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The Greek's Innocent Virgin

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The Greek's Innocent Virgin / L. MONROE — «HarperCollins»,

Greek tycoon Sebastian Kouros thinks he knows all about Rachel Long: as far as he's concerned, she's a scheming money-grabber who deserves nothing from him or his family.But the searing sexual chemistry between them can't be denied. Sebastian sees an opportunity to seduce this girl who plays it so sweet and innocent. He'll discard her when he sees fit….Only Rachel isn't a gold digger at all–she is innocent and she's a virgin….

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 27

“Did it hurt to hear I could never love you?”

“Yes.” Rachel had promised herself a long time ago to be as honest as it was possible for her to be. “Do you need to hear that I’m stupid enough to care about you so your ego is bolstered? Or maybe you just want revenge?”

“It is not that.”

“I don’t understand you, Sebastian.” She swallowed against the constriction in her throat. “You kissed me in Andrea’s room. And the other night, you kissed me on the beach and touched me. We almost made love, for goodness’s sake, but then you told your mother you could never love me.”

His hand traveled down her cheek and neck, one finger softly brushing the rapid pulse he found there.

“Sex is not love.”

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The Greek's Innocent Virgin
Lucy Monroe

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To Kim Young, an editor of beautiful creative vision and insight. Thank you for taking a chance on me, for working with me and pushing me to be the best I can be with every book. You are a tremendous blessing in my life and will always have a special place in my heart.

Your Forever Fan,

Lucy

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CHAPTER ONE

RACHEL LONG felt curiously numb as she walked away from her mother's graveside, the scent of damp earth filling the hot Greek air.

Andrea Demakis had died at the age of forty-five and Rachel felt nothing. No outrage a life should be cut so short, no pain in the loss of a parent, no fear for the future.

She simply felt nothing at all.

Not even relief. The emotional turmoil her mother had visited on those around her was no longer Rachel's personal sword of Damocles, hovering above her and ready to shred her life again. And yet, she experienced no sense of liberation at the knowledge, merely emotional numbness in the face of the finality of death.

Her feet moved without her directing them, carrying her away from the final statement of a life that had been lived with only one goal, self-gratification.

The service was long over and the other mourners had gone. All but one. Sebastian Kouros stood in the absolute stillness of extreme grief beside his great-uncle's grave. He had thrown the first handful of dirt onto the coffin, his steel gray gaze stoic, his big body rigid beneath the unrelenting Greek sun.

She stopped beside him, unsure what to say.

Or indeed if she should say anything at all.

His family had despised her mother and that contempt had glimmered in more than one pair of eyes when they had settled upon her today. No matter how many times she got the look that said no doubt she'd been cut from the same cloth as her hedonistic mother, it hurt. Only Sebastian had never allowed his obvious dislike of Andrea Demakis to impact the way he treated her daughter. He had always been kind to Rachel, gentle toward her shyness and even protective.

He had been the one to convince his great-uncle to pay for Rachel's university education, but would Sebastian's tolerance continue in the face of his beloved uncle's death?

After all, everyone knew why the old man was dead.

He'd married the wrong woman and not only had he lived to regret it, he'd died because of it.

The truth was, he could have died on any of numerous occasions over the past six years when Andrea had teased him into attempting physical feats better left to men half his age. Only he hadn't. He had died in a car accident, driving under the influence of alcohol and too much tension after yet another horrific argument with Andrea.

He'd caught his young wife in bed with another man…again.

They had fought in front of witnesses and then left the party. Rachel had learned her mother had only been in the car because when she'd refused at first to leave with him, Matthias had threatened to cut her off without a penny and divorce her. Motivated by self-interest when shame would have never swayed her, Andrea had gone with him.

And they had both died.

So, what could Rachel say to the grieving man beside her?

There were no words to undo the pain of the last six years, pain that had culminated in him losing the man who had stood in his father's stead since he was a young boy. Nevertheless, the compulsion to try could not be ignored.

She reached for his hand, hers trembling. "Sebastian?"

Sebastian Kouros felt the small fingers touch his, heard the tentative word quietly spoken and fought the urge to turn on Andrea Demakis's daughter with all the rage he wanted to vent against a dead woman.

"What is it pethi mou?" The endearment slipped out much too naturally when he was feeling in no way tender toward her, but she was little—barely five feet, five inches to his six-foot-four and he had followed his great-uncle's example, calling her by the endearment since first meeting Rachel.

"You're going to miss him." Her soft voice touched a place inside he could not afford to be stirred and maintain the precarious hold he had on his composure. "I'm sorry."

He looked down at her, but all he saw was chestnut brown hair pulled into a conservative French twist. Her face was averted.

"I also."

Moss green eyes came around to meet his own. "He should never have married Andrea."

"But the marriage changed your life, did it not?"

Her pale features flushed, but she nodded. "For the better. I can't deny it."

"And yet you chose to accept employment in the States, only returning to Greece for a few short weeks out of the year."

"I did not fit into their lifestyle."

"Did you try?"

Her eyes widened at his cold tone, their green depths darkening in confusion. "I didn't want to. I never liked living amid the chaos of Andrea's hectic social life."

"Had you no thought of trying to mitigate the effects of your mother's selfish nature on the life of a man who had done so much for you?"

She stepped away from him, removing her hand from his as if burned. "You cannot live another person's life for them."

"Indeed?" Part of him knew what she said was right.

He had been unable to stop his great-uncle from making the disastrous marriage, but the deep well of pain inside him denied a totally logical view of the old man's death.

"You profited by the marriage. The least you could have done was to at least try to curb Andrea's destructive behavior."

"I couldn't have done anything." Her words were firm, but her face was set in guilty lines and he knew she too wondered if she could have changed the steady downward spiral Andrea had made of Matthias's life. "I couldn't," she repeated.

"Perhaps in this, you also had no desire to try…" His voice trailed off on the subtle accusation and she flinched.

"I gave up trying to impact Andrea's lifestyle a long time ago." Rachel's voice reverberated with emotional hurt he could not ignore and he had a totally inappropriate urge to kiss the bow-shaped lips set in such an unhappy line until they were soft and glistening.

Until her eyes reflected sweet passion instead of a past filled with secret sorrows.

