

Merídio's Daughter



LJ Maas

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For CB with love

Chapter 1

Tessa Nikolaidis watched their reflections move behind her as she peered pensively out the window. The image cast back into the glass displayed a burly man being ushered into the office between Stefano and Alex. They pushed him into a chair, and he sat there obediently. Tessa waved her hand in a dismissive gesture at her two large henchman, but still she gazed out the window, her eyes the color of the Aegean Sea that lay below. The two assistants left her in the room alone with the rugged fellow. Although her back faced the man, even he knew he was lucky to be alive. Attacking her didn't enter the man's mind.

She sighed deeply as she looked out onto the beautiful vista. The sunset was indescribable. The yellow-orange glow turned the surface of the blue-green sea below the same soft color, and the muted hues bounced back at her from the whitewashed houses along the edge of the sea.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and wished she were anywhere else at this moment, perhaps at sea on her catamaran, nestled in the arms of a beautiful woman. She closed her eyes and could feel the setting sun on her shoulders as the *Meltémi* blew strongly from the north. She could almost feel the woman in her arms. She shook her head slightly and opened her eyes. This wasn't the time for dreaming. Besides, her business didn't exactly afford her the kind of relationships with the type of women who might enjoy fine wine and Milton on the sea.

She needed to focus on the task at hand. Running the slender fingers of one hand through her ebony hair, she swallowed down the longing and the melancholy; they would only make her weak. She needed strength for this business of Mr. Meridio's. After all, he paid her well to do what she was best at—enforcing his will.

Another deep breath and the woman with the soulful gaze disappeared. As she turned, the burly man looked into her face, and what he saw there caused him to swallow hard. Her perfectly chiseled features spoke highly of her pure Greek heritage, but it was her eyes that held the man mesmerized. Moments earlier, she looked out onto the world with deep blue eyes, now as she turned her gaze to the seated man, her eyes were as cold and pale as ice.

"Mr. Stefanopoulos, my name is Tessa Nikolaidis," she said in a low alto voice, devoid of emotion.

He swallowed again. He knew who she was. The corners of her lips curled upward slightly, watching as he crossed himself, hoping to ward off what he thought was surely the *evil eye*.

She couldn't stop the indifferent smile. The Greeks always considered women with blue eyes more capable than any other of being able to curse someone with the *evil eye*. There was only one thing that thrilled Tessa more than seeing the look on a man's face once he realized who she was, and that was his fear.

"Miss Meridio?" the flight attendant addressed the young blonde who had her eyes closed.

The attendant hated bothering first-class passengers; they could get very testy, but this one seemed genuinely nice when she served brunch.

"Miss Meridio?" she repeated.

The blonde opened her eyes to reveal dark green irises, the color of a lush forest. She pulled herself up, apparently surprised that she fell asleep. Wisps of wheat-colored hair fell across her eyes, and as was her habit, she shook them away with a quick toss of her head. Quickly running a hand through her short locks, she focused on the attendant.

"Yes?" she asked, looking up expectantly at the attendant who bent toward her.

"Miss Meridio, the pilots have taken a message for you." The attendant held out a piece of paper. "Do you read Greek?"

"Yes, thank you." She opened the folded note and smiled.

Only her father would have the audacity to make the pilots deliver an emergency message to her when she was fifteen minutes from landing in Athens. He told her his *Karê* would be at the airport to meet her. Casey folded the note and wondered who this new *right-hand man* was. She never liked the man everyone called Tusky, but she remembered the sadness in her father's letter when he told her that the large man, whom she had grown up in fear of, had been killed in an unfortunate car bomb attack. That was five years earlier. They blamed it on the Turks or the Albanians, much like they blamed everything bad that happened in Greece.

Casey stretched and leaned her elbow on the armrest of the seat, her chin resting comfortably in the palm of her hand. She looked out the airplane window and lost herself in the billowy white clouds. It felt strange to be going home again, although most people would not consider Greece her homeland, nor would they, at first glance, take her as a native. When she told the attendant that she did speak Greek, she answered with a short *nai*. The woman looked surprised but said nothing.

Greece was Casey's home, in an eccentric sort of way. As the story was told to her, her mother was born to a Greek father and French mother. Her father went against family tradition by not marrying a woman of full Greek blood. The story got muddled after that. Neither her mother nor her father would ever explain it, but from what she could gather, when Cassandra Meridio was five years old, her mother took her and left Greece for the United States, never to return. Casey now held dual citizenship in both countries.

It was always very civilized between her mother and father. Casey spent every summer at her father's estate on the island of Mýkonos. The rest of the year, she lived with her mother on Long Island. For the past six summers, Casey hadn't been to the Greek Island. College life was too time-consuming, and every summer, she traveled around the globe on an archaeological dig. Finally, with her Master's Degree in Ancient Civilizations in hand and

the funding of the University of California behind her, she was returning to her father's home. She was placed second in command of the dig, mostly because of her heritage and command of the language and area. It was a joint effort between the United States and Greece, and Casey was going to make the most of her first opportunity.

She was nervous about seeing her father again after so much time, but she had nothing to worry about. Andreas Meridio cherished Casey like a goddess. His daughter wanted for nothing growing up. On the day she graduated, she had a royal blue BMW M3 convertible waiting in the driveway. When she told her father of her assignment in Chóra at the Archaeological Museum, he insisted she come home to the estate to live. Casey's first thought was to make up some excuse to live on her own in an apartment, but since it had been six years since she visited the island, she decided to let herself be pampered for a while and look for an apartment once she was there. A few weeks of vacation couldn't hurt, she thought.

The blinking of the cabin lights brought her out of her reminiscing, and she refastened her seat belt. Hopefully, her father's *Karê* would at least be someone she could get along with while she lived there. She shuddered as she remembered the unfeeling stares she had always received from Tusky. Cassandra hoped this one would be more on the friendly side.

"What are you trying to do—get us killed?" Tessa hissed and grabbed the card that said *Meridio* from the chauffeur driver's hands. Turning it over so the name was hidden, she slammed it into his chest. "*Vlâkas*," she cursed the man's stupidity.

"But I don't know what she looks like," he stammered with a heavy accent.

"Don't worry, I do," she said.

Every day for the last five years, she had looked at the picture on Meridio's large oak desk. Casey was all of about twelve with long blond hair and braces gleaming on her teeth. She was a tiny thing, looking even smaller sitting atop a large black stallion. Tessa wouldn't have needed the picture to remember, anyway.

She had the image of Meridio's daughter as a child burned into her brain.

After all, how much can one girl change?

Casey stood and stretched muscles that had tightened up during the seventeen-hour flight from California. She'd had a bit of a jog, rushing to catch the connecting flight in Amsterdam, but she fell asleep and barely moved since then. Getting off the airplane, she dreaded the wait in Customs. Coupled with the fact that she had no idea who she was supposed to be looking for, it was already a stressful afternoon. Laptop case in hand, she moved through the busy airport like a seasoned traveler, unaware of the gazes that followed her every move. She was able to move swiftly through the east terminal to baggage claim.

She stopped a young man working as a skycap and surprised him by speaking in Greek, explaining it would be worth a large tip if he obtained her bags and directed them to Customs for her. The young man tilted his hat back and leered at her. When she held up a ten-thousand drachmas bank note invitingly, his eyes went wide, but his face froze, not on the money, but at something over Casey's left shoulder. His face went pale and he shook his head, attempting to move away. Casey took hold of his arm to pull him back to face her.

"*Ochi*," the young man said forcefully and pushed the hand away that still held the crisp bank note. As if Casey didn't understand, he repeated himself in English.

"No!" He looked behind Casey and backed up.

Casey was surprised at his frightened behavior. He bowed slightly, turned, and all but ran away. Casey felt a presence behind her. She remembered the look on the man's face and turned with one of her best American back-off glares.

Neither woman would ever remember if any words were exchanged in those first few seconds. It was as if every bad movie cliché came to pass and time stopped for a few precious heartbeats. It felt much longer to the two women who stood staring at each other.

Casey looked up into the bluest eyes an artist could have ever

imagined. The woman in front of her was easily six inches taller than she was. She had long ebony hair that cascaded across broad shoulders and down her back, her dark bangs swept casually to one side. One eyebrow arched under those bangs, and Casey thought she saw a definite look of amusement—or was it surprise?—in the stranger’s contemplative glance. The woman looked suspiciously like an American federal agent in a tailored black suit and white silk blouse. She seemed perfectly at ease as she held her hands, pensively folded, in front of her.

Tessa watched as Casey walked through the airport, ordering the others to stay behind. She saw her opportunity when the skycap attempted to hit on her. Once Casey turned around, it took every bit of Tessa’s self-restraint not to laugh out loud at the look she was given. Then Tessa found herself caught in a gaze that swirled with all the colors of the ocean. This was definitely not the twelve-year-old in that picture. This woman must be someone else entirely. The top of her head came up to Tessa’s chin, but her body was a work of art. All sleek muscle covered by skin that looked so soft, Tessa had to clasp her hands together to keep from reaching out and touching it. Then Tessa remembered who this woman was, and as suddenly as her eyes softened, her expression slipped back into its cold pretension.

“Cassandra Meridio, I presume?”

The voice startled Casey out of her haze. Tessa’s expression went from quiet contemplation to severe impassivity in the blink of an eye.

“Yes?” Casey said.

“My name is Tessa Nikolaidis. I work for your father.”

Casey took the offered hand and for a second, thought about not letting go. She couldn’t understand the feeling when it was obvious from Tessa’s indifferent stare that it was only a perfunctory handshake. Casey couldn’t explain it. The funny thing was, Tessa seemed just as reluctant to end the contact.

“Please follow me, Ms. Meridio,” Tessa said, then promptly turned and walked away, fully expecting Casey to follow.

“But...my bags...” Casey started.

“I’ve already taken care of your bags.”

"Shouldn't I be in Customs?" Casey said, a bit breathless from keeping up with the woman's long strides.

"Already taken care of."

"Hold it!" Casey stopped after finally realizing that she was practically running to keep up. "How about we ease it down to a slow jog, huh?"

For the first time since the two met, a small hint of a smile played at the corners of Tessa's lips.

"Sorry" was the only word Tessa spoke as she indicated the door to the car.

The limousine pulled to the curb seconds before the women walked out into the heat of the afternoon. Swiftly pulling open the door, Tessa let Casey enter and sat across from her, next to a muscular young man in his thirties.

"This is Alex, also in the employ of your father. He doesn't speak English very well." She indicated the man seated next to her.

The beefy young man smiled shyly at Casey as she introduced herself in Greek. He shook her hand and pulled away quickly, shooting nervous glances at the woman next to him.

Casey watched and listened to Tessa's English but couldn't place the slight accent. The inflection of her voice was a bit off, as if she learned English in England or Australia. She couldn't be American; she spoke the language too perfectly. Tessa looked over her shoulder and spoke to the driver in Greek, asking him to drive by the port road to the airfield. That's when Casey realized the woman was Greek. The throaty way she rolled her R's, a technique that had always been difficult for Casey, seemed to roll off Tessa's tongue with a natural ease.

Tessa picked up the phone on the first ring. She proceeded to conduct business, speaking sometimes in Greek, then in English. She held a black leather portfolio in her lap and constantly scribbled on the legal pad inside. All the while, Tessa kept one eye trained casually on Casey seated across from her. Casey seemed to take business dealings in stride and looked out the window, her chin resting nonchalantly in the palm of her hand. Tessa wondered how many of these rides Casey had gone on with her father, being

ignored just like this, business always coming first. Suddenly, Tessa caught an unguarded moment of pain in Casey's features. Then just as quickly, it was gone.

Tessa closed her notebook and turned off the phone.

"May I offer you a drink, Ms. Meridio?" Tessa gestured to the small bar.

"Actually, my friends call me Casey. I'd love a vodka, if you have it."

"Indeed we do, Ms. Meridio. Ice...tonic?"

Casey realized with that response how it was to be between her and this woman. Tessa was extremely beautiful, but cold and distant, and Casey understood that she would always be Meridio's daughter to the stranger who hid her emotions so carefully. She shook her head at the offer of additional amenities.

Tessa watched the woman's expression as she poured them a drink, purposely ignoring the offer to call her employer's daughter by her first name. *She's a beauty, that's for sure, but this is the last thing you need in your life right now. No complications, that's what you promised yourself. And this one...Meridio's daughter... she could definitely make life complicated.*

Casey took the offered drink from Tessa's grasp, and a spark jumped between their fingers. Casey pulled back her hand and looked at her fingers as though they'd been burned.

"It's dry this time of year" was Tessa's only explanation, but even she felt it.

It was more than static electricity; it was scintillation borne of a fire that burned deeply within each woman but always kept in control. Neither recognized the cause, but each of them suddenly felt the incompleteness of their lives.

Tessa was tempted to smile and tell her she would love to call her Casey, and for a moment, her lips parted as if to speak the words. *Gahmóh Toh!*

What the hell has gotten into you, Niko? Are you out of your fucking mind? What are you going to do—fuck the girl? You do and you'll be under the cornerstone of one of Meridio's new buildings. Get it together, woman.

Casey watched Tessa's face as she sipped the refrigerated

vodka. It was ice cold with a citrus flavor, yet it still burned as it slid down her throat. Tessa's blue eyes darkened and she appeared to be about to speak. The frown lines in her face relaxed. Just as quickly, Tessa's tanned features hardened and the open look on her face slammed shut. She grabbed the phone once more and angrily flipped open the notebook in her lap, ignoring Casey completely.

The short flight to Mýkonos was uneventful, and another car was soon taking them up the small hill to her father's estate. The medieval house had been situated on this modest bluff, looking out onto Tourlos Bay for centuries. Casey remembered when she was a child running away to escape for a few moments of solitude to the beach at San Stefanos.

There was an enormous amount of activity once they exited the vehicle. Some of the confusion was due to the fact that Andreas Meridio's only child hadn't been home in nearly six years. Much of the ensuing activity, however, revolved around Tessa. She answered questions as she walked and gave directions to workers, staff, and gardeners, while always seeming to keep one eye trained on the horizon, scanning the area for what, Casey didn't know. Finally, it hit her.

Casey stopped and stood a couple of feet from Tessa. She fixed an incredulous look on her and Tessa returned the frank gaze with one of her own.

"You...You're my father's *Karē*?" Casey asked in amazement.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Meridio, I thought I made that clear," Tessa said flatly.

"You most certainly did not, but I think you already knew that. Did you enjoy taking me for a fool, Ms. Nikolaidis?" Casey asked with a hot edge to her voice.

For the second time that day, Tessa came close to smiling.

"Ms. Meridio!"

Casey turned and a bright smile lit up her face, her anger immediately vanishing.

"Olympia!"

An older woman, gray streaking her hair, rushed up to the two women. She wrapped strong arms around Casey and hugged her tightly.

"I've missed you in my kitchen." The plump woman laughed. "I have no one to steal *dolmádes* from underneath my nose."

Casey laughed and remembered the times she would help in the kitchen to sneak bites of the stuffed grape leaves that Olympia made to perfection.

"Hey, I learned to cook by stealing food in your kitchen." Casey put on what she hoped was an affronted expression.

"Well, at least some girls learned how to cook," Olympia chided. "This one would burn water if you gave her a chance." She pointed in Tessa's direction.

For the first time, Casey saw a small smile replace Tessa's customary scowl. Tessa leaned down closer to Olympia, who was nearly as tall as Tessa.

"Why should I bother to learn when I can get beautiful women to do it for me?" She grinned.

Olympia laughed at her. "Someday you'll be sorry you didn't learn more."

Tessa leaned even closer to Olympia and grinned. "If I learned any more, I'd be dangerous." She winked.

"Cassandra."

Casey knew the voice before she turned around. "Pappa." She whirled and flew the half-dozen steps to where Andreas Meridio stood waiting.

He hugged Casey and practically lifted her off the ground. The handsome man kissed Casey's forehead and whispered something in her ear, to which Casey smiled and nodded, tears filling her eyes.

Tessa and Olympia watched the exchange. Olympia couldn't help but notice the change in Tessa's expression. For a moment, Tessa let down her guard and smiled as father and daughter embraced. She seemed to be a million miles away in her own memories, but it only lasted for a moment, then her impassive façade slipped back into place.

"Mrs. Karoubas, I hope you're planning something special for tonight. You know how *Máhtia Mou* eats," he said with a smile, slipping an arm around Casey's waist and pulling her closer.

"Oh, I see everyone has my number, eh?" Casey laughed

good-naturedly, secretly enjoying the pet name her father had bestowed on her as a girl. He told her she was his darling.

"Indeed I do, sir, all Ms. Meridio's favorites."

"Excellent, thank you, Mrs. Karoubas." He dismissed Olympia. "I see you and Tessa have met. Tessa, join us for dinner, won't you? I'm having a few guests in. I'd like to welcome this one back home properly."

"Of course, Mr. Meridio," Tessa said, realizing this wasn't a request, but a command. "If you'll excuse me, I have some work to attend to before then." Tessa walked away toward the back of the estate without another glance at Casey.

Casey was only half listening to her father, her gaze following the uncommunicative *Karé* until the beautiful woman was out of sight.

Tessa watched the boats sail into Tourlos Bay, her back to the seated men. They had been going over a report for the past hour. Andreas Meridio sat behind an antique mahogany desk that, Tessa mused, must have taken ten men to carry in. Alex sat in a chair across from him. They were grooming Alex to be second in command, but he wasn't a leader. If anything happened to her, Alex would be in charge, and Meridio would most likely be a dead man.

"Tessa, what do you think?" Meridio asked.

Tessa never turned from the window. It seemed she spent a lot of time daydreaming out of windows lately. She tried to focus on the conversation at hand, but the vision of a pair of deep green eyes kept jumping to the forefront of her thoughts.

"I think it's her first day and you're pushing," she finally said.

Andreas nodded and leaned back in the large leather chair. Tessa was the only person alive he would allow to speak to him in this manner. Her assessments were usually brutal but honest. He looked at the report the American investigator faxed him. If Casey saw the papers in his hand, she would probably be on the first plane back to America. He couldn't take chances and needed to know what Casey had been up to in the last few years.

Again, he perused the papers. She had a number of roommates

in college, thank the holy virgin, who were all female. She didn't party to excess; rather she was more of a workaholic, like her father.

"Tessa, what does this mean when she writes about her orientation toward sex?" Andreas asked.

Tessa allowed a smile to play at the corners of her lips. Personally, she thought this tidbit was too good to be true. *It means she eats pussy, you morons.*

She waved her hand at the men behind her. "It means she doesn't sleep around," she lied.

"Of course she doesn't." Meridio looked offended at the thought. "She's only twenty-five years old, for God's sake."

Tessa's grin, hidden from their view, grew wider.

"She's a good Catholic girl, Mr. Meridio," Alex said. "Says here she goes to Mass at least once a month and see, she goes to confession. You know a lot of those American girls don't bother anymore."

Yeah, I bet the priests drop their teeth when that ball of fire comes in, Tessa laughed to herself.

"My daughter is Greek, not American," Andreas said coldly.

Tessa could hear the edge to Meridio's voice.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Meridio. I was just saying—"

"Shut up, Alex," Tessa warned before he let his tongue get him in trouble.

"Mr. Meridio, if you want my opinion, why don't you just let things lie for a while where Cassandra is concerned? Let her get used to being here again and see how she acts once she gets settled into her position at the museum. The family business need not concern her for a while yet. Take it nice and slow." Tessa turned to face Meridio and put on one of her most charming smiles. "No sense anyone getting hurt needlessly."

Tessa smiled as he nodded his agreement. He never noticed that her smile looked more serpentine than caring.

Perhaps two dozen people showed up to Andreas Meridio's dinner party. Casey was oohed and ahed over until she escaped to the balcony for a much-needed breath of air. She leaned over the

parapet that overlooked the swimming pool and sighed deeply.

"What's the matter, you don't like being the heir apparent?" The low alto voice came at her from the shadows, and she recognized whom the seductive sound belonged to immediately.

She turned away from the voice and looked out onto the lights of the bay.

"It has all the thrill of being a prized mare, put on display to be sold to the highest bidder," Casey said.

"Ah, but good horseflesh." Tessa emerged from the shadows, a glass of wine in hand. "The ones with the breeding, they command a high price. One wants to know what they're getting for their money."

"And what do they do once they've invested time and money in her and she's not all they thought she would be?"

Tessa walked up behind Casey, so close Casey could feel Tessa's warm breath on her neck.

"Usually, they think it's all in the genes. They figure if they didn't hit it with this one...Well, they just put her out to breed. Nothing to do all day but decide which stallion she'll let mount her."

Tessa's moist breath on the back of her neck was doing dangerous things to the rest of Casey's body. Casey felt as if Tessa's voice lowered to a whisper. She shook her head and put some distance between the sensuous voice and herself.

"Stallions mounting her, eh? Well," Casey arched an eyebrow, "therein lies the rub."

Before Casey could continue her explanation, a serving girl opened the balcony door. "Dinner is prepared to serve, Ms. Meridio."

"Thank you, I'm on my way in." Casey moved toward the door.

Tessa followed Casey, enjoying the cat and mouse repartee. "You are aware that as lady of the house you will be expected to bless the evening," Tessa said to Casey's back.

Casey stopped and turned to look up into clear blue eyes, but she couldn't figure out if they were serious or mocking.

"And I suppose you've been filling that position for the last six years?" Casey asked.

Tessa tilted her head to the side, bowing slightly in acquiescence.

“Ms. Nikolaidis, do you *want* to be the lady of the Meridio house?”

Tessa laughed. Not only was the deep throaty laughter extremely sexy, but it was also the first time Casey heard the genuine sound from Tessa.

“That, Ms. Meridio, is perhaps the farthest thing from my mind,” Tessa said truthfully.

“Well then, I guess I’ll just have to muddle through somehow,” Casey said sharply and returned to the dining room.

Andreas Meridio sat at the head of a long table. Tessa was seated to his right, Casey to his left. Tessa watched with mild amusement as Casey stood to begin the dinner. The group fell silent and watched Casey. Tessa was perhaps the only one in the room who noticed how Casey’s hands shook slightly.

Casey said a quick Hail Mary that she wouldn’t embarrass herself or her father or give Tessa Nikolaidis even the tiniest reason to say I told you so. She may have been raised in America, but her mother never let her forget where she came from nor the tradition surrounding her birthplace.

She reached down and lifted her fluted champagne glass, while at the same time picking up a brand new twenty-drachmae piece that was placed facedown on a small plate. She held up the shiny piece and dropped it in her champagne glass. When it floated to the bottom, she held her glass high.

“To good fortune, good health, and to the sea,” Casey said. “*Yamas!*”

She finished and drank the bubbly liquid until the glass was empty. With a grin in Tessa’s direction, Casey produced the coin between her teeth. Everyone at the table held their own glasses up, and the familiar toast of *Yamas*, or *to us*, was heard around the table. From Tessa, Casey was sure she heard a muttered, “*Touché.*”

Chapter 2

“You surprise me, Pappa. *You* hired a female *Karê*?” Casey teased.

Casey sipped her almond cordial. After kicking off her shoes, she tucked her bare feet underneath her and relaxed on the large leather sofa in her father’s den. Casey hoped her father would tell her more about this mysterious, withdrawn woman.

“No giving Tessa a hard time, young lady,” Andreas said. “Another glass of *sournáda*?”

Casey shook her head at the offer of more liqueur. She was already flying from the wine she consumed with dinner. “What do you mean a hard time?”

“I know you, Cassandra. You have your mother’s temper, as well as her eyes. I may have to ask Tessa to go along with you when you go into town or down to the *Baka*. Now before you get all indignant...” Andreas held up a hand to silence Casey. “There’s been more trouble in Greece than when you were here last. Trust me, *Máhtia Mou*, Tessa is the person you want around if any trouble should happen. *Katalavaynés*?”

