



ILLICIT NIGHT
WITH THE
Greek

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SUSANNA CARR

Susanna Carr

Illicit Night With The Greek

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The Greek's unexpected parting gift...Stergios Antoniou hasn't seen his exiled troublemaking stepsister Jodie Little since the night they finally gave in to their forbidden attraction. Learning she's returned to Athens during a business deal too crucial to jeopardise, he holds her prisoner on his private island until it's over. Jodie wants to rectify the past but, being so close to Stergios's potent sensuality, she's once again a slave to their destructive desire. One last illicit night should put their affair behind them – but Jodie leaves the island with more than scorching-hot memories...

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“One touch and you will come apart.”

Jodie’s lips stung with awareness. “You killed anything I felt for you when you walked away that night.”

“Which just makes it worse, doesn’t it?” Stergios rested his big hands on the kitchen counter, trapping her. “You don’t want to desire me,” he said in a mesmerizing tone as he leaned in. “I’m the one who can tear down your masquerade, and I’m the one who drives you wild. You’re ashamed that you respond to me.”

She swallowed hard as she fought the urge to draw him closer. “That’s not true,” she whispered. “It’s okay, Jodie ...”

Stergios dipped his head and his mouth brushed her ear. Her breath hitched in her throat as she inhaled his scent, his heat. She was surrounded by him.

“That’s how I feel when I’m with you. And I still can’t stop myself. I don’t want to.”

He slid his hands into her hair, his fingers gripping the back of her head. She’d flattened her hands against his chest, determined to push him away, when he claimed her mouth with his.

One Night With Consequences

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Illicit Night with the Greek

Susanna Carr



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SUSANNA CARR is an award-winning author known for her contemporary romances. Readers throughout the world find Susanna’s stories a delightful escape that has often helped them through difficult times. Reviewers frequently describe her work as ‘fun’, ‘sexy’ and a ‘must-read’. When she isn’t writing, or spending time with her family in the Pacific Northwest, Susanna enjoys reading romance and connecting with readers online. Visit her website at susannacarr.com.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

TENSION GRIPPED STERGIOS ANTONIOU as he stood alone on the balcony that jutted out from his cousin's mansion. He ignored the iconic view of the Parthenon against the blue September sky as he scowled at the blonde woman at the garden party below.

Jodie Little. His stepsister. His darkest secret.

Burning hot fury ate away at him as he watched Jodie glide through the crowd of Athens's high society. She looked different. She had cut and straightened the long mop of curls. Her hair now fell into soft waves that reached her pointed chin. The yellow floral dress was modest as it skimmed her slender figure. Her bold red lipstick was at odds with her delicate appearance.

He knew the presentable image was false. It was a masquerade, a shield. It had been years since he'd last seen her but he knew time couldn't have tamed her true nature.

"There you are," his mother said as she stood beside him. "When did you get here? Come join the party."

Stergios didn't look away from Jodie. "How long has she been in Greece?" he asked.

Mairi Antoniou sighed. She rested her forearms against the ornate balustrade as she watched her stepdaughter charm a guileless shipping heiress. "She let her father know she was at a nearby hotel about two days ago. If she thought she would be welcomed with open arms, she is going to be extremely disappointed."

"Why has she returned?"

"Something about missing her father."

Stergios studied Jodie intently. The seductress didn't understand the meaning of family. She had been absent from her father's life for four years and she suddenly wanted a reunion. "What do you think is the real reason?"

“I don’t know,” she replied softly. “Gregory doesn’t have money of his own.”

“And Jodie recently inherited a fortune,” he murmured. He tore his gaze away from Jodie and scanned the sophisticated crowd for her father. Stergios spotted the tall, well-dressed man on the other side of the lush garden.

Gregory Little had a talent for marrying wealthy women. His only goals were to keep his powerful wife happy and live in the luxury she provided. Stergios knew his stepfather was a benign presence in their lives, unlike his daughter.

“Gregory didn’t know she was coming for a visit,” Mairi insisted. “They’ve been in contact after her mother died earlier this year, but he didn’t invite her.”

Stergios’s stepfather was given a generous allowance. The man knew what was expected of him if he wanted to keep the money flowing, but having a wealthy daughter meant another stream of revenue. “Do you believe him?”

“Of course. Jodie has caused him nothing but trouble and embarrassment.” His mother’s voice was brittle with anger. “That girl almost caused a rift in our family because she couldn’t keep her legs closed.”

The blood pounded hard in Stergios’s veins as he remembered. Jodie knew how to create problems with minimum effort. It could be uttering an explosive comment at a formal dinner or creating a public spectacle at Athens’s most popular nightclub. But none of that compared to seducing his cousin Dimos. If she had succeeded, it would have destroyed a bright and promising future for the Antoniou family.

“She shouldn’t be here,” he declared gruffly. Why had she shown up this week of all weeks? “Does Dimos know that she’s around?”

Mairi stiffened. “I asked him to put Jodie on the invitation list for this party,” she reluctantly admitted.

Stergios cursed as he pushed away from the balustrade. He scanned the guests at the party but he didn’t see his cousin. That alone was suspicious. Dimos had always gravitated toward Jodie.

“What happened between them is in the past,” his mother argued. “Dimos was in a rebellious stage and was easily misled. He was no match for a determined whore.”

Jodie had entranced Dimos almost instantly, yet his cousin had not been an innocent victim. Stergios knew his mother refused to believe that. She’d like to think that an Antoniou man had better standards.

“It took us too long to realize that she was a manipulative liar,” his mother declared. “When she said you’d followed her into the wine cellar that night... Well, no one was going to believe that.”

Stergios closed his eyes briefly. Everyone in the family knew about his aversion to dark and confined spaces. But he had pushed past the reluctance that night because of Jodie. Because of her special brand of trouble.

“Of course she couldn’t bewitch you, but Dimos was unworldly back then,” his mother continued. “Just remembering everything she has done makes me—”

“It’s too much of a coincidence that Jodie has returned when we need this alliance with the Volakis family. She’s out for revenge.”

His mother scoffed at the idea. “She’s not the type who would follow the financial news or understand your long-term plans for the Antoniou Group. Jodie is not that smart. For goodness’ sake, she’s a finishing school dropout.”

“Jodie wasn’t kicked out of all those schools because of her academic performance,” he reminded her.

“She has no interest in destroying us,” his mother said. “She wants to be one of us.”

“Sometimes the enemy is within the family.”

Silence pulsed between them. Stergios inhaled sharply as he firmly pushed back the memories. He sensed his mother turning to face him. Stergios mastered his troubled thoughts and didn't flinch when she tentatively placed her hand against his shoulder.

"You don't need to protect us against Jodie." Concern wavered in her voice.

His mother was wrong. He must always remain alert. Build enough power and wealth that nothing could touch them. He didn't want anyone in his family to know the bleak and cruel world he had experienced.

"She's a problem but we've dealt with worse. In fact, we won't need to do anything," Mairi said brightly, dropping her hand before she turned away. "Jodie can't pretend to be demure and innocent for long. Her true colors will show. They always do."

"And while we wait, she'll seduce Dimos and stop the wedding," he predicted.

His mother gasped. "No, Dimos won't betray us like that."

"Dimos will bed Jodie the first chance he gets," he countered. He knew his cousin would view Jodie as the one who got away.

"He won't," she argued. "He knows how important this merger is to the family."

That didn't stop Dimos four years ago, Stergios thought grimly. If anything, the need to claim Jodie was more imperative to his cousin now. But Mairi Antoniou had a blind spot when it came to family. It was his duty to recognize and eliminate any threats.