Damn it. There should be no room with the pain gripping his insides for this inexplicable desire.

It was the same appalling need that assailed him every time he came within ten feet of the beautiful, but reserved woman. His Greek mind could not reconcile wanting Rachel with the disdain he had felt for her mother.

By rights, he should despise Rachel as much as he had the selfish, ruthless woman who had given birth to her.

Rachel entered the masculine study with trepidation.

It had been Matthias Demakis's domain, the only room in the large Mediterranean villa on the privately owned Greek island that her mother had not redecorated. In the past, this room with its rich red upholstered chairs and dark wood paneling had been the setting for two of her happiest moments: the evening Matthias had told her she no longer had to attend her mother's parties despite Andrea's demands and the day the old man had told her he was sending her to university in America.

However, today promised no joy.

She had been called down to attend the reading of the wills. Since her conversation at the graveside with Sebastian the day before, she'd spent most of her time in her room. The Kouros and Demakis families were in residence and she had no desire to make herself a whipping boy for their grief and entirely righteous anger. Justified it might be, but she was not the one who had destroyed Matthias Demakis's life.

Sebastian's accusation that she should have tried to stem Andrea's devastating behavior had been ludicrous, but she'd had no desire to laugh. He held her responsible for her mother's sins and that hurt more than she wanted to contemplate.

The one man in all the world she'd ever wanted physically, the only man she'd trusted enough to swim with or talk to alone on a balcony of the old villa late at night, hated her. Her mother's death had not resulted in personal anguish, but the knowledge Sebastian was forever out of her reach did.

She'd paid the price for being Andrea's daughter for twenty-three years. Must she keep paying it, even now that the other woman was dead?

"Miss Long, won't you take a seat?" The white haired lawyer had been on Matthias's retainer for decades, but still maintained an aura of vitality she couldn't help but admire.

As Matthias had…before he'd married a woman more than twenty-five years his junior.

Rachel tried not to make eye contact with anyone else as she made for a small ottoman in the back of the room set against a bookcase. She sat down, smoothing her hands nervously over the oyster white loose trousers covering her legs. The current trend of tight clothes that showed strips of skin had not made its way into her closet despite the fact she lived in Skin Central—Southern California.

Phillippa Kouros, Sebastian's mother and Matthias's niece, came into the room to take a seat beside her son. Although the powerful man's back was to her, Rachel had no problem reading his body language as he solicitously cared for his mother and then turned to the lawyer and gave him permission to begin.

Andrea's will held few unexpected details. She'd left all her worldly goods to her husband, except in the event he preceded her in death, then her possessions were to pass on to Rachel. The sequence of bequeathals did not surprise her. Andrea would never have expected Matthias to outlive her and had no doubt made the stipulation as some manipulative attempt at making him believe she valued him even above her daughter.

However, Matthias Demakis's last will and testament was somewhat surprising. Although he had left a few things of sentimental value to his family members and Rachel, the bulk of his estate had been passed down to Sebastian Kouros, including the villa.

He had made no provision at all for his younger wife, nor had he left instructions for Sebastian to care for the widow. Knowing how his family had felt about Andrea, that omission was telling to Rachel's way of thinking. Evidently, Matthias had grown completely disenchanted with his wife's peccadilloes and scandalous behavior.

The white-haired lawyer set the document down after he had finished reading it and fixed his blue gaze on Rachel, which effectively brought the attention of the other occupants of the room as well.

Rachel squirmed inside at the stares directed her way.

"The coroner was unable to determine which of the occupants of the car died first." The lawyer's gaze shifted to Sebastian. "However, I'm sure the family will not dispute you taking possession of your mother's personal belongings."

Sebastian's head shook in a slight negative.

Rachel felt nothing, certainly no joy in possessing anything resulting from her mother's misbegotten lifestyle. The one thing she would have gladly received from Andrea, the other woman had taken to the grave with her.

The identity of Rachel's father—a piece of information her mother had refused to part with throughout Rachel's life.

Sebastian looked up at the sound of a knock on the study door. It was open, but Rachel did not come in. She stood framed in the opening, her face cast in shadow by the light coming in from the hallway so he could not see her expression.

He didn't like that and he waved her inside impatiently, having expected this visit, but not pleased his cynicism had been proven right. As much as he knew she was Andrea's daughter, he'd always wanted to believe she didn't share her mother's avarice.

"Come in. You don't have to stand in the hall."

She stepped forward, entering the room like a wary doe in the hunter's sights. "I didn't want to intrude."

"If I needed privacy, the door would be shut."

"Of course." She took a deep breath, avoiding direct eye contact, her hands fisted at her sides. "Do you have a moment? I have some things I need to discuss with you."

He nodded toward one of the red leather chairs he and his mother had occupied when the wills were read earlier. "Have a seat. I know what you want to talk about and I'm sure we can come to an amicable arrangement."

Rachel had taken the news she'd inherited virtually nothing with too much calm acceptance earlier that day. Any offspring of the scheming Andrea would have expected a large settlement on the death of her wealthy stepfather. Rachel had to have been seriously disappointed.

The small set of books on Hellenic culture Matthias had bequeathed to her had been nothing more than a sentimental nod to the evenings he had spent discussing Greek history with his stepdaughter. Even if she sold them, they would net her only a few thousand dollars.

Sebastian saw no reason to refuse Rachel a settlement…in exchange for a vow of silence on her mother's years as Matthias Demakis's wife. He had no desire to read sleazy stories in the gutter press given credence by paid for interviews with Andrea Demakis's daughter.

Rachel slid into the red chair, its oversize winged back giving her the appearance of a child. Or perhaps a fairy queen. Children did not have curves that haunted men's dreams and sparked their libidos. He knew Rachel did, even if the white pants and top she currently wore did nothing to reveal the hourglass figure he'd seen on the few occasions she'd swum with him in his great-uncle's pool.

She was as unassuming and conventional as her mother had been flamboyant and morally corrupt. At least on the surface.

How much of that innocence was real?

Considering the discussion they were about to have, he would have to assume a very small part.

"I shouldn't be surprised you expected me." A smile briefly lifted the corners of Rachel's mouth. "You've always seen things others tend to ignore."