“Yes, I understand,” Casey said with an evil grin, which her father couldn’t keep from chuckling over.

“Know this. Tessa is not a woman to be played for a fool. You won’t have her chasing after you like poor Tusky did. You almost gave the man heart failure a few times, do you realize that? I’m giving Tessa free reign around you. She can tie you up if she has

to.” Andreas turned to pour himself another almond cordial.

Casey’s eyes narrowed at that last bit, and she was thankful her father turned his back to her. *Tie me up, eh? Hmm, very interesting.*

“Just remember, no acting like a teenager or Tessa’s likely to turn you over her knee. *Katalavaynés?*”

Oh, this gets better and better.

“Yes, Pappa...of course.”

Casey mustered up the kind of innocent smile that used to have the good sisters at Sacred Heart School for Girls believing that there was no way on earth this innocent creature could possibly have been engaging in perverted acts with other female students.

“Nikki! Nikki!” Alex was still pounding on the door when Tessa pulled it open, her body barely covered by the red silk robe she hastily threw on.

“The island better be on fire,” she hissed.

“We got trouble.”

Tessa ushered him in to explain.

“It’s Casey, she—”

“What happened?” Tessa’s voice was tinged with concern.

“No, it’s not like that. She’s swimming in the pool.”

Tessa stared at the nervous man. “You’re waking me up at fucking midnight to tell me she’s swimming in the goddamn pool?” Tessa’s voice grew louder with each word.

“Naked,” Alex finished flatly.

Tessa suddenly stopped moving and laughed softly. “Alex, go get a free look, just make sure Meridio doesn’t catch you.”

“It’s not just me that knows. Every guy on the estate is hanging out a window to get a look. It don’t look so good, her being an innocent kid and all.”

Tessa laughed silently to herself. *Innocent is the last thing this one is.*

“Look, she’s Meridio’s daughter, go tell him.”

“Aw, don’t make me do that. He’ll want to know how I know and what do I say—that I was watching, too?”

Tessa stood and ran her fingers through her long hair. A low growl escaped from her throat as she ripped off her robe, moving

into the bedroom. She quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and sneakers and walked into the living area to find the shirt she'd tossed off earlier.

Inserting her hand into one arm of the cotton shirt, she looked up to see Alex staring hard at her chest.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, it's not like you've never seen a pair of tits before," she spat, pulling the shirt over her broad shoulders.

"Never a pair that looked that good," Alex joked nervously.

Tessa paused and looked up from her task of buttoning the garment, fixing an icy stare at her underling.

"You won't think they look so good when you're dead!"

"Sorry," Alex mumbled apologetically.

"Come on, let's go save the princess." Tessa growled, striding off in the direction of the pool.

Casey hated to admit it, but she was getting—correction, she *was*—drunk. Feeling a little buzzed and not being able to sleep, she opened a bottle of wine and consumed a third of it when she realized that she wanted to go for a swim.

A voice inside her brain told her this wasn't the way to start off on the right foot in her father's house, but that voice was swimming upstream against a sea of alcohol, and Casey ignored the muffled sound inside her head. She floated on the pool's surface, her eyes partially closed and a dreamy expression on her face. She let her mind roam as she imagined fantasies being played out. Finally, the lover of her fantasies took on a familiar dark-haired, blue-eyed look. Thoughts of muscular arms and bronze skin put Casey's body into a most pleasing state.

Suddenly, the lights in the pool went out and Casey was left in darkness until her eyes adjusted to the dim light surrounding the patio. In that instant, it felt as if her heart stopped beating until the deck lights came into view. She cautiously swam to the edge, and when she looked up, she was staring into the blue gaze that, moments before, was doing unspeakable things in her fantasies.

Casey folded her arms on the top ledge of the pool and rested her chin on a forearm. "Hello there," she said with a seductive smile.

Tessa eased her tall frame down to one knee in front of the smiling woman. Tessa was trying as hard as she could not to grin back at the beautiful girl, nor let her eyes roam below the water's surface. *Just don't look down. Whatever you do, don't look down.*

She reached up a hand and rubbed her own face, realizing that having this woman around could eventually get her killed. A peculiar desire ran through her, one she hadn't felt in a very long time, and she knew that sooner or later, she would be sorely tempted to give in to Casey's charms. The odd thing was that she didn't know why. She was no stranger to the pleasures of a woman, but she'd never had trouble resisting one before. This one, however, affected her, and she couldn't understand how that could be.

"Ms. Meridio," Tessa began softly, "having trouble sleeping, are we?"

"Not exactly trouble. I suddenly had the urge to take a swim."

"Without a bathing suit?"

"Feels better this way." Casey grinned. "Besides, I thought it might help me sleep."

"Might I suggest a glass of warm milk as an alternative?" Tessa said. "Ms. Meridio, might I also remind you that there are a great number of men on this estate, and as we speak, at least half of them are ogling you in the pool?"

Casey looked up at the windows of the mansion that surrounded the lower patio area where the pool was set. "Really? I didn't even realize," she said with a mock sincerity that Tessa wasn't falling for.

Actually, Casey did realize. She wasn't much of an exhibitionist, but the alcohol helped lower her inhibitions to the point that it didn't matter. After the talk with her father, Casey knew there was only one thing that would bring Tessa out and that was if she thought Meridio's daughter was in trouble. Of course, Casey had no idea what she was going to do now that she'd gotten this far. The idea of flirting with this forbidding woman was one thing; actually thinking she could seduce such a beauty was terrifying.

"Think you're sleepy yet?" Tessa asked in a bored tone.

She stood and moved over to where Casey's terrycloth robe lay across a patio chair. Tessa walked to the other side of the pool by the steps at the shallow end and held up the robe, indicating that Casey's swim was over. Tessa had a look on her face that said she wasn't used to being disobeyed.

Casey noticed the expression and immediately bristled at the superior attitude. She took one look at Tessa's face and grabbed the metal handrails at her side, pulling her naked form from the pool. All the while, Casey watched Tessa's eyes for some hint of a reaction. What she received satisfied her to the core.

Tessa was sure her eyes went wide as she watched Casey's sleek body emerge from the semi-darkness of the water. She was caught up in the vision of muscles bunching and flexing in Casey's arms as she pulled her weight from the water. Casey's dripping wet form stood in the shadows as Tessa stood rooted to the spot at the other end of the pool. Casey reached up to run her fingers through her short hair, wringing some of the water away in the process. Tessa looked on and her stomach flipped. She couldn't see everything, but she did notice how Casey's breasts lifted sensuously, the moonlight gleaming against the wet skin, when Casey lifted her arms.

An intense heat settled between Tessa's legs, and she shifted her feet to ease the pressure the tight jeans were placing on her center. She didn't like losing control of a situation, and she most certainly lost control of this one. Casey was standing there, like this was the most ordinary thing in the world, and when Casey tilted her head back slightly, Tessa saw the smirk on her face. *Oh, I don't think you're quite ready to play with the big girls, my dear.*

Tessa turned to face Casey full on and held the cloth robe up, a shoulder in each hand. She gave a smirk of her own and arched an eyebrow in Casey's direction. *You come to me, little one,* the gesture said.

There was a slight moment of panic for Casey as the warm night air surrounded her naked body, watching in surprise as Tessa stood her ground, preparing to see if she would give in.

In each woman's mind, the first one to lower her gaze would lose. Tessa played at control and was determined to act as if Casey's body wasn't affecting her in the least. Casey, on the other hand, knew that if she looked down, it would be a display of subservience, and she wasn't about to give in. Casey took a deep breath and walked as nonchalantly as she could to Tessa.

That's it, Nikki. Make her come to you. For the Virgin's sake, don't look down. You can always take care of that ache between your legs with your own hand once you get back into your room, just don't look down...don't look down...don't—

Oh my God! Théh Mou!

Tessa did look down. It was nothing more than the flicker of an eye, but Casey caught it. Tessa cursed herself, but it was too late, she already had the image burned in her brain. Curves and hard muscle in all the right places and most definitely a natural blonde.

They both knew who won this round, and when Casey stood in front of Tessa, she paused before turning around to allow Tessa to help her put her robe on. Tessa figured she might as well be slaughtered for a sheep as a lamb, so she felt no guilt in taking a good long look at Casey's shapely backside. She turned Casey around by her shoulders to face her.

"Sleepy yet?" Tessa asked.

"I don't feel too good...I think—" Casey began, then she got the oddest look on her face.

Tessa had seen that look plenty. It was the distinctive expression one has just before they unexpectedly lose their dinner all over your shoes.

Tessa raised an eyebrow menacingly. "Don't you da—"

Tessa could only watch as Casey did what no other person could have possibly done and still have hoped to be alive the next morning.

Tessa sat on a high stool, leaning one elbow on the ceramic countertop of the kitchen. Tessa liked to enjoy her midmorning meal in the quiet of the kitchen with only Olympia as company. The long counter was set up much like the *kafeneía*, or American cafés.

Olympia didn't try to engage Tessa in any inane conversation, and Tessa was always respectful and cleaned up after herself.

Tessa sat sipping on her Greek coffee while perusing the weekend edition of the *Ta Nea*. It was printed in Athens and usually arrived a day late at the local kiosk, where everyone else bought their newspapers and magazines, but this was the Meridio household. Meridio waited for nothing, and the paper was ferried in daily.

Tessa occasionally popped a bit of food in her mouth from the plate in front of her, chewing slowly and reading at the same time. Olympia poured more of the strong, steaming coffee into Tessa's cup, and she offered a slight smile in thanks. Tessa's hearing was remarkable, and she turned immediately at the soft sound near the entrance to the kitchen, just in time to see Casey turning and attempting to leave the way she'd come. Olympia noticed the retreating figure and called out.

"Good morning, miss," Olympia said cheerily.

Casey was caught now. She really didn't feel like talking to anyone, and Tessa ranked number one on that list. After she became sick one more time that morning and couldn't feel anything beyond the pounding pain in her head, she remembered the events of the previous evening. She did not think she would ever be able to look the woman in the eye again for as long as she lived. Of course, who should be the first person she should run into this miserable morning but her father's *Karê*.

Casey mumbled a good morning without raising her bloodshot eyes. She gently eased onto the stool next to Tessa, praying she had a shred of decency in her heart. Casey was so wrong.

"Bet your head kind of hurts," Tessa leaned over and said loudly in Casey's ear.

Casey could only whimper in reply, her hand going up to her temple.

"Would you like a meal, miss?" Olympia asked, unaware of Casey's condition.

Casey looked up, and to Tessa's great satisfaction, she turned a few shades of green right before their eyes. Quickly shaking her head, Casey looked down at the plate Tessa had in front of her,

then looked up into the blue gaze.

“*Sardellés*,” Tessa said in answer to the unasked question. “Here, try one.” Tessa cruelly held up the small grilled sardine wrapped in a grape leaf and wiggled it under Casey’s nose.

Casey leaped from her seat and bolted from the kitchen as if the room was on fire. Tessa laughed loudly, a satisfied grin breaking across her face.

“You should be ashamed. What did you do to that girl?” Olympia asked sternly.

“Me?” Tessa asked in disbelief.

“You didn’t—” Olympia began.

“Are you crazy? Do I look like I have a death wish?” Then Tessa revealed the drunken girl’s exploits of the previous evening.

“She may really be ill. Perhaps you should go see to her,” Olympia suggested.

“I should?”

Tessa was about to argue with Olympia, but she saw the truth in it. If anything happened to Casey on her watch, there would be hell to pay. Tessa growled in frustration as she stood and went to find Casey.

Tessa stopped abruptly as the downstairs bathroom door opened and Casey walked out looking a little shaky. Even though Tessa was concerned, she couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled to the surface.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything this small move that fast.” Tessa chuckled.

Casey was about at her limit. She looked up into Tessa’s amused expression while tears filled her eyes.

“You can be a very horrible woman, did you know that?” Casey abruptly brushed by Tessa, leaving her standing there, wondering what just happened.

Tessa could barely react, thinking only of Casey’s words. *Of course, I’m a horrible woman...ask anyone on the island, they’ll tell you that.*

Looking at the stairs up which Casey just fled, she ran her fingers through her hair and rubbed her neck. Funny thing was,

she didn't *want* to be horrible to Casey. She was taking great pains to be a bitch to this sweet girl, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why. Was she jealous? That was always a possibility. No, when it came down to it, this gentle woman could end up getting hurt in all this, and Tessa didn't want to see that happen. For some unexplainable reason, she felt very protective of Meridio's daughter. Again, a feeling she didn't want to admit. She knew she was being paid extra to see that no harm came Casey's way, but it was something more—a feeling deep inside that told her she would probably do it for nothing.

Tessa realized that this new lady of the house complicated her plans, and she didn't like complications.

Shaking her head, she moved back toward the *koozéna* to face Olympia, realizing an apology to Casey would definitely be in order. After entering the sunlit room, she opened a cabinet and pulled an olive wood bowl from the shelf that contained a number of tiny herb-filled bags. Tessa had no idea how complicated her life was about to become.

Tessa knocked gently on the door to Casey's room. She could hear the muffled sound of Casey crying, and the noise tugged painfully at her heart. She only meant to tease Casey. She had no idea it would affect her the way it had. Olympia told Tessa that Cassandra hadn't been home for nearly six years, and this must be rather frightening for her, living in another country and preparing to start a new job.

Tessa knocked again. "Ms. Meridio," she called out.

"Go away!"

Tessa took a deep breath and fought the response to go back the way she'd come. She attempted to turn the doorknob and found it locked, then she reached into her pocket for a set of keys.

"I hope you're decent because I'm coming in, whether you like it or not."

Tessa opened the door to find Casey lying on her bed, her arms hugging an oversized pillow to her body. Casey whipped her head around and quickly wiped her eyes when she saw Tessa enter her room.

"How did you...Oh, great. Don't tell me you have a key to

my room, too,” Casey muttered as she sat up and reached for a bottle of aspirin on the bedside stand.

“I have a key to *every* room on the estate,” Tessa said dryly, setting the tray in her hands onto the table. She plucked the bottle of aspirin from Casey’s hands and tossed it in the wastebasket.

“Hey!” Casey cried out.

“Those things will kill you,” Tessa said. “I have something that will work better anyway.”

Casey leaned back against her pillows and watched in disbelief as Tessa sat on the edge of the bed and placed tiny amounts of powders into her palm. She reached into the small bags tucked in a wooden bowl and took the tiniest pinch of the herb, allowing the grains of powder to fall into her outstretched palm. Casey watched as a design took shape in Tessa’s hand. When Tessa was finished, the small circle of herbs in her palm was no more than two inches across. They formed a design comprised of a circle and two progressively smaller circles and inside the smallest one was an X.

Tessa looked up, but a strange look crossed her face.

“I...uh...I think I should have done this in your hand,” she uncharacteristically stammered.

“Why, what do I have to do with it?” Casey asked suspiciously.

“You, uh...” For some odd reason, Tessa was finding it hard to describe. She demonstrated by sticking out her tongue and pretending to swipe it against her palm.

“I have to lick it out of your hand?” Casey asked with skepticism.

“Well, it’s more like you just press the flat of your tongue against the powder to coat your tongue with the mixture. The design is more than a picture. It’s done this way because the taste buds on your tongue will react to the different herbs and the areas of your tongue that they touch. Sorry, I’ve just never done this for anyone else before.”

Casey smiled through her headache and looked up into the blue gaze that looked more human than at any other time since the two women met. She reached out and pulled Tessa’s hand closer to her.

"After what you saw last night, I guess I shouldn't be embarrassed about this, huh?"

"After what I saw last night, you don't have much to be embarrassed about."

Casey blushed and realized that was probably as close to a compliment as she would ever come with this unusually stoic woman. She leaned her face close to Tessa's hand.

"Remember, just let it coat your tongue and don't swallow until I tell you."

Casey paused and looked up one last time at the beautiful woman. "You do know that if you poison me, you'll never get away with it," she deadpanned.

Tessa couldn't keep from chuckling at Casey's comment. It was then that she realized what a huge mistake it had been to put the herbs within her own hand. She felt the warm wetness of Casey's tongue press against her skin and her eyes closed to the intense pleasure she derived from the feeling. Behind the closed lids, she envisioned Casey's tongue against a part of her body much farther south, and she had to stiffen her muscles to curb the shiver that was tingling along her spine.

"Gross," Casey said, and Tessa's eyes opened quickly.

"Don't swallow yet," Tessa repeated her instruction and reached for a small white cube from the wooden bowl. She held the porous cube in front of Casey. "Open."

Casey opened her mouth, and Tessa placed the object on her tongue. Enjoying the warm feel of Tessa's fingertips against her lips, Casey's smile was immediate.

"Sugar," Casey said.

The taste was equal parts bitter and salty. But when the sugar cube melted on her tongue and Tessa told her to swallow, Casey's mouth exploded into sensory delight. By the time the entire mixture slid down her throat, her mouth felt like... She could barely describe it.

"My mouth feels like a flower garden." She smiled.

Tessa smiled as she poured more herbs into a small piece of cheesecloth and tied string around it to hold it closed. Then she placed the bag in a mug and poured steaming water over the herbs.

She tossed a couple more sugar cubes in the mug and handed it to Casey.

“Drink this.” Tessa stood, opened the French doors, and allowed a warm, gentle breeze into the room. She pulled the heavy draperies, plunging the room into semi-darkness. Tessa picked up the tray and moved toward the door.

“Tessa?” Casey called out.

Tessa turned and looked at Casey, whose green eyes were a little less pained. She looked fragile sitting in the darkness on her bed, more like the girl Tessa remembered from their childhood.

“Are you coming back?” Casey asked in a small voice.

Tessa gave Casey a wry grin. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Drink your tea.”

Tessa closed the door gently, and Casey leaned back into the softness of the pillows and sipped on the tea. She closed her eyes and let the liquid’s warmth ease its way into her body. Her stomach already felt better, and she wondered if it was merely coincidence that the pounding in her head was easing. She smiled as she remembered the taste of Tessa’s skin and the way it lingered on her tongue still, long after the sweetness of the herbs and sugar disappeared.

Tessa slowly opened the door to Casey’s room; the sight that met her would have made it impossible for even the hardest heart to turn away. Casey had fallen asleep with a smile on her face, wisps of golden hair fell across her closed eyes, and her arms still hugged the pillow tightly. Tessa’s brow furrowed. As she took a step closer to stand beside the sleeping figure, she remembered an Easter morning so long ago.

She bent down and brushed the hair back from the sleeping woman’s eyes, the backs of her fingers lingering momentarily on Casey’s cheek. Tessa pulled up a soft leather chair and placed it at the foot of Casey’s bed. She eased her tall frame into the seat and crossed her legs, resting her chin in the palm of her hand.

She had an incredible urge to hold Casey in her arms. These feelings were new and they worried her. Tessa could deal with the feelings of physical desire the woman evoked in her body,

but emotions such as unconditional love would only get them in trouble. Too many complications, she thought as she rubbed her fingers against her forehead. *So what if we could hook up? What then? Hiding and slinking around from any eyes that might tell?* She wondered how her boss would take the news that his only child was a lesbian. If Meridio found out Casey was *mia lesveea*, he'd have her in a convent so fast her American head would spin. Tessa didn't want to picture in her mind the things that would be done to her, right before Meridio slit her throat.

Oh, what in the hell does any of it matter? There's no way a woman like this will ever love you. What are you dreaming for? Once she finds out what you're really doing here, working for her father, she'll either narc on you or she'll hate you. Tessa's heart thought that one would be as bad as the other would. *She could be useful...help me get closer.* Tessa tried to justify her possible actions. *Sto dheáhvalo!* she silently cursed. Tessa could only hope that involving Casey wouldn't become necessary.

Finally, Tessa relaxed her mind and absently watched the easy rise and fall of Casey's chest as she slept.

Tessa's mind snapped sharply to the present as she heard someone stop in front of Casey's door and turn the knob to enter the room. Her hands tensed on the arms of the chair until she recognized the figure of Andreas Meridio walking into the room.

Tessa quickly held up her finger to her mouth, requesting the man remain silent. She rose and stood by the door to speak to him.

"She had a bit of a headache, probably just all the excitement of being back yesterday," Tessa whispered in answer to his questioning look.

"Should I call the *giatró*?" he asked with a concerned expression.

"No, I don't think a doctor is really necessary, Mr. Meridio. I made her a tea," Tessa said.

Meridio looked at Casey on the bed and accepted Tessa's answer. Her way with herbs was known around the household, and he considered Casey in good hands.

"I just came to see if she wanted to go to Mass this evening. Better let her rest," he whispered to Tessa.

“If you’re going to town, I’d better go along,” Tessa said, slipping easily into the hard demeanor of her position.

“No, Tessa, you’re my *Karê*, not my bodyguard. I’ll have Peter with me. I think it’s important that you stay with Cassandra, just in case she feels worse later. *Katalavaynés?*”

“Yes, I understand, Mr. Meridio.”

Tessa watched the man bend down and lightly kiss Casey’s cheek, then he was gone. Tessa crossed the room and sat back in the leather chair, resuming her protective vigil.

Chapter 3

“Yeah?” Tessa quickly grabbed the ringing phone and mumbled sleepily into the receiver.

“Tessa, get dressed. I want you to take Cassandra to Mass this morning,” Andreas Meridio said.

“Yes, Mr. Meridio.” Tessa hung up and rolled over in bed.

The sun was barely up, and Tessa had gone out to the Kástro, a gay bar overlooking the Kástro district in Mýkonos Town, the previous night after her vigil at Casey’s bedside. Tessa had every intention of finding a willing young woman, preferably a small blonde, and getting laid. After the weekend she had, she felt she had not only earned it, but also deserved it. She started out at the younger clubs, Anemoi and Pierro’s, but for some reason, she couldn’t get hot and bothered about any of the women who approached her. She’d briefly entertained the notion of a professional, but by that time, she didn’t care anymore.

The management at the Kástro knew her as the Meridio *Karê*, so she was shown to a table on the patio where she sat with her back to the wall, able to see the patrons outside, as well as inside. The local customers knew her, as well, and she returned their stares, watching the gay couples and straight tourists enjoy their evening. A few of the local women eyed her invitingly, but once their friends whispered in their ear who Tessa was, they lowered their gazes and pretended not to be interested.

Tessa laughed ironically at herself. She was worried about a

woman like Cassandra being able to love her. She couldn't even get the respectable women of Mýkonos to look at her. Sure, if she requested it, they would be brought to her table. If she demanded, they would be delivered to her bed, but somehow, that just wasn't enough anymore. She desired a woman in her bed who *wanted* to be there, not just because she thought she'd let her father live.

So Tessa ended up listening to Vivaldi and sipping *retsína*, a wine flavored with pine resin, through most of the night. She drank to ease the pain of the hurtful glares of those around her and to forget the pair of deep green eyes that, in their innocence, seemed to mock her.

Tessa looked at the clock by her bed and jumped up, moving into the bathroom for a hot shower. Her head felt heavy, and as she looked into the mirror at her haggard reflection, she knew she would have to use her hangover cure on herself.

"I keep telling my father that it really isn't necessary to have you take me everywhere," Casey said quietly to Tessa, who sat next to her in the back of the dark-colored auto.

"It's no trouble, Ms. Meridio," Tessa murmured. "Besides, Greece has changed since you lived here."

"It certainly has. Who is that Peter that follows my father around? He's got the most unpleasant scowl on his face most of the time."

Tessa smiled at Casey's assessment of Peter Tsigaris. "He's your father's bodyguard, and that look is a warning to people who might find it tempting to hurt your father."

"Hurt my father?" Casey turned from the open window to look at Tessa. "My father grows olives for a living. Who could possibly want to hurt him?"