"Jodie knows the importance, as well," he warned as he grasped his mother's elbow and guided her back to the party. "She has returned because she has some unfinished business and the money to fund it. She's a real threat to the Antoniou-Volakis marriage. We need this alliance and I won't let Jodie Little destroy it."

* * *

Some things never change, Jodie told herself. She flashed a friendly smile at one of the older Antoniou women. The curmudgeon in unrelieved black didn't reciprocate as she drew the lovely heiress away to the other side of the garden. It was as if this family believed Jodie could corrupt the young woman with just her presence.

She strolled along the garden, sipping from her water glass as if she didn't feel all eyes on her. Jodie knew she was being paranoid. Many of the relatives had been indifferent to her when she had lived in Athens. Yet no one seemed happy that she had returned.

Jodie sensed a strange undercurrent that hung in the late summer breeze. These people were convinced she was going to make a mistake or cause a scandal. It was as if the Antoniou family was waiting for disaster and bracing themselves for impact.

They were in for a long wait. Jodie locked her smile into place. That was the old Jodie. She was wiser now, and more in control of her emotions. This time she was determined to fit in. She straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrant garden flowers. This time she would belong.

"Jodie?"

She gave a start when she recognized the male voice. She whirled around and saw her cousin Dimos Antoniou. Jodie instinctively took a step back and wished she hadn't shown any sign of weakness. She corrected herself and welcomed him with a smile before he embraced her with a strong hug.

"It has been so long," Dimos said as he kissed both her cheeks.

"It has," she agreed, not allowing his touch to linger. He looked exactly as she remembered, with his long face, lanky build and black hair that flopped over his forehead. "Thank you for inviting me to your new home. It's beautiful."

"Zoi's family gave it to us as a wedding present."

"I think you and your fiancée will be very happy here."

He thrust his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his feet. “Can you imagine me getting married?” he asked.

She silently shook her head. Dimos was three years older and she had been grateful for his friendship, but he had always seemed immature for his age. “And you’re a vice president with the Antoniou Group.”

He ducked his head. “That won’t be official until I come back from my honeymoon.”

“Your family is very proud of you and they want you to have the best of everything. You deserve it,” she said huskily as the words caught in her throat. Dimos had understood the rules very early on and, more importantly, had followed them. In return, he was rewarded handsomely.

She wondered what it was like to be loved and accepted by family. She wanted that now more than ever. Jodie had yearned for a wisp of connection with her parents but she had waited for them to make the first move. She now regretted her lack of action when her mother had died suddenly of a heart attack several months ago. Jodie knew she had to do something immediately if she wanted to have a relationship with her father, her only living relative. She would have to be the first to apologize, to yield, to change.

But what kind of sacrifices would she have to make to have her father accept her? How much would she have to hide about herself to be considered lovable?

Dimos’s smile dipped as the light dimmed from his eyes. “That’s very kind of you, Jodie. Especially after what happened between us.”

Shock washed over her and she fought for a mildly interested expression. She hadn’t been prepared for Dimos—for any Antoniou—to mention that night. Jodie wanted to cross her arms and back away but she was immobile. The only thing she felt was the pressure of her fingertips as they pressed against the cool surface of her water glass.

Dimos shoved his hand in his hair and looked away. “I did not handle the situation well,” he confessed in a low tone.

She fought the urge to find a quick getaway. “No one did,” she mumbled. She had been branded a Jezebel, a woman determined to snag an Antoniou man for a husband and ruin any potential marriages that had been carefully orchestrated. After that night she had been considered extremely dangerous to the Antoniou family’s future.

“I didn’t know that one of the maids had seen us.”

Jodie blinked. That was what he was apologizing for? That they had been caught? Interrupted? She pressed her lips together before she said anything. It was tempting to give a scathing reply but she had to be on her best behavior.

“I couldn’t believe that maid went and told Stergios.” Bitter anger bloomed in Dimos’s voice. “What had she been thinking?”

Jodie wondered if she might bite her tongue off as she fought back the words. The maid had known exactly what Dimos’s intentions had been. Jodie wished she had figured it out earlier. She had seen Dimos as a cousin who helped her navigate a big family, not as a viable lover.

“And I know this is years too late, but I should have spoken up.” Dimos splayed out his hands. “I didn’t realize you would have been severely punished.”

She was wrong, Jodie decided. Dimos was still immature for his age. Her jaw hurt as she fought to remain silent and took a small sip from her water glass. She wanted to point out that she had never encouraged him, or that it was never too late to right a wrong. He could have protected her from the fallout at any time. But that wouldn’t have served him.

And if there was something she had learned over the years, especially after that infamous night, it was that men didn’t understand the meaning of honor, respect or protection. They pursued, they took what they could get and they got out fast.

“So, how long are you planning to stay in Greece?” Dimos asked with a puzzled expression when she didn’t respond.

She darted a glance at her father standing among the older Antoniou men. Her first goal was to ask for forgiveness for her past behavior but she didn't know if her father would give her the chance. "I'm not sure," she murmured. "My plans aren't set in stone."

"Then you must come to my wedding," he said, his eyes widening with enthusiasm.

Jodie raised her hand to halt that line of thinking. "I don't want to intrude."

"Intrude?" Dimos laughed. "That's not possible. You're family."

She wished it were true. She wished she didn't have this need to belong somewhere. To belong with someone. She had always been the outsider. The burden. She was used to it, and at times wore the label like a badge of honor, but everything changed after her mother's death. She wanted to be loved, accepted and part of a family.

"You must agree," Dimos insisted.

"Jodie must agree to what?"

She went still when she heard the low, masculine voice. Stergios Antoniou was here. She swallowed hard. He was standing next to her. Her pulse began to gallop as her stomach made a sickening turn. Her skin went hot and then cold but she refused to look in his direction.

"I invited her to my wedding," Dimos said with a touch of defiance.

"I doubt there's space," Stergios responded.

"I can make space," Dimos promised Jodie. "It's going to be on an island that Zoi's family owns. It's small, but not that small."

She nervously licked her lips as the panic swelled inside her. It pressed against her skin, ready to burst free. Every instinct told her to run but she stood as still as a statue. "I wouldn't want to cause any inconvenience for you or your bride," she explained huskily.

"You won't," Dimos said with a lopsided smile. "I'll go ask Zoi right now."

She watched helplessly as Dimos strode toward his fiancée. She wanted to run and hide but knew she had to be brave. At least appear fearless. From the corner of her eye, she saw Stergios's crisp white linen suit. She forced herself to turn. Jodie looked straight ahead at his pale blue shirt. She tried to ignore how it emphasized the breadth of his powerful chest before she jerked her gaze to his face.

Her breath snagged in her throat as her heartbeat roared in her ears. She stared at Stergios's luxuriant black hair that fell past his chin. The shadow of a dark beard almost diminished the whitened scar on his upper lip.

This was not the Stergios she'd known. She blinked several times, noting the bold lines of his cheekbones and nose, the slash of his mouth and his warm golden skin. She recalled how he'd once kept his hair ruthlessly short and had shaved twice a day. Now it looked as if he could no longer contain the wildness that rumbled through him.

His dark brown eyes were cold as he callously assessed her and immediately found her lacking. "I don't know what you're trying to achieve—"

"I wasn't asking for an invite," she bit out. "He offered and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Perhaps he didn't understand what you were saying." His gaze drifted to her mouth. "You're not good at saying no to any man."

She swallowed the gasp of outrage and fought the driving need to fling the contents of her glass into his face. Damn it, her new and improved image was already slipping. She was never in control when she was around her stepbrother. She had to get away from Stergios or risk making a scene. That wouldn't help her gain forgiveness from her father.