"Certainly more than my uncle did when he looked at your mother."

An emotionless mask descended over Rachel's porcelain features, all vestiges of her smile dissipating like mist under a warm sun. "No doubt."

"And I suppose this is what you wish to discuss with me?" The fact Matthias Demakis had finally wised up to his grasping, faithless wife leaving neither her, nor her daughter anything of real value in his will.

"In a way, yes." She sat up straight in the chair and then shifted her legs so that one crossed over the other. "I need to return to my job fairly soon."

"Yes?"

"And there are my mother's things to be gone through."

"Did you want to delegate that task to the servants?"

"No." Her mouth pursed as if in distaste at the thought. "That wouldn't be right, but I need to know what you want me to do with them."

"Surely that is a decision you must make."

"I'd considered donating her clothes and jewelry to charity, but then I realized there was the possibility Matthias had given her family heirloom pieces. I'm sure you wouldn't want them to go to strangers."

Ah…the first salvo. "And you would like me to buy them from you?"

Her eyes widened, the distaste in her expression blatant this time. "Don't be ridiculous. I simply need you to take a moment to identify which of the jewelry are heirlooms. If you don't have the time, perhaps your mother would be willing to do it. Anyway, I can't and I want to make sure your family takes possession of them before I dispose of the others."

"You propose to give me the family pieces?"

"Yes." She looked at him as if she was doubting his intelligence.

It was a new experience for him and he almost found himself smiling.

"It would actually help quite a bit if someone could go through all of the things in her bedroom with me to make sure anything of sentimental value to the family is kept before I have the removalists come."

"Removalists?"

"I've been in contact with an international association dedicated to the welfare of children. They've agreed to take possession of Andrea's things and sell them at auction to raise funds for their cause."

Reeling with the unexpected direction the conversation had taken, Sebastian's superior brain took several seconds to compute the import of Rachel's words. "You don't plan to keep anything of your mother's?"

"No." Rachel's now completely dispassionate expression told him nothing of her thoughts.

"But her clothes alone are easily worth over one-hundred-thousand American dollars."

"That's wonderful news for the charity."

"But means nothing to you?" He refused to believe it. No one was this uninterested in financial gain. "And the apartment in New York. You plan to give that to charity as well?"

"She owned an apartment in New York?" Rachel sounded more annoyed than overjoyed by that piece of news.

"I suppose you're going to tell me you want to donate that to charity as well?" he asked derisively.

"No, of course not."

"I didn't think so."

"If you'll have the deed drawn up, I'll sign it back over to the estate."

Sebastian reared to his feet, sending his chair crashing backward. "What kind of game are you playing?"

Rachel paled, but drew herself up, uncrossing her legs and moving forward on her chair.

"I'm not playing any sort of game," she said with quiet vehemence. "Maybe you were right about me trying to put a brake on Andrea's behavior. I didn't try and I'll have to live with that knowledge for the rest of my life, but I refuse to personally profit by it. I simply won't." The fervor in Rachel's manner was either the best drama he'd seen in a long time, or she was entirely sincere.

"There is no need for you to make a grand gesture," he dismissed with irritation, realizing his words the day before had instigated this conversation. "While there is no doubt your mother manipulated my uncle for her own gain, her material extravagance cost him negligibly in a financial sense."

He listed off the few properties and cars Andrea had been gifted by Matthias in their six year long marriage.

None of which did Sebastian have any desire to take possession of. It had been the personal cost of marriage to the grasping woman that had hurt Matthias and subsequently his family so much.

"Then it should be a simple matter for your lawyers to see that all significant properties are returned to the estate and smaller possessions donated to charity."

"My uncle would not have wanted you to give up claim to your inheritance in some misguided attempt to make up for the past and I refuse to condone you doing so."

She shook her head and smiled, a genuinely amused expression that made her green eyes glow and his breathing go from normal to erratic.

"You are so used to getting your own way, you amaze me."

"Is that so?" He wasn't sure if her words were a condemnation or not.

"Yes. You're absolutely confident that you can dictate my decisions for me." Her lips still twitched with humor.

"And you find this amusing?"

Her lips tucked into a prim bow. "Not really, it's merely that it apparently has not occurred to you, but it's up to me how I dispose of Andrea's property. If you refuse to accept reversion to the estate, then I will donate it all to worthy causes." Without warning, the amusement drained from her expression. "I want nothing of my mother's. Nothing at all."

"It is too late. You carry her genes." The cynical words were out before he thought better of them and he cursed in Greek as Rachel's face leached of all color.

She stood up, a visible tremor in her limbs, her eyes burning him with indictment for the pain he saw there. "If you don't have the necessary papers for me to sign before I leave Greece, I will see to the disposal of the properties when I return to America."

She turned and walked from the room, ignoring his demand she wait. He watched her go, frustration gripping his insides.

Damn it all to hell. Why had he said that?

Rachel had come into his uncle's study and set all of Sebastian's preconceived ideas on their head. She had proven in the most basic way that her mother's influence over her values and actions was negligible and still he had taunted her with being Andrea's daughter.

It had been unfair and obviously painful to her.

He could not remember the last time he had apologized to a woman, but he was sure he needed to offer one now.

Rachel sat across from Phillippa Kouros and wondered why she'd talked herself into joining the family for dinner. She'd felt rude asking for yet another meal to be served in her room and then there had been the message from Sebastian. He'd sent a servant to inform her he expected her to share the meal with the family.

And she'd come, not wanting to offend him.

Why did she care what the judgmental tyrant thought of her? He'd shown her that despite his kindness in the past, just like everyone else, he saw her through a glass tinted by her mother's bad blood. So what if he was the one man she'd ever felt a physical reaction to?

Her adolescent fantasies of him as the hero of her dreams were just that and she needed to vanquish those images forever from her brain.

Which meant she should be doing her best to complete the break with the Kouros and Demakis families.

Nevertheless, she found herself trying to draw his mother into conversation. The older woman's dark eyes were too sad for Rachel's tender heart to ignore.

Sebastian had been called from the table to take an urgent international call at the beginning of dinner. His brother had left the island with the rest of the family after the wills had been read.