Tessa hoped she would have had more time before Casey brought up this line of questioning, and now here she was faced with making a lie sound plausible to an intelligent woman.

"Your father grows olives, yes, but he is a very wealthy and influential man. Many politicians see him as a threat because of the power he wields. His holdings are vast, Ms. Meridio. I don't think you realize what a wealthy woman you really are."

The answer silenced Casey as she resumed her pose, staring out the window as they took the road to the Paraportianí church. Suddenly, she gave a half-smile and whispered dreamily, "When I was a little girl here for the summer, I used to ride my bicycle to Mass."

I know, Tessa wanted to say. *I used to watch you.*

It was like night and day entering the Greek Orthodox Church. Casey couldn't help but smile at the pleasant memories she had of her visits here, so different from American churches. First, there was the quiet of the vestibule. Casey had to admit to herself that she was surprised when Tessa led the way into the busy church. Tessa never let more than a hand's width of distance separate the two of them, her gaze always searching the faces around them. Casey was even more surprised as she watched Tessa bless herself with the holy water and pull out a medium weight crucifix on a golden chain from around her neck. Tessa touched the piece of jewelry to her lips and turned to wait for Casey.

In complete contrast to the quiet of the vestibule was the seeming discord of the inner sanctuary. The priest chanted the liturgy while parishioners stood rather than sat or kneeled. Some women to the side visited with one another as young children ran and played. The atmosphere reminded Casey of so many good things when she spent her summers in Greece that she wanted to cry.

A boy of perhaps five ran into Tessa's legs, and she scooped him up, grinning as he laughed at the strong woman.

"Forgive me, *Karé*." A woman who was obviously the boy's mother held out her arms to Tessa.

Casey watched as Tessa's face returned to its customary impassive air. She nodded at the woman and gently placed the boy in her arms.

"They know you here?" Casey asked.

Tessa never took her eyes off the priest as she said, "Are you surprised that people actually know me or that the people who do go to church?" Tessa asked, turning and finally fixing her gaze on Casey.

Casey didn't know how to reply, suddenly fearing she had

offended Tessa. Opening her mouth to stammer some sort of an apology, she caught Tessa's small grin as she turned her head back to the priest. *Did she actually just tease me?* Casey was finding Tessa an interesting paradox.

As they prepared to leave the sanctuary, Casey tugged on Tessa's arm, turning left into a small chapel. The altar was much smaller than the one in the main cathedral, but dozens of candles in blue and red votives burned brightly.

Tessa watched with her arms folded across her chest as Casey placed some bills in a basket and lit a candle. She knelt at the small altar, then crossed herself and prayed. Tessa continued to stare, feeling a twinge of envy that Casey could look so at peace as she prayed. Tessa smiled slightly as she considered her envious thoughts and crossed herself, warding off the power of the evil eye. No sense taking chances.

Tessa felt the silence surround them and found herself walking up beside the kneeling woman. Casey felt the weight shift on the kneeler and looked out of the corner of her eye. She spied Tessa, crossing herself, then once again Tessa removed the crucifix from its hiding spot underneath her shirt to gently press it to her lips. Tessa's brow furrowed as she neither bowed her head nor closed her eyes, but stared intently up at the adornment hanging on the wall.

Tessa felt the weight of Casey's gaze, and she spoke without looking over at her.

"When you pray, do you think he hears you?" she asked quietly.

Casey looked up at the crucifix and wondered how to respond. "If you're asking me if I've ever seen the proof of an answered prayer, I think the answer is no, but it helps me to think that he does. I'm sorry I can't give you a better answer."

Tessa's look of worry was quickly replaced with a wry smile. "That's okay. I suppose it doesn't really matter."

Tessa stood and held out a hand as Casey accepted the assistance and rose. Casey turned back and watched as Tessa threw a handful of ten thousand drachma bank notes into the basket and lit two candles. Turning back toward Casey, Tessa never met Casey's gaze as she led them from the church.

Once they stood out in the bright sunlight in front of the cathedral, Tessa nodded to Demetrios, the driver, to get the car. The young man moved quickly, and Tessa and Casey waited on the side of the small street, which was bustling with early morning churchgoers.

"Do you think it actually does any good...going to church?" Tessa asked introspectively.

"Hey, it certainly can't hurt." Casey smiled back. "I, for one, want to cover all my bases," she said, making Tessa laugh aloud.

"It was so different going to Mass in the States," Casey began. "They were so quiet it used to scare me. I would spend three months here, then go back to America and be completely out of sorts for weeks. I always liked the casual atmosphere here. It was so much more...I don't know, like family.

Casey blinked as a bright glare hit her eye. Casey realized it was a passing car as the sunlight hit its windshield. She lifted her hand to ward off the glare and Tessa caught the car's motion from the corner of her eye. A dark sedan was moving by, but now, it slowed down. Way too slow, Tessa thought. Instantly, every one of her nerves stood on end and a spurt of adrenaline was released into Tessa's system.

"Casey!" Tessa cried out.

Tessa grabbed the hand that Casey was using to shade her eyes. She jerked hard, pulling Casey into her arms. As their bodies came together, Tessa wrapped her arms around the smaller figure, pressing the small body protectively against her and turning her back to the street.

They sounded like small pops, not even as loud as firecrackers. A bullet ricocheted by Tessa's ear just before she dropped to the ground, her body covering Casey's. She heard the window shatter in the car parked next to them, and Tessa felt a burning sensation in her left forearm.

As suddenly as it started, it was over. Tires squealed as the car picked up speed, but not before Tessa looked up to see at least two of the passengers in the dark sedan. Demetrios pulled in front of where Tessa knelt, the brakes sounding sharply. He reached over the back of the seat and pushed the door open from the inside.

Tessa picked Casey up and tossed her in through the open door, diving in herself.

“Move now! *Veáhsou!*” she shouted at the driver.

“Are you hurt?” Tessa grabbed Casey by the shoulders.

Casey shivered uncontrollably, but words seemed to be impossible at the moment. She looked into Tessa’s eyes, and Tessa saw the terror within the green depths.

“Cassandra.” Tessa took Casey’s face in her hands. “Are you hurt?”

Casey shook her head and tears filled her eyes, spilling down her tanned cheeks. Tessa pulled the woman close to her. “Shh, everything is all right. It’s all over now.”

Tessa soothed Casey while pulling a cell phone from her inside pocket. “*Malákas,*” she said angrily as she dialed 100 and spoke rapidly in Greek. She placed two more calls in rapid succession, and Casey knew the last was to her father. She could hear Andreas Meridio’s shouts through the phone. Casey allowed herself to be held in Tessa’s protective embrace. When the final phone call ended, Tessa squeezed Casey’s shoulder affectionately.

Casey looked down at Tessa’s hand and noticed that blood soaked through her shirt at the wrist. The crimson stain turned larger and fell in tiny drops onto Tessa’s slacks.

“Tessa, you’re hurt!” Casey cried out.

Tessa looked down and gave Casey a lopsided smile. “Just a scratch.” Then she winked.

Casey turned an incredulous look on the woman, but then she saw the wink. Casey couldn’t help it; she laughed nervously and wiped the tears from her face. She grabbed her shawl from the seat where she’d left it before they entered the cathedral and held Tessa’s hand in her lap as she wrapped the shawl around the woman’s bleeding arm.

Driving at breakneck speed, they were at the estate in minutes. Small white police cars with blue lights flashing on their roofs surrounded the estate. Andreas Meridio waited on the front steps when the car pulled up. Tessa leapt from the car and gave directions to a group of young men in black suits. In a matter of

moments, it was as if Tessa's presence and direction restored the chaos the household had been thrown into.

Andreas hugged Casey closely and called for a doctor before she interrupted him.

"Pappa, the blood isn't mine. I'm all right. Tessa is hurt, though."

By the time the estate settled down, it was evening. For the men who lingered, Olympia unveiled a large selection of *mezédes*, or appetizers, that she made earlier in the day. Plate after plate of food was set out for the men to snack on during the night, along with *oúzo* and *gentilini*, a white wine from Crete.

Tessa sat in one of the open-air sitting rooms with her shirt off, wearing only a white tank top. The *giatró* had just cleaned the wound on her arm and was preparing to sew closed the gash caused by a deeply embedded piece of glass, not a bullet as Casey thought earlier.

Tessa noticed Casey holding a plate loaded with food, eating, and watching the doctor treat her wound. She sat alone and still looked shell-shocked by the morning's events.

"I'm amazed that you can eat like that and still remain so tiny," Tessa said, calling Casey over to her.

Casey sat on a chair closer to the table where Tessa and the *giatró* sat. She blushed at Tessa's words.

"I eat when I'm nervous," Casey said.

"I'm just the opposite...Ow." She shot a look full of daggers at the *giatró* who sewed the wound closed. "I can't eat a thing when I'm nervous. *Not* that I'm ever nervous." She finished the statement with the tiniest of grins.

Casey was astonished at their conversation given the fact that this was the most cordial Tessa had ever been to her and it was while she was getting her arm sewn up without an anesthetic.

"Hey, how about sharing?" Tessa opened her mouth widely.

Casey laughed. "Which do you fancy? I have a little bit of everything."

"Uhm, the *tsirosaláta*." Tessa indicated the thin strips of smoked fish.

Casey speared a piece of fish with a fork, gave it a squeeze of lemon juice, then dipped it in olive oil. She fed the *mezés* to Tessa until it was gone.

“Sorry I ate it all, but that was the first food I’ve had today. I was starving,” Tessa said.

“A Greek only eating once in a day? Sacrilege,” Casey said in a tone of mock disbelief.

Tessa looked up at the figure who stood behind Casey. Andreas Meridio kissed the top of Casey’s head.

“How are you, *Máhtia Mou*?” Meridio asked, his large hands resting on Casey’s shoulders.

“I’m all right.” Casey raised her head to smile tiredly at the man.

The *giatró* finished the fine line of sutures and placed a dry bandage over the wound. He tied a sling around Tessa’s neck.

“Keep your arm elevated for a few days, like this.” He indicated the position in which he wanted Tessa’s arm to remain.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tessa growled.

“Tessa, when you’re through here, we need to have a few words,” Meridio said.

“Ready now, Mr. Meridio.” Tessa stood to follow him.

“You,” Meridio leaned down to kiss the top of Casey’s head, “get some rest.”

“I’m too wired to sleep,” she complained, but by that time, he had already walked away.

“You,” Tessa pointed a finger as she made her way to follow Andreas Meridio, “no late-night swimming.”

Casey giggled as Tessa turned and walked away.

My God, tell me I didn't just giggle like a schoolgirl. She's being so nice, what's up with that? Okay, maybe she feels sorry for you. Maybe you look like you've had the shit scared out of you today. Maybe, maybe, maybe. All right tall, dark, and wonderful... how do I find out about the real you?

“My daughter!” Meridio screamed. “In front of the holy church!”

Everyone in the room hung his or her head with the exception of Tessa. Tessa stood in her customary pose, facing the window,

seemingly lost in her thoughts. It was as if she were split in two. There was a part of her that couldn't erase the fear that clutched at her heart when she thought of losing Casey, the way Casey felt in her arms, and the gentle way in which Casey wrapped her shawl around her injured arm. The feelings went beyond mere desire, and Tessa knew it. She realized there was something more happening between them, something that ran deep. Hadn't she felt the bond begin all those years ago?

Then there was the anger. The darkness pushed its way up and nearly threatened to take control of her very being. In the past, when she was younger and more reckless, the darkness drove her. It brought her to the position and wealth she now held, the older she grew, the more she learned how to control the blackness that would overtake her. She had obviously grown complacent with her newfound position. Ten years ago, no one on the streets surrounding the Piraeus would have dared to shoot at her. She controlled the money they made and the way they spent it. If a man took exception to her back then, he kept it to himself or he was liable to show up in an Athens hospital without his *arkhédhias*.

That was Tessa's trademark in the old days. The old boys, if you crossed them, were likely to cut off your penis and stuff it down your throat after you were dead. Tessa knew the only way to command absolute loyalty was through fear. When her dark side ruled her judgment, she had a man held down, and she sliced off his balls, stuffed a towel between his legs and dropped him off at the closest emergency room. No man wanted to live that way, so the punishment became the perfect motivator. She tried without much success to push the feelings of rage back down.

"Tessa," Meridio said to her back. "I want the man responsible for this. I want his *arkhédhias* in a sack on my desk."

Tessa turned around slowly. There wasn't a man in the room who didn't feel a tightening in his groin at the feral smile that pulled back the woman's lips, displaying her perfect white teeth.

"It will be my pleasure, Mr. Meridio."

Meridio handed a glass of *sournada* to Tessa, who sat in the chair across from his desk.

“*Veeva*,” they said in unison, taking a long sip of the almond cordial.

Andreas Meridio slid open the top drawer of his desk, pulling his checkbook from within. He flipped open to the precise spot and wrote. He folded the check in half and held it out to Tessa. The brilliant blue eyes darkened in confusion.

“This is for you. You saved my daughter’s life today.”

The corners of her mouth curled upward, halfway between a sneer and a smile, at the man’s gesture. “You already pay me for what I do. I don’t want to put a price on something like this.”

“I’m not asking you to take it. This is payment for a *hahré*.”

Tessa looked into the man’s eyes and listened as he placed the emphasis on the word’s first syllable. He was making payment on a favor or a debt, and the money could not be refused. She shrugged and accepted the note, casually slipping it into her pocket without bothering to look at the amount. If this truly were *hahré*, it would be rude to question the sum.

“Go buy a new boat or something,” he said with a laugh. “Go on, go rest that arm. And, Tessa?” he asked as she stood to leave. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Meridio.”

Tessa walked across the lawn and stood under the olive trees by the guesthouse where she made her home. She unfolded the check and swallowed hard. It was made out for a little over three million drachmas.

In essence, Tessa told Meridio that she couldn’t put a price tag on Cassandra’s life. According to him, she was worth roughly the equivalent of one hundred thousand American dollars.

Tessa’s arm throbbed painfully, but she didn’t feel like getting up to take anything. She knew a tea concoction or a few hits of *ouzo* would do the trick, but she suddenly felt bone tired. She came in earlier and undressed, leaving her clothes in a heap by the door. After changing into an old pair of worn jeans and a white tank top, she collapsed on the sofa.

A knock at the door brought her, groaning, to her feet.

“The island better be on fire” was Tessa’s customary growl as

she swung open the door. "Oh" was all she could say when she saw Casey's stunned face.

"Well, you have an interesting way of keeping the solicitors at bay," Casey said. "Hey, weren't you supposed to keep that sling on your arm?" she said sharply.

Tessa leaned her good arm high up on the doorjamb and let an eyebrow disappear under her ebony bangs.

"Did you come over to *my* house just to yell at me, Mom?" Tessa asked with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

"Excuse me? Your house?"

Suddenly, Tessa lost her expression of mock superiority and displayed a sheepish grin. "Touché." She pushed the door wider, inviting Casey in.

Tessa scooped her clothes from the floor and tossed them in a chair while Casey's back was turned. Then Tessa allowed herself the luxury of taking in Casey's tanned legs, which were displayed admirably by the crisp white shorts she wore.

"I figured you might be hurting. I had a couple Percodan left and thought..."

Tessa plucked the bottle from Casey's fingers and tossed it in the nearest wastebasket, much the same as she had with the aspirin.

"Hey! You know if you keep throwing my drugs away—"

"You'll live longer," Tessa finished. "What else have you got under there?" Tessa asked, indicating the large plate covered by a cloth napkin.

"I'm not sure I feel like sharing now," Casey said with one hand placed on a slim hip.

Tessa could smell the sweet aroma coming from the plate, and her mouth watered at the thought of fresh figs, her favorite. She tried to muster up a look that would induce Casey to have pity on her.

"Oh, wait...is that actually a pout? Let me get a camera," Casey teased.

"Well," Tessa began, rubbing her injured arm gingerly. "I did practically save your life, but I guess I don't want that to influence you."

"Oh, don't even go there." Casey laughed.

"I could whine a little if that would help," Tessa joked.

"I don't think my heart could take it." Casey wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "Here."

Casey pulled the napkin from the top of the plate and presented the platter to Tessa. Most of the plate was filled with fresh figs, sliced in half. The other portion of the plate held *mizýthra*, a cheese made from *féta* whey.

"Ahh, *nóstimo*!" Tessa slipped into her native tongue to exclaim the word delicious. "How did you know that *syka me tyri* is my favorite *mezés*?" She motioned Casey into a seat in the living area.

"Pure deduction, my dear Watson. It just so happens that it's my favorite appetizer, too. Besides, Olympia told me." She put on a sheepish grin upon admission of her informant.

Tessa opened a bottle of *Gentilini*, and the women sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, enjoying their white wine and late-night snack.

"Tessa, do you mind if I ask where you learned English?"

"No, I don't mind. I went to school in England when I was eleven, then I went to the University at Oxford before I came home to live. You see, we have a lot in common. I used to come home for the summers also."

"Your parents must have missed you terribly, being away all those months during the year," Casey said.

Tessa suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable, and Casey realized she must have landed on sensitive ground as Tessa jumped up and walked over to the stereo.

"Do you like opera?" Tessa asked.

"Absolutely. What have you got?"

"How about Puccini?"

"Madame Butterfly?" Casey's eyes lit up.

"Let me guess...*Un bel di*?" Tessa said with a wry smile.

"How did you guess? I love that scene."

Laughter rumbled seductively from Tessa's chest. "I had a feeling. You seem like the hopeless romantic type."

"It's an incredibly beautiful scene. It has such impact." Casey looked slightly wounded.

"The whole thing is depressing," Tessa countered. "She should have blown them all off and gone back home with her maid."

"Oh, you." Casey slapped Tessa on her good arm once she had started the music and returned to her seat on the floor.

Casey listened to the rest of the aria, eyes half-mast, and a slight smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Tessa couldn't resist watching Casey seated across from her. Her heart lifted at Casey's obvious enjoyment from something as simple as music. It was at that moment that Tessa felt her dark side to be a million miles away.

She could scarcely believe that she was sitting here enjoying food, music, and even a limited amount of conversation with this woman, with anyone. It was as if she were someone else. Tessa Nikolaidis didn't make friends, and she certainly never courted a woman. Yet, here was the Meridio *Karê*, and she was actually enjoying herself. No one would believe it, she was sure of that. Her reputation among her peers and other acquaintances was well known and well deserved. Tessa realized that no one but Casey would ever see her this way. It was Casey with a heart as bright and warm as sunshine that brought out this goodness in her. When she stood next to Casey, she felt like she could be redeemed.

When the final note of the aria ended, the soft expression on Tessa's face was more from watching Casey than from the tempest of the music. Casey thought otherwise.

"See, you're a closet romantic," Casey teased.

Tessa chuckled in that throaty tone of hers and smiled endearingly at Casey.

"Being a hopeless romantic is something I just don't have the time for, little one."

Casey stared at Tessa for a few long seconds, as if she were trying very hard to remember something. Meanwhile, Tessa's smile froze on her face as she grasped the words she just uttered.

"What?" Tessa asked, stalling for time.

"Uh, nothing...nothing," Casey said, shaking her head. "I just had the strangest sense of *déjà vu*, like...I don't know, like I'd heard you call me that before. Weird, huh?"

"Yeah," Tessa agreed.

Tessa was more than a little confused. She cursed herself for her mental lapse in using the pet name in the first place. Then she wondered why Casey still didn't remember that Easter twenty years ago.

Chapter 4

Tessa leaned back in the thickly cushioned leather chair in her office. Her eyes remained closed, even as Alex and Stefano ushered two college-aged men into the spacious room. The melodious strains of Art Tatum's piano filtered through the stereo speakers, and Tessa held up a hand, requesting silence when Alex cleared his throat nervously.

Tessa had been reliving the moments she spent with Casey the night before, not wanting to lose the feeling of contentment that flowed across her like the music that filled the room. It was almost as if she were asking forgiveness from Casey for the woman she would have to become. It caused an ache in her chest, being so close to atonement, yet so far. When she sat with Casey, it was easy to think of a future that contained neither violence nor pain. Yet, here in her office, with the smell of her victims' fear hanging in the air along with the last few notes of song, she felt that familiar feeling of power clutch at her belly.

It wasn't merely darkness; it was a feeling that coursed through her, just as blood flowed through her veins. It was the thrill of the chase and the rush of victory mixed together. She breathed deeply and let the beast loose a little at a time until her demeanor barely resembled the woman Casey knew.

Pushing away from her desk, she rose and stood silently, searching their eyes, these men who were more boys than anything else. Her penetrating stare and deeply etched scowl caused them to

look away from her harsh gaze. When Tessa spoke, her awareness of that other side of herself, the one who could still love, feel, and want, was gone, replaced by this woman. The one who raised her lip in a sneer and asked, "Which one of you is Mikolo?"

"I am," the young man with the new beard said quickly.

Tessa walked around the desk to stand before the man who spoke. She moved with a subtle power and a grace that belied her true intent. The non-threatening way she moved put the men at ease. With lightning speed, so fast it was almost a blur, she lashed out with her right arm and backhanded the man across the face. "That is the last time you will be allowed to lie to me," she hissed.

"Please don't hurt him. I'm George Mikolo," the man on Tessa's right admitted.

He looked like an Athens University student, clean-shaven with wire-rim glasses. Tessa wondered where a boy like this got the *arkhédhias* to shoot at her and the woman under her protection. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

"I want to know why," she said through clenched teeth.

She held up a hand as Mikolo opened his mouth, silencing him before he said a word. She reached across her desk for something, and when the object in her hand came into view, she nodded to Alex and Stefano.

The two large men grabbed Mikolo and held him down in the chair, his friend too terrified to move. Tessa went to the immobilized man and unfolded the ivory-handled straight razor in her hand. She lifted her leg and pressed the weight down onto the tops of his thighs, then she slowly unbuckled the belt at his waist. All the while, her cold gaze watched his face.

Mikolo's friend, Yannis, whimpered in his chair and mumbled a string of Hail Marys under his breath. Mikolo's breath was coming in audible pants that resounded throughout the room. Tessa chuckled, but it was an entirely unpleasant sound.

"I think you know *she's* not going to help you, don't you?" she asked rhetorically as she stared down at the man under her, referring to Yannis's prayers.

"I can be a very forgiving woman, most people don't know

that about me. You see, I'm going to give you three chances." She fixed an almost reverent gaze on the blade in her hand, tilting it so the light gleamed brightly when it hit the metal, then she looked down at Míkolo's crotch.

"For every lie you tell me, you'll become one member short of a threesome. If you lie to me more than three times, I'll leave you to bleed to death on my nice Persian carpet and not think twice about it. *Katalavaynés?*"

Sweat rolled off his brow and into his eyes, and he blinked to wash away the burning sensation, nodding fiercely.

Tessa brought the razor up to her own eyes and ran her thumb lightly along its edge. She never even looked at Míkolo when she asked her first question.

"Who fired the shots?"

"I did," he said truthfully.

This surprised Tessa. She didn't think this scrawny boy had the stomach for it. She half expected him to piss his pants in fright. Usually, the first thing the guilty did was to beg for forgiveness, groveling and crying for mercy. She'd seen grown men in this same position who acted much worse than this one.

"Who was the target?"

"Meridio's d-daughter." His voice cracked in response.

"Now you may tell me why," she said slowly, grinding her teeth in an attempt at control.

His response came out in a torrent of Greek and bits of English.

"We didn't mean to hurt her. We only wanted to scare her! I swear on the Virgin, it's the truth. I thought she was here to take over her father's business, and I talked some friends into helping me. We thought if we scared her, she would go back to America. I was only supposed to break the glass in the car she was standing by, but...I'm such a poor shot...I-I never shot a pistol before." Tears streamed down his face by this point.