"Don't confuse me with the women you associate with." Jodie turned on her heel.

"Running away already?"

She whipped around, wobbling to a standstill as she glared at him. Stergios had sounded disinterested and bored while she was a jittery mass of nerves. It wasn't fair. "I don't run away. That's your signature move, stepbrother dear."

The muscle bunching in his cheek was the only indication that her barb had hit its target. “You know how to create a disaster and leave without a trace while everyone else deals with the aftermath. The merger had fallen apart after that night because Dimos suddenly didn’t want to get married. It has taken me years just to get the Antoniou-Volakis wedding to this point.”

“I was banished.” She wanted to stamp her feet. This was bad. It was as if her hard-earned poise had disintegrated into nothing. “There’s a difference.”

“Banished?” Stergios repeated with skepticism. “You’ve always been dramatic.”

And you’ve always been cold and hateful. No, she realized that wasn’t true. Stergios had been tolerant the first time she’d moved in with the Antoniou family. He had been her only companion, her one true confidant. But gradually he had become distant.

The more he was around her, the more he knew and learned about her, the more hostile he became. It had been a relief and yet agony when he missed her eighteenth birthday to work overseas on a project. He had returned a few months later but her joy had been brief and misplaced. It had become obvious that Stergios couldn’t stand being in the same room with her.

“If you were banished, why are you working so hard to return to the family fold?” His tone was casual but he watched her with open suspicion. “You’re not the type to forgive.”

Stergios knew her too well. Having one person understand her should bring comfort, but this man would use that knowledge against her. “I am here,” she said slowly, emphasizing each word, “to repair my relationship with my father.”

“And that’s all?”

No, this time she wanted Gregory Little’s concern and interest. She wanted to be a priority. She’d always wanted that from her father but she had tried to gain it the wrong way when she had been a teenager.

Jodie lifted her head when she suddenly understood Stergios’s question. “Oh...you think I’m here to get revenge or to cause trouble. To stop this merger that you need so badly. I hate to disappoint you, but the Antoniou family isn’t worth my time.”

One winged eyebrow arched at her statement. As if he couldn’t believe his family wasn’t everyone’s top interest. “You returned just when Dimos and Zoi are about to marry.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get the family newsletter,” she said with exaggerated sweetness, “or I would have timed my visit better.”

She was about to flounce away but Stergios easily read her next move. He grabbed her arm, his large fingers biting into her pale flesh as he held her still. Her skin went hot as she remembered the last time he touched her. She knew better than to look at him or she would betray her conflicted emotions.

“I don’t trust you.” His voice was low against her ear.

She shivered from his nearness. “I don’t care.”

Stergios’s grasp tightened. “Stay away from Dimos.”

“With pleasure,” she said in a hiss and forced herself to look into his dark eyes. “Now let go of me.”

Jodie saw the turbulent emotions chasing across his face before he abruptly released her. She was uncomfortably aware how her skin tingled from his touch. “I have no interest in Dimos,” she continued. “I didn’t seduce him back then and I’m not pursuing him now.”

“Why should I believe you? You’re a liar.”

Her anger flashed wildly. Yes, she had lied in the past, but it had been a stupid and instinctual attempt to protect Stergios that night. She had made a sacrifice for him and he couldn’t see it, couldn’t appreciate it. The hurt and the injustice of it all rolled inside her. “And if I wanted to seduce Dimos, there is nothing you could do about it,” she slung at him.

“I’m warning you, Jodie.” His voice was low and menacing.

She pressed her lips together. Why did she say that? Why was she provoking Stergios? She knew better but she was unable to stop. “I could have had him in my bed like that.” She gave a satisfying snap with her fingers. “I certainly wouldn’t have picked a cold wall in a dark wine cellar.”

They stared at each other, instantly trapped in the inconvenient memories. She shifted, her spine aching as she remembered the rough brick against her back. Jodie swallowed as she recalled how she had laved her tongue against Stergios’s warm skin. She felt her cheeks flush as the echoes of their mingled gasps and incoherent words reverberated in her mind.

She couldn’t think about that. Not now, not here, not ever. “I could have contacted Dimos any time over the years,” she declared in a rush. “And he would have dropped everything for the chance to have sex with me.”

Stergios sneered with disgust. “So you know the power you have over him.”

She did now, not when she had been eighteen. “I know the power I have over all men,” she said loftily. “Dimos is more susceptible than most.”

“And why do you think that is?”

No doubt he saw it as her fault. “I haven’t encouraged him at all, but warn me off again,” she said in a growl as she glared at him, “and all bets are off.”

Stergios braced his legs as if he was preparing for battle. “You dare to threaten me?”

“There is very little I wouldn’t dare,” she told him boldly as her legs shook. “I am here to be with my father. If you block that in any way, I will do everything in my power to stop the Antoniou-Volakis merger.”

His expression went blank. There was no anger or repulsion. It was like a mask and that unsettled Jodie more than his cold fury.

“It wouldn’t take much.” She knew she had to stop talking and yet she pursed her lips and made a show of looking around the party. “All I have to do is crook my finger and Dimos will—”

“You have always been a destructive force.” His voice was just a rasp. “But I won’t allow you to destroy this family.”

“I don’t care about the Antonious.” The family was simply an obstacle to her goal. She had to play nice with them if she wanted even a tenuous bond with her father.

Stergios set his hands on his lean hips. “You need to leave and never return.”

Jodie regretted saying anything to Stergios. He could prevent her from getting what she wanted. She wished she had planned a better strategy to meet with her father. She had been too impulsive, too impatient and too scared of getting rejected again. But she couldn’t show her uncertainty or Stergios would use it against her. She lifted her chin and met his gaze. “That is out of your control.”

His smile chilled her to the bone. “It’s foolish of you to think that.”

Dread trickled down Jodie’s spine. It was foolish for her to go toe to toe with Stergios. He was a dangerous animal who lashed out if he felt threatened or cornered. “I have every right to be here.”

“And I have a right—a duty—to protect my family at all cost.”

She’d always known that. It was one of his traits she had admired and it used to hurt that his protection hadn’t included her. “According to Dimos, I am family.”

Stergios’s eyes narrowed into slits. “I have never considered you family.”

Those words would have slayed her when she was fifteen but now they slid right off her. “It’s easier for you to think that, isn’t it?” Jodie leaned closer, refusing to show how his words, his presence, had shaken her. “Helps you sleep better at night.”

The mask fell away and exposed Stergios’s wrath. A ruddy color seeped beneath his golden skin. His eyes glittered as he hunched his shoulders, ready to pounce. Jodie’s chest seized as she watched his upper lip curl, pulling tightly at his scar.

“After all—” her voice trembled “—the great and virtuous Stergios Antoniou is supposed to be trustworthy and do what is right. He strives for excellence and discipline. Why, he would never have sex with a virgin without marrying her.”

His jaw clenched and she knew his restraint was slipping. She had just made her most dangerous enemy very angry. She knew she should retreat and hide—no, she should beg for mercy, but the words kept spilling from her mouth.

“He would never have sex with his eighteen-year-old stepsister, right? And then walk away without a backward glance.” The rejection had swamped her that night but she didn’t stumble over the words now. “Discard her and throw her to the wolves.”

She saw the pure hate glowing from his eyes and she wanted to recoil. Did he hate her for reminding him of his moment of weakness? Or was it something more? Did he hate her because she continued to show him what kind of man he truly was?

“But I know the real Stergios Antoniou,” she confessed, driven to finish what she’d started. “I saw it that night four years ago. You’re like every other man I’ve met. Threaten me all you want, stepbrother dear, but I’ll take my chances.”