"I've only got a small patio at my apartment, but I keep an herb garden," Rachel said as the salad course was served.

Phillippa's great passion was gardening and Rachel gave silent thanks for something to talk about unrelated to the family's recent loss.

“Basil and mint grow especially well in pots,” Phillippa replied, her dulled eyes lighting a little with interest. “I had not expected you to like gardening. Andrea was appalled by the very idea of getting dirt on her hands.”

“My mother and I shared very little in common.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“Yes.” What else could she say?

“A mother and a daughter can find much joy in sharing one another’s lives. My own mother taught me many things, not least of which was a love of growing things.”

“She must have been a very special woman.”

“She was. She and Uncle Matthias were always close.” The grief came back to settle over Phillippa like a physical mantle.

“Did you teach your sons to garden?” Rachel honestly couldn’t imagine Sebastian or Aristide tending plants, but she hoped the question would get Phillippa’s mind off of her grief.

The older woman smiled with indulgence. “No. Those two were always too busy for such a time intensive hobby.” She shook her head. “I have two wonderful sons, but I would have liked having a daughter as well.”

“I’m sure when they marry, their wives will find you a welcome addition to their lives.”

The thought of Sebastian married to a proper Greek girl caused pain deep in the region of her heart, but Rachel disregarded it. She had grown very adept at ignoring her feelings.

But Phillippa was shaking her head again. “They were too busy as boys for hobbies and are too busy as men making money to find wives. Sebastian is already thirty and he has never even dated a woman longer than a few weeks.”

“I’m sure when the time is right…” Her voice trailed off at the strange look in the older woman’s dark eyes.

But before she could question it, Sebastian returned from his telephone call.

He folded his tall frame into the chair at the end of the table. “Mama, there is something I would appreciate you doing for Rachel.”

The Greek woman looked at her son with obvious love and approval. “What is it, my son?”

“She wants to donate her mother’s possessions to auction for charity, but she doesn’t want anything of sentimental value to the family to be sold.” He looked to Rachel as if expecting her to confirm or deny his words.

So, she nodded. “That’s right.”

Phillippa’s dark brown eyes expressed her surprise. “You wish me to go through your mother’s things with you?”

“Just the things in her room. Anything that might be considered hers in the other rooms of the house can simply stay with the villa.” She’d thought about it and that seemed the easiest way to handle the situation.

“But surely you’ll want the things she treasured.”

“No.”

“I have a few items of my mother’s. They give me comfort when I think of her.”

“I will find more satisfaction knowing her possessions brought something good to the lives of children in need.”

The compassionate understanding in Phillippa’s eyes was almost enough to make Rachel lose the rigid hold she had on her emotions. “I understand. I would be pleased to help you.”

“Thank you,” Rachel replied with deep sincerity.

The sweet fragrance of honeysuckle mingled with the warm, salt laden air off the sea, wrapping around Rachel while her toes sank into pebbly sand. Unable to sleep, she’d come down to the beach, thinking a walk would help settle her mind.

But it wasn’t her mind that needed settling.

It was her body.

Being around Sebastian always did this to her, made her aware of her femininity in a way she managed to ignore the rest of the time. After what had happened to her when she was sixteen, that wasn't hard, but somehow the powerful tycoon undermined defenses that were rock-solid around other men.

And he didn't even try.

Sebastian Kouros had no interest in her, had never once intimated that he was aware of her as anything other than his beloved great-uncle's stepdaughter.

But that didn't stop her hormones from raging, or her heart from tying itself in knots over him.

"What are you doing out here, pethi mou?"

Spinning around at the sound of his voice, her heart climbed right up into her throat. She staggered backward away from that all too close masculine body, her feet hitting wet sand and then water. "Sebastian!"

His hands shot out and grabbed her shoulders, stopping her from an ignominious landing in the shallow water. "You did not know I was here?"

She shook her head dumbly.

He pulled her forward until her feet were once again on dry land, but he did not move, leaving her way too close to him. "I made no attempt to disguise my approach."

"I w-was thinking." She stumbled over her words, her brain processing the new sensory input from his arrival.

His fingers were warm and solid through the silk-thin cotton of her sleeves and his scent, spicy and overwhelmingly male, dominated her senses. The full moon supplied sufficient light for his formfitting, black T-shirt to reveal every defined abdomen and well-developed chest muscle. While his light colored sports shorts drew attention to legs that would have looked more appropriate on a long-distance runner than a corporate executive. His feet were bare like hers and their toes were scant inches apart.

For some reason that seemed very intimate.

CHAPTER TWO

"YOU must have been thinking about something very absorbing if your thoughts were so deep they prevented you from hearing my footsteps."

How ironic that thoughts of the man had prevented her from preparing herself mentally to meet up with him. "Yes."

"Why are you not sleeping?"

Did he realize he was still holding on to her? She tried shrugging to see if the movement would remind him to release her and step back. "I couldn't."

He ignored her silent bid for freedom, probably hadn't even noticed it. "Your mother died less than a week ago. It is understandable, this lack of rest."

"I suppose," she replied, content to let him draw his own conclusions.

She had enough to deal with not moving those remaining inches and snuggling into the warmth and safety his tall body offered. She wanted him physically and that in itself was shocking enough, but she wanted something else from him, something she'd learned long ago was not on offer in her life. Love. Commitment. Security.

"I understand. My uncle's death has caused much grief in my family."

That was probably as close as Sebastian would come to admitting his own weakness and the fact he was no doubt awake because of his own undiluted grief. Any feelings of sadness she had at the death of her mother were weakened by relief that the emotional pain of living in the shadow of her misdeeds was over.

She licked her lips, trying to maintain her concentration when his nearness was wreaking havoc with her ability to focus on what was being said. "Matthias was a good man."

Sebastian's hands dropped away from her shoulders finally, but he remained too close to ease her awkwardness. "He was, but I should not have dismissed your own grieving."

"What do you mean?" She had not expressed any real grief, so how could he have dismissed it?

She wasn't even sure if she was capable of mourning her mother's death.

"I was not kind to you this afternoon and I am sorry." The words came out stilted, not at all like his usual smooth conversation.

He probably apologized about as often as she dated, which was never.