Tessa wavered, fiddling with the razor anxiously held in her right hand. Míkolo's words were so pathetic they had to be the truth. She stared hard into his eyes and saw the verity of it. Easing the weight of her leg off Míkolo, she waved Alex and Stefano to let go. She folded the razor back into its handle and tossed

it absently onto the desk. Walking behind the large olive wood structure, she bent to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of *ouzo* and three glasses.

She poured a generous helping of the liquor into all three glasses. She was only going to pour two at first, but the throbbing pain in her arm returned and a metallic taste on her tongue that she knew was adrenaline had her pouring the liquid in a glass of her own. She handed the young men each a drink and leaned upon her desk, sipping the clear liquid.

"You know, we have a decision to make now," Tessa began.

"We could leave Greece. No one would have to know," Yannis pleaded.

Tessa kept her gaze on Mikolo and raised an eyebrow. "I think you know better than that, don't you?"

Mikolo swallowed and looked down.

"I cannot only be forgiving, but I can also be merciful. You see, I can't just let you both walk out of here. What kind of a message would that send to the foolish boys who might do me and mine harm the next time? No." Tessa swallowed the rest of her drink and moved around the desk to seat herself. "Someone must pay for the crime, and someone must go back and tell the others what a compassionate woman the Meridio *Karê* can be." Tessa smiled at the irony in her words. "I leave it to you two to decide who stays...and who goes."

Tessa leaned back. This was the part where she usually learned the most about men and human nature. For all their machismo and bravado, Greek men—no, men in general—turned out to be a pathetically weak bunch. She watched as housewives walked to their deaths, wanting nothing more than to spit in Tessa's face one last time. She also watched grown men grovel and offer up their daughters in exchange for their own lives.

"I'll stay," Mikolo said quietly.

Tessa watched as Yannis warred within himself. He wanted to be brave; she could see that. He wanted to offer himself up, but his terror got the better of him. Instead, he hung his head, his silence saying more than his words could. She knew Mikolo was frightened, probably not at his own death, but by the methods

that would bring it about. He held himself together, and Tessa felt that if the time had been different, he would have made a good student of hers. He seemed as if he held the potential to be as cold and ruthless as the position of the Meridio's *Karé* demanded. She shook her head mentally. It was not to be, for today would be the last day this young man would be seen as George Mikolo.

With a nod, she watched as Stefano hustled Yannis from the room; he refused to look his friend in the eye as he passed.

Alex looked at Tessa and motioned a questioning eye at Mikolo, still seated in the chair. Tessa rose and pulled a compact 9mm Glock 26 and its holster from her desk, tucking it into her waistband at the small of her back.

"No, Alex, I won't need any help. This one I'll do by myself," she said with a chilling tone of finality as she put on her black suit jacket. She moved to walk away from her desk, and seemingly as an afterthought, she picked up the straight razor, sliding it into her pants pocket.

Mikolo's knees shook, and they had all the strength of a newborn calf as he walked along the office halls with Tessa. There was never a question in his mind about running. It seemed, standing next to the powerful woman in the elevator, that there was nowhere in the world for him to hide from Tessa's all-seeing gaze, so he obediently followed along.

Tessa stood outside in the early morning sun waiting for the valet to bring her car around to the front. She knew Mikolo stared at her, but she couldn't look at him, her anger was too great. She practiced a few control techniques to push the beast back down for a while. If she looked over at the man who had very nearly taken Casey's life, she would gut him right on the street.

Once they were settled in her silver Mercedes, Tessa gunned the vehicle down the road to the docks. She only had to wait a few minutes until the car ferry that would take them to Athens pulled into port. Mikolo watched Tessa and hoped that she had one shred of human compassion left in her and that she would send him to the Virgin swiftly. The possibilities of what she could and probably would do to him filled his mind until his hands shook constantly.

The French doors were ajar, and even in her sleep, Casey smiled as the warm, late morning breeze blew across her skin. Her mind was a million miles away, reliving a different time, her eyes moving rapidly under her closed lids. Casey awoke, breathing deeply at the suddenness of her return to reality.

She ran a hand through her short locks, her brow furrowed in concentration. She hadn't experienced that childhood dream in years, but what would prompt it now? She could never remember what she dreamt upon waking, but she remembered the feeling. It started out as undiminished happiness and contentment and ended as if her life were suddenly incomplete, as if something had been torn away from her.

Why in the world would I be dreaming like this again? Geez, eighteen months of therapy...you would have thought I'd be cured by now, wouldn't you?

Casey rose and stood in front of the doors that looked out onto Tourlos Bay, wondering, as she had numerous times in her life, how she could attain that feeling of completeness once again.

Andreas Meridio sat at the large wooden desk in his office and hung up the telephone as Tessa walked into the room. Tessa didn't say a word; she walked up to where Meridio was seated and tossed a paper sack on the desk.

"What's this?" he asked in confusion.

"You said you wanted them in a sack on your desk," Tessa said ominously.

The man carefully opened the sack and inside lay a plastic bag containing a bloody mass of something. As much as he had seen in his day, the vision of this still made him exhale in a small groan under his breath. Tessa smiled to herself. All men reacted this way at the sight.

Meridio closed the paper sack. "Did he admit it?"

"They all do in the end."

"Did you keep him alive?" Meridio asked.

"Yes, Mr. Meridio."

"Good. I want him and any of the others to know who they're

fucking with. I want him to remember the day he tried to hurt a member of the Meridio family.”

“Trust me when I say that George Mikolo will remember this day for the rest of his life.”

“A good morning’s work. Come, join Cassandra and me for lunch,” Meridio said, rising from the desk.

He walked to the door, then turned abruptly.

“Oh, Tessa. Dispose of that.” He pointed to the sack on his desk before leaving.

Casey sat on the outside patio, sipping a *frappé*, waiting for her father to join her for lunch when Olympia set another place at the table.

“Do we have company, Olympia?”

“Oh, no, miss. Tessa will be joining you and your father.”

“Oh.” Casey brightened a little.

Olympia tried to disguise her reaction. Meridio’s daughter would not be the first woman to fall for the enigmatic *Karé*, but Tessa best be aware that it could be a deadly affair should Casey’s father discover them together.

“Can I help you, Olympia?” Casey asked, already knowing what her answer would be.

“No, miss, you just relax. These bones aren’t that old yet,” Olympia said with a smile.

Olympia made three trips back to the table before she was finished placing platters of food on the table. Casey had forgotten about the three-hour-siesta rule to lunch in Greece and how enormous the midday meal was.

“*Kaliméra*,” Tessa said to Casey as she approached the table.

“Good morning yourself,” Casey said. “Pappa,” Casey acknowledged her father as he placed a light kiss on her cheek.

Tessa sat and commanded her body not to react with Meridio so near. Cassandra sat across from Tessa in a pale pink sleeveless top and a white skirt. Casey’s tanned muscular legs were tucked under her as Tessa quickly realized was Casey’s favorite repose. Tessa accepted a glass of iced tea from Olympia and allowed Casey, as the lady of the house, to fill her plate from the larger platters.

Tessa was impressed that Casey chose some of her favorites. Of course, all the fare was exceptional, and it helped that Olympia had been an excellent chef in her younger days. Tessa sprinkled pepper over the *Meltizánes imám baıldí*, small eggplants filled with a ragoût of onions, tomatoes, and herbs, smiling to herself as she realized that the *dolmádes*, parcels of grape leaves tightly stuffed with currants, pine nuts, and rice, were Casey's weakness. Of course, no Greek lunch would be complete without bread, cheese, and fresh fruit.

"What will you do today, *Máhtia Mou*?" Meridio asked.

"I was thinking of going into town, unless you don't think it's safe," Casey said.

Meridio looked at Tessa for the answer. He valued her opinion, and this was her area of expertise, after all.

"I think it would be a good idea," Tessa said. "It would be good for people to see you out after yesterday's incident, show them you're not afraid."

"But I have to admit I am afraid, at least a little." Casey smiled weakly.

"Only little children and the simple-minded live without fear, Ms. Meridio," Tessa said.

"Besides," Meridio added, "you won't be having any more trouble from those hoodlums from Athens."

"Did the *astynomía* arrest them then?" Casey asked, wondering why they hadn't told her that the police apprehended them.

"Yes," Andreas Meridio said without hesitation. "They were young men looking to cause trouble. They probably worked in Lésvos, on the farms. Probably thought they had a score to settle."

During this whole time, Tessa refused to raise her head to look at Casey. Tessa was a proficient liar, but she had the oddest feeling that Casey would know if she weren't telling the truth.

"You mean they worked on the olive farms? What kind of grudge could they have against us, Pappa?" Casey asked.

"Anything, maybe they thought they weren't getting paid enough or that they didn't get enough holidays...Who knows," Meridio said.

"Would they really be angry enough to kill us?"

"They didn't mean to hurt us," Tessa entered the conversation. "They only intended to scare, but they were rotten shots," she said with a wry grin.

"Pappa, come into town with me?" Casey asked hopefully.

"Another time. I have paperwork and phone calls to attend to. Tessa will go with you. She'll be happy to. Won't you, Tessa?" Meridio asked, rhetorically, of course.

"Absolutely," Tessa said promptly, realizing she was not being asked but told. "Where did you have in mind?" Tessa saw her plans for an afternoon's sailing flying away before her eyes.

"I told Olympia I'd go with her to the *laiki agorá*."

Tessa had her fork midway between her plate and her mouth and stopped. "Shopping?" Tessa heard the words *street market*, and was aghast.

"Better than that. Shopping for food. Olympia says the best fish don't arrive till after lunch," Casey teased.

Tessa's face held an expression of complete resignation but not one fragment of delight. Andreas Meridio laughed at the grimace on her face. He rose from his chair, kissed Casey, and slapped Tessa on the shoulder.

"Well, you ladies enjoy yourselves." He laughed and left the patio before Tessa could figure a way out of the fate she'd been set up for.

Chapter 5

Tessa recommended that Meridio's daughter be seen around town, but the street market wasn't exactly what she had in mind. Tessa followed dutifully behind Casey and Olympia, pausing and trying not to look too bored as they stopped at each of the vendor's booths. She pushed aside daydreams of being on her catamaran on such a beautiful day and scanned the area, watching without appearing too obvious.

Casey threw cautious glances back at Tessa as she walked along with Olympia. Tessa looked bored stiff, but she did make an effort and grinned at Casey when Casey turned and smiled back at her. Soon, Casey gave packages to Tessa. Although Tessa accepted them gratefully at first, she thought she looked more like a pack mule, and this might not be the best thing for her reputation.

Motioning to a boy sitting on the curb, Tessa bent down and spoke to him rapidly in Greek, pulling a few bank notes from her billfold. When she pressed the bills into the boy's hands, he nodded enthusiastically and took the packages.

Casey looked down at the boy at her side and smiled, noticing he was carrying the sacks of fruits and vegetables that had been in Tessa's possession a few moments earlier. Glancing behind her, she watched as a smug smile graced Tessa's features. Casey laughed aloud.

"Did the *Karê* hire you to carry those?" Casey asked the boy. He nodded and smiled broadly. "She told me to follow the

beautiful woman with the golden hair, but I already know you, Ms. Meridio.”

“Oh, is that so? What’s your name?”

“Demitri.”

“Well, Demitri, do you like *baklavás*?”

The boy nodded again, and Casey helped him juggle his burden to accept the pastry that Casey purchased.

“Olympia,” Casey said in a lower tone of voice. “Why does Tessa look as if she’s being tortured? Does she hate shopping that much?”

Olympia chuckled at Casey’s assessment of Tessa a few paces behind them.

“On a day like this, she would be out on her sailboat. I think we put an unexpected crimp in her plans.”

Casey stopped moving, once again surprised at how little she knew about Tessa. Looking back at Tessa, Casey’s smile became radiant.

“You have a boat?”

Tessa saw the sunlight mirrored in Casey’s smile, and she returned the look. She could tell that the radiance in Casey’s features was from excitement.

“You sail?” Tessa seemed surprised at the revelation.

“I’m not exactly seasoned, but I had a Hobie Cat when I was a teenager. I make a great passenger, though. I know how to stay out of the way.” Casey blushed, and she wasn’t sure why.

“You should have told me. On a day like this, the Aegean would be beautiful,” Tessa said, and Casey saw the blue color of Tessa’s eyes deepen.

“You know, we could still...” Casey looked expectantly at Olympia, putting on the sincere face that for nearly twenty-five years Olympia had a difficult time saying no to.

Olympia looked from Casey to Tessa and felt that she was looking at two teenage girls. The expression of hope on their faces caused her to laugh quietly.

“I can see that you’re both infected with the fever now and you’d be no good to me anyway. I think we should continue our shopping tomorrow,” Olympia said.

“Yes!” Casey smacked her hands together, and Tessa again followed behind the two women, except that she had a definite spring to her step.

Mýkonos harbor was one of the busiest tourist spots on the island, and the taxi boats that carried passengers to the island of Delos left from its docks. Walking down the far dock where the larger boats and yachts were moored, Tessa and Casey drew stares from the locals, as well as the tourists. Men and women alike stole glances at the two women dressed in tank tops and shorts. Tessa stopped in front of the harbormaster’s office and spoke with the men inside for a few moments. After returning to where Casey stood waiting, Tessa showed Casey to the slip her boat was moored in.

“Wow, this is really something,” Casey said in awe.

Tessa tried not to smile, but the *Apógevma Nóstimo* was her one source of pleasure, and she swelled with pride at Casey’s words. A G-Force salon cabin cruiser, it was the largest catamaran in the harbor and cost its owner over two hundred thousand American dollars. It was nearly forty feet long, and Casey looked at Tessa in wonder.

“You take this out alone?”

“It’s not as big of a bear as you’d think. It handles like silk across your skin.” Tessa held out a hand to help Casey aboard.

“The *Apógevma Nóstimo*?” Casey smiled at the boat’s name, *Afternoon Delight*.

“As much as I would like the other reputation, the reason for the name is that I only get out on her in the afternoons, after work, or during my lunch,” Tessa explained sheepishly.

It was rather nice, Tessa thought, having someone else with her. Casey was eager to learn, and once Tessa laid the boat out to her, a lot of things came back to Casey. Tessa leaned way over to toss out the aft line, and when she turned back to the boat, she saw Casey quickly lower her gaze, Casey’s face a lovely shade of pink that had little to do with the sun. Tessa turned her back on the woman as a huge grin crossed her face. She caught Casey staring at her legs, and Tessa rather liked that feeling.

Tessa was right, the double hulls cut through the blue-green water like a warm knife through butter. Casey had never been on a catamaran so large before, especially one with such a large cabin. They sailed up toward Tínos Island first, then turned and headed back, passing their starting point at Mýkonos harbor and sailing south around to Paradise Cove.

Tessa seemed at ease on the water, and Casey hadn't seen the woman's true beauty until then. With her ebony hair whipping wildly behind her and a relaxed grip on the steering wheel, Tessa seemed enthralled with the speed the most.

"It's like flying!" she said in Casey's ear at one point. "Would you like to float and watch the sunset?" she asked. Receiving an enthusiastic nod, she stilled the engines and pulled the main sail aside, letting them drift off the coast of Paradise.

"Hey, how about breaking out those *mezés* Olympia gave us?" Casey suggested.

"Don't tell me you're hungry already," Tessa exclaimed.

"Lunch was hours ago, and I'm starving."

"You're always starving." Tessa chuckled. She jumped to her feet and held out a hand. "Want a tour?"

Casey let Tessa help her rise and show her through the cabin below.

"We never had this on my Hobie Cat back home." Casey laughed.

Tessa chose a bottle of white wine from Límnos and scooped up the sack of appetizers while Casey gathered some napkins and a couple of wineglasses. They lounged informally on the bow, sipping wine and munching on the snacks Olympia had provided. Olympia allowed for the sweet tooth she knew both women were slaves to and packed sweet bread, morello cherries, orange slices soaked in honey water, and candied pistachio nuts.

They polished off more than half the bottle of wine, and Tessa leaned back with her eyes at half-mast, enjoying the feel of the slowly sinking sun and the woman at her side. She enjoyed Casey's company for many reasons, but most of all, she delighted in the moments of silence where neither of them felt they had to fill up the quiet with mindless chatter. True, Tessa was an

unusually subdued woman, keeping her own company for the most part, but she enjoyed this woman by her, taking pleasure at having someone to share a sunset with.

They lay back against the boat, feeling the roll of the water beneath them.

“Tessa?”

“Hmm?” the alto voice hummed back.

“Were those men shooting at me or you?”

Tessa opened her eyes and stared into the blue sky. “Frankly, I think either one of us would have been a feather in their cap.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

Tessa turned her face toward Casey without moving her body. “It was you.”

Casey closed her eyes and seemed to think about this for a few seconds before the next inevitable question came.

“Why would men I don’t even know, who my father doesn’t even know... Why would they want to hurt me?”

Tessa rolled over and held her head in her palm, watching the pained expression on Casey’s face.

“Your father has wealth and influence, more than you realize, all over Greece, not just here on Mýkonos. Everyone knows that if you want to hurt someone, you hurt what he values most.”

Casey rolled until her position mirrored Tessa’s. “Would it bother you if I had been shot?” Casey asked softly.

“*Sto dheáhvalo!*” Tessa cursed, sitting up. “Of course it would bother me. What kind of question is that?”

Tessa stopped, suddenly understanding what Casey was asking. Would Tessa simply feel the impact of the loss because she was supposed to be protecting Casey, because she was her father’s *Karé*, or would it be on a more personal level? Tessa wasn’t sure how to answer without getting herself in deep. Of course, when Tessa looked down into the green gaze that looked back at her so trustingly, she knew she could answer with nothing but the truth.

“Yes, it would bother me a great deal.”

“Good.” Casey suddenly brightened. “Because it would bother me a little, too.”

Tessa shook her head and laughed at Casey. “*Théh Mou!* You are incorrigible.”

“Yeah, but it keeps you on your toes, eh?”

“That it does.” Tessa couldn’t resist smiling back.

“Seriously, why did you call the boys who shot at us from the car *malákas*?” Casey asked.

The Greek term was never one Casey felt comfortable using. The closest English translation was *masturbator*, a stupid lazy person who sat around and played with himself. Growing up, Casey heard boys tease one another by calling each other *malákas*, but it would be cause for physical violence if it ever came from a foreigner’s lips.

Tessa didn’t know how to explain. How could she tell Casey how she felt about those men without revealing too much of herself? Would Casey still worry what Tessa thought about her if she knew what the other side of Tessa’s life was like?

“Because I thought them the most despicable cowards for shooting at a woman in the first place.”

Casey caught the singular use of the word and realized Tessa didn’t lump herself into the helpless woman category.

“Mostly,” Tessa continued, “it was the way they did it, driving along and shooting from their car. A real *mángas* doesn’t shoot you while he is all snuggled and protected in his auto. It’s like the American gangs, what you call drive-by shootings in your Los Angeles. Such cowardly bastards,” Tessa hissed. “They shoot you and don’t want to show their face, so they hide in their cars like old women.”

Tessa suddenly remembered who she was talking to and lessened up on the anger in her voice.

“I’m not saying that I haven’t learned that killing is a stupid senseless business, but it takes more guts to kill a man when he can see it coming than behind his back. To walk up to a man and look in his eyes, to see his sweat and to know what his fear smells like.” Tessa created the shape of a gun with her fingers and placed her index finger softly against Casey’s temple.

“Then while you’re looking in his face and he’s begging and crying for his own life, pop.” Tessa pressed her finger harder

against the side of Casey's head, and Casey shuddered at the realism in the simulation.

"You put a bullet in his brain. I'm not saying it's smart," she looked out onto the water, "but it's a hell of a lot harder to do."

Long moments of silence passed as each woman floated along, lost in her own thoughts. Casey's mind raced with all the information she'd just been given and the implication behind Tessa's words. It frightened Casey when she realized how different their worlds were. Casey would have no more a clue as to what it felt like to kill a man up close as she would to know what it felt like to be the queen of England. Her real concern came from the underlying feeling that Tessa indeed knew what it felt like to take a man's life. Casey wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees, stealing glances over at the beautiful, dark woman at her side.

Tessa sat and waited for Casey to process all she'd been told. *She's a smart girl; she'll figure it out.* There was no other way to explain her anger to Casey, and Tessa cursed herself for revealing too much. No matter how much she might want or need this woman in her life, she had to see to her vow first. *It won't matter much. Once it comes to fruition, she won't want you.*

Tessa felt the weight of Casey's stare and remained gazing out onto the vista before her as the sun was still an hour away from setting. Her blue eyes reflected the horizon, and she anticipated the next question that was sure to come. Now that Casey had time to think about it, surely she would put two and two together and see the reality of their situation.

Casey watched Tessa even as she realized that Tessa *knew* she was being watched. The light fluttering in Casey's stomach was familiar to her, but it had been a very long time since she felt it and certainly longer since she'd done anything about it. It became clear to Casey that if Tessa were to tell her right now that she was a mass murderer or that she'd never harmed another person in her entire life, Casey would believe her. Whether it was good or bad, Casey knew she would believe anything this beautiful, mysterious woman told her. She rolled the words around in her head and had no doubt about their verity. Right or wrong, good

or bad, dangerous or not, it didn't matter. The concerns couldn't change the way her heart felt. She had quickly fallen in love with the enigmatic Tessa Nikolaidis.

"Tessa?"

Again, Tessa tried to steel herself for the question that would come next and even now wondered how she could be anything but honest with the woman who was wrapping herself around her dark heart.

"Yes?" Tessa turned her head and brushed her wind-blown hair from her eyes.

"What do your friends call you?"

Tessa's brow furrowed, and she wondered if Casey was making fun of her. "What?"

"A nickname that your friends call you. Does everyone call you Tessa?"

"I don't have any friends," Tessa said, still staring at Casey in amazement.

"Can I be your friend?"

Tessa tried hard not to let the words affect her, but she knew she wasn't succeeding. Hot tears threatened as she remembered when a pretty blonde five-year-old with eyes the color of the hillside at Filérmós asked her the same thing.

"I think I'd like that," Tessa said softly.

Both women turned to watch the sun as it slowly descended below the horizon. Goose bumps broke out over Casey's arms as the *Meltémi* blew in from the north, bringing a cooler breeze with it. Tessa jumped up and returned swiftly with her own jacket, Casey's jacket, and a soft blanket.

They sat, shoulders touching, leaning against the thick mast, and watching as a golden glow lit the sky for the longest time before the sun gave the appearance that it was sinking into the sea. No words were spoken for a long time. Suddenly, Tessa was drawn from her introspection to the feel of a small body leaning more heavily against hers.

The wine and the sun took its toll on Casey, and her head bobbed as she struggled to stay awake for the length of the long sunset for which Greece was notorious. She was losing the battle

fast, and Tessa did what she would never have done had she not had a bottle of wine and had she not been at sea with a most beautiful woman. She repositioned her body and pulled Casey in front of her, between her legs, Casey's weight resting on Tessa's chest. Casey mumbled something in her sleep and surprised Tessa by snuggling into the strong woman's warm embrace.

Tessa could do no more than smile at her good fortune. She remembered that it was less than a week earlier when she wished she had this very thing, to be on her boat, a woman in her arms, and a sunset to share. Perhaps the Greek gods of old heard her wishes and decided to take pity on her. Perhaps it was merely a coincidence, but whatever the reason, Tessa wouldn't take her wishes back now for all the drachmas in the world. She held Casey close to her until only a thin slice of the sun could still be seen. The quiet bundle in her arms stirred.

"I'm not sleeping," she murmured drowsily.

"Yes, you are." Tessa chuckled in her ear.

"No, I'm lovin' every minute of the sunset." Casey desperately tried to get her bearings. *Am I lying in Tessa's arms?*

"Well then, you're the first person to ever snore while she's awake."