CHAPTER TWO

“JODIE, WOULD YOU care for some more coffee?” Mairi Antoniou asked.

“No, thank you,” she replied as she studied her father and stepmother from across the breakfast table. What should have been an intimate meal was more of a grueling interview. She had been prepared for that. Jodie wished she could spend some time with her father in private but getting him alone was proving difficult.

She was, however, making progress. Jodie couldn’t believe she was back in the Antoniou family home. She’d never considered it a possibility. Yet, two days after she had been invited to Dimos’s housewarming party, she was eating a late breakfast with her father and stepmother while a maid was unpacking her suitcases.

She should be celebrating. Relieved that the reunion with her father was going this smoothly, this quickly. Her instincts told her not to trust it and Jodie tried to ignore the negative voice in her head.

Looking around the breakfast room, Jodie noticed it was still fussy and formal. She always found the ivory chairs uncomfortable and the large white floral arrangements overwhelming. She studied one of the many portraits of Mairi’s ancestors that covered the sea-foam-green walls. Once again, she decided that Stergios did not get his stunning masculine beauty from his mother’s side.

Jodie’s gaze rested on a portrait of her stepmother. She wondered what it would be like to be surrounded by family and tradition. Some of the younger Antoniou generation found the family customs constricting but she would have found comfort and privilege in continuing traditions.

Jodie looked down at her gold-rimmed china plate that had been passed down from generation to generation. Only a guest unfamiliar with the Antoniou household would think the breakfast had been planned as a feast to celebrate the return of the prodigal stepdaughter. But the family always had pastries, olives, cheese and tiganites in the morning. The small pancakes had been her favorite and she would often drown them with grape molasses, much to her stepmother’s horror. Today she avoided the tiganites and had been the epitome of good behavior.

“I hope you will find your room satisfactory,” Mairi said.

“Thank you.” It was the same room she had stayed in years ago. In the corner on a separate floor from the rest of the family. But that didn’t matter. She was going to accept what was offered and pass every test they gave. She would win the approval and love of her only living relative.

“What are your plans for today?” her father asked as he set down his paper and rose from his chair.

“I need to find a wedding present for Dimos and Zoi.” It had to be appropriate but impersonal. She didn’t want her gift to cause any speculation or a lecture from Stergios. Jodie winced. She wasn’t going to allow her stepbrother to influence her in any way.

“And perhaps some clothes for the wedding?” Mairi suggested as she gave a pointed glance to Jodie’s bright green dress. “It will be very...conservative.”

Jodie nodded. Mairi had shown remarkable restraint not commenting on her short hem or towering heels. What was considered understated in New York City was different than her stepmother's opinions. She had to make some adjustments. "I understand."

"I'm sorry we have to leave just when you've arrived," Mairi said as Gregory helped her out of her chair, "but your father and I have some business to attend to in the city."

"Please don't feel like you need to entertain me." She didn't want to be the center of attention. She wanted to show her father that she could seamlessly be part of his life without any trouble or work.

"Make yourself at home," her father said as he gave an awkward pat on her shoulder before he trailed after Mairi.

Home. She grimaced as she felt a pang in her chest. This stately mansion had never been her home. She had arrived here the first time when she was fifteen after she had been kicked out of another boarding school. Jodie had felt as if she'd been on probation the moment she had first entered the vestibule. But it hadn't mattered if she had behaved or caused trouble. She was always going to be sent away to another school, another country.

Now her actions would make a difference. For better or for worse. One mistake and her father would disown her for good.

Jodie rose from her seat and strolled into the entrance hall. She barely glanced at the marble grand staircase or the carved limestone walls. It was the silence that grabbed her attention. She forgot how quiet it was in this place even though Mairi liked having her extended family live under one roof.

She linked her hands behind her back and walked outside onto the shadowy portico. Her eyes widened with pleasure as she surveyed the bold colors of the grounds, the scent of the exotic flowers and the sounds of a gurgling fountain in the distance. She sighed as the tension ebbed from her shoulders. It felt as if she had paradise all to herself.

Jodie remembered spending many hours following the web of gravel paths to escape the house. She had frequently skinny-dipped in the large lake until her stepmother found out and put a stop to it. She also climbed the trees in the wooded area, daring to go as high as she could, often ignoring Stergios's exasperation and words of warning.

Jodie descended the terrace and noticed the garden had thrived in her absence. It took her several moments to recognize the changes in the landscaping. She suspected they were made in favor of the high-tech security features. Mairi could have hidden the cameras and emergency call buttons but the Antonious always needed to see what protective measures were being taken around them.

She left the terrace and wondered if there was a new piece of sculpture or work of art. Walking past the formal flower garden, she remembered how exploring the grounds had been one of her many solitary diversions.

When she had first moved here, she'd thought having many relatives would be a blessing. For an only child who had lived in boarding schools since she was six years old, the idea of a big family was as tantalizing as it was foreign. It had ultimately been a disappointment. It wasn't easy being an outsider in a close-knit family.

It was only after Jodie had been banished that she'd realized the Antoniou home was more than a showpiece. She paused and brushed her fingertips against the velvety petals of a flower. The house and the grounds were part of the family's fortress. Mairi only felt safe when she was at home and surrounded by loved ones.

The Antonious didn't trust any outsider with the exception of Gregory. Jodie understood why. They had placed their trust in one of their own and paid the cost. They may never recover from being blindsided decades ago when Stergios was kidnapped as a child.

Jodie closed her eyes as the wave of sympathy washed over her. She had only collected bits and pieces of the story since everyone seemed to follow a pact of not discussing it. She knew Mairi and her ex-husband had been in an ugly custody dispute and that Stergios's father had hired a team to kidnap his son. Stergios had only been seven years old.

Jodie blinked away the sting of unshed tears as she imagined a young and vulnerable Stergios. Mairi was a tigress when it came to her only child but she didn't find him until he was nine. Stergios had lived on the run and in horrible conditions. He had emerged scarred, malnourished and tormented from the experience.

From the day Stergios had been taken, the house and grounds became impenetrable. So had the Antoniou family. Jodie accepted the fact and she knew their wariness wasn't entirely personal.

Jodie sighed and slowly retraced her steps, returning to the portico. She saw a flash of movement in the corner of her eye and turned to see Stergios. He emerged from the wooded area, the gravel crunching under his running shoes as he jogged toward the house with a punishing pace. The fight-or-flight response swirled in her chest. She cast a quick glance in the direction of the formal garden, her heart skipping a beat as her hands bunched into fists.

It was too late to disappear, Jodie decided as she watched Stergios get closer. She tried not to notice that he only wore a dark pair of running shorts, or the way his golden skin glistened. Her gaze darted to his broad shoulders and then to his muscular arms. Jodie felt a spurt of heat low in her belly and she wasn't sure where to look. She focused on his chest and followed the path of his dark hair. Her attention rested on his V-cut abs.

He didn't break his rhythm as he jogged onto the terrace and then stepped onto the portico. He passed her as if he wasn't going to acknowledge her presence.

"I didn't know you were still living here," she blurted out.

Stergios stopped without turning around. "I don't." Sweat ran down his spine but he didn't sound out of breath. He placed his hands on his lean hips and stretched. She was mesmerized by the play of muscles and the faint crisscross of scars that ran down his back. "I have a home of my own but I stay here when I'm in Athens."

Jodie stepped in front of him, blocking his way. It was irritating that he wouldn't deign to look at her. She inhaled his scent and went still. It was hot, sweaty and male. A blush crept up her neck and into her face. She didn't know why it left her flustered.

"How long are you planning to stay?" Jodie asked. His nearness was almost her undoing. Her breasts felt heavy and tight and she crossed her arms against her chest.

"For as long as you are, pethi mou," he said. "I'm only here to keep an eye on you."

"What?" Jodie's lips parted as a thought occurred to her. "Is that why I was invited to the family home? To make surveillance more convenient for you?"

His eyes glittered with amusement. "It was thoughtful of you to accept."

Jodie abruptly looked away and stared at the door that led to the house. She should have known it hadn't been her father's idea. Her intuition had been correct. She shouldn't trust this act of hospitality.

She wasn't going to let this get her down. Jodie clenched her teeth as she encouraged the flicker of determination to catch fire. It didn't matter why she was invited. She was here and she was going to make the most of it.

"Going to go pack?" he asked in a drawl.

Her arms tightened around her as if she was holding herself together. "Why would I?" she asked as she slowly met his gaze. "I'm getting what I want."

"Are you sure? Dimos doesn't live here."

"Wonderful," she declared. "Now you don't have follow him like a guard dog and save him from predatory women. That must free up so much time for you."

There was a heavy beat of silence. "That wasn't the only reason I stopped Dimos."

"Of course it was. If Dimos had sex with me, a woman supposedly under the protection of the Antoniou family, he would have been stuck marrying me instead of the heiress of your choice." She paused, not sure if she should say anything more. "Do you even know why we were down in the wine cellar that night? We were going to break into the good stuff while everyone was out of the house."

"It didn't look that way when I tore you two apart."

Jodie glared at him. When Stergios had intervened, Dimos had her in a tight hold and had been sticking his tongue down her throat. She hadn't been trying to get closer to Dimos—she had been pushing him away! “I was never interested in him. There was no way we were going to have sex!”

Stergios lifted an eyebrow. “Then how do you explain what happened between us?”

She felt her face turn bright red. It had been different with Stergios. When Jodie had returned from her last finishing school fiasco, she had become violently aware of her stepbrother's sexual allure. It didn't matter that he was eight years older or that he was too intense for someone like her.

But Jodie didn't want anyone to notice how much power Stergios had over her. She had some pride! The man hated her and yet she wanted to get closer to him. She had become an expert at hiding her attraction. Or so she thought. Now she knew why she'd always bickered with Stergios. Why they'd always seemed to get under each other's skin.

When Stergios had shoved Dimos up the stairs that night, she had launched into an argument with her stepbrother that felt as though it had been simmering for weeks. Vicious words had been exchanged and nothing had been held back.

To this day Jodie wasn't sure what had happened next. What had been the trigger? Had she made the first move or had he? All she knew was that her mouth had slammed against his. His kiss, his touch, had set her free. It was as if they had exploded out of their cages. She'd clawed and bit as he ruthlessly made his claim. She'd encouraged him to give her everything he had. Their coupling had been fast and feral.

She hadn't experienced anything like it since. Even now her heart pumped hard and her skin felt scorched as she remembered the way he took her against the wall.

“I looked for you after that night,” Stergios confessed.

She jerked back as the memories splintered. “No, you didn't,” she said softly. “You left like a bat out of hell. Where did you go?”

He speared his hands in his long hair and gave a guttural sigh. “It doesn't matter.”

It had mattered to her. She had felt rejected and abandoned. Used.

“You'd left Greece by the time I returned,” Stergios said, staring blindly at the garden. “I went to America to find you. I assumed you went to your mother's but you had already left by the time I arrived in New York. Your mother wasn't helpful in how to contact you.”

She gave an awkward nod. Carla Little had not been a motherly, nurturing kind of woman who needed to know what her daughter was doing. “Mom was in the middle of a business deal that would have determined her legacy,” she mumbled. “She couldn't afford any distraction.”

“I kept looking for you,” he admitted with great reluctance before he returned his piercing gaze on her. “No one seemed to know where you were.”

Her parents hadn't been interested in finding out. While her friends were envious of her independence, the lack of parental concern had always embarrassed Jodie. “I knew how to take care of myself,” she said. “Why was it so urgent to find me?”

“I wanted to check on you.”

Jodie drew her head back. She wasn't sure what to say. Of all the people who had been part of that night, he had been the only one who tried to contact her. Even though he had made it clear how much he didn't like her, how little she meant to him.

Stergios watched her with an intensity that pinned her to the spot. “You were a virgin and I was...rough.”

Jodie frowned when she saw his stony expression. Stergios had been beating himself up about that night when she'd savored the primal and naked responses. It had been everything she had hoped for with the man who had starred in her secret fantasies.

And why did he have to bring up her inexperience? Her eyes widened with surprise. “Wait...were you going to insist on marriage?” she asked. She knew how the Antoniou males thought.

They had very old-fashioned views. The men married the virgins and had affairs with experienced women.

“I didn’t use protection that night,” he said stiffly, as if the oversight went against his personal code of honor. “I needed to know if there were consequences.”

Oh. He wasn’t worried about her as much as he was concerned about an illegitimate child. Disappointment crashed through her. She wanted to hunch her shoulders and curl into herself as if she could contain the pain. “There weren’t,” she said in a whisper.

Stergios gave a sharp nod. “I knew I had to seek you out because you wouldn’t have volunteered that information with me.”

Not necessarily. He always assumed the worst in her. “If you thought that, why did you give up looking for me? We’re talking about your child, the Antoniou heir,” she said grandly as she spread her hands up high in the air. “You would have searched the world if you thought that was a possibility.”

“I stopped looking a few months later.” His features hardened as he gave her an unforgiving look. “There was a picture of you online and you were definitely not pregnant.”

She frowned. “What picture?”

Stergios sneered from the memory. “You were on a yacht in the Caribbean with that royal playboy.” He spat out the last word as if it was a curse.

Jodie wanted to cringe. The prince had been a mistake. She had been looking for love. She had been desperate to be loved and found a playboy instead. Unfortunately, she had found a few playboys on her search for love before she wised up.

“I see,” she said calmly as she watched Stergios’s lip curl with disgust. “And suddenly it no longer mattered that I was a virgin or eighteen.”

He shrugged. “I might have been your first, but then you threw yourself at the next man who showed any interest,” he declared as he turned away. “You were no longer my problem.”

No longer my problem. The words echoed in her mind as she dazedly watched Stergios stride into the house. Once he’d decided that she “belonged” to another man, she had no longer existed.

Jodie hissed air between her clenched teeth as the pain ricocheted. He had ruthlessly cleaved her out of his life. He had moved on without missing a step. It was a fear she struggled with constantly. The fear of becoming invisible. Forgotten.

But she had no idea it was that easy.

She needed to work harder to become unforgettable to those who mattered. It was an impossible task, Jodie decided as she took the steps back to the garden, intent on getting away from the house, from Stergios. As she marched along the path she gradually realized what she had to do. She was going to use her wealth to become an indispensable member of the family. She might be unlovable now, but money could change anything.

CHAPTER THREE

HE HAD UNDERESTIMATED JODIE, Stergios decided later that night. He considered what he had seen at the family dinner a few moments ago and scowled. Not only had she gained her father’s attention with the mention of an expensive gift for his upcoming birthday, but Jodie had also excelled in the area that had consistently been her downfall. She had been the quintessential dinner companion, delighting the surliest of his uncles and making fast friends with the younger wives and fiancées.

Stergios reluctantly admired Jodie’s strategy. She had approached the outer circle of his family and was slowly gaining allies. He couldn’t have this.

He leaned against the marble newel post as he watched Jodie descend the staircase like a regal queen. She had reapplied her bright red lipstick after dinner and he found it difficult to look away from her mouth. He couldn’t fault her long-sleeved black dress. It should have been modest but it clung lovingly to her thighs. The white stripe zigzagging from her shoulder to her waist and hips was pure Jodie. Despite her attempts to blend in with the crowd she couldn’t wear anything that might have her fade into the background.

“You gave a worthy performance at dinner tonight,” he said as she drew closer.

She cast him a haughty look. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were very proper.” He should have appreciated the charade. Stergios remembered the family dinners she’d attended in the past. At times he hadn’t known if she’d been intentionally provocative or if she’d been unable to control her tongue. “You’re playing it safe. That’s not like you.”

She stood on the last step and met his gaze. “I know what is expected of me.”

“Especially if a wrong move will harm your chances with this family.” She wasn’t going to make a mistake soon. Jodie was using all of her knowledge from her past visits to dazzle and deceive. “What is it you want from us? Status? A favor?”

“As I have said before, I no longer want to be estranged from my father.”

She was sticking to that story but Stergios knew there had to be something more. What had happened that would cause this change of heart? What did her father have that she wanted? “Why?”

She frowned. “He’s my father.”

“He’s also the one who threw you out of this home.” And to someone like Jodie, that act would have been unforgiveable.

The corner of her mouth dipped before she looked away. “Emotions ran high that night,” she said quietly. “We said and did things we later regretted. It’s time to forgive and move on.”

Stergios raised an eyebrow at her practiced answer. “You think Gregory regretted his actions? That he wants forgiveness?”

She hesitated and glanced at the music room where her father was chatting with guests. “I can only speak for myself,” she replied in a faraway voice.

“You didn’t think the timing of that night had been suspicious?” He crossed his arms as he watched her closely. “He cast you out of his life when you were eighteen.”

Jodie’s head jerked and she gave him a cold stare. “Mairi kicked me out,” she corrected him. “This is her house and my father was obligated to agree with her.”

“And Gregory was no longer receiving child support from your mother.” His quiet tone didn’t soften the blow.

She pressed her lips before she spoke. “You think my father only tolerated me because of the money?”

There were many times when he had believed that. Gregory may have won full custody of Jodie, but he had constantly sent her overseas to any school that would take her. When she was away, it was as if Gregory forgot her existence. Each time Jodie had been expelled from a school and came here to live, Gregory had made it clear that the living arrangements would be temporary.

“He didn’t get rid of me the moment he could. I hadn’t just turned eighteen,” she reminded him. “If that had been his reason, he would have kicked me out months before.”

Stergios knew he had wounded her. Her rigid stance and cool tone didn’t give her away. It was in the way she tried to give a scornful smile. Her tremulous lips ruined the effect.

He had dug in and exposed a fear that had settled deep in her heart. It gave him no pleasure. But Stergios knew he couldn’t hold back if he wanted her to leave. He had to go in for the kill.

“It’s common knowledge that Gregory wanted to become a father so he could eventually live off the child support.”

Her forced smile tightened. “Yes, I’ve heard what was said during the divorce proceedings. That was one lawyer’s argument and it doesn’t make it true.” She took the last step and headed for the music room to join the others.

“Why would you want a relationship with a man who only showed an interest in you for the money?” he called after her.

“Perhaps you should ask your mother that question.” She whirled around. There was restrained anger in her movement but her expression was coldly polite. “My father married Mairi for money.”

She married him because he's a respectable escort. He's not a danger to her fortune or family like your father was."

Stergios's head snapped back. No one discussed Elias Pagonis in this house. In front of him. No one. Stergios had shed his father's name years ago but he couldn't rid himself of the memories and the damage Pagonis had created.

Jodie took a step closer as if she wasn't aware of the emotional grenade she'd just lobbed. "Mairi and my father have been married for ten years and they have grown fond of each other. Is it really outside the realm of possibility that my father can grow to love his only child?"

Stergios struggled to focus as old anger swelled inside him. He wouldn't allow Jodie to distract him with the mention of Pagonis. "Are you going to buy Gregory's love with your inheritance and hope it becomes the real thing one day?"

"Do you think that's the only way I can get love? By paying for it?"

Stergios heard the crack in her voice and the weak sound pulled at him. "Be careful with this plan," he said roughly as he fought for control over his emotions. "You'll soon run out of money. And when that happens, Gregory will have no use for you."

"Why are you giving me advice, Stergios? I can't believe it's from the goodness of your black, withered heart. If my father loses interest in me, that will suit your purposes."

"Because I don't believe that's why you're here." Rejection was the one thing Jodie Little couldn't excuse. "You can't accept that Gregory got rid of you."

"He didn't get rid of me." She leaned forward and he noticed the suspicious moisture in her blue eyes. "He had to make a choice between his wife and his daughter."

"And he'll make the same choice over and over again." Stergios almost missed the flicker of pain before she blinked. "You have money now but it's nothing compared to what we have. We have more money, influence and power. You can't compete."

"I'm not trying to take him away from your mother." Her voice was rough with annoyance.

"Oxi, it's worse. You're trying to become part of this family." He viewed her plan as an invasion and he would use all of his resources to prevent that. "Do you actually believe we're going to lower our guard and let you in?"

"No, of course not. It didn't happen before. Why should it now?" She shook her head as if she was suddenly weary. "I am not the enemy, Stergios. I don't have the power to hurt anyone."

Stergios wanted to scoff at that declaration. "I disagree. I've seen the damage you cause without even trying."

Jodie set her mouth into a grim line. "Don't put all the blame on me."

"You have always been trouble." He raked his hand through his hair. "If you weren't causing me headaches, you were destroying everything important to me. I can't have you anywhere near Dimos's wedding."

Jodie stared at him silently for a moment before she raised her chin. "Sorry to hear nothing is going your way, Stergios," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You better get used to it while I'm around."

The woman didn't understand, Stergios decided. His gaze rested on the sway of her hips as she strutted to the music room. Jodie assumed he played fair but when it came to protecting his family, he wasn't constrained by a gentleman's code of conduct. He had learned early in life what it took to fight to the death. He followed the law of the jungle and always won. Always.

Stergios wandered into the music room a few minutes later. It had taken some time to purge the thought of Pagonis and rein in his emotions. Jodie had hit her mark and it appeared she had done so without any strategy. It was as though she could see through him however much he tried to dissemble.

He stood by the door as he watched one of the guests, yet another heiress and family friend, play his mother's favorite sonata on the piano. Everyone seemed spellbound by the display of technical

precision but the music didn't reach him. Rarely did anything pierce through his armor these days. Just Jodie Little. Stergios frowned at that troubling thought.

"Stergios?" He turned and saw Zoi Volakis. He wasn't sure how long she had been standing there. She was a petite woman with dramatic features who dressed just like every other female in his social circle. "I've been meaning to ask. What exactly is Jodie to this family?"

"She is Gregory's daughter from his first marriage," Stergios answered. He refused to say she was part of the family. Legally she was a relative but her actions proved otherwise. She wouldn't think twice about destroying his family.

"She doesn't look anything like him," Zoi decided. "And they act like strangers."

So he wasn't the only one who noticed that. "They're Americans. New Yorkers."

She gave a wry chuckle. "That must explain it. How long does Jodie plan to stay?"

Her casual tone hit a wrong note and Stergios went on alert. "She hasn't said. Why?"

Zoi hesitated, as if she was reluctant to say anything. "Jodie is very close to Dimos."

He looked around the music room for his cousin. Frustration and something dark and dangerous bloomed inside him when he saw Dimos and Jodie standing by the windows, apart from the other guests. "They grew up as cousins in the same house."

Stergios recognized Dimos's awestruck look. He had seen that expression on his cousin's face in a picture four years ago. Mairi had sent him a picture of a family event when he had been working on an assignment overseas. It was more than infatuation. He had known at that moment that Dimos wanted to claim Jodie.

And Stergios returned home immediately after seeing that picture. He had done everything in his power to keep Dimos and Jodie from getting together. Stergios could tell himself it was to protect the merger but there had been darker, more primal reasons he hadn't wanted to explore.

"Is there anything I should know?" Zoi asked.

"No, of course not," Stergios replied smoothly. "Dimos wants to marry you."

She nodded her head but she didn't appear relieved by his answer. "Dimos and I do not have a love match, but I take this commitment seriously," Zoi said. "I'm getting married because it's my duty to my family."

Stergios tensed when he heard the warning underneath Zoi's polite tone. He didn't need this. Not now. "Dimos knows how important this merger is for both our families."

"Good, but I am not as self-sacrificing as you may think." She cast another glance in Dimos's direction before she lifted her chin with injured pride. "I had tolerated the delays and setbacks before we got engaged, but I will not be humiliated by my husband's wandering eye."

Stergios gritted his teeth as he watched Zoi walk out of the music room. They were so close to getting this merger settled but it could all fall apart in the next few days. He took part of the blame. He had pushed Jodie too far and had hurt her feelings. She retaliated the only way she knew how.

He strode toward his cousin and Jodie. They seemed to be in a world of their own with their heads tilted close to each other. Dimos must have caught a glimpse of him. His forehead was creased with worry as he cautiously approached Stergios. "What's wrong?"

"Stay away from Jodie," he warned in a low, fierce tone.

Dimos flushed as he glowered at him. "Why? You can hate her all you want but—"

"She isn't going to share her body or her bed with you." Stergios watched with satisfaction as Jodie slipped out of the music room and hurried to the grand staircase. She wouldn't be a concern for the rest of the night.

His cousin continued to splutter with outrage. "What the—"

"She's leading you on because I told her not to," Stergios said with brutal honesty. "Haven't you learned anything about this woman?"

"You have no—"

Stergios leaned forward and watched with satisfaction as his cousin took a cautious step back. “And if this wedding doesn’t happen, if you try anything with Jodie, I will cut you out of this family.”

Dimos’s jaw went slack before his eyes glittered with hate.

“You’re supposed to be engaged,” he said as the anger flashed hot inside him. “Act like it. Go find your fiancée and pretend Jodie Little doesn’t exist.”

Stergios turned his back on his cousin and forced a genial expression before he mingled with the guests. Now if only he could afford the same luxury and act as if the threat of Jodie Little didn’t loom over his family.

* * *

Just a couple more days, Jodie thought as she rested her head against the soft leather chair. It was almost over and yet the knowledge didn’t relieve the coiling tension inside her. Dimos’s wedding was to be held the following evening and she would have finally proven to Stergios that she had no plans of revenge or destruction. But intuition told her that he wasn’t going to stop. He was going to find a way to push her out for good.

Jodie shifted in her seat and tried to relax. The ride in Stergios’s private helicopter was loud but she wore a headset to communicate. She had found the all-white interior and luxurious touches more intimidating than comfortable. It was just another reminder that the Antonious had more money and power than she.

She glanced at Stergios. He sat in the chair next to her and read his tablet. He was dressed more for a funeral than a wedding in his black designer suit and black silk tie. He had been moody since they had left the house and she had done her best to ignore him.

Jodie crossed her arms and tapped the pointed toe of her black stiletto heels against the floor. “I still don’t understand why I had to arrive at the wedding with you.”

He didn’t look up from the screen. “It’s a matter of logistics.”

She made a face. “You have a thousand relatives and not one could include me in their travel plans?”

“Not one.”

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that you won’t let me out of your sight until Dimos gets married?”

He swiped his fingers against the touch screen. “That is correct, pethi mou,” he murmured distractedly.

He had been her shadow for the past few days and she had been unable to shake him off. It didn’t matter if she talked nonstop or gave him the silent treatment. He didn’t care if she wanted to have a private moment with her father or get lost in a crowded party. He had always been at her side.

Jodie pointedly looked away from him and nervously peered through the window. She didn’t like the way the dark gray clouds filled the sky or how the choppy waves crashed against each other in the Aegean Sea. She hoped they landed soon before the weather got rougher.

Just as she was going to ask how much longer the trip would last, Jodie saw the island as the helicopter pilot started his descent. Her lips parted with surprise when she saw the rolling hills covered with fat, leafy trees. After meeting Zoi and her family, she had expected one big amusement park filled with pristine beaches, golf courses and all the amenities. This looked like an uninhabited island.

As the helicopter set down on the landing pad, Jodie caught a glimpse of a house. It was white and modern with clean lines and a flat roof. It wasn’t a mansion and she assumed it wasn’t the main residence. It probably belonged to one of the islanders.

She scrambled out of the helicopter inelegantly in her form-fitting orange dress and sky-high heels but she refused Stergios’s assistance. She stood at the edge of the helipad as she watched him confer with the pilot.

“Where is your suitcase?” Jodie asked as he walked past her, effortlessly carrying her bags.

“Everything I need is here,” he said, patting his briefcase.

She didn't doubt it. The man was outrageously sexy and didn't have to primp or make any effort to look good. It really wasn't fair.

Jodie followed him along the gravel path, falling behind thanks to her spindly heels. She heard the whine of the helicopter behind her as it ascended. "It's very quiet here," she commented as she brushed her hair away from her face.

"Not for much longer, I'm sure."

There was no music or the sound of conversation. What kind of event was this going to be? A wedding should have a festive tone, even if it was arranged.

"The way Zoi had talked about her wedding, I thought there'd be more decorations," she said as she tried to walk faster. "I'm not saying she'd line the helipad with flowers but I wouldn't put it past her."

Stergios didn't say anything as he waited for her to catch up.

Jodie stopped next to him and placed her hands on her hips as she looked around. It was strange that no one had met them. "Where is everyone?"

His mouth settled into a harsh line. "At the Volakis Island, I assume."

Jodie frowned with confusion. "Wait. What?" She shook her head as she tried to make sense of what he said. "Isn't this the Volakis Island?"

"Oxi, this is my home," he replied in a resigned tone.

She glanced around again at the white sand beach and leafy trees. The island was unspoiled and isolated. Free from any distraction. It suited Stergios.

"Why did we have to stop here?" She whirled around and watched the helicopter fade into the gray sky. "Why didn't you ask the pilot to wait?"

"He'll be back in three days."

"What?" Her heel skidded against the path. She grabbed his sleeve but her hand barely wrapped around his muscular arm. "I don't understand what is going on."

His eyes were cold and wintry when she met his gaze. "You didn't leave when you had a chance," he said in a clipped tone. "You didn't stay away from Dimos. You left me no choice."

Her mouth parted as the shock and confusion crashed inside her. "What are you saying?"

"You're not going to the wedding," he announced. "You're stuck here with me until I decide it's safe to let you go."

CHAPTER FOUR

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT!" She looked around the island, the scent of the briny ocean and the promise of rain suddenly overwhelming. Her head began to spin as she took deep gulps of air. "I did not agree to this. My father is expecting me at this wedding. It will embarrass him if I unexpectedly don't show up."

"You have no choice in the matter. I suggest you get inside before the storm hits."

She waved her hands in the air as she spluttered with outrage. "Do you honestly believe that I will just follow you? Only because you say so?" She reached inside her purse and grabbed her phone. "You forget that I'm not an Antoniou who mindlessly obeys your orders."

"Put that away," Stergios replied. "You're not going to reach anyone. There is no internet or phone connection on this island."

She refused to believe him. A man as important and powerful as Stergios Antoniou would have all of the latest technology. But as she held up her phone she saw he was telling the truth. Maybe she was in a bad range. Maybe she had to go higher on the island.

"People are going to worry if we don't show up." She hated how her voice escalated as she took short, choppy breaths. "Especially you. You have to be at the wedding. You've been part of it every step of the way. Will it still go on if you don't manage every moment of it?"

"One of my assistants is calling my mother to let her know we've been detained because of mechanical problems."

He sounded indifferent. She hated it. Hated him. “You thought of everything. How long have you been planning this?”

“It came to me this morning. Does it matter?” He gave a shrug before glanced at the darkening sky. “We need to go inside.”

“No.” She looked around wildly, her heart pumping. There had to be a boat around here. A Jet Ski. Something. She would find a way to escape if she had to comb through every inch of this island.

“Come along, pethi mou,” he said with a bite of impatience. “The caretaker is away but you are safe with me. After all, you are my guest.”

She scoffed and cast him a look of disbelief. “I am your hostage.”

Stergios flinched. He went pale as his expression turned blank. “What did you say?” His voice was a rasp.

“You heard me.” Jodie didn’t like how the air suddenly crackled between them. Alarm trickled down her spine. “You have kidnapped me. You, of all people.”

He dropped the suitcases on the ground as if his fingers went slack. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” His hand sliced through the air. “This is not a kidnapping.”

“You are detaining me against my will.” Her voice faded as he approached her. It took all of her courage to stand her ground.

“Did I take you by force?” he asked through clenched teeth. “Are you in chains?”

Jodie saw the haunted look in his eyes and she knew he was wrestling with old memories. But she couldn’t afford to show him any sympathy. “What are you saying? That I’m not your prisoner because I had a comfortable ride over here?”

He stabbed his finger in the direction of the house behind him. “You will have a room of your own and plenty of food. You will have comfort and privacy. I will make sure every one of your needs are met.”

“As long as I do what you tell me?” She flung her hands high in the air. “Forget it. I’m not going into that house. How do I know that you won’t lock me in the room?”

“There are no bars on the windows. You can come and go as you please.”

“As long as I stay on the island,” Jodie added. “That still makes me a prisoner.”

He closed his eyes and drew in air between his teeth. His hands clenched and unclenched at his side. “This is not a kidnapping.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Then get me off this island right now.”

He paused as the tension radiated from his body. Just when she thought Stergios was going to explode, he opened his eyes and took a step back. “Oxi. No.”

His answer was so quiet and calm. He didn’t care what he did or to whom. “I should have expected this.” She shook her head in disgust. “This is why you intimidate everyone. They can sense that you aren’t the gentleman you pretend to be. They know there’s a wild animal just underneath ready to pounce.”

“I’m going inside.” Stergios walked away and grabbed the luggage. “You can do whatever you please.”

She stamped her foot as the fury ripped through her. “What have I done to deserve this?” she called out to him. “Why do you hate me so much?”

Stergios slowly turned around. His eyes were cold and his mouth was curved in a stern frown. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking or feeling. He was back in control. “Hate you?” he asked. “Jodie, I don’t give a damn about you.”

“You’re lying,” she yelled. “You wish you could forget me. You hate how I make you feel.”

The corner of his mouth hitched. “Dream on.”

“I could tell that night in the wine cellar,” she blurted out. “That’s why you ran away. You were ashamed that I had that much power over you.” Ashamed that, of all women, it had been me.

Stergios's harsh features tightened as he hunched his shoulders. She could tell she struck a nerve. He was trying to hold himself back before he retaliated.

Jodie pressed her fingertips against her lips. She had to curb her tongue. She was already vulnerable to this man. She didn't need Stergios to figure out how he made her feel. She was the one who lost control when they were together. He was the one who had power over her.

"I'm going to make you regret this," Jodie said in a hiss as she turned around and went back up the steps. "And you will have no one to blame but yourself."

* * *

Stergios paced along the windows that overlooked the beach. He had discarded his jacket hours ago and had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. It was turning dark and the rain was still coming down hard. Jodie had not made an attempt to find shelter.

He paused and looked for a flash of the bright orange designer dress. He had seen the pop of color every once in a while as she searched the island for an escape. Stergios now spotted her sitting on the wet sand near the house. Her blond hair was plastered against her head and her soaked dress clung to her body as the ocean waves lapped against her bare feet. With her slumped shoulders and outstretched legs, she appeared weary. Defeated.

Kidnapped.

Stergios hissed and rubbed his hands over his face. Jodie always knew what to say to pierce his armor. She would do anything to get a reaction. But it wasn't going to work. This was not a kidnapping.

He knew what a kidnapping felt like. It was a constant state of fear and of not knowing. It was howling pain punctuated with numbness. At times he hadn't felt human. He had been a pawn, a package. His childhood, his innocence, had been stripped from him in an instant. Worst of all, he had discovered what he was capable of and how far he would go to find freedom.

He understood what it felt like to be taken. And still... Stergios stared at Jodie. He replayed his actions in his mind and it had been strangely familiar. The truth suddenly cracked his resistance wide open. It was as if jagged shards dug deep in his chest and he couldn't breathe.

He had made the same decision his father had made years ago.

Stergios took a shallow breath as the pain scored through him. This hadn't been a delay or a detour. He had kidnapped someone. He had followed his instincts and had snatched Jodie in broad daylight.

He rested his forehead against the windowpane and struggled to remain standing as a cold sweat prickled his skin. The idea to abduct Jodie had come naturally and he hadn't questioned it.

Stergios closed his eyes as the nausea swept through him. After all these years of fighting the possibility, blood will out. He thought he had been protecting his family by keeping Jodie away. Instead, he had uncovered one of his deepest fears. He had always pushed himself to be a better man than his father. To distance himself from everything the man had represented.

But every time he looked in the mirror, he was reminded of his father. Despite his achievements and milestones, nothing could cover up the fact that he was Elias Pagonis's son.

Stergios stepped away from the window. He thrust his hands in his hair, but he didn't feel the sting of his fingers dragging along his scalp. He had to fix this. Redeem himself. Find a way to erase his actions.

He glanced up at the sky and noticed how the trees swayed against the wind. There was no way they could leave the island tonight in this weather. And could he allow Jodie to attend the wedding? Was he willing to take that risk?

Stergios would consider the consequences later. Right now she was his obligation. He couldn't let anything happen to her while she was here.

He strode out of the house, the door banging against the wall, and marched through the sand. Jodie's eyes widened as she caught a glimpse of him. She scooped up her shoes as she struggled to stand up.

“You are so stubborn,” he called out over the roar of the storm.

She scurried back, poised to run. “Don’t talk to me! I’m furious with you.”

“Are you going to stay out here all night?” The wind whipped his hair as the cold sheet of rain stung his bare skin.

“Yes,” she spat out. “I’d rather catch pneumonia than be your prisoner.”

“You always pick the wrong choice,” he said in a growl as he rubbed the water from his eyes. “Instead of showing common sense, you have to make some dramatic statement.”

“This from a man who thought kidnapping was the only option.”

He had had enough. Stergios lunged forward and grabbed Jodie. She screamed as he gathered her in his arms. She fought for her release, kicking and slapping, demanding that he set her down.

“Keep that up and I’ll drop you,” he warned as he walked across the beach.

“Try it and I’ll take you down with me.”

He entered the house and walked through the living area, past the welcoming heat of the fire he had built in the fireplace. “There are two bedrooms,” he told her as he approached the door. “Mine is on the other side of the house. This one is yours. You can stay here for as long as you like.”

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