"It's no big deal. Don't worry about it."

"I hurt you and I should not have added to your pain in that way."

Oh, man, when he got going on the remorse thing, he took it seriously. And it made her feel guilty because while he'd hurt her, it had not been in addition to the pain of loss, but to the pain of a lifetime lived as Andrea's daughter.

"Thank you for your concern, but honestly, I'm used to comments like that."

The sound he made said her words had not soothed him.

She sighed, unable to stifle the urge to reach out, to touch in an age-old gesture of comfort. Her fingers settled gently against his hair roughened arm and it was all she could do to remember what she was going to say. Oh, yeah…

"I'm not angry with you." Not anymore. "Matthias was a kind and caring man. I'm sorry he died the way he did. I'm sorry my mother's life ended the way it did, but I don't blame you for pointing out the truth. I am her daughter and I've learned to live with that."

An indecipherable expression settled over his angular features. "Earlier, I was worried you might take your story to the tabloids, but I realize now you would not do so."

Chills of horror skated along her nerve endings. "Never."

"Andrea courted publicity of the worst kind."

"And I had to live with it all my life."

"You did not like it."

"I hated it. As a child, I got teased and was expelled from two different private schools because of her behavior." Andrea had been caught having sex with one of Rachel's teachers by the man's wife and the second time, she'd been arrested for cocaine possession. "It wasn't much better at university. The world seems like such a big place until you're the one in the middle of ugly media attention."

And by then, her mother had married a rich Greek tycoon old enough to be her father. It was the stuff of fantasy for would-be journalists making their name in the tabloid press.

Which was why Rachel had legally changed her last name upon graduation. She'd never told Andrea, not wanting a big scene, but no one in Rachel's current life knew that she was related to a woman notorious for her sexual exploits and questionable social activities.

In the United States, the story of Rachel Long, daughter of Andrea Long Demakis, simply did not exist.

Being shy and rather average looking had its advantages.

She realized this time it was she who continued to hold on to him and quickly pulled her hand away. "Sorry."

"I do not mind."

She swallowed. "Yes, well, I should get back. I'm sure I can sleep now," she said, lying through her teeth, but needing to get away from his unnerving presence.

His hands caught her waist, halting her body and her breathing all in one go. "Are you sure?"

"I…" She choked trying to get air into her lungs and he pulled her closer, soothing her back, his expression too heated to be labeled concern.

She started to breathe again, but still couldn't speak. His silver gaze was doing things to her insides she'd long since convinced herself was the stuff of fantasy. Shivery sensations traveled along nerve endings she didn't even know she had and a heavy, aching sensation in her womb radiated downward to make her thighs clench.

Firm, masculine lips tilted in a knowing smile and she was sure he knew just what was happening to her.

He never broke eye contact as he drew her near until their bodies barely touched and she could not help the involuntary shudder that went through her at contact.

His eyes filled with primal male triumph. "Yes. I knew you felt it too."

"Felt what?" she asked, knowing her attempt at prevarication was hopeless.

He ignored it completely.

"I need to know." His head lowered until his lips were a breath from hers. "Don't you wonder too?"

She would have asked, "Wonder what?", but his mouth closed over hers.

And she stopped thinking.

All she could do was feel.

It was entirely alien, this merging of their mouths, the mingling of their breath, the gentle seduction of knowing lips. She had not known men like him, with so much power and masculine strength, could be gentle.

Her hands went to his chest of their own accord, drawn by a lure as inexplicable as it was inescapable. She tentatively explored the ridges of muscle that had fascinated her earlier and her fingertips encountered hard points. Mesmerized by this unexpected indicator of his excitement, she investigated the phenomena completely.

He groaned and yanked her into his body, his hold growing fierce, the kiss turning incendiary. Fiery passion sizzled between their lips and she did not pull away. That fact registered with what was left of her conscious mind along with the realization she felt not one iota of fear.

There was no room inside her for anything but an all-consuming erotic craving and physical delight, both sparked by him. He tasted good, so different from her and yet infinitely right and desirable.

Without really knowing how it had happened, his tongue was in her mouth and he was teaching her how to find pleasure in an intimate kiss she had always considered much too invasive. She wanted to give it back and copied his movements with instinctive feminine sensuality she had been sure she no longer possessed.

Growling, he lifted her off the sand, grinding his pelvis against hers and causing shock waves to ripple throughout her body.

But still, she felt no trepidation…nothing that would dilute the molten lava of need flowing through her veins.

When he pressed against her bottom, causing her thighs to drift apart, it was the most natural thing in the world to lift her legs and lock her ankles tight behind his back. Her skirt rucked up, leaving her skin bare against him in an unbearably exciting connection and sexual hunger exploded inside her as her sweet spot rubbed against his hardened male flesh.

She needed something and she pressed herself against him as intimately as possible, gyrating her hips to increase the sensations exploding in her most intimate flesh.

His hand trespassed the silk of her panties to touch a place that had not been touched in seven years. The feel of his fingertip at the entrance to her body brought forth a rush of dew drenched pleasure. Then his finger moved to possess her and old fear rushed through her in an unstoppable torrent, dousing her pleasure and filling her with a desperate need to be free.

She tore her mouth from his. “No. Stop. What are we doing?”

“You do not know?” he asked incredulously, his voice thick with desire.

She didn’t answer. Could not answer. The feel of that finger almost inside her had brought forth memories that would drown her if she let them.

Unlocking her ankles, she frantically tried to scramble from his arms.

After a second of unequal struggling, he let her go, spewing words in Greek she had no desire to know the translation for.

“I’m sorry,” she jerked out, yanking her skirt down to cover her wobbly legs.

Her heart was beating her to death, her palms were damp and her mouth was cottony and dry.

His hands clenched and she stepped back, unable to prevent a reaction born of the past but called forth in the present.

His face a mask of frustrated desire, he threw his head back and inhaled deeply before looking at her again.

When he did, the feral intensity had been muted, but his mouth was set in a grim line. “No. It is I who should apologize. A man should not take advantage of a woman’s weak emotional state. It was wrong to kiss you when you were already upset from the week’s events.”

She couldn’t believe he was taking it on himself, but then hadn’t she always known he was no common man? He stood above all others in her mind and had been elevated to almost saint status with his understanding of her rejection.

He didn’t know why she had pulled back and had not asked, creating a well of gratitude that ran soul deep inside her.

“I didn’t mean to let it go that far,” she said, remembering accusations from the past of being a tease, tormenting words that haunted her nightmares.

“I did not mean for it to happen at all,” he admitted ruefully, making her smile when it should have been impossible. “I saw you from my room and came out to check on you and to apologize for my inappropriate remark earlier. Instead, I took advantage of an attraction neither of us would benefit from acting on.”

While his words completely exonerated her from blame and set her mind at ease, they left gaping wounds in her heart. He was saying that they did not belong together in any sense.

She'd known that.

Had always understood he was way out of her league, but it still hurt. He'd given her her first taste of real passion and the possibility she could know the entire gamut of sexual experience with him tantalized her. She'd gotten frightened, but only when he touched her like she'd been touched that one fateful night.

If she could tell him about it…ask him to avoid doing that, would she be able to make love completely without fear?

Why was she even asking herself these questions? He had made no secret of the fact that he was appalled by the fact he'd kissed her. Sexual intimacy with Sebastian Kouros was not on the cards for her.

She forced her lips into a semblance of a smile. "You're right. A relationship between the two of us would be out of the question." She was trying to sound sophisticated and casually accepting of his reading of the situation, but she was afraid the façade would crack any second. "I—I think, I'll go to bed now."

He insisted on walking her to her room, not relieving her of his now grim presence until she shut the door on his formal goodnight.

Sebastian walked away from Rachel's room calling himself six kinds of a fool. What in the hell had he been thinking to kiss her like that?

To kiss her at all?

Okay, so he had wanted her for years, but she was not the woman for him. Not even for a brief affair. She might be different from Andrea, but Rachel was still daughter to a piranha.

As well, it would hurt his family if he got involved with her. They deserved better than a second serving of the kind of gossip that had surrounded Matthias's marriage. He had loved his great-uncle very much, but the old man had been ruled by his libido when it came to Andrea and he had brought shame upon their family.

How could a Greek man with any kind of pride stay married to a woman he knew to be unfaithful?

And yet Matthias had.

The night of the crash had not been the first time his uncle had found evidence of his much younger wife's sexual exploits outside the bounds of their marriage. Each time, Sebastian had been sure the old man would finally come to his senses and kick the bitch out of his life, but Matthias never had.

Sebastian would never allow a woman to make such a fool of him. He had no tolerance for lies and subterfuge of the type that had marked Matthias's second marriage. He abhorred any type of dishonesty and would not give the time of day to a woman who lied about her age, much less her fidelity.

His great-uncle had been smart enough to prevent his beautiful, conscience-less wife from cleaning him out financially and had shown his brain was still functioning on some level within the bounds of his marriage in not leaving her anything in his will, but there was no doubt Andrea Demakis had bankrupted the old man's pride.

For a Greek male, that was the worst consequence imaginable.

Sebastian had found it impossible to comprehend Matthias's willingness to stay married. How could he have allowed himself to be manipulated by his sexuality into pursuing a lifestyle the total antithesis of what he had known his first sixty-plus years? A man should live his final years with dignity, but his uncle had not.

Humiliation had been his companion, particularly for the past year. What had spurred Andrea to wave her sexual conquests in her elderly husband's face? What had made her behave so foully? And why had Rachel ignored it all, never once attempting to stop the abhorrent behavior?

The dark night outside his bedroom window offered no answers, but the questions served to remind him that no matter how different Rachel appeared on the surface, she had been too self-interested to care about Matthias Demakis.

Just like her mother.

Rachel finished packing the last box in her mother's bedroom and closed it. A sense of accomplishment warred with disappointment. She'd searched Andrea's room thoroughly and found nothing related to her life before she married Matthias Demakis. No indication of who the man who had fathered Rachel might be.

Considering her mother's taste in companions, she would have given up her desire to find him years ago but for two poignant memories from her childhood.

She'd been little, three, maybe four, and sitting on a man's lap. He'd been reading to her and while she had no idea what he'd been reading, she could still remember the sense of love and security she'd felt. She'd called him, "Daddy," and kissed his cheek when he'd finished. He'd hugged her tight and when she closed her eyes she could remember that hug.

It had made her feel safe.

And she remembered waking in the night and searching an apartment in the dark for her daddy, crying and calling his name. She'd been about five, or six then. Her mother had slept on, no doubt passed out from alcohol or something more potent, but Rachel had stayed up all night, accepting that her daddy wasn't coming back only when the first rays of sun indicated a new day.

She didn't know if her father had chosen to stay out of their lives as her mother had claimed or if he had been unable to find them. Andrea and Rachel had lived in various parts of Europe since Rachel had started school. Her mother's exploits had made the gutter press at times, but wouldn't have been noteworthy in the States. She had been neither filthy rich, until Matthias, nor a celebrity.

Even her marriage to Matthias Demakis had only made her of interest to a few gossip rags in the States. While other students at her university had learned enough about her exploits to judge Rachel on them, that didn't mean a man who hadn't seen Andrea in over twenty years would recognize her in publicized photos, or even read that type of paper.

Rachel wanted to believe her father was an American man, unaware of Andrea's recent notoriety and longtime residence in Europe. However, she had to acknowledge that he could very well be as permanently gone as Andrea.

Shaking off thoughts that led nowhere, Rachel ran tape along the box's seam. For whatever reason, her father was lost to her and that was that. She tore the tape off and straightened, blowing at a strand of hair that had fallen from her ponytail. Emotionally detached, she surveyed the once decadent room now stripped of much of its sumptuous decor.

Sebastian had encouraged her to pack everything for the auction. He planned to redo the room in the near future, erasing Andrea's influence on the villa as thoroughly as possible. Of course, that's not how he'd put it. He'd been very tactful since their discussion in the study three days ago, but his feelings regarding Andrea Demakis were no secret.

Stretching tired muscles, Rachel reached toward the ceiling and then bent from one side to the other. Her muscles ached and her eyes burned with fatigue. She'd spent a lot of time on her knees packing and sorting in the past three days and had slept poorly at night, too much time given to reliving Sebastian's kiss.

Bending forward, she touched her fingertips to the plush carpeting. Straightening, she leaned backward, doing almost a backbend, and saw a pair of trouser covered male legs.

The Greek curse that met her ears was instantly recognizable and just as startling.

Her balance gave way and she could do nothing to stop falling flat on her back, bumping her head in the process.

Sebastian dropped to his knee beside her, his gorgeous features set in concerned lines. “Are you all right, pedhaki mou?”

She couldn’t speak, her breath having been knocked right out of her. The best she could do was a series of guppy-like movements with her lips.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders and gently pulled her into a sitting position, causing a whoosh of air to make its way into her lungs.

“Thank you,” she croaked out.

He probed the back of her head with his fingertips. “Does this hurt?”

“Just a little.”

“There is no bump forming.”

“I’m all right.”

He didn’t release her, but continued checking for injuries in a way that left her trembly with want. “What were you doing?”

She felt heat blister her cheeks while she tried to control the urge to touch back. “Stretching.”

“You fell.”

“You surprised me,” she informed him in a cranky tone that made her cringe inside. “I lost my balance.”

“Ah, so it is my fault.”

She tilted her head back to see his face, unable to credit the humor in his voice, but it was reflected in his molten metal eyes. So was a warmth she would do well to pretend was not there.

“Yes.”

“Then I must do something to show my remorse at causing such a mishap.”

Her jaw locked against any word she might have uttered as his mouth came down to meet her own.

It was not a flaming kiss, had no overt passion in it, but nevertheless, her heart went wild and her body ached to align itself with his.

Thankfully, his hold on her shoulders was too strong to allow her to do it and humiliate herself in the process.

He lifted his head. “You have sweet lips, Rachel.”

She licked them, tasting only him. “Thank you.”

“So polite.” He kissed her again, this time letting his lips linger for a few seconds, letting his tongue slip out to gently mesh with her own.

He pulled back far enough to speak. “Have I made up for my transgression?”

His breath brushed her lips tantalizingly and she wanted to continue the kiss, but she forced out a choked, “Yes.”

“That is unfortunate.”

Oh, man…this guy was one-hundred percent lethal. “Y-yes, it is.”

“Maybe I should put something on account.”

She couldn’t say anything as his mouth came over hers again, but just as the kiss was turning wickedly interesting, Phillippa’s voice came from the doorway.

“Is she all right, Sebastian? What happened?”

Making a low sound of frustration, he lifted his head and looked over his shoulder. “I startled her when she was stretching and she fell.”

“I’m fine,” Rachel added, prickling with hot embarrassment at having her clumsiness revealed as well as being caught kissing him.

“Are you sure? You are still on the floor.”

Sebastian's laughter made his chest vibrate against Rachel and she felt herself falling further under his spell. "She is still on the floor because I have not let her up yet."

"Oh."

There was a wealth of meaning in that little word and it seemed to disturb Sebastian because his joviality disappeared and he made quick work of getting them both back on their feet and then stepping away from her. It felt like a rejection and she wanted to remind him he'd been the one to kiss her.

However, his white shirt showed smudges and wrinkles from her dusty hands where she'd unwittingly clutched at him and she had to admit, if only to herself, that she'd been a more than willing participant.

"Aristide is here. We will have lunch and then he will take me back to the mainland."

"You're leaving?" Rachel asked.

"Yes. I must get back to my garden."

"Thank you for your help with Andrea's things."

"It was my pleasure. You are a gentle young woman. I have been grieving my uncle's death and you kept my mind set on the present, not the past. It is I who owe you my thanks."

Rachel did not know how to react to the praise or the look of frowning interest Sebastian was bestowing on her. She felt like a moth in a jar and was finding it just as difficult to breathe.

"I like you," she finally managed to get out and Phillippa smiled.

"The feeling is mutual."

Thankfully, Sebastian said something about Rachel getting cleaned up before lunch and made it possible for her to make her escape.

Sebastian watched Rachel hurry from the room, her cheeks as red as ripe pomegranate seeds. "She does not know how to take a compliment."

"I imagine with her mother, she did not receive many," his mother replied as they made their way downstairs.

"No, I do not suppose she did."

"Andrea Demakis brought a great deal of pain to our family."

"Yes," he growled, wishing his body wasn't still reacting to holding Rachel in his arms.

His mother gave him one of those looks he'd never learned to decipher as they entered the dining room. "To be such a woman's daughter would have been even more painful."

"She did nothing to stem her mother's downward spiral this last year."

"Perhaps she felt she had no influence."

"Or she found her own comfort more important to her than that of an old man."

He had no trouble interpreting his mother's expression now. Disappointment radiated from her dark eyes and he gritted his teeth against justifying his accusation against Rachel. He had a feeling nothing he said would improve the situation.

He turned to greet his brother, but his mother was not finished with the conversation.

She walked around him to stand between him and his brother. "And does your personal comfort require you to drag her down to her mother's level in your mind so that you will not give in to the attraction you have for her?"

"I am not—"

His mother raised her hand. "Lie to yourself, my son, but do not attempt to lie to the woman who gave you birth. Rachel is not anything like Andrea, but if you believed that, your heart would be at risk and that frightens you."

That was going too far. "I could never love the daughter of Andrea Demakis."

"Uh-oh." His brother's expression was pained and his mother made a moue of distress.

Needing no further impetus, Sebastian turned toward the doorway.

Rachel stood, framed in its entry, wounded green eyes fixed on him.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE'D made an amazing transition in so short a time. Her straight brown hair was in a loose pile on top of her head and she'd changed into a dress that not only matched her eyes, but fit her more closely than her other clothing. The sage green silk highlighted the curves he'd been desperate to touch only minutes before and she'd glossed her bow-shaped lips. She looked beautiful and infinitely kissable.

Her expression said that would not be on offer again in this lifetime.

"I did not mean…" He drifted into silence for the first time in memory, not knowing what to say to undo the damage his hasty words had done.

She turned her head, breaking eye contact, her body language dismissing him as effectively as if she had told him to go to hell.

"Would it be possible for you and Aristide to delay your departure an hour?" she asked his mother. "I could pack and go with you. I've finished sorting Andrea's things."

His mother shocked him by shaking her head with evident regret. "I am sorry, Rachel, but Aristide has an appointment he must keep. We will leave directly after lunch."

Aristide looked surprised as well, but he nodded. "That is right. I am sorry, Rachel."

"I could pack while the rest of you eat," Rachel offered.

Both the offer and her initial request infuriated Sebastian and he did not know why. "Surely that is not necessary. I will arrange for your transport to the mainland tomorrow morning."

"I would prefer to leave today." She didn't bother to look at him as she said it.

"You have no reason to fear staying alone in the villa with me."

She turned then and her gaze flayed him. "You've made that clear enough."

"Come, let us eat lunch. Rachel, you do not wish to pack in a rush. That invariably leads to leaving something behind."

Rachel sighed, looking unhappy, but accepting. "You are right. I won't be returning to the island, so I will have to make sure I take everything with me this time."

"You will always be welcome here." His mother's tone brooked no argument. "After all, this was your home for several years."

"It is Sebastian's home now and I wouldn't dream of intruding on him in the future."

Aristide came around the table, stepping in front of Sebastian to lead Rachel to a seat.

"Visits from family are never an intrusion," he said with a charming smile Sebastian had an inexplicable urge to wipe off his brother's handsome, young face.

"You are kind to say so, but I am not family, not really, and I won't be coming back to Greece so the issue won't arise," she replied as she allowed him to seat her and then asked a question about his business, effectively changing the subject.

Sebastian had known in a vague way that once Rachel left, she would be gone for good, which was as it should be. He did not need the temptation of Andrea Demakis's daughter around, but hearing her say it with such certainty inexplicably angered him.

Rachel did her best to ignore Sebastian during lunch, focusing her attention on his younger brother and Phillippa. Aristide was very charming, flirting shamelessly with her and keeping them all entertained with an account of one of his friend's visit to Crete.

Sebastian smoldered, but she could not imagine why. What did he care if she enjoyed a harmless flirtation with Aristide?

Sebastian had been so adamant she was not worthy of his affection and she'd felt so stupid for allowing herself to give in to the urge to dress up a little for lunch, to try to look pretty for him. A man who could kiss her senseless one minute and the next declare with positive vehemence that he would never feel any sort of emotion for her. What a laugh.

She was such an idiot.

She wished she could have left with the younger man and Phillippa, but that was not possible. Sebastian's mother was right. Rachel would no doubt regret attempting to pack in haste. Not that she would contact Sebastian to send anything on for her, no matter what might get left behind.

However, she supposed she could avoid Sebastian until the following morning when the launch came for her.

Rachel was on the beach attempting to do just that a few hours later.

She dug her toes into the sand, enjoying the warmth of the late afternoon sun. It was the first time in three days she'd really relaxed. She'd spent the time since lunch packing her own things, making sure she'd cleaned out every nook and cranny of the room that had been hers since she was seventeen.

And she was still berating herself. Because when she'd come across a small decorative box of mementos, she'd been unable to toss them and they were now packed in the corner of her biggest suitcase.

Inside the box were pictures she'd accumulated over the years since her mother's marriage to Matthias. Many of them were of Sebastian. Some were clippings from newspapers; some were photos from family gatherings she'd attended before finishing university. There was a single dried yellow rose from the bouquet he'd given her for her eighteenth birthday and the silver locket engraved with her initials he'd given her for her twenty-first.

There was even a black onyx cuff link he'd tossed in the study's trash bin when he'd lost the other one. She'd dug it out and put it away with her mementos. Such a silly, juvenile thing to do, but perhaps understandable as a teenager.

So, why had she felt the need to keep the cuff link at the age of twenty-three?

She didn't know. All she did know was that she had been unable to toss it and when she'd tried, she'd actually ended up pulling it out of the trash can in her bedroom to gently polish and put it back in the box. He'd worn the set of cuff links to her eighteenth birthday, the one and only time he'd ever danced with her.

She refused to analyze too closely why that had such emotional significance for her, just as she would not dwell on his forceful and public rejection earlier. Both issues were best left in the far recesses of her mind.

She yawned and lay back in the sand, letting tired muscles unwind. The quiet surrounded her, emphasizing the difference between the Southern Californian beaches back home and this one. No crashing surf or cacophony of voices rose to disturb her solitude. There were no horses for rent, or surf-boards standing erect in the sand. The island was private and though a small village existed on the North side, the other occupants never trespassed on the Demakis Villa's beach.

She'd swum here unafraid of being ogled by men…when her mother was not entertaining.

Soon she would be leaving all this behind for good. She would not return to Greece, never see Sebastian again, never soak the sun's rays into her skin in quiet solitude like this one. Her heart contracted in rebellion of her thoughts.

"Eugenie informs me you plan to eat a snack in your room rather than join me for dinner."

Her eyes flew open to the sight of Sebastian towering over her reclining form. His hair covered, tanned legs dominated her line of sight and she had to tilt her head back to see his face. Like the other night, he'd changed into shorts, but his white polo shirt that emphasized the darkness of his skin went better with his power persona than the casual tank top had.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Obviously, I came to find you."

"Oh. Why?"

He frowned. "Is it really such a sacrifice to share your final meal in Greece with me?"

"I cannot imagine you wanting my company."

“Do not be foolish. You are a guest in my home.”

And Greek hospitality was offended by the notion she would eat a solitary meal in her room. It had nothing to do with her, or him wanting to spend time with her. “Don’t worry about me,” she said, wanting to allay a guilt prompted evening à deux. “Entertainment is not required for my last night here.”

His dark eyes traveled up and down her form, an expression in the gray depths she did not want to decipher and then he smiled. “Perhaps I wish to entertain you.”

He was back to being the charming Greek billionaire, but she was still smarting from his vow he could never love Andrea Demakis’s daughter and wanted none of it.

She clambered to her feet, brushing the sand off the seat of her loose fitting capris. “There’s no need. I’m tired and could use the extra sleep of an early night.”

“You cannot be thinking of going to bed now.” He looked genuinely horrified as only a man who slept a mere five hours a night could. “It is barely evening.”

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