"I do not snore." Casey pulled away and turned to look in the woman's face behind her.

"Yes, you do," Tessa drawled. She couldn't resist teasing Casey. "It's this cute little puppy dog kind of snore."

"Oh, you." Casey slapped Tessa's arm and laughed once she realized she was being teased.

"You about ready to head back?" Tessa asked reluctantly.

"Mmm, no," Casey said, not wanting to extricate herself from the warmth of Tessa's embrace. "But I guess we don't have much choice."

For both women, the spell was broken, but as they sailed back into Mýkonos harbor, their hearts felt full of feelings neither one of them could express easily in words.

Chapter 6

By the time Casey pulled herself from her bed the next morning and cleaned up, Tessa and her father were already on the patio, drinking coffee and conducting business.

“*Kaliméra.*” Casey smiled as she approached the table.

She was greeted in the same manner by the two as she kissed her father’s cheek.

“Thank you,” Casey said to the strong cup of Greek coffee Tessa poured for her.

“Well, *Máhtia Mou*, I have business on Lésvos. Would you like to spend the weekend with us?” Andreas Meridio asked.

When her father indicated that the *us* she would be joining would be he and Tessa, Casey didn’t have to think twice.

“What time do we leave?” She smiled.

Tessa never looked up from her paper, and she kept her face frozen in the same neutral expression as always, but inside, she was grinning from ear to ear.

“We leave at ten o’clock, can you be packed by then?” Meridio asked.

“For a weekend? Sure, Pappa.”

“I think I better handle a few items of business and get packed myself. If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Meridio, Ms. Meridio?” Tessa said, rising from the table.

“Of course,” father and daughter said in unison.

Casey watched Tessa walk toward the guesthouse. Initially feeling a little hurt at Tessa's *business as usual* demeanor around her, she was soon to realize that this was probably a wise move on Tessa's part. Casey observed her father staring after Tessa also.

"I'm glad you're able to get on with my *Karê*," Andreas began, turning back to Casey. "Tessa is a very competent woman, and I feel better having someone with her abilities around you. Cassandra, I need to ask you...Has Tessa ever acted, well, has she ever made any advances toward you, any conduct that could be thought of as improper?" he asked hesitantly.

"Wha—?"

"Now before you go getting all upset, I ask for a good reason. I know you young people think everyone and everything is just fine nowadays, but this is Greece, not America, and our ways can still be very Old World. Tessa does not make it a secret among our people that she is *mia lesveea* and—"

"Pappa," Casey interrupted, "Tessa has never treated me with anything but respect and thoughtfulness."

"All right, I understand." Meridio held up his hand. He felt he was about to receive a lecture, and the worst thing he could think of was to be lectured by a woman, even if the woman was his daughter. "I just wanted you to know about her, in case it would bother you in any way."

"Pappa, I think you should know something about me—"

A large crashing sound came from behind them, causing Casey to jump. Olympia had been carrying a tray, and the contents of the platter were now on the patio in hundreds of pieces.

"Mrs. Karoubas, are you all right...Do you need help?" Meridio asked, rising from his chair.

"No, no, Mr. Meridio. Anna will help me clean it up." Olympia indicated a young girl who came running to assist.

"What were you saying, *Máhtia Mou*?"

Casey looked up, but she caught Olympia's gaze throwing daggers in her direction. Olympia was facing her father's back, and as Casey glanced up at the woman, she saw Olympia shake her head slightly. Casey looked in her father's face, now uncertain as to what to do. She was about to tell him of her own sexual

preference, but it was obvious that Olympia didn't think it was the right thing to do.

"I...I was about to say...that it feels good to be back home," Casey finished and knew she'd gotten it right when Olympia smiled and nodded.

"It's good to finally have you home again. Now go and get packed."

Casey made a point of walking through the kitchen to go upstairs and stopped when she saw Olympia. Picking up a piece of the broken china, she grinned slightly at Olympia.

"I take it this was your idea of a subtle hint?"

"Miss Mer—Cassandra, there are many ways here that are different from what you're used to in America. If you told your father that you were *mia lesveea*, do you think he would allow Tessa to accompany you anywhere? I fear he might even discharge her."

Olympia chose her words carefully. She had no idea how far the relationship between Casey and Tessa had gone, but she wanted Casey to realize that she was in Greece, a country run by men. How well Olympia knew that men held all the power in her homeland. She also used the word discharge when even she knew that would be the kindest thing that would happen to the attractive *Karé*.

"Olympia, how did you know about me?" Casey asked in a low voice.

"I have been the cook in this house for nearly thirty years. I was here on the day you were born, for your first communion, and on your sixteenth birthday. There is very little I don't know about you." Olympia took Casey's chin in her fingers.

"How would I have ever gotten along without you?" Casey smiled at the woman who had been like a second mother to her all these years.

"Go on now. You don't want to keep your father and Tessa waiting."

Casey kissed Olympia's cheek and rushed up the stairs to her room. Olympia stood in place for a few moments lost in past memories. Shaking her head, she moved around the large kitchen.

Their private plane landed at an airport about eight kilometers south of Mytilini, on the island of Lésvos. A limousine sat waiting for their arrival, and the drive to the villa where they were to stay was short and uneventful. The Laureate, a restored villa, was situated on Vareia beach. A public hotel most of the time, but as Casey was soon to discover, when her father stayed there, it became his own private villa. Casey hadn't been to this particular villa before but thought it breathtaking. Set amidst a beautiful garden, it was surrounded by avenues of bay trees and giant pines.

Even though Andreas Meridio bought out every room in the villa for his personal use, the entire hotel staff stayed to work, and they were courteous and helpful to Casey. She was shown to a large suite of rooms and enjoyed the fact that Tessa had the rooms next to hers.

The three lunched together, but Andreas Meridio seemed somewhat preoccupied. Casey hated the way her father's bodyguard hovered in the shadows, but she tried to think of the silent man's role as an important one and kept her mouth closed about it. In the meantime, Tessa seemed to enjoy the information Casey knew about the island and its history from an archaeological standpoint. Meridio abruptly stood and motioned to Peter.

"I'm going to the *elaiotriveio*, *Máhtia Mou*. I'll be there all afternoon. Tessa, you are to bring Cassandra along when you're finished here." Then he brusquely kissed Casey and left.

Casey groaned and grabbed the bottle of wine, pouring herself a generous glass.

"What's that sound for? You don't like the olive mill?" Tessa asked in confusion.

"Whenever my father says I'm to meet him at the *elaiotriveio*, it means only one thing. He wants to test me. He likes to make sure I know everything about olives." Casey moaned.

"And do you?" Tessa chuckled.

"I know absolutely everything there is to know about olives. When you eat them, when you press them, when you harvest them...The list goes on and on."

"They're only olives. How hard could it be?" Tessa asked as Casey groaned her displeasure once again.

"So tell me what you know about olives," Tessa said loudly to be heard above the convertible sports car's engine and the wind that whipped past.

Casey always enjoyed the drive up the hillside to the olive mill outside of Plomári. Since they were staying at Vareía, they had to drive around the Kólpos Géras bay. One thing Casey learned quickly was that Tessa loved speed, and Tessa drove like most of the locals, full out at breakneck speed.

"Well, let's see. The olive groves that belong to the Meridios date back to 700 B.C. However, there was a frost that wiped them out and they were replanted with new in the eighteenth century. Olive oil used to be the big export commodity of ancient Greece. Did you know that they would massage great warriors with olive oil, then scrape it off them and put it into jars to sell? Something about it being an aphrodisiac, I think."

"Oh, that sounds disgusting."

"You're telling me. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, Lésvos and Crete are in competition over who makes the most and the best oil. We have over eleven million trees here on Lésvos, but some say Crete produces more and a better quality of oil, mostly the people who farm on Crete. This island, however, uses every part of the olive, rather than just pressing for oil alone. We use the fruit for eating, of course, and it's pressed for oil, but we also grind up what remains after the oil is pressed out and use it for soaps. After they use all they can for the soaps, they take what's remaining for fertilizer."

"Cassandra?" Tessa stopped Casey's informative lecture.

"Yes?"

"Is all this true?" Tessa frowned. She had been born and spent most of her life in Greece and didn't know half of what Casey did about their main export.

"Absolutely. This stuff has been drilled into me every summer since I was little. You watch, the first thing my father will do is bring a plate of olives out and see if I remember my old lessons."

“And will you?” Tessa laughed.

“Geez, I hope so.” Casey laughed in return.

“Why do we use Greek olive oil instead of Italiana?” Andreas Meridio walked along the concrete pavement of the olive mill and past the large wooden vats with Casey trying to keep up with his longer strides. Tessa followed along silently.

“Because Greek oil is better quality,” Casey said, and Tessa silently applauded Casey.

“Why?” Meridio asked.

“Because we have hotter, drier summers, and that causes lower acid levels in the fruit.”

They stopped at a table, and Meridio motioned to a young man to bring out a large platter. Tessa watched Meridio drill Casey just as she had predicted. There were at least a dozen varieties of olives on the tray, and Casey hadn’t made a mistake yet. Meridio seemed to take this seriously, and Tessa wondered if he wanted Casey to at least be able to run his legitimate business ventures should anything happen to him.

Meridio held a fruit up, and Casey was expected to know its name or uses.

“*Elítses*,” Casey wavered as her father held up the small dark fruit. “Um...Oh, that’s no fair, Pappa. Those are from Crete.”

Andreas laughed for the first time that afternoon. “Yes, but you did well in knowing what the competition produces.” He held up another and so it went on for some time.

“*Tsakistés*...uh, picked young and cracked before curing in brine. *Kalamáta*, the most famous Greek olive. Always almond-shaped and cured in red wine vinegar.” Casey popped one in her mouth, then gave Tessa a wink when her father bent down to retrieve another olive.

“*Thásos*, salt-cured, strong flavor, and goes well with cheese.”

“Excellent, *Máhtia Mou*, someday you will be a formidable opponent to the farmers on Crete,” Meridio said proudly.

Tessa saw something then in the man’s eyes, something she hadn’t seen before. Meridio praised Casey, but not with the love and affection of a father to a daughter. Rather, the man

commended her as one might do with a prized stallion or another bit of valuable property. As if she were not a treasured piece of his heart, but something he owned, something he trained and invested precious time and money on.

The thought disturbed Tessa as she stood watching the interaction between Meridio and Casey. In her memory, she always registered his attitude toward his only child differently. She wondered where this new look came from. Was Meridio simply placating Casey until the time he could groom a man for her to take as a husband? According to Greek law, all Casey's wealth would then belong to her husband. It would be a miserable existence for someone such as Casey.

Much to Tessa's, as well as Casey's, chagrin, Meridio dismissed Tessa, telling her to take the rest of the day off. He said he would keep Peter with them, but he wanted to visit a couple of their distilleries in Plomári. Tessa couldn't very well beg to go along with them, even though a trip to the Ouzo distillery would dearly hit the spot. So Tessa left with a slight nod to Casey, leaving her in her father's care.

"Pappa, I feel bad making Tessa go off on her own," Casey said. Truth be known, she couldn't have been more miserable at the notion of spending the rest of the afternoon without Tessa around.

Andreas Meridio laughed aloud at Casey's worried expression, placing an arm around her shoulder and pulling her in the direction of the car.

"Not to worry, she's probably headed toward the local brothel as we speak!" He laughed again.

The remark did nothing to ease Casey's sadness. If nothing else, it increased her fears, making her wonder if the beautiful *Karê* was indeed on her way to experience a little rest and relaxation.

Driving back down the hillside, Tessa decided to make a side trip to Mantamádos. Their pottery was renowned throughout the Greek Isles, and Tessa needed something new to burn incense in. Driving along the coastal road, where there was very little besides land and small villages, Tessa thought again of the reasoning behind Meridio's new attitude toward Casey.

Perhaps Meridio was finally realizing that Casey would never accept his true business. Even if Casey could, Meridio's partners would never take orders from her. Tessa herself had a hard enough time dealing with them, and her reputation scared the hell out of most grown men. But these were not Greeks, not even Turks or Albanians. These men came from across the Mediterranean Sea, from Libya. No, Tessa didn't picture Casey as the kind of a woman who would take part in the family business.

Tessa's main problem now would be to find a way to encourage Casey to stay in her archaeology business, go back to America, anything so she wouldn't be around when Tessa's plan neared completion. Tessa's heart tightened in her chest at that last thought. Not having Casey around was just about the last thing she wanted right now.

Tessa took the steps two at a time up to the floor where her suite was situated, directly across from Casey's. Checking to see that she had no messages, Tessa changed into something less formal. She knew she would probably do no more than listen to some music or catch up on reading. It was late when she got in, and she was told that Andreas Meridio already retired. After having donned a pair of cotton slacks and a short-sleeved polo shirt, Tessa picked up one of the small sacks she carried in with her and decided to see if Casey was still awake.

"Oh, hi" was Casey's cool response when she opened the door to her suite, even though the woman standing in front of her was very nearly making her drool all over herself.

Tessa didn't know what the trouble was, but she felt the icy temperature of the room immediately.

"Have a good time in Plomári?" Tessa asked.

"Simply lovely," Casey said sarcastically. "Did you have a good time...wherever you ended up?"

Tessa tried to gauge Casey's tone, but for the life of her, she couldn't understand what was going on.

"Where is it that you *think* I ended up?"

"Well...I-I, well, it's really none of my business." Casey turned away quickly.

"No, I really want to know." Tessa grabbed Casey's elbow, turning her to face her. "Where is it that you think I've gone?"

Casey knew she was caught but good. *Why did I say anything in the first place? Now it's going to look like I'm jealous.* There was nothing to do but voice her displeasure, so Casey dove in, head first.

"My father said you were...that you were probably on your way to the local brothel." Casey said the words but didn't dare look up to meet the blue gaze that suddenly sparkled with understanding.

Jealousy? Over me?

"I see, and the fact that I would be with a woman and not a man...that would bother you?" Tessa decided to have a little fun at Casey's expense.

"No, of course not," Casey said quickly.

"Oh, so it's not because I prefer a woman in my bed, it's because I prefer *another* woman," Tessa said as if she were trying to get the situation clear in her head.

"Yes," Casey said. "I mean, no. I mean...what do *you* mean?"

Tessa leaned her head back, laughing long and loud. She had never come across a more endearing woman, and her senses were being completely seduced by Casey.

Casey turned about as scarlet as a human could, and when she realized there was nothing left to do, she laughed at herself. Tessa found that an absolutely charming quality.

"I'm sorry, I had no right—"

Tessa placed her index finger over Casey's lips, interrupting her thought.

"You had every right," Tessa found herself saying. Yet she didn't believe it was her mouth that said it. Quickly trying to recover, Tessa held out the sack. "I thought you might like this, I went to Mantamádos today."

"You went to Mantamádos without me...shopping?"

"Trust me, I don't shop like you or Olympia. If I see something I want," Tessa said in a low voice while leaning closer, "I take it. If I don't like it, I leave it be."

"Oh" seemed to be the only response Casey was capable of.

“Are you going to open it?” Tessa asked, her blue gaze sparkling in a combination of amusement and desire.

“Huh?”

“Your gift. Are you going to open it?” Tessa said slowly.

“Oh, yeah.”

Tessa enjoyed the blush and the dazed expression on Casey’s face.

“Oh, it’s beautiful.” Casey remembered a similar, intricately designed, ceramic incense burner when she visited the guesthouse where Tessa lived.

Not knowing what else to say, Casey hugged the woman in front of her and placed an innocent kiss on Tessa’s cheek. Tessa stood rooted in place, completely shocked by Casey’s guileless gesture. Now it was Tessa who blushed. She could feel the heat creeping up her neck and tried to quickly change the subject.

“So are you going to be a good hostess and offer me a drink or do I have to scrounge the downstairs bar?”

Casey laughed, as much from Tessa’s remark as from her embarrassment.

“I have *retsína* and some white wine. What’s your pleasure?” Casey asked with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes and put an emphasis on the last word.

Tessa caught the double entendre and smiled wickedly.

“Well, let’s start with the *retsína* and see where that takes us.”

Seated on the balcony outside of Casey’s suite, both women watched the lights along the beaches of Vareia, sipped *retsína*, and listened to the breeze rustle the trees below.

“Tell me more about where you live in America,” Tessa said.

She was interested, true, but more than anything, Tessa loved listening to Casey speak. The lilting tones of Casey’s voice were absolutely captivating, and Tessa closed her eyes, enjoying the sound.

“I would sit on the beach on Long Island, that’s where I grew up. On cold days, when there was no one else around, I would sit there, and all you could hear were the waves crashing in and the gulls over the water. I would close my eyes and think I was

on Mýkonos. Of course, I used to think the same thing when I was here in Greece. When I was here, I used to want to be there. When I was there... Well, you know what I mean." Casey sipped her wine and watched Tessa. Her eyes were closed, a slight smile curling at her lips.

"I know I was very small and I don't remember much that happened when I lived here all the time, but I feel it sometimes, like perhaps I'm remembering a dream. There used to be so much to do here in Greece when I was small. I used to love the holidays, so different from the ones in America. Of course, most of the holidays we celebrate here are religious, but I missed that when we moved away. I only remember being here for one Easter, but I can't even remember that very well. I remember a *feeling* of it, though," Casey said with a faltering tone as if she were trying at that moment to pull something from her mind but was unable to.

Shaking her head, she smiled again. "The more I try, the more it eludes me."

"Why can't you remember, do you think?" Tessa's voice came as a surprise. Casey almost thought she was alone in her reminiscing.

"I don't know. I used to ask my mother that same question all the time. It seems odd that all the best memories of my life would suddenly disappear like that."

"What did she say?" Tessa asked with a curious expression.

"She said it must have been because that was the year we left Greece to come to America. The childhood trauma of it all."

"Sounds reasonable," Tessa mused, half-wondering if that was the truth.

Tessa knew what a life-altering experience that day had been for her, but for the first time, she saw that perhaps what Casey went through might have been enough to traumatize a sensitive five-year-old. Like the roots of a tree, pain had a way of spreading itself around, reaching its tendrils into so many lives.

"I was in therapy for it," Casey said. "I know, you already think I'm nuts, right?" Casey smiled and Tessa chuckled.

"When I was small, I would have these dreams. I never once remembered what I dreamt about, but the feelings were so

intense that I would wake up crying. My mother tried to help, but all I could tell her was that I would start out feeling absolutely wonderful, like I could do anything, then everything went wrong and I would wake up with a pain so real that my chest would ache.” Casey took a sip of wine and looked to see if Tessa thought she was a flake. Tessa sat watching her, listening intently.

“The dreams finally lessened. Sometimes it would be years between the time I would have one again. It was when I had my first serious love affair. The very first night we slept together, the dreams came back. I had them every single night until I was taking sleeping pills just to get a few hours of rest at night. Needless to say, it effectively ended that relationship.

“I started seeing a doctor, but after eighteen months, all she could say was that it was some kind of childhood trauma. Duh, I could have told her that. It had a lovely effect on my love life. It’s rather strange, though, the dreams only resurface when I fall in love.” Casey gave an ironic, painful laugh. “Tends to keep me single.”

Tessa looked at Casey with a mixture of worry and concern, hoping that someday the dreams that plagued her would disappear altogether. That someday she would be able to recognize only the good moments of that day when she was five.

The dream started out as usual, but then it took an unexpected turn. She’d never been down this road before. Casey could hear someone screaming, but she couldn’t see who it was. Suddenly, she realized the voice belonged to Tessa. She had to get to where Tessa was, but they wouldn’t let her reach her friend. There were no faces visible, but strong arms held her as she desperately tried to pull away.

“No!” Casey screamed, pulling herself to sit up in bed.

It took all of three seconds before Tessa was bursting through the door to the suite, wearing only a robe and carrying a gun in one hand, followed by footsteps running up the stairs to the second floor. Tessa’s posture changed immediately when she opened the bedroom door, seeing Casey and realizing the danger was in her dreams and nothing more. Tessa wanted nothing more than to

scoop Casey up in her arms and hold on to her tightly, but those thoughts became dreams as Andreas Meridio pushed his way into the room.

"It's all right, just a nightmare," Tessa said as Meridio strode past her.

Tessa hustled the rest of the staff who were awakened by Casey's screams back to their rooms, returning within seconds to Casey's suite.

"It's all right, Pappa, really. It was just a nightmare," Casey said shortly, caught between embarrassment and anger.

"Do you still have those?" Meridio asked.

"Hardly ever," Casey lied. "I'm all right, really." She gave a half smile to her father who looked more concerned than he was willing to admit.

"Tessa will stay with you for a little while then," he said, looking back at Tessa.

"Of course," Tessa said. "I'll be back in a moment."

Casey didn't feel like arguing. So when Tessa returned, dressed in jeans and a faded blue T-shirt, carrying a small brown bottle, Casey gave in. Her father kissed her and said to call him if he was needed, but Tessa knew he would prefer not to be needed. Nightmares were considered a weakness, and no Greek man wanted to be around a woman's weakness for long.

"Don't tell me, it's more of your magic medicine." Casey watched as Tessa poured two glasses of amber liquid.

"*Conyák*." Tessa handed Casey a glass of the brandy.

"How come I don't have brandy in my room?" Casey tried to put on a smile.

"Because you didn't ask for it," Tessa said matter-of-factly.

Tessa took a sip of the liquor and set her glass on the bedside table, seating herself on the edge of the bed. Casey took one sip and looked up into blue eyes that seemed filled with their own distress. Tessa very lightly brought her fingers up and touched Casey's cheek.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Sure," Casey said, unsure of her own unsteady voice.

The green eyes filled with tears. Tessa watched as Casey's

head shook, indicating that she most certainly wasn't all right. Tessa took the glass from Casey's hand and set it with her own. Then without thinking, she gently enfolded Casey in her strong embrace.

The tears turned into sobs at Tessa's tender and compassionate touch. Soon Tessa held Casey against her tightly, running her fingers through the short blond locks and pressing her lips softly against the top of Casey's head.

Casey melted into the warm embrace and let the tears of a great many frustrations loose at once. She was comforted, not only by the arms surrounding her, but by the fact that Tessa didn't offer insincere and meaningless words to console.

"Shh, Cassandra...I'm here," Tessa murmured.

Tessa listened to Casey's weeping but could think of no words to ease the pain. Little did she know, but the ones she uttered cut straight through to Casey's heart. Tessa wanted to give more comfort to the woman in her arms, but frankly, she didn't know how. She had never been a woman of words, and now when she needed them the most, they deserted her.

It seemed as if a long time passed before Casey's tears stopped and she leaned against Tessa's chest, listening to the strong heart beating steadily. No words were exchanged as Tessa ran her hand in small circles against Casey's back. Tessa cursed herself once again for her inability to do or say more for Casey, but for Casey, what Tessa did offer was enough.

Chapter 7

It was coincidence that Tessa and Casey left their rooms at the same time. They met at the top of the winding staircase on their way to morning coffee. Casey was finding it hard to look Tessa in the eye.

“Well, you are quickly seeing me in all of my pathetic, vulnerable glory. I’m not exactly putting my best foot forward where you’re concerned.”

Tessa gave her usual low chuckle. “If that’s as bad as it gets, I still got ya beat.”

“Thanks, for...well, for just being there, I guess.”

Tessa didn’t know what to say to this display of emotion and gratitude, so she did what she was best at. She graced Casey with a lopsided smile and winked at her.

“Ahh, *Máhtia Mou*, is the world looking better in the light of day?” Andreas Meridio asked, kissing the top of Casey’s head as he pulled a chair out for her.

“Yes, Pappa, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake up the whole villa.”

“Nonsense. Although Tessa looked a little disappointed that she didn’t get to shoot anyone.”

Tessa set down her newspaper and placed a small *koulourákia* on her plate. The rolls were covered in sesame seeds and stuffed with currants. Tessa still believed, like most Greeks, that breakfast was the least important meal of the day, but she was quickly

becoming seduced by the American tradition of a roll with her morning coffee.

Placing small bites of the bread in her mouth, Tessa spoke in her usual matter-of-fact tone, nothing like Casey knew her to be when they were alone.

"She scared the hell out of me," she said in Meridio's direction, and the man laughed out loud. "Trust me, if you ever get accosted in a dark alley, let loose with one of those yells. I guarantee it will bring help left and right. You took away a few years of my life with that thing, which I can ill afford at this point," Tessa finished with a smirk.

"Oh, very funny. I hope you're both enjoying yourselves at my expense," Casey said with a smile.

Casey was surprised at this tirade from Tessa, but she understood the reasoning behind it. Tessa wasn't supposed to be growing close to Casey; she was in close contact with her for the sole purpose of looking after Meridio's daughter for a while. It wouldn't do for Andreas Meridio to see his *Karê* in a position like she was in the night before. As innocent as the physical contact had been, Casey realized her father would never allow it.

Casey watched her father as he read the morning *Ta Nea*, occasionally jotting a note on the legal pad that he had in front of him.

"Pappa," Casey began enthusiastically, "come horseback riding with me today?"

"Oh, that's impossible today. I have appointments to keep. Besides, I'm too old to be riding hills like these. That's why you have Tessa. She'll go with you." Meridio motioned to Tessa.

"Horses...great. My days just keep getting better and better," Tessa deadpanned.

Although Casey smiled at Tessa's attempt at humor, Casey was affected by her father's behavior. Casey couldn't understand it, either. If she even brought up moving into an apartment of her own, he became incensed. But since she'd returned to Greece, they hardly saw each other. Casey was beginning to feel like that prized mare again, only around for show.

"As much as I would enjoy riding with Tessa, I'm sure she has better things to do than baby-sit me. I could wait, Pappa. Perhaps we could go this afternoon?"

"Go with Tessa," Meridio said firmly. "I'll be gone until late this evening, don't wait up. *Katalavaynés?*"

"Yes, of course, I understand." Casey put on an artificial smile for her father's benefit as he left the patio.

Tessa tried to keep her gaze on her paper and appear as though she were not listening to the conversation, which wasn't all that easy considering the fact that father and daughter were practically talking over her. Even Tessa could see that Casey looked like a hurt little girl who had been put off one too many times. The way Meridio talked about Casey all these years, Tessa thought perhaps he was different when it came to her, that maybe she would be the one redeeming quality of his life. It was turning out that Andreas Meridio was like any other man in Greece. Their women were cherished so long as they did what they were told and made sure they were around when he needed a bauble to hang on his arm.

"So when do we go?" Tessa asked.

Casey gave a weak attempt at a smile. "It doesn't sound like it's one of your favorite things."

Tessa thought Casey was trying to fight off tears. "You know that was for show, don't you?" Tessa asked in a voice that was softer than usual.

"I know." Casey nodded. "The Meridio *Karê* must have a pretty girl she wants to do something with on a beautiful day like today." Casey tried to give Tessa an out.

"Yes, she does." Tessa grinned slightly, the smile giving her a look of charm and mystery.

She tilted her head slightly to meet Casey's eyes. When their gazes met, the sparkle and note of mischief appeared uncharacteristic for Tessa. It took Casey a full minute before she caught Tessa's meaning.

"Are you sure?" Casey brightened.

"Absolutely." Tessa grinned. "Somebody's got to teach you to ride."

"Oh, is that right? I guess we'll just have to see about that."

The smile in Tessa's heart grew larger as she saw the spark of fire return to Casey's eyes.

"*Gahmóh Toh!*" Casey cursed. "Fuck!" She decided to add the English version for good measure. "Oh, it's all right, girl. It's not your fault." She laid a gentle hand on the neck of the large chestnut mare. "She threw it," she said to Tessa.

Tessa jumped down from her mount and examined the horse's hoof just as Casey had done.

"You're absolutely right." Tessa mocked Casey's ability to recognize the missing horseshoe.

Casey pushed Tessa back slightly. "Oh, very funny."

Tessa laughed and it felt good. They spent the whole day in the hills, riding the horses, stopping for a picnic lunch. It all seemed like a dream to Tessa. She'd never had anyone to be with this way, no one she could call a friend, and she was seeing a small glimpse of what she'd been missing all her life.

"I'll just walk her back, you can go ahead," Casey said.

"It must be a good three miles back to the villa. By the time you get back on foot, I'll be too old to enjoy that dinner you owe me," she said with a smug grin.

Casey realized the truth of what Tessa said, but she didn't know if she was so upset because her horse had thrown a shoe or whether it was because she lost the race to the top of the rise. Loser paid for dinner, that had been the bet, but Casey hadn't anticipated that Tessa was as good a rider as she showed herself to be. *Oh, well...There are definitely worse things that could happen to a girl than looking into those baby blues over dinner.*

"This guy's a big boy." Tessa patiently patted her horse's flank. "I don't think he'll have any trouble giving both of us a ride."

Tessa pulled the reins of the incapacitated animal over the mare's head and tied the leather thongs off on the back of her horse's saddle. After pulling herself easily into her saddle, she extended a hand to Casey. Casey put her foot in the stirrup that Tessa had vacated and allowed Tessa to pull her up into the saddle. Situated behind Tessa, Casey was a lot closer to Tessa than was probably good for her, given her feelings for the woman.

Tessa steered the animal down the steep path, and Casey quickly realized she had only one thing to hang on to. It was either wrap her arms around Tessa's waist or be pitched headfirst onto the ground below. She tried to be casual about it, grabbing a hold of Tessa's belt rather than her body.

"You better hold on tighter than that, little one." Tessa's voice came from in front of her.

For a moment, Casey thought she was falling as she let go of Tessa's belt. Casey grew dizzy, then a wave of nausea caused her hands to tremble.

"Hey, I said you better hold on—" Tessa turned in the saddle to look at Casey, but her voice froze at the sight of Casey's face.

"Casey, are you all right?" Tessa asked in a strained voice, pulling up on the horse's reins.

Casey opened her mouth, but she couldn't seem to produce any sound. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she couldn't imagine why she felt this way.

"I don't feel so good. Can we stop for a minute?"

Tessa dismounted immediately, grabbing her canteen and helping Casey from the saddle. Casey felt like the blood had been drained from her legs and she faltered with her first step, leaning heavily against Tessa. Tessa didn't think twice as concern overrode propriety. She bent down and with surprising strength scooped Casey into her arms and carried her off the rocky path onto a dry grassy patch of ground.

Tessa noticed the flush on Casey's face and removed a bandanna from her neck, poured water from the canteen onto the cloth, soaking it through. She pressed the cool cloth to Casey's face, then her neck until Casey looked up with a weak grin.

"Gee, that was kind of scary," she said, her pallor a little less ghostly.

"You're telling me." Tessa leaned back on her heels, resting her palms on her thighs. "What just happened? Too much sun?"

"God, you're going to laugh at me, but I dreamed what just happened back there. I don't mean my nearly passing out, I mean when we were on the horse. In my dream last night, you said that to me. You told me to hold on to you tighter and you called me

little one.” Casey ran her fingers through her now damp hair. “I don’t remember your face, but I remember your voice. You don’t get it, do you?” Casey asked. “Tessa, I’ve never remembered anything from that dream, not once in all these years. This is the first time I’ve been able to recall even small bits of it.”

Casey seemed confused while Tessa bit her lip, concentrating on Casey’s face. Tessa fought with herself as she listened. *Shouldn’t I tell her? God, after all these years. But if she knows who I am, she’ll remember what happened. She’ll figure out what I’m going to do. I won’t be able to hide it, not from her. Oh, I’m sorry, but I just can’t do this yet. You don’t understand what’s involved, little one.*

“I don’t know what to say,” Tessa said honestly. “It sounds a little farfetched, but stranger things have happened, I guess.” She reached out to touch Casey’s cheek. “Feel up to heading back now?”

“Yeah.” Casey nodded. She was quick to add a smile for the woman who was turning into more than Casey ever imagined. “Yeah, I feel a lot better now. Come on, I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Tessa added with a chuckle.

They situated themselves on the large gelding once more. This time, Tessa was taking no chances and she took Casey’s hands in her own until Casey’s arms circled Tessa’s waist. Casey certainly wasn’t complaining about the arrangement, and silently, each woman enjoyed her circumstance.

Casey was silent for most of the trip, lost in her own thoughts. *I know you think I’m a huge flake, but it was you. It was your voice I heard screaming, and it was you I rode on the horse with, just like this. How could my dreams be about a woman I’ve never met before? Especially when I’ve been having this same dream for most of my life?*

Tessa was wrapped within her own private memories. Two women and their thoughts mirrored each other’s so completely, yet in their hearts, they were worlds apart. One sought enlightenment, while the other tried to hide from the truth.

Tessa and Casey walked back into the quiet villa, laughing loudly.

"I can just picture it." Tessa wiped tears from her eyes.

"There wasn't a thing I could do. I just held on for dear life and prayed to the Virgin until this huge stallion carried me across the finish line," Casey laughed.

"Did your father ever find out?"

"Oh, no, and spoil the illusion? I simply had mother take a picture of me with a smile on my face and a first-place trophy in my hand as I sat on the back of that terrible beast."

"You're something else, do you know that?" The two women walked up the stairs to their suites together, realizing by the silence that Andreas Meridio was still out. "I've looked at that picture every day for five years and wondered how a tiny thing like you got the *arkhédhias* to mount an animal that size."

"Hey," Casey said, looking wounded, "it's vertically challenged, *not* tiny."

"Oh, excuse m—"

Both women froze at a crashing sound from within Casey's suite.

"Stay here," Tessa commanded in a tight voice.

Casey watched as Tessa reached behind her and pulled out a pistol from under her jacket. She hadn't realized Tessa carried one, but now the reason Tessa always wore a jacket became clear. She followed Tessa's progress with her eyes as Tessa quietly opened the door and slipped inside.

Casey couldn't stand this helpless female routine. She couldn't hear anything inside the room and became concerned about Tessa. Just as Tessa had done, Casey quietly slipped inside the dark room. She saw the curtains by the French doors blowing into the room with the breeze but couldn't see Tessa anywhere.

"Tessa?" she whispered.

"When I tell you to stay, it's for a reason." Tessa's warm breath brushed against Casey's ear.

Casey let out a startled cry, and Tessa moved away from her. The lights came on in the room. Tessa stood by the light switch on the wall, shaking her head.

"I got worried about you," Casey offered as explanation.

"Casey," Tessa's voice was soft but commanding. "I can take care of myself. I won't need to worry if I know that when something happens, you will do exactly what I say, when I say it. *Katalavaynés?*"

The contrite blonde nodded. "I understand. I'm sorry."

"Just don't do it again, that will show how sincere your promise really is." Tessa crossed the room to the open window. Tessa knelt and scooped up some broken glass and tossed it in the trash. "Looks like the curtains knocked over a glass on the table... no big deal."

"Thanks, Tessa," Casey said softly.

Tessa had her hand on the doorknob, poised to leave, but she turned at the last moment and leaned heavily against the door.

"Nikki," she said barely above a whisper. "You asked me on my boat if I had a nickname. Well, that's what my friends nowadays call me," she said to Casey's confused expression.

Casey crossed the room to Tessa. Smiling almost shyly, Casey reached out her hand until it slipped within Tessa's larger one. Tessa's head was screaming at her by this point. She needed to say good night, to leave, and close the door behind her. Instead, Tessa refused to listen to her conscience and listened to her libido instead.

Holding Casey's hand, she pulled the woman into her arms, feeling the soft, warm body against her chest. The next thing she knew, her lips were pressed against the sweetest mouth she'd ever tasted. When Casey's lips parted and a tongue hesitantly pressed against Tessa's lips, Tessa not only allowed entry, but also permitted Casey to take her mouth in a kiss that left Tessa dizzy. It started out gentle but quickly grew heated, their hungry mouths swallowing each other's moans.

Tessa turned their bodies until Casey was pressed against the solid oak door. Tessa's left arm leaned on the door over Casey's head, her right hand stroked the smooth skin of Casey's throat, moving dangerously low into Casey's cleavage. The hand came up again and slipped around Casey's neck as Tessa locked her lips fiercely with Casey's.

Tessa was the first to remember where she was and whom she was with. She suddenly pushed away from Casey and held her at arm's length. She refused to meet Casey's eyes, struggling to control her breathing. *I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe I let it happen. Oh, God, how I want you.*

Casey placed a palm on Tessa's chest, her own breathing erratic.

"I'm sorry, Nikki...I-I...I'm sorry," she repeated, not knowing what else to say.

"No." Tessa removed her hands from Casey's arms. "I'm to blame. I just got...I got a little carried away."

"We don't have to stop," Casey whispered softly.

"Yes...yes, we do...I do. I'd better go." Tessa turned and nearly fled from the room.

Casey leaned her forehead on the door, sighing deeply as she listened to the fading sound of Tessa's boots.

Chapter 8

The early morning ferry trip back to Mýkonos was a silent affair. Tessa barely said two words to Casey after the incident in Casey's bedroom. Tessa returned to using the same distant manner as when Casey first arrived in Greece. Tessa looked miserable, and Casey appeared as if her heart were breaking. It was a testament to how well Andreas Meridio actually knew Casey, for if he thought there was anything out of the ordinary, he kept it to himself.

Casey didn't feel like looking at anyone, let alone talking. Once back at the estate, she said she had some things to work on in preparation for the dig, which was to begin in two weeks time. She closed the bedroom door and stayed there throughout the day. She came down for a cup of tea around midday, and even Olympia's *ougátsa*, a pastry of sweet custard dusted with cinnamon and sugar, could not entice her. Casey noticed that Olympia and Tessa seemed to be arguing on the patio. Their voices were low, but Casey watched as Tessa gestured strongly with her hands and stalked off toward Meridio's office.

When Casey was absent from the dinner table, Andreas Meridio looked at Tessa for explanation. Beyond telling him that his *right hand* broke Casey's heart, which was not something Tessa was eager to do, she could offer very little. When Meridio asked her to check on Casey and fix her a tea if she was feeling ill, Tessa could only comply with his wishes.

"Ms. Meridio..." Tessa knocked softly against Casey's door.

"Casey?" she called once she realized no one else was about.

"Come in."

Tessa's first thought was to tell Casey to get her butt downstairs or both of them would wake up at the bottom of the Aegean in the morning. Her next thought was to stay by the open door and call Casey to dinner. Both of those scenarios drifted away when Tessa saw Casey poised on the bench seat in front of the window, her knees bent and her arms wrapped around her legs. The sun was setting and the window was pushed open, the breeze delicately blowing at the wisps of golden hair that framed her exquisite face. The color of the sun gave the woman's image an ethereal quality.

"I'm sorry" was all Tessa could think to say.

"What are you sorry for?" Casey seemed genuinely surprised at the words.

"I guess because I can't be the woman you want."

"I think *that's* my problem...you are the woman I want," Casey said, displaying a defeated half-smile.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew me, I mean really knew me. You'd change your mind if you understood the kind of person I was...that I am. If you knew the way I treat women."

"And you're that bad, that evil that you think I'd have a change of heart if I knew your secrets?"

Tessa's brow furrowed together, and for an unguarded moment, Casey thought she saw a deep, unendurable pain swirling within their depths.

"Yes," Tessa said. "I'm not who you think I am. I'm a horrible woman, you had that right on the first day."

Moving to stand behind Casey, Tessa willed her emotions back in check, never allowing Casey to see the hands that trembled slightly. Tessa screwed her eyes shut tight. *It will only hurt for a short time, little one, then you can go back to America and find a nice girl you can spend forever with.*

"I'm not the kind of woman that falls in love. I use women. I take them when I want, for what I want. I can be sadistic and cruel, and I can fuck them for one night and never want to know their name. The next morning, I can throw them out of my bed without giving a damn about their feelings."

Tessa took a deep breath for this last bit.

"You are beautiful, but you just happened to be the woman standing in front of me at the time I got horny. Don't read any more into it than that. Don't think I stopped last night out of some chivalrous notions you have about me. I stopped because I like my job here and your father pays me quite well to see that you stay safe. The check I got for saving your life the other day will make a nice down payment on a new boat."

Tessa was breathing hard but hiding it well. She knew the quickest way to get over someone was to find a reason to hate her. She didn't think it would be hard to make herself sound loathsome to Casey, and she was giving her a lot of reasons.

Casey never looked up at Tessa; she kept her gaze trained on the sinking sun.

"My father is paying you extra...that's why you've been spending time with me?" Her voice shook.

"Yes," Tessa said between clenched teeth. "I'm sorry."

"Hey." Casey tossed her head back, the tightness of her jaw an indication of how hard she was trying to hold back her tears. "You act like you're breaking my heart here. For God's sake, all we did was kiss. If I fell in love with every woman I kissed after dinner and a few drinks, I'd never get out of bed."

Casey ran her fingers through her short locks, willing herself not to fall apart in front of this woman. The last thing she wanted was for Tessa to see her cry.

"Please, tell my father I'll be down in a few minutes."

Tessa raised an eyebrow in surprise. *God, this girl has more tenacity than I give her credit for.*

Tessa nodded as she walked through the door and into the hall. The moment the door was pulled closed, both women felt a pain like the thrust of a knife twisting deep within their hearts.

Casey walked through the large garage that housed a half-dozen sports cars, passing by the large space that was meant for the limousine. Her father took the limo and left for the evening, citing that it was a men's club he would be at and that it was no place for a young lady. She walked around the sparkling blue car,

ensuring herself that there were no scratches. The car had arrived that day, and as she slipped into the leather interior, she was happy to be behind the wheel of her college graduation present once again. The car purred when she turned the key in the ignition. She pulled out of the garage swiftly, not turning on the headlights until she was down the long driveway of the estate.

Casey knew exactly where she wanted to go. She revved the car and turned onto the lane that would take her into Venetia, or Little Venice. Years had passed since she'd been in the town, let alone the part of the city she was headed for. Her heart felt empty and she had only one goal. She wanted to be by herself, away from Tessa's prying eyes, and she wanted someone to make her feel good.

When she finally pulled up in front of the two-story building with its brightly painted balcony and the sign that read *To Spilaio*—The Cave—she knew she was in the right spot. She easily found parking around the corner; not much had changed. She promised the boy attending the cars a hefty tip if he saw that no one even dared to breathe on her auto, then she took a deep breath and went in through the back door.

A few women looked up from their dart game, but they thought it must be one of the regulars coming in at that hour. The night was early and The Cave was nearly empty, but Casey knew what the next few hours would bring. Every head turned when the beautiful blonde walked up to the bar. She kept from making eye contact with any one person, and carefully following tradition, she ordered a bottle of *ouzo* and two glasses in Greek.

Choosing a table against the back wall, Casey poured herself a glass of *ouzo* and turned the second glass over. A table of twenty-year-old women smiled at Casey's action and grinned and joked with one another. Finally, one of the bravest among them stood and straightened her leather jacket. She walked over and stood in front of Casey's table. It appeared the two made conversation for a few seconds, but Casey never turned over the second glass, so the woman smiled with good grace and went back to her table. A few more of the early evening regulars tried their hand at impressing the woman who was obviously American but spoke

flawless Greek. Casey never turned over the second glass, but she smiled as she poured herself a second glass of the strong liquor. The night was indeed young.

Tessa sealed the last envelope, and in an unhurried precise scrawl, she entered the figures in the books that Andreas Meridio would look at first thing in the morning. After crossing the room to the large black safe that was nearly as tall as her, she put the envelopes of cash into a canvas sack and placed the sack on a shelf inside. She turned her head, her hand instinctively going to the ever-present gun at the small of her back, when she saw Alex step into the room.

"I almost blew your fucking head off, *Vlákas!*" Tessa hissed.

"I-I didn't know it was you," Alex stammered. "I thought you went with her."

"With who?" Tessa asked, slamming the safe's door, then spinning the handle before she punched a series of buttons on a computerized panel.

"Meridio's daughter," Alex said in a confused manner.

"Isn't she in her room?"

"No, she said..." Alex looked into Tessa's eyes as realization flooded his features. "She said she was pulling the car around to get you...and you two were going out," he said slowly. "She wasn't coming to get you, was she?"

Tessa's eyebrow arched so high that Alex could only mumble a few prayers in his head, praying to the Virgin for protection from his mentor's temper.

"Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?" Tessa seethed.

"She's gone," Alex said with all the resignation of a dead man.

Tessa turned and stalked from the office and took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. Not bothering to knock, she flung open the door to find an empty room. She slammed the door shut behind her, went back downstairs and into the foyer, leaving a stream of curses in her wake that made Alex blush.

"I'll go look for her," Alex muttered by way of an apology.

"You..." Tessa had her fist clenched and her arm halfway

cocked, ready to lay the brawny man out. She stopped and took a deep breath to get control of herself. Alex wasn't dumb, just not always smart. He let Casey get the better of him, but Tessa had been on the receiving end of that, too. Casey was cunning when she wanted to be. "You...just stay here in case she comes back. If she shows up, call me on my cell phone."

"What if she doesn't?"

"Then you better pray like hell that Meridio doesn't want to give his little girl a good night kiss when he comes home!" Tessa nearly shouted.

Tessa hadn't really been sure in which direction to start out. She went by the beaches and some of the local nightclubs but saw no sign of Casey. Trying to think like an innocent woman wasn't easy. Besides the local places, she couldn't figure where else Casey would venture. Suddenly, Tessa slammed on the brakes and pulled off the deserted road. *Did I say innocent?*

Now that she thought about it, Casey was anything but innocent. She was a woman with a broken heart and she was hurting. What would Tessa want in that case? To get laid naturally, to get good and drunk, then to find some woman willing to help her forget her heartache. Tessa spun the car back around to head to the Kástro. If Casey wasn't there, then at least Tessa was an expert at where every lesbian bar was on Mýkonos.

It was one in the morning, and The Cave was packed to capacity. Casey had been the focal point of the evening, but she knew what she was looking for, and she wasn't about to settle at this point, not for a couple more hours at least. She was close to the halfway mark on her bottle of liquor, but she sipped slowly, enjoyed a few *mezés*, and was able to keep her wits about her. Some of the women were attractive and some charming, but Casey kept the second glass on her table turned upside down, a silent invitation to those wanting to capture her affection for a short time or the rest of the evening. If the waiting woman decided she wanted to join you in a little entertainment upstairs, she turned the glass over and poured you a drink. Once you swallowed the drink and turned the glass back over, the deal was signed. It meant the woman was

yours for as long as you both were happy with the arrangement. It was a simple tradition but followed closely, and the rules were strictly enforced. Once you drank the offered libation, the woman was yours without grief from those who had taken their chances and lost. This setup tended to eliminate fighting and it lent to the casual sexual aura about the place.

It was what The Cave was all about after all. The second floor was a large studio with couches, chairs, and boxes, but no lights. You did whatever you wanted with whomever you chose to be with in the darkened room, while those around you, sometimes standing or lying right next to you, did the same thing. It was all consensual, and you could have it as gentle or rough as your taste preferred. There were no names and no complications. There was absolutely nothing responsible about it, and that was exactly what Casey wanted.

A shadow fell across Casey's table, and when she looked up, she smiled. Very tall, very sleek and muscular, short black hair that fell into her eyes a bit, and when she smiled, the brown eyes smiled, too.

Brown eyes...well, guess you can't have everything, Case.

The woman said hello in perfect English. Casey grinned but returned the greeting in Greek. Casey indicated the woman should sit but didn't yet pour a drink for her new companion.

"You're not Greek, I'm thinking," Casey said in a quiet voice.

Casey leaned forward until her elbows rested on the table. "Does that really matter?" she said in Greek.

Her companion laughed and shook her head, thinking that she could certainly give the beautiful American a night to take back home and tell her girlfriends about.

Tessa came out of Pierro's. She threw the attendant a bill and settled herself in her car. It was twelve thirty and she was getting worried. She began to think Casey might do something foolish. Picking some Greek girl up in a bar was one thing, but what if Casey wasn't caring much about life in general? Would she try to hurt herself?

No, that's not Casey's style...think. If you wanted to get laid,

where would you go? Whorehouse? Possibly, but Casey's the last woman in the world that would have to pay for sex. What if she didn't want anything but a good screw...no questions...no complications...

"Oh, shit!" Tessa cursed aloud. Once again, she did a one-eighty and gunned the car up the hill to Venetia.

Casey and the young woman talked for a few more minutes, but still Casey had not turned over the glass. Disappointment was displayed in her companion's eyes.

"Perhaps I should go," the woman said, rising. Propriety dictated that she stay no longer without Casey offering the drink.

"No, please stay."

The woman sat back down and motioned to the bottle and the glass.

"Perhaps." Casey offered a seductive smile, her hand circling the base of the bottle, her fingers tapping on it gently.

The stranger reached out her hand and tenderly stroked the length of Casey's hand all the way to her fingertips. Casey grinned lazily and watched as the woman's touch left a trail of goose bumps on her skin. Casey closed her eyes briefly at the pleasurable sensation, but when she opened them, she was no longer looking into the brown eyes of a stranger, but her mind conjured up an image of blue eyes and dark skin. Casey thought it wasn't likely to get any better than this tonight as she reached for the bottle of *ouzo*.

She turned the heavy glass over, and a number of smirks, as well as jealous sighs, rose throughout the bar. She filled the glass with a shot of the *ouzo* and sat back, staring into eyes that, disappointingly, turned brown once again. The stranger smiled slightly as she lifted her hand to accept the drink.

Slender fingers scooped the shot glass up just as the stranger's fingertips grazed the outside of the rim. Casey looked up into Tessa's angry face as she swallowed the liquor in one forceful gulp and slammed the glass upside down onto the table.

"This bar is closed. Go home, little girl," she hissed at the stranger who was now on her feet. "You, come on." Tessa pointed at Casey.

“Just what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Casey yelled, rising to her feet.

“Taking you home,” Tessa yelled back.

“It doesn’t sound like your woman wants to go home with you, friend,” the stranger said evenly.

“I don’t give a good goddamn what she wants, and she is *not* my woman,” Tessa said fiercely.

“Then she’s free to stay if she chooses.”

“Over my dead body,” Tessa said ominously as she grabbed Casey by the elbow.

“I’d hate for that to be the alternative,” the stranger said, pulling a long bladed knife from inside her coat.

Tessa stood still for a moment and released Casey’s hand. She moved away from Casey so she wouldn’t be in the middle of anything.

“So you want to play king of the hill, do you?” Tessa smiled a thoroughly evil smile.

The stranger smiled back, the same baneful grin.

Casey was caught up in the electrically charged atmosphere that suddenly swept over the room. Any amount of a buzz she had going disappeared as she stood, stone cold sober, watching as the two women eyed each other warily. The stranger could have been Tessa five or ten years earlier. The same height and build, they sized each other up, waiting to see who would make the first move. They only stood a couple of feet apart, and Casey watched as Tessa’s left hand moved so fast that it was almost a blur. Tessa reached to her back, under her leather jacket, and pulled out a Glock pistol, pressing it against the stranger’s forehead.

“Guess what this means?” Tessa spat.

The stranger was no novice to the street or having a gun pointed at her head. She tossed the knife onto the table and winked at Casey.

“I think it means you win,” the stranger said.

“I think it means you’re smarter than you look,” Tessa said.

The stranger raised her hands and Tessa lowered the gun, then replaced it in her holster. The two women stood there, trying to decide what would be done.

Casey watched as the fire still burned just below the surface.

"All right, enough. Tessa, I'm leaving, just...please, both of you, calm down," Casey said quietly.

"You don't have to be afraid of her," the stranger said to Casey.

"I'll be all right. Thank you for a semi-lovely evening," Casey said with a nervous smile.

The stranger gently took Casey's hand, keeping one eye on Tessa, whose lips raised in a menacing sneer as she watched the woman draw Casey closer.

"She may say you're not her woman, but her eyes tell a different story," the stranger whispered in Casey's ear, smiling, then releasing the shocked blonde's hand.

Tessa held out her hand to Casey, but Casey walked abruptly past her and out the front door.

"If she were my woman," the stranger called to Tessa's back, "I wouldn't give her a reason to come looking in a place like this."

Tessa never slowed her stride, but the stranger's words struck surprisingly close to her heart.

By the time Tessa reached the parking lot where she knew Casey's BMW was parked, Casey had started the car and was preparing to leave.

"I'll follow you to make sure you get home all right," Tessa said.

"I said I was leaving. I didn't say I was going home."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"What part of it didn't you get? Do I need to say it slower?" Casey shouted back at the woman leaning over the car.

Tessa felt a rising fireball in the pit of her stomach, and she desperately tried to shove the beast down. She was unused to being shouted at or disobeyed, especially by women. She reached in and pulled the keys from the ignition. Casey jumped from the vehicle, slamming the door.

"Goddamn you, give me back those keys!" Casey screamed.

"Not until you stop acting like a child."

"Oh, fine, just keep the damn things, I'm going back inside."

Casey made a move toward the bar.

"Forget it." Tessa was towering over her in a heartbeat, her hand clamped tightly around Casey's wrist.

"Oh, I see," Casey shouted. "You don't want me, but you don't want anyone else to have me, is that it?"

Tessa grabbed the front of Casey's blouse; her eyes lit up like blue fire, her gaze narrowing.

"So is that all you want now...a good fuck?"

"Yeah, that's all I want, just one good fuck," Casey returned hotly.

"Well, you should have told me that, baby." Tessa pulled Casey closer by her blouse until their faces were inches apart. "I would have been glad to accommodate, then you wouldn't have had to sneak all the way down here. Come on." Tessa pulled Casey to the BMW.

"Get in," Tessa said, not waiting for a response before shoving Casey through the passenger side door.

Tessa slid in behind the wheel and adjusted the seat before looking over at Casey.

"What's the matter, baby? You said this is what you want, right, just some uncomplicated sex? Trust me, I'll give you the best you've ever had." Tessa teased and mocked at the same time, undisguised lust now apparent in her gaze.

When Tessa started the car and turned onto the one-lane road up into the hills of Ano Merá, Casey had a "deer in the headlights" look, and Tessa knew who the victor would be this time.

"Don't worry, baby. It'll be better than anything those little girls back at the bar could give you," Tessa purred.

Tessa's amorous intent was clear, and Casey had to make a quick decision. Act like the scared little girl Tessa thought she was or fight back.

Casey steeled herself and leaned against the door so she was facing Tessa.

"I don't know, this sounds like an awful lot of buildup to me. Are you sure your body is going to be able to keep up with that mouth of yours?" Casey said with a confident air.

Tessa slammed on the brakes so hard that Casey had to use

both hands to keep from crashing into the dash. Tessa grabbed Casey by the back of the head and pulled her body halfway across the gearshift by her hair. Tessa's mouth crushed the stunned Casey's lips. She kissed her long and hard, her tongue forcing itself hungrily into Casey's mouth until she heard a small whimper of surrender escape from Casey's throat. She pulled Casey away from her roughly, her hand still holding her by the hair.

"Now anytime you feel my mouth or any other part of my body isn't keeping up, you just let me know." Tessa put the car back in gear and sped off, not looking across at Casey again until they reached their destination.

Chapter 9

“Where are we?” Casey asked as Tessa unceremoniously pushed her through the door.

It seemed to be a village farmhouse. It appeared deserted, but it looked as though someone still kept it up. There were fresh logs in the fireplace and blankets on the sofa, and Casey noticed there wasn’t any dust on the furniture.

Tessa crossed the darkened room and lit an oil lamp that hung on a high peg near the kitchen area. She seemed to pay no mind to Casey, who stood shivering from the night air in the middle of the cabin. Tessa lit a fire and soon the room was aglow and the leaping flames warmed the area quickly.

“No electricity,” Tessa said. “You still cold?” She leaned her backside against a square wooden table.

Casey nodded, but the next words she heard didn’t make her any warmer, they made her shiver all the more.

“Come over here...I’ll get you warmed up.” Tessa leered.

Casey looked up into Tessa’s hungry eyes. A thought raced through her head about a fairy tale and the way Little Red Riding Hood felt when she looked into the eyes of the wolf that was about to devour her. Casey couldn’t tear her own needful gaze away, so she slowly crossed the room to stand in front of the seated woman.

Tessa quickly reached out and pulled Casey to her. There wasn’t any tenderness involved, and if Casey thought it was to be

a gentle seduction, she was very wrong. Tessa grabbed Casey's backside and pulled her between her spread legs, squeezing the woman harder against her and spreading her own legs even wider.

"Is this what you wanted to feel tonight?" Tessa's hands found their way under Casey's blouse, her hands kneading her breasts roughly.

Casey gasped at the first touch, and Tessa grinned that grin that didn't seem to belong to her. Tessa snaked one arm around Casey's waist and aggressively kissed her, one hand still fondling Casey's breast over the material of her bra. Casey moaned into Tessa's consuming kisses, pressing her small body closer. When Casey wrapped her arms around Tessa's neck, Tessa pulled back.

"Ah, ah, ah." Tessa pried Casey's hands away and pulled them behind Casey's back. She held her wrists in her firm grasp at the small of Casey's back, pushing up slightly until Casey gasped in pain.

"Nikki, why are you doing this?" Casey asked, wincing.

Tessa put on a look of genuine surprise. "It's what you wanted, isn't it, baby? Tell me the truth." Tessa sucked and bit at the sensitive flesh along Casey's throat. "When that girl in the bar took you upstairs and asked you how you wanted it, you were going to give her complete control, weren't you? You were going to let her do anything she wanted to...tender, hard, it didn't matter as long as you got off, did it? You wanted to be up there in the dark giving it all to her, didn't you...didn't you?" Tessa jerked up on Casey's wrists, demanding an answer.

"Yes, I-I did."

Tessa released Casey's wrists, and Casey rubbed the area to get her circulation going again. Tessa slipped her arm around Casey's waist again, and her hand found its way under the blouse, this time gently teasing her nipples through the silken material of her bra, stroking them into tightened nubs.

"You didn't have to go all the way to the bar, baby," Tessa said, her voice turning deceptively soft.

Tessa kissed Casey's lips, teasing with her tongue until Casey opened her mouth and accepted Tessa's probing muscle.

"I would have given you that anytime. You could have come over to the guesthouse, and I could have given you what you needed. You could have spread your legs or bent over and I would have given you anything you fantasized about."

All the while Tessa talked, she kissed Casey, nibbling gently on her lower lip. Her fingers under Casey's blouse squeezed and pinched the erect nipples until Casey was trying to hold back the rocking motion of her hips.

"Did you think her fingers and her tongue were more talented than mine?" Tessa continued. "Hmm? Oh, no, that's right, you didn't want to have to see her face, did you? We can handle that, too, baby."

Tessa released Casey and stood, towering over her. She grabbed Casey's shoulders and spun her around. Slipping an arm around Casey's waist, Tessa crushed Casey's body against her chest.

"Now you don't have to see my face. It can be as anonymous as you want," Tessa purred into Casey's ear as she reached around and unbuttoned Casey's blouse. "Now I want you to tell me what you were going to let her do to you upstairs in that bar."

Tessa easily released the front clasp on Casey's bra. When her hands took possession of the firm mounds of flesh, Tessa moaned against Casey's neck, grasping smooth skin between her teeth and biting down sharply. Her hands lingered over the tightly pebbled flesh, and she rolled the aching points between her fingers, grinding herself against the smaller body in front of her. She slid her hands lower, unzipped Casey's slacks, and breached the barrier of her panties, stroking the silky patch of hair. Casey's whimpers were constant as Tessa held her and teased her body.

"Were you going to let her touch you like this?" Tessa asked, her voice hoarse with desire. She could feel her own wetness growing as she touched Casey.

Strong, slender fingers slipped lower and Casey's hips bucked against the pleasure. Casey was close to tears. She had never been this aroused yet hurt at the same time. She couldn't begin to explain to Tessa that she wanted sex from those other women, but she wanted so much more from the woman who was now setting her body on fire.

"Oh, God, baby, you're so wet." Tessa groaned as she slipped her fingers into Casey's silky folds.

"Oh, God!" Casey exclaimed as Tessa's long fingers stroked her swollen clitoris.

"Like that, do you? Nice and slow just like this? Are you going to come for me, little one?"

That was the remark that woke Casey out of her libidinous haze—*little one*. Yes, this was exactly what she wanted from the stranger in the bar, but she loved Tessa too much to experience this casual contact with her.

"Nikki, please stop."

"Oh, no, I want to feel you come for me first."

Casey pushed against Tessa; she grabbed onto Tessa's wrist, but Tessa was much stronger. Suddenly, Casey couldn't hold the tears in any longer, and her body shook with sobs. She cried out of pain and frustration and a hurt that clutched at her chest tightly.

If it had been any other woman, Tessa would have gone on and taken exactly what she wanted, never thinking twice about tears. This wasn't just any other woman, though, and now Tessa became confused, her body and her heart pulling her in two directions. She handled her overwhelming emotions the only way she knew how—her anger bubbled to the surface.

"If this is what you wanted from her, why not me?" Tessa hissed, pulling her hands from Casey.

"Because I'm not in love with her!" Casey cried.

It took only seconds for Tessa to react. She turned Casey around to face her and shoved her, thrusting her back in the direction of the front door. Casey's body hit the solid wooden entrance, and the impact nearly knocked the wind out of her. Tessa towered over her, and her fist came flying in the direction of Casey's head. Casey didn't have time to duck, but the blow wasn't aimed at her head, but at the door, a good six inches above her. Tessa repeated the blow, then pounded her fist against the wood until her knuckles were raw and bleeding.

"You are not in love with me! Don't ever say that!" Tessa screamed as she hit the door again. "No one can love me!"

With tears streaming down her face, Casey flinched each time Tessa's fist struck the door.

"You don't know who I am...the things I've done, that I do, that I'll do tomorrow. I'm a monster and—"

Tessa's voice finally broke, and Casey could see the deep pain in the blue eyes gone dark with emotion. Tessa's gaze darted back and forth nervously, filling with tears that she seemed unable to shed. She leaned her weight over Casey until her forehead was pressed against the smooth wood.

"Don't you understand?" Tessa said with utter defeat. "Women like you don't love women like me. I don't deserve to be loved, not at all, and especially not by someone as good as you."

Never in her life had Casey witnessed so much hurt and pain manifest itself into one woman's words. She took Tessa at her word, and for the first time realized that Tessa had probably done things that would turn Casey's stomach, perhaps shock and frighten her. Tessa felt her own life to be beyond redemption, so far gone that she would give up any chance at happiness rather than infect Casey's life with her pain.

Only one problem with that, my love, I don't scare that easy.

Knowing that she might possibly find Tessa's fist connecting with her jaw, she decided to risk the outcome. Standing nearly on tiptoes, Casey wrapped her arms around Tessa's shoulders and let one hand slip into the dark mane of hair.

"Everyone deserves to be loved. I know I may not realize all the things that you've done, and I'm not saying that I wouldn't be shocked or appalled by them. It's just that right now I don't give a damn what horrible things you've brought about, and it doesn't matter how cruel or how hard you act toward me. It will never make me stop loving you. Don't you understand me...I love you, Nikki."

Casey continued her soft whisperings, all the while caressing the tense muscles in Tessa's shoulders. At length, she could feel the anger slip away from Tessa's body. Tessa pulled away slightly, her arm still leaning heavily on the door at the side of Casey's head. The tears that filled the blue eyes finally fell, silently rolling down tanned cheeks. Tessa raised a hand and hesitated for a moment

before reaching out with her fingertips and wiping Casey's tears away. Tessa continued to stroke Casey's face as if in wonder, as if she were seeing her for the first time.

"I'm so sorry," Tessa whispered, leaning closer to place a feather-light kiss on Casey's forehead. "I don't see it." Tessa's breath fell lightly against Casey's face. "I don't understand what you could see in me that would make you love me."

Casey smiled a little and placed a tender kiss on Tessa's lips. The touch of her lips was so gentle and easy that Tessa had to wonder if their lips were touching at all, but the delicate contact was like a balm to Tessa's soul.

"Then I'll have to teach you to see yourself through my eyes," Casey said, pulling away from the kiss.

Tessa could think of nothing to say to counter Casey's thoughts or to argue at the absurdity of their situation. Her head told her that there were arguments available, but, admit it or not, her heart desperately wanted this to happen. Unable to speak or explain all she felt to Casey, she did the only thing she could do. She wrapped Casey within her strong embrace and held her there, running her fingers through the short blond locks and reveling in the feel of her lips as they brushed against the golden hair.

Casey pressed closer to the chest of the woman whose warm embrace now encompassed her. She listened to the strong heartbeat and breathed in the scent of her cologne. Casey's fingers ran up and down Tessa's spine in a languid motion. She smiled to herself when she felt Tessa's heart beat faster. Casey enjoyed the knowledge that the beautiful woman who held her felt something at her touch. Casey pushed Tessa's shirt aside where it was unbuttoned at the neck and pressed her lips to the smooth skin there. She felt a hitch in Tessa's breathing and moved her kisses lower. Unbuttoning two more buttons, she slid the tip of her tongue against the dark skin within the hollow between Tessa's breasts.

"Oh, God, Casey." Tessa groaned, letting her head tilt back in serene pleasure.

Casey kissed her again, then moved away from Tessa. Tessa stood transfixed, her chest rising and falling deeply as she

attempted to catch her breath. She watched as Casey went to the sofa and took the blankets piled there and arranged them on the rug in front of the fireplace. Casey watched the fire for a moment, then added two more logs to the dying flames. They sparked briefly and caught fire, the reflection of the orange flames dancing across Casey's body. Tessa continued to stare as Casey unbuttoned her slacks and let them slide off her body.

"What are you doing?" Tessa found herself asking, although it seemed a rather inane question given the look in Casey's eyes.

"I'm undressing," Casey said matter-of-factly.

"Why?"

Brilliant exposition...you're a silver-tongued devil. Get over there and do something. Stop her, help her, do anything...do her, just quit standing here like you're an innocent virgin.

"Because I want you to make love to me," Casey said, smiling a thoroughly seductive smile.

The moment had come, and Tessa pushed herself from the door and walked to where Casey stood.

"Casey—" she began.

Casey initiated a kiss that made all the others they shared so far pale in comparison. Tessa had honestly never been kissed by a woman who had the power to make her knees go weak, but Casey was doing it. She felt the strong bones in her long legs turn to liquid at the passionate kiss. Casey moved her mouth to Tessa's neck and sucked hard at the flesh there.

With what seemed like a supreme effort, Tessa pushed Casey away. "Please, stop."

Tessa made her decision and would have to live with the consequences that would come. Casey raised her gaze to meet Tessa's. For the first time that day, Casey watched as those eyes took on their familiar sparkle when they looked at her.

"Just for a minute," Tessa said quietly, placing her index finger on Casey's lips.

Tessa removed her jacket and pulled her cellular phone from the breast pocket. She carefully removed the holster and pistol from the belt at her back and placed it on the small table by the sofa. She punched two numbers on the keypad of the phone and

pressed the talk button.

"It's me. Is he back? What happened? Good. No, I found her," she said into the phone, looking up just as Casey removed her blouse and the unclasped bra that still clung to her shoulders. Tessa closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply.

"What? Yeah, she's fine. Look, if you need me tonight, if anything happens at all, don't let anyone know I'm not there. Call me on the cell, I probably won't be home till morning." Tessa put her hand over the mouthpiece because she was sure she was breathing heavily into the speaker. Casey slipped off her panties and arranged herself on the blankets, lying on her side, her head held up in the palm of her hand, a Mona Lisa-like grin on her face.

"Just don't let Meridio know I'm not there. Go over to the guesthouse and take my phone off the hook, turn on a light in the bedroom, make it look like I'm...otherwise engaged. No, she won't...she'll be with me," Tessa said at last, realizing she was entrusting her life to Alex with that last statement. He didn't disappoint her.

"You can count on me, Nikki," he said sincerely.

"And, Alex...you handled yourself pretty well tonight."

Alex pushed the end button on his cell phone and grinned to himself. Then his expression grew worried. He hoped his mentor knew what she was doing. A guy screwing the boss's daughter was one thing. A dyke screwing Meridio's daughter was a match he didn't even want to think about lighting. He knew one thing, though. Nikki was in a pretty good mood when she was around Casey, and Casey was always nice to Alex.

He leaned back in his chair and thought about Nikki's last words. *You handled yourself pretty well tonight*. She'd never said anything close to that to him. He knew he wasn't the smartest brick in the load, but it felt nice to hear it. Maybe Meridio's daughter was just what the *Karê* needed.

Tessa clicked off the call and placed the phone beside her holster. Turning back to face the woman on the blankets, she let her gaze slowly travel the length of Casey's body, her eyes expressing unadulterated lust.

“Talk about cruel,” Tessa said with a smirk.

“Well, you seemed to be taking an awfully long time on the phone, and I had to do something.” Casey indicated her naked body.

Tessa stood at the corner of the blanket and removed her own clothes as Casey’s breath was stilled. Tessa took her time, removing each article of clothing with a deliberate and steady motion. Finally, standing over Casey, Tessa let her arousal peak as Casey’s hungry eyes consumed her flesh. Tessa dropped to her knees and arranged her body so that she was lying alongside Casey, mirroring her pose.

“See something you like?” Tessa asked seductively.

“Absolutely,” Casey said, not even attempting to disguise the want in her gaze as it traveled along Tessa’s muscular physique.

“Then never let it be said that a Nikolaidis was unwilling to satisfy a woman’s every desire,” Tessa said in a low sultry voice, repositioning her body until her length lay on top of Casey’s.

“God, you feel so good,” Casey groaned as her body arched up to press against Tessa.

Tessa ground her hips in a tempting swirling motion against Casey’s mound, Casey instinctively spreading her legs wider. Tessa moaned at the pleasing sensation, then released a low growl at the feel of Casey’s wetness. Casey writhed in mere anticipation, her movements exciting both women even more.

The heavy gold crucifix that Tessa wore around her neck dragged along Casey’s body as Tessa raised up on her hands, still grinding their mounds together in a teasing motion. Casey kissed the crucifix lightly, moving the charm so that it hung down Tessa’s back.

“Aren’t you a good Catholic girl?” Casey teased and smiled.

Tessa rewarded Casey with a charming smile of her own.

“Well, I am Catholic, and I am a girl,” she began, reaching in to capturing the soft lips below her in a kiss filled with fiery passion. “You can tell me about the *good* part in the morning.”

Casey chuckled and Tessa moved her body down Casey’s prone figure. Casey had an unshakable feeling that there wouldn’t be any question there.

Tessa woke just as the black sky was lightening to a shade of gray. The rising sun was some time off, but her internal clock nudged her awake at her usual time. She had probably been asleep all of an hour, but although she was exhausted, her body never felt more alive or happy. *Tessa Nikolaidis happy?*

Tessa smiled openly at her thoughts but knew it was true. She kissed the top of Casey's tousled head. Casey murmured something and burrowed herself deeper within Tessa's embrace. Tessa knew that for the first time in a long time she was happy. If anyone would have told her that inside of a week she would fall this hard and this fast, she would have laughed in their face or laid them out with one punch. She would have assumed they were making fun of her. *It certainly has been a long time in the making, though, hasn't it, little one? Much longer than just a week. Has it really been twenty years?*

She refused to think about what was waiting for them outside this house. She wrapped both arms tighter around Casey and only wanted to feel what was right here, right now. She never thought herself capable of having someone like this love her, not being the kind of woman she was. Yet here was Casey, lying in her arms after the most incredible night of lovemaking, as physical proof. It was true that Casey didn't know specifics, but she guessed and still she was here.

I do love you, Casey. Tessa cursed herself for not saying it aloud. Casey said those words to her many times during the night. Although Tessa felt them in her heart, she couldn't find the voice to say them. Here she was, a woman who feared few things in life, yet she wasn't strong enough to profess the sentiment she'd never shared with anyone. She wasn't brave enough to give Casey her heart. Even though Tessa knew that all her love and happiness rested here in her arms, she still had an obligation to fulfill that would eventually cause Casey to hate her. *There were things put into motion long before you got here and planted yourself in my heart, little one, things I have to see through to the end.*

"Casey?" Tessa called softly, attempting to rouse the warm

body in her arms. "Come on, sweetheart, it's time to wake up."

"Oh, no." Casey groaned. "It can't possibly be time to wake up. I still have sleep left in me."

"Well, shake it off," Tessa chuckled, "because the sun will be up in an hour or two and we still need to pick up my car."

Tessa finished the statement by placing her fingers under Casey's chin and tilting her face upward. Casey ran her hands through sleep-tumbled hair and suddenly became self-conscious.

"I must look like hell," she said with her chin still in Tessa's gentle grasp.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Tessa said honestly, placing a sensuous kiss on Casey's lips.

It took only seconds for Casey to deepen the kiss, her hands roaming across Tessa's body. Tessa stifled a moan and quickly grabbed a hold of Casey's roving hands.

"Oh, no, you don't." Tessa laughed.

"What? Don't I get breakfast?" Casey asked coyly with a look on her face to match.

"You had a month's worth of breakfast last night," Tessa countered.

"Hey, can I help it that you taste so good?" Casey whispered, nipping at the woman's earlobe.

Tessa took a chance that she would hit the right spot and tickled Casey intently.

"Oh, God, no fair." Casey giggled breathlessly. "Now I really have to go to the bathroom."

Tessa could barely stop laughing as she rolled off Casey. "First door on the left," she said, still laughing as she pointed down the short hallway.

When Casey finally popped her head out of the bathroom, she looked somewhat confused.

"Nikki, there is too electricity in here."

Tessa had been lying on the blankets with her eyes closed, her hands clasped behind her head. Her eyelids popped open, and as she rolled over to meet Casey's eyes, her face took on a decidedly sheepish expression.

"Um, I lied?" She shrugged noncommittally.

"You..." Casey began, pointing a finger at Tessa. "Well... you're just too damn cute to yell at in the morning." Casey returned to the bathroom.

Tessa's face relaxed into a toothy grin as she watched the attractive figure disappear into the bathroom and heard the sound of the shower running. She jumped up, went to a small cabinet, and pulled some towels from a shelf. Entering the small room, she watched as Casey ran a brush through her hair.

"Want to be a dear and wash my back?" Casey turned and slipped her arms around Tessa's waist.

Tessa raised an eyebrow at Casey's tactics, but the warm body pressed against her naked flesh felt too delightful to turn down.

"Well, I guess it would be *faster* if we showered together, and we would be doing our part to conserve water."

"Mm-hmm," Casey agreed. "After you."

Tessa stepped into the old-fashioned claw-foot tub, pushing aside the shower curtain that ran all the way around the ceramic bathtub. She turned the nozzle up toward her body and let out a roar.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" she exclaimed, leaping from the tub.

"What?" Casey asked.

"There must be something wrong with the water heater, that stuff is like ice," she said, shivering.

"Oh, that. I only had the cold water on," Casey said matter-of-factly. She reached down and turned the warm water handle. "I guess that pretty much evens us up for the *no electricity* comment."

"You," Tessa muttered, pulling Casey against her. "I'll get you back for that, sweetheart." She grinned maliciously. "When you're least expecting it."

They did manage to do a little washing amidst the kisses and caresses. Casey was having a hard time keeping her hands to herself, and Tessa was having an even harder time not giving in to Casey's advances. Tessa weakened, however, when Casey ran her tongue across a nipple already erect with desire.

"Ca-ssan-dra," Tessa drawled out a warning tone.

Casey's perfect white teeth bit down gently on the hardened flesh.

"Oh, yes." Tessa couldn't keep from moaning, realizing that Casey was on her knees, letting her tongue slide into the dark thatch of hair between Tessa's legs. "Oh, God, Casey." Tessa groaned, leaning forward, towering over Casey, placing both hands flat against the tile wall.

She involuntarily spread her legs but only slightly. Still, it was enough for Casey to take advantage and bury her tongue deeper into the sweet wetness. Using firm strokes of her tongue, Casey knew that she could quickly bring Tessa to a point where Tessa would beg her not to stop. Tessa spread her legs a touch more, bringing them to the sides of the tub. She moved the showerhead so it was pointing away from them and released a few more breathless moans before Casey raised her head from her pleasurable task.

"We really...don't have...time for this, baby," Tessa panted.

Casey ran her tongue in one more extra firm stroke against her lover's now throbbing clitoris.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked quickly.

"Oh, yes!" Tessa's moan of pleasure was directed at Casey's previous action, so when Casey stopped completely, Tessa's eyes snapped open. "I-I mean, no!"

Casey performed the same routine and stopped quickly. "Was that a no, I want you to stop, or a no, I don't want you to stop?"

"It...I...Oh, God!" Tessa shook her head to try to will some sense into it. She figured that the reason her brain was refusing to function was because all her blood was now flowing straight to other parts of her body. "I...oh, God, please...I mean...Oh, Casey, just don't stop eating me!" Tessa finally blurted out, her hips thrusting forward shamelessly.

Casey smiled at Tessa's enthusiasm and positioned Tessa's foot on the rim of the tub.

Spreading her legs wide, Tessa released a growl that rumbled through her chest as Casey's insistent tongue lapped at her center. Her hips rocked against Casey's fingers, thrusting inside her, and she placed her hand on the back of Casey's head.

“Please, baby...harder.”

Casey wasn't sure whether Tessa wanted her to suck harder on the swollen clit she had in her mouth or if she wanted a stronger motion from her fingers. She decided to do both, and the combination skyrocketed Tessa into an orgasm that left her body shivering and her legs unable to hold her own weight any longer. She sank down to the edge of the tub and pulled Casey into her arms.

“Oh, I'll get you back for that one, too, little one.”

“I'm counting on it.”

When they were dressed and finally ready to leave, the sun was peeking over the eastern hills. Tessa wrapped her arms around Casey and kissed her tenderly.

“You have to remember, sweetheart, when we walk out of this house, we can't be lovers,” Tessa whispered.

Casey raised her head, a shocked expression on her face.

“That didn't come out right.” Tessa grinned. “I mean, that to the rest of the world we can't appear to be lovers.”

“That makes me feel a little better. How long? Will we always have to live this way?”

“No, love, it won't always be this way, I promise. It's just that...well, there are things that I—”

“I know. Things you can't talk about, right?” Casey looked up with love radiating from the depths of her eyes.

Tessa nodded and pulled Casey tightly to her body, enjoying the silken texture of the golden hair against her cheek. She didn't want Casey to see her face, but more importantly, she didn't want to have to look into her eyes. She held Casey within muscular arms and said two quick prayers. One, that Casey would someday forgive her for what she had to do, and two, a prayer of thanks for this feeling of loving and being loved in return, no matter how long it should last.

“I wish I knew what it is,” Tessa said.

Casey pulled away to look into the blue eyes that sparkled with caring and desire. “What *what* is?”

“The one thing I did right to get you.”

They shared a kiss that was equal parts devotion and

desperation. Tessa held the door open. Taking a deep breath, Casey walked across the threshold to become Meridio's daughter once again.

Chapter 10

Things couldn't have gone better if they'd planned it, right up until the point when Casey was on the fourth step headed up to her room when her father's office door opened. Casey panicked for a second and clutched the handrail in fear. She was too far away from the top of the landing to run for it, so she did the only thing she could think of. Turning around quickly, she hit the bottom step just as Andreas Meridio came into view.

"Good morning, Pappa. Did you have a pleasant evening?" she said cheerily.

"Well, well, I'm surprised to see you out of bed so early this morning. I'm glad, though. I have some business associates on the island, and they have a fondness for the steeplechase. I want you to have breakfast and put on your riding togs. I need your help in impressing these men. *Katalavaynés, Máhtia Mou?*"

"Of course, I'd love to," Casey said with a bright smile that changed to a grimace as soon as he was out of sight. *Dear God, this is going to be the longest day of my life.*

"Good morning, miss," Olympia said as Casey entered the *koozéna*.

"Morning, Olympia. I need some of your strongest Greek coffee."

"Make that two." Tessa's voice startled both women.

"That's easy enough." Olympia turned back to the stove.

Tessa leaned on the counter next to Casey, and quickly scanning the area, she raised her index finger to Casey's lips,

Casey kissing the digit. Tessa rapidly pulled her finger away, but not before Olympia turned to face them, two coffees in hand.

Olympia looked hard at both women as she shook her head.

"I only hope you two know what you're doing," she said, mostly to herself, since neither Tessa nor Casey would look up.

"I have to go to work. Have fun sleeping all day," Tessa whispered to Casey as she left with her cup of coffee, acting as if she hadn't heard Olympia.

"Oh, haven't you heard? I get to entertain my father's friends at the steeplechase track today," Casey said tiredly.

"Aren't you a bit wobbly for those jumps today?" Tessa asked with concern.

"I'll be okay." Casey hoped that she wouldn't fall asleep in the saddle at any point during the day.

"Tessa, come in," Meridio said.

Tessa always stood at the entrance without walking in immediately every morning for the past five years. Propriety dictated it so, and she wasn't one to break too far from Greek tradition.

Tessa barely took her seat and a sip of her coffee before Meridio placed a manila folder in front of her. Upon opening the binder, she stared into the face of a man who looked vaguely familiar.

"Do you know him?" Meridio asked.

"I know of him. I've heard things...all bad. Why?"

"He's our new connection. Our friends across the water are shaking their organizational infrastructure a bit. He'll be the man we deal with from now on."

"Lovely," Tessa exclaimed, closing the folder.

"I've invited them to lunch and to the horse track. He has a fondness for the steeplechase and good horses. We can make a present of one of our good mares. It will go a long way with a man like that. I want you to come along for obvious reasons, but Cassandra's going to be there, and I don't want any of his men thinking she comes as part of the gift. I want it made very clear that she's my daughter, *Katalavaynés*?"

"Absolutely." Tessa shared her usual serpentine smile with him. "Trust me, if any one of those men lays a hand on your daughter, it will be a very bleak day for his parents."

Meridio rose and placed a hand on Tessa's shoulder. "I know I can depend on you to stay with Cassandra every minute."

"You can count on me, Mr. Meridio." Tessa smiled broadly once his back was turned.

Casey closed the door to her room and stripped off the clothes she still wore from the previous evening. She walked across the room and tossed the garments into a large wicker laundry basket. She stepped into the walk-in closet to find her riding pants and a pale green polo shirt, along with freshly polished boots hanging in front of her. *That Olympia is so damned fast, what would I do without her?*

Turning with her clothes in hand, she thought she heard a faint click in her bedroom. Walking out of the closet, she noticed that a breeze blew in from the balcony door, which was slightly ajar. *Funny, I don't remember opening the doors.* She laid her clothes across the valet chair near the dresser and moved to close the doors.

Quickly, a hand covered her mouth and a warm body pressed against her naked flesh from behind. Casey recognized the familiar cologne immediately.

"I told you it would be when you were least expecting it, didn't I, little one?"

The hand slipped from her mouth and did a possessive exploration of the front of Casey's body, a deep moan vibrating in her ear.

"Good God, Nikki. You scared the hell out of me." Casey wasn't sure whether it was fear or desire that had her breathing so hard.

"I think I should get points for having impeccable timing." Tessa indicated the naked body wrapped in her strong embrace. With one arm locked around Casey's waist, the other boldly caressed a path that ignited flames of passion in both women.

Tessa let her fingertips run along the definition of muscles in

Casey's abdomen, bringing them up to cup the underside of a firm breast. Her lips and tongue tasted the smooth skin of Casey's neck before moving up to capture the soft earlobe within her perfect white teeth. She let her tongue swirl over the small bit of flesh in her mouth, while at the same time allowing her thumb to lazily stroke a tightening nipple. Casey groaned aloud at the exquisite touch, arching her back into Tessa's caresses, trying to press her flesh harder against Tessa's hands.

"Shh," Tessa whispered into Casey's ear. "If you make any noise, I'll have to stop."

Casey didn't know if Tessa was trying to warn her or threaten her. She did know that there was no way she was going to risk having her stop at this point.

"I don't want to hear a sound, not a moan or a whimper," Tessa cautioned teasingly. She grinned as she felt the frustration flow through Casey's body.

She raised her hands and kneaded the firm mounds of flesh within each hand, grasping the pink tips and rolling them between her thumb and forefinger. Casey endured the slow torture as long as she could before her own hands pressed the larger hands against her firmly.

"Is this what you want, baby?" Tessa halted her kisses momentarily to whisper in Casey's ear as she pinched and pulled the hardened points of flesh with a rougher touch.

Casey nodded vigorously, and Tessa chuckled at Casey's attempt at silence. Tessa slid her hands down and across smooth, quivering flesh, which fluttered when the palms of her warm hands brushed lower, across the light down of her abdomen. Both hands swirled their fingers within the flaxen curls, teasing themselves lower into the warm wetness, only to abruptly change direction and brush through the curls once more.

Casey was trying hard not to make any noise. She knew they had to be quiet, considering where they were, but it also occurred to her that this was a power game of Tessa's. Deep down, it was a way for Tessa to assert her dominance, and even though Casey hated to admit it, even to herself, it thrilled her. Tessa was a woman of her word, and Casey wouldn't be at all surprised if Tessa pulled

away only to leave her wanting. This fact, not knowing whether Tessa would give her release, excited Casey in a way that she'd never felt before.

Tessa slid the fingers of both hands deep into the blond nest of curls, unable to contain a groan at Casey's wetness.

"Oh, God, baby...you feel so good."

Tessa felt Casey legs tremble weakly and didn't think Casey was going to last much longer.

"Kneel down on the floor," she commanded.

It was a good thing. Just as Tessa told her to kneel, Casey's knees buckled. She sank to the floor, Tessa on her knees behind her. Tessa sat back on her heels and pulled the smaller body to lean against her. Casey turned her head and grabbed a handful of raven hair. It didn't take much effort to pull a more than willing Tessa's lips to her own.

Tessa's mouth swallowed any noise Casey was making, Tessa's fingers continuing to stroke the silky, wet folds. With one hand, she stoked the throbbing clit; the other poised two fingers at Casey's entrance and pressed against her sex in a teasing manner. Casey finally broke her lips away from the kiss, breathing hard, her eyes closed; she leaned her head back against Tessa's shoulder.

"Oh, please, Nikki," Casey murmured.

"Please what?" Tessa asked, knowing what Casey desired. Tessa's center throbbed painfully at the slow and careful seduction, and she ground her hips against Casey's backside.

"Please...I want to feel you inside me."

"Mmm, inside you? Why, baby?"

Casey could barely think, considering the fact that every brain cell and nerve synapse was firing between her legs at the moment. She understood completely what Tessa wanted to hear. *Dear God, do you know how hard it is giving that up to someone?*

"Because it feels so good when you fill me up." Casey turned her head and once more captured Tessa's lips. Pulling away to catch her breath, she continued, "Please...I'm begging you... please, fuck me."

Tessa took Casey's mouth, her tongue exploring hungrily even as the thrust of her own hips grew stronger.

“That was a good answer, baby. Because you asked so nice and because you look so damn hot begging me like that...”

Tessa pressed two fingers inside Casey, and instantly Casey’s hips thrust down hard on her fingers. She continued to stroke the hard nub of flesh with one hand while matching the rhythm of her lover’s hips with the other. Tessa’s own climax rushed upon her, and she held it off as long as she could, but the feel of this woman’s excitement was having an intense effect on her body.

“Oh, Casey,” Tessa groaned, feeling her body’s shuddering release begin.

“Nikki...” Casey buried her breathless cry against the warm skin of Tessa’s neck.

Casey’s hand locked Tessa’s wrist in an iron grip, and Tessa stilled her movement, feeling her lover’s inner muscles spasm, then clench tightly around her fingers. It was as if there was a connection between Tessa’s hand inside Casey and her own groin. Feeling the fluttering of Casey’s inner walls against her hand prolonged the release coursing through her own body.

“*Théh Mou!*” both women hissed at the same time.

“I don’t usually...as a rule...thank God after sex,” Casey panted, “but...that was...incredible.”

“You look pretty cute like that.” Tessa kissed Casey’s nose as Casey stood and buckled her skin-tight riding pants at the waist.

“Between you and me, I hate them. I’d much rather ride in blue jeans and Tony Lamas.”

“You and your bad American habits.” Tessa folded her arms across her chest.

Casey ran her palms along the thighs of the tan riding pants, then stepped forward and slipped her arms around Tessa’s waist.

“I love you,” Casey said softly and placed a tender kiss on the startled woman’s lips.

“I...Casey...I don’t—” Tessa uncharacteristically stammered, unsure of how to react. *Oh, Casey, if I feel it, why can’t I say it?*

Casey stopped Tessa by placing her fingers over the soft lips she just kissed.

“I know. I know how hard this is for you, love. You don’t

have to say anything at all. I can feel what's in here." She placed the palm of her hand over Tessa's heart and rewarded Tessa with a smile that was as bright as sunshine.

Tessa didn't hesitate, pulling Casey to her, holding her tightly.

"You are truly a gift to me, little one," she whispered, trying to hold back the tears that burned the back of her eyes.

"Muhammad bin Yamen, please let me introduce my daughter, Cassandra Meridio. She is an excellent rider and will show you how fine the horseflesh raised on Mýkonos is." Andreas Meridio looked nervous as he made the introductions.

Yamen and his henchmen were polite upon meeting Casey. In their eyes, she was a woman and looked at as nothing, but they learned to get along with the ways of other countries and the position women attained. The tall, Amazon-looking woman, however, worried them.

"And this is Tessa Nikolaidis, my *Karê*," Meridio said.

The Libyan visitors made no attempt to shake hands with Tessa, but she never flinched or turned her gaze away from their obdurate stares. She casually folded her arms across her chest and glared back, the perpetual scowl upon her face. She was used to situations like this, Old World men who were offended at the idea of working alongside a woman. Tessa's retribution was to straighten herself to her full height, a good six-feet-two with her riding boots on and look down at the shorter men. They hated that, and Tessa could barely contain her mirth when she saw a few of them straighten up to try to equal her height.

Casey gave the men a tour through the family stables, giving them more information than they probably wanted to know about horses and the way they were trained for the steeplechase. Tessa stood back and not only kept a protective eye on Casey, but also studied her newest adversary, Yamen. Tessa listened as Casey spoke and was again surprised by her new lover. *She knows almost as much about horses as she does olives. Why in the hell does she dig up dead stuff for a living?*

They took a break for lunch, Olympia having prepared a

veritable feast on the patio. Meridio and Tessa sat with Yamen, the rest of the men at another table, while Casey was relegated to lunching in the kitchen with Olympia. Under other circumstances, Casey would have been offended and probably would have tried to do something to display that attitude. That day, she didn't mind in the least. She didn't like the way the men looked at her. Half of them, including their leader, looked down their noses as if she were nothing more than a piece of fine furniture or a rug beneath their feet. The other half leered at her when they thought no one else was watching. Tessa was always watching, however, and Casey took comfort in that fact.

It was late afternoon and Casey's lack of sleep the night before coupled with the large lunch she just enjoyed had her yawning deeply as she tightened the strap on the large bay gelding's stirrup. The horse looked like a skyscraper standing next to Casey. She tugged on a pair of tight-fitting leather gloves and adjusted the helmet on her head. Taking the reins in her hands, Casey accepted a foot up from the stable hand. The horse seemed skittish, and Tessa watched the muscles standing out in Casey's lean arms, biceps flexing strongly as she tried to rein the animal in. Finally, Casey's will and firm hand convinced the animal to accept the bit, and he shook his head, waiting patiently.

Tessa was impressed at Casey's mastery over the large beast, but she couldn't help noticing the yawn that Casey let out. She walked closer, looking up with concern written across her features.

"You sure you're up for this?" Tessa asked.

"Sure, just wake me up when I'm done," Casey deadpanned, adjusting a set of goggles over her eyes.

"Casey." Tessa lowered her voice so that only Casey could hear. "Are you sure? You could break your back if you fall. I just want to make sure you're alert enough."

Casey couldn't help the smile that found its way to her face. "Yes, I'll be fine. Don't worry, okay?"

Tessa gave a smirk at that and gently hit the horse's rump to get him going.

Casey watched out of the corner of her eye as the spectators climbed onto a few special bleacher seats and pulled out their

binoculars. The steeplechase was by no means a flat course. The Meridio estate boasted a three-mile cross-country course, but Casey would only be using half of that so she would stay in view of the spectators. The steed was *Mávro To Vounó*, Black Mountain, and she rode him around to each of the jumps, giving the horse a look at the fences.

Tessa nodded to a stable hand, and while Casey still warmed up her animal, Tessa took the reins of a white stallion they called Flash. He was the fastest thing in the stable, and Tessa wanted to be prepared in case anything should happen on the course. Hearing the woman she loved tell her she was fine and believing it were two different things, and Tessa didn't like the tickling feeling in her gut that warned her of trouble.

Casey was a supremely light rider and sat her saddle evenly. Most of the other "jump" jockeys she competed against were much larger than she was, in the 140-pound range. It took more than speed to win a steeplechase; it took a lot of muscle, too. She took a few small practice jumps, a box hedge no more than three feet high, finally testing the gelding's strength over a four-foot rail fence. Casey enjoyed having an open field to run on. Usually in a steeplechase competition, she was vying for position with forty or so other competitors. The sound of the horse's hooves surrounded you and echoed like thunder in your brain, the mud and divots of earth flying up into your face and body.

The gelding was a jumper horse, big and strong. He was trained for the hurdles and didn't know how to do anything else in life but run flat out and lift his body so that it appeared to be floating in air for a few precious heartbeats. He was larger than most steeplechase thoroughbreds. The strong animal made it look easy.

Casey was three-quarters of the way through with her run when she saw the large center jump coming up. It was a nearly five-foot timber fence, fashioned after the Maryland Hunt Cup's largest jump. They had just set into their run when Casey's vision blurred. Hindsight told her she should have just hung on and let the animal beneath her do his thing, but not being able to see clearly, she panicked, and in that moment of distraction, she pulled back

on the horse's reins. The animal felt the pull of the bit against his back teeth and instantly dug in its heels. Casey realized, as she was in midair being thrown from the animal's back, that this probably wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done.

Tessa leapt upon the white stallion's back, her feet never touching the stirrups. She sped across the course at breakneck speed, flying across the hurdles effortlessly.

Casey lay on her back and wondered why she couldn't breathe. She rolled onto her side. In the distance, she saw Flash taking the jumps more quickly than Casey thought she would ever be able to manage, and she thought of herself as an above average rider. Astride the stallion was Tessa, her dark hair flying around her, a look of fear etched across her tanned face.

"My knight on her white charger," Casey managed to gasp breathlessly as Flash pulled up and Tessa jumped from his back.

"Casey, honey, are you okay? Where does it hurt?"

"I...could tell you...if I could breathe," Casey panted with irