned around to leave, thinking about returning to Somerset in a week when a thought hit her and she spun around to face him. His expression was brooding and intent, as though he had been in the middle of a deep, disturbing thought. "Leo, I was wondering if I could step into your office for a couple of minutes before we meet so I can check my email. Toni scanned and emailed me a picture Elizabeth drew for me."

The corner of his mouth lifted into an imperceptible smile, but his eyes remained pensive. "Of course. Turn on the computer. There's no password."

Awkwardly, she smiled. "Thanks. I'll see you in a bit."

Twenty minutes later she was in front of his desk. Sam turned on Leo's computer.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, Leo was making his way downstairs, thinking how he was going to broach the subject with Sam about Jack's file when his stomach clenched with dread. He swore in Greek and sprinted down the rest of the stairs, taking them two at a time. Sam was, at this moment, in his office at his computer. He had forgotten he had placed Jack's file, the one Katina had altered, on his screen as a shortcut. When Sam turned on his computer, she would see her name in a file in the center of his screen.

Leo stormed into his office, praying she wasn't there.

She was. And the look she gave him chilled his blood.

* * * *

Sam waited a moment before his computer flared to life and her eye caught the small icon in the center of his screen. The words *Samantha Hope's file* filled her vision, making her legs weak.

Dread and fear settled uncomfortably in her stomach as she moved the mouse and clicked on the icon. A file appeared on the screen.

A few moments later she felt nauseous, angry, and stunned. What the—

Leo barged into the office and she looked up at him, tearing her gaze away from the words 'prostitute', 'swindler', and 'fraud'.

She gave Leo and hard, unwavering look. "What's this?" she asked coldly, numbing herself to the tortured regret on his face.

"I can explain."

"I'm listening."

"Do you remember when I mentioned Toni's last relationship to you and how I had suggested a prenup to the man she was seeing and he immediately disappeared?"

"Yes."

"He ended up marrying another woman, a very rich woman, whom he subsequently divorced, swindling her out of millions."

“What does that have to do with this?” she asked, pointing distastefully to his screen. “Furthermore,” she added, her voice rising with the anger that was mounting in her chest, “why does it say here I was a prostitute and that I swindled senior citizens out of their savings?”

“I hired Jack Brandon, the friend I told you I’ve known for twenty years, to investigate you and John. He owns a private investigation firm in London. That file you see is what I received a couple of weeks before Toni got married.”

Sam took a deep breath to calm herself down. “Well, he’s either a really bad private investigator or he lied.”

“It’s neither.” Leo strode into the room, his face taut and pale. “I’ve known for a while now the file was wrong. It was falsified, tampered with, before I saw it.” He stood before her and took her by the shoulders. “Sam, look at me.”

She couldn’t. She stared at his chest. “I don’t know how you can... Why you would... Why it said those things... Why, Leo?” she asked again, raising a pair of accusing eyes on his grim face.

“It was Katina. She tampered with the file before I had the chance to read it. I confronted her about it after she walked in on us in the library, but she denied it. I broke off our relationship—if you could call it that—right then and there and told her I never wanted to see her again. I only allowed her to stay for dinner to keep the peace between her parents and mine, but I made it clear to her that night if she had said so much as a syllable out of context to you, I would have hauled her out onto the pavement.” He took her face in his hands, his dark gaze pleading with her immovable glare. “Sam, I need you to believe I only had you investigated to ensure my sister wasn’t making the same mistake twice.”

“That’s why you were so hostile to me on the phone two months ago and then again at the airport.”

“Yes, but I quickly discovered you were nothing like that file.”

“I see.” She felt her heart thaw at the sincere regret tightening his features, but she couldn’t give in just yet. This was too much for her to take in. She needed time. “How could Katina do something so terrible?”

“I kept asking myself the same question. I can only surmise it was jealous rage.”

“Enough to ruin someone’s reputation? She had it that bad for you, huh?”

Leo grimaced. “I didn’t realize how bad until she started acting crazy around Nitsa, too, and on a few occasions Maria. Katina hated any woman in my life.”

“When were you going to tell me about the file?”

“I tried a few times. First in the library before Katina walked in on us and later on when I told you I wanted to see you after my meeting with Carlos.”

“And yet I discovered the file, didn’t I? So I’ll never really know if you ever would have told me.”

His expression was grave. “I would have told you, Sam. We were getting closer and I didn’t want anything to ruin it. I wanted to come clean with you.”

Her face burned with shame. "And then I slept with you. My God, I can't believe I was so stupid."

"Don't say that," he ground out, grabbing her shoulders. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Don't I? Your idea of getting to know me was hiring a private investigator? How do you think that makes me feel?" She pulled away from him. "I...I need to get away from here."

"Where are you going?"

"Out. Anywhere but here."

"Sam, please don't go. We need to talk."

She gave him a look filled with pain. "We have nothing left to say."

* * * *

The next afternoon, Sam stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a large white towel. She padded into the bedroom and combed through her damp hair when she heard a knock at her locked door.

Since the episode with Leo in his office yesterday morning, Sam had made it a habit to lock her door. She wasn't ready to talk to him yet. She wasn't sure she would ever be ready.

"Who...who is it?" she called tentatively.

"It's Maria, *koritsimou*. Please open the door."

Relief washed over Sam and she unlocked the door. "Hi, Maria," she said, her relief fading when she saw the stricken look on the older woman's face. "What is it? Is it the baby? Nitsa?"

Maria shook her head. "It's Leonidis, Sam. He has been in a terrible mood since yesterday morning and he's been asking to see you."

"Tell him...tell him I'm not well," Sam offered as calmly as she could, but the crack in her voice betrayed her emotions.

Maria wrung her hands into a knot and gave Sam an earnest look. "Sam, he... Never mind, *koritsimou*. I will tell him."

The housekeeper left and Sam closed the door. She didn't know how her legs carried her, but they did, and she sunk on the edge of her bed.

A few minutes later, there was another knock at her door. This time it was louder, sharper, impatient. Sam felt a crazy flutter of wings in her stomach. She knew who it was this time. There was no mistaking the muttered curse from the other side. Sam's gaze flew to the bolt on the door. Her eyes widened in shock. She had forgotten to lock her door.

In one swift move, she slipped off the edge of the bed, the sharp movement dislodging the towel from her breasts, and she darted across the room to reach the door in time. It was too late.

Sam froze, naked, as Leo swung open the door, anger blazing in his eyes. It took him a moment to register her lack of clothing. When he did, he looked visibly shaken and something predatory and wild sprung behind his eyes, making them glitter with unconcealed desire as he raked over her bare breasts, her long limbs, her taut flat belly, and lower to her femininity.

“Put some clothes on,” he said hoarsely. “We need to talk first, and talking is the last thing on my mind right now.”

With as much dignity as she could muster, she picked up the towel and wrapped it around her breasts. “What do you want?” she asked huskily.

“Didn’t Maria tell you I wanted to see you?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“Why did you send her away?”

“Because I’m not...I’m not feeling well.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked sharply, his anger dimming as he gave her a concerned look. “You’ve had too much sun today, and you missed every meal here since yesterday.”

“I didn’t want to dine with you.”

Leo clenched his jaw. “Starving yourself won’t help matters, Sam.”

“I’m not starving myself.”

“Then why did you miss out on the meals? Maria went through a lot of trouble putting them together for you. She thinks of you as one of her own now.”

Guilt coursed through her veins and her gaze wavered under his patronizing glare. “I didn’t realize...”

“No, you didn’t,” he commented dryly, propping himself on the edge of the doorway, crossing his arms across his chest, as he regarded her silently for a few moments. Her temper rose. Why was he making *her* feel guilty? He was the one who had hired a private investigator on her. He was the guilty one. Not her, she thought.

“Were you alone on the beach?” he asked softly. It was a simple question, but she could hear the sharp ring behind his words, almost as though he forced himself to say them.

“Of course I was alone,” she replied, irritated. Then, throwing caution to the wind, she added recklessly, “Give me at least another day to find another lover.” Leo drew in a sharp breath and took a menacing step toward her. “Will you go now?”

“Why?” His gaze grazed her body from head to toe. “Don’t you like it when a man appreciates your lovely body?”

Sam was a mass of confusion. On the one hand, all she wanted to do was fling herself into his arms and let his kisses and touch melt away her worries and fears. She also wanted to tell him she had forgiven him. And she had. How could she not? He had wanted to protect his sister as much as John would have wanted to protect Sam. Leo cared about Toni and had acted out of love when he had hired Jack Brandon to investigate Sam. She knew that now. She’d known it yesterday, actually, soon after their initial argument and the reason she had avoided him was because it had been the coward’s way out. A clean cut.

Sam knew their relationship began and ended here, and keeping her distance now would make it easier for her when she left.

On the other hand, all she wanted to do was to be left alone. She was on too much of an emotional rollercoaster and she didn't know how to deal with it.

"Please go. I need to change. I'm going to see Alek and Elena. We're going to rent three *pedalos* and see the island."

"No."

"I'm asking you politely to leave me alone."

He took a deep breath and slowly walked toward her. Sam shivered. "Why do you want to run away from me after what happened?"

"What happened?"

"Something that changed me. That changed everything between us."

The endless ocean between their homes hadn't changed. It was still there, lying like a malevolent ghost, taunting and nipping at her happiness.

He drew in a sharp breath as he ran an anguished hand through his hair. "Sam, I want you. Now. Don't fight me."

Their gazes held and she felt her treacherous body succumb to his passionate, raw, dark energy. She wanted him, too. She couldn't deny it, but was it wise to throw caution to the wind and fall back into his arms? She envisioned her life back home, without him. She had the love of her kids at Grangers and the joy of her work at the shop, but was that going to be enough for her? Instinctively she knew something was always going to be missing from her life. Something vital and strong. Leo.

With a small whimper, she let the towel drop and flung herself at him. He groaned as he gathered her into his arms, whispering hoarsely into her damp hair, "*Agapimou*."

There was that expression again. Did it mean 'my love'? Sam couldn't pursue the thought further. She wanted him, too, and she pressed her body up against his, female against male, wrapping her arms around his neck as she kissed him with reckless abandonment.

Leo ran his hands over her back, her bottom, her arms, leaving a scorching trail where he touched her. Sam whimpered against his mouth, squeezing her eyes against the threat of tears.

He carried her to the bed and laid her down, his face taut with desire and need. He ran a hungry, dark gaze over her body as he quickly shed his clothes. And then he was on top of her and Sam arched her body to meet his as he ran ardent, hot kisses over her face. This may have been the last time she was going to be with him and she clung to him like a drowning woman to air. She didn't want this to end.

"I want you now, Leo," she whispered.

The dark, possessive look he gave her sent a tremor through her limbs and she lifted the lower part of her body to meet his.

Without another word, he entered her, swiftly and sharply, and she cried out. He filled her completely and they began to move in unison. Sam arched her neck and closed her eyes as the escalating pressure in her belly mounted. She dug her nails into his back and wrapped her legs around him.

Leo climaxed with one final, hard thrust, spending his seed in her and Sam followed as she soared to the heavens and then plummeted to earth.

She wrapped her arms around him. This time she didn't tell him he was too heavy. This time she held him close to her breasts. They didn't have much time left together and she wanted every second to count.

"Under no circumstances do we delay our talk," he practically growled into her neck. He raised his head and gave her a determined look. "I'm going to shower. We're meeting in the dining room in thirty minutes. Be there," he added harshly, dropping a hard kiss on her bruised lips.

And all she could do was nod.

Chapter 10

Thirty minutes later, Sam was ready to meet Leo. She put on a simple pair of beige pants, a white shirt and slipped on her brown sandals. Her hair was misbehaving and she pulled it up into a messy knot at the base of her neck. A few tendrils escaped the clip and she let the wisps fall and frame her glowing, tanned face.

Sam glanced at her gold wrist watch and inhaled an unsteady breath. Leo was waiting for her. She made her way down the stairs as Maria was coming up with the portable phone in her hand.

“It’s Toni for you, my dear.”

Sam took the phone.

“Sam, I have bad news,” Toni said, her tone serious.

Her belly lurched. My God, one of the children was hurt! “What is it?” Toni didn’t respond and Sam panicked. “Oh my God, it’s one of the kids, isn’t it? Toni!”

“Sam, you’re not going to like what I’m going to tell you and there’s no way to say it other than just to blurt it out.” She paused. “Elizabeth’s getting adopted.”

“What?” A cold dread seeped into her bones and her legs turned to jelly as she collapsed on the stairs. “What did you say?” she asked woodenly, grasping the stair’s handrail with her free hand.

Toni made a sympathetic noise from the other end of the line. “I’m so sorry, Sam. The papers will be signed on Monday and Elizabeth will be gone from Grangers by Tuesday. The headmistress called to let me know. She thought you’d want to know because she knows how close you two are. She told me...she told me you should cut your vacation short if you want to spend some time with her before she leaves. According to the headmistress, Elizabeth’s inconsolable. She keeps crying for you.”

Tears welled in Sam’s eyes and spilled down her cheeks. No. Elizabeth couldn’t be leaving so soon. Sam loved her. And as much as Elizabeth needed Sam at bedtime, Sam had grown to need Elizabeth, too.

“I’m leaving as soon as I can book a flight,” she said, her voice cracking. She thought of Elizabeth’s sweet, angelic face and stifled a cry, recalling how her mother had told her on many occasions Sam should not get too emotionally attached to the children. She sobbed into her hand.

If she went home tomorrow, she would only have four days to spend with Elizabeth and then she would never see her again. Her grief and pain dimmed the bright opulence of the hall as darkness surrounded her. Still sitting on the stairs, she gasped, trying to catch her breath. She felt like she was going to hyperventilate.

“Sam? Sam, are you all right? Sam, I’m so very sorry, hon. John and I are heart-broken over this for you. We know how much you adore that little girl.”

"I should have adopted her. I should have taken that chance. It should be me, Toni." Another sob escaped her lips. "I should be the one to see her grow up. I should be there for her when she graduates college and gets married." Tears streamed down her face. "I...I've let her down."

"Oh, Sam. I...I'm so sorry," Toni repeated gently. "Are you going to be okay?"

"No. I have to go. I'm booking the next flight out."

Sam made her way blindly into Leo's office. She'd use the internet to book the first available flight out. She opened the door as she choked on another sob and wiped her eyes.

"Sam, what's wrong?"

She jumped and saw Leo stride purposefully toward her, his hands reaching out to take her in his arms and that's when the floodgates opened. She clutched his shirt and cried with all the grief and sadness weighing down her heart.

"*Agapimou*, what is it?" he asked gently, raising her face to peer into her eyes.

His concern was palpable and the thought of leaving him brought another rush of tears to her eyes. "It's...it's Elizabeth," she said, sobbing. "Toni just called and told me she's getting adopted. I...I have to go home and spend what little time I have left with her."

A dark frown appeared on his face. "After she's adopted, you can't see her anymore?"

Sam nodded. "It's a rule. It...it helps the children integrate into their new families much quicker if...if there's no contact from their old life." She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and drew in a shaky breath. "I came in here to use the internet. I need to find the next available flight out. I'm hoping to leave by tonight."

Leo pulled her back into his arms. "You will. I'll help you find a flight," he said gruffly over her head. She closed her eyes and let his solid energy calm her. "Sam, what about us?"

She looked up at him. "Is there an us? Leo, you don't owe me anything. I...I don't regret any minute I spent with you."

"You can't just walk out of my life, Sam. You could be pregnant with my child."

Sam hadn't thought about that and the thought of raising Leo's child by herself brought more tears to her eyes. She buried her face into his shirt and mumbled against his chest, "This has got to be the worst week of my life. First falling in love with a man I can never be with and now losing Elizabeth." She raised a pair of stricken green eyes, glittering with tears, to his staggering expression. "I would never do anything to hurt you, Leo. If I'm pregnant, we'll draw up papers to make sure you get visitation rights."

"What did you say?" he asked, his deep voice a hoarse whisper.

"I said we could establish visita—"

"Not that. The other thing."

"That...that I love you. I'm sorry if this is making you uncomfor—*oomph!*"

Leo was kissing her breathless, as he ran his hands over her back, crushing her body up against his. He pulled away and drew in a ragged breath, his dark, bottomless eyes devouring her. "You don't know how happy you've made me, Sam." He cupped her face with his hands and

smiled. "Why are you looking at me like that? Don't you know how much I love you? Don't you know how much meeting you has shaken me to my core? I cannot envision the rest of my life without you, *agapimou*. My love."

My love. He meant it! "You love me?" she asked in a small voice.

"How can I not love you?" His expression softened. "You've breathed life into my very existence. You've awakened a part of me I thought was dead. And you've bewitched me since that first moment I spoke to you on the phone at Toni's apartment two months ago."

"Oh," she said in a daze as his words started to sink in. Then joy and elation settled around her heart and she said, "Oh." And then her face fell. "Oh," she ended sadly.

"What is it?"

"How can this work, Leo? We live in places separated by an ocean. It will be taking the term 'long distance relationship' to the extreme."

"Sam, I'm a wealthy man. A very wealthy man. I can go anywhere in the world. And my business is mostly all travel, so I don't see a problem."

It wasn't enough for Sam to have Leo in her life part-time. "Leo, I can't do it. I can't see you every few weeks." She thought about Elizabeth and turned away from him to walk to his desk.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her back to face him. His expression was frustrated as he ran an agitated hand along the back of his neck. "I don't think you understand me, Sam. I want to marry you. I want to live in Somerset with you and," he added slowly, brushing a tear from her face, "I want to make you happy, as happy as you've made me." He gave her a look so tender, Sam's breath caught. "So first things first, *agapimou*. We're flying back together and put a stop to this adoption."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying we must do everything in our power to halt the adoption proceedings. Call the headmistress now. Find out if all the papers have been signed. If not, we have a chance. Even if we have to go to court to have a judge give us Elizabeth, we will."

Her heart stopped. She was unable to believe her ears. "What are you saying, Leo?" she repeated, her face paling.

His eyes were curiously shiny. "I want us to adopt your Elizabeth. And Alek, too, if you don't mind. Alek's adoption will come easy and quick after the sizeable donation I will make to the orphanage. As for the people wanting to adopt Elizabeth, I may be able to help them with a child from our orphanage here in Corfu."

"Can we do it?" She buried her face in her hands. "Oh my God, Leo. Don't make me hope for the impossible."

Gently, he took her hands and stared at her tearful face. "I will move mountains if I have to," he said quietly.

And she did believe him. He would move mountains for her. Sam's heart burst with unadulterated joy and she jumped into his arms, raining kisses all over his face. "Yes. Yes! Yes to everything," she cried. "I love you."

It wasn't until later, when Sam and Leo were on the plane, that Sam realized her cards had been right, but she had misread them—again. She *had* collapsed in grief on the stairs, but it had nothing to do with Leo. It was because of Elizabeth.

Sam recalled what she had done just before she and Leo had left the villa to go to the airport and a part of her felt sad. Sad, but curiously free and liberated. Just before she had closed her luggage, she had glanced at her Tarot, the edges worn, the colours faded from years and years of use.

She had placed a gentle hand over the tattered, worn out cards and had whispered, “Good bye.” And she had dropped them in the small waste bin by the dresser.

She didn't need them anymore. She believed in something else. She believed in love, in faith and only now she understood what her Aunt Zoe had tried to explain to her. The future wasn't so cut and dried. Everyone had the ability to change it. To make it better.

She left her room to start her future with Leo.

...A future she had faith in.

Epilogue

It was a week before Christmas and Sam felt the baby kick. She was seven months pregnant and she never felt more blessed than she did right now. She was standing in front of Grangers Orphanage on the lawn, with Alek on her left and Leo standing on her right, holding Elizabeth in his arms.

The construction crew were packing all their equipment back into their vans and trucks. Light snow was starting to come down and Elizabeth squealed with delight as she raised her little face.

"It's snowing. We can make a snow man, daddy," she cried with delight.

Leo chuckled and placed a light kiss on her cherubic cheek. "Yes, *koritsakimou*, we can. Very soon."

Alek grinned up at him. "Dad, have you ever built a snow man before?"

Leo reached behind Sam with his free hand and ruffled the young boy's hair. "Don't get smart, young man. I used to make great snow men growing up. I mixed the ocean water with the sand and made some very impressive...mud men."

Alek chuckled. Leo grinned at the young boy Sam knew he had grown to love as his own son.

He bent his head and kissed Sam on the top of her head. "And you, *agapimou*? How are you feeling? Will you be able to make the trip to your parents? The ride may be too long for you."

Sam smiled up at him and rested her head on his arm. "How will I not be comfortable in that mobile home you rented? The drive alone is going to be fun. Did you see the size of the living room in that thing?" She looked up into his smiling face. "I love you, Leo. Thank you so much for wanting to spend Christmas with my family this year. And thank you so much for agreeing to get married Christmas Day so my whole family can be there. I can't wait till you meet them all, especially Aunt Zoe. She's a special woman. You'll love her and she can't wait to meet you."

"I told you once I want to make you as happy as you've made me. Besides, I can't wait to meet your family either. All ninety of them," he added, chuckling. "By the way, my parents called me this morning. Their plane will be landing as we arrive at the ranch. Toni and John confirmed they'll pick them up. "

"That's great," Sam said, raising her face for a kiss. Leo lovingly obliged. "I'm so happy, Leo. This is going to be a great Christmas."

The foreman cleared his throat as he waited patiently for the happy couple to notice him. "So, how do you like it, Miss Hope?" he asked once Sam and Leo turned to him.

Sam and Leo, with Alek and Elizabeth, all looked up at the roof top of Grangers Orphanage. They all smiled.

"It's perfect," Sam whispered, her eyes bright with tears.

"Merry Christmas, Sam," Leo said deeply. "*Kala Christouyena*."

And all four pairs of eyes stared up in wonder at Grangers Orphanage's new shiny red and gold sign.

Hope's Orphanage.

About Anastasia Maltezos

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Anastasia Maltezos is an exciting new author in the romance genre who strives to bring her own spiritualism and faith to all her heroines. Her love for the romance genre stems from her belief in happily ever afters and she loves to create stories where love conquers all .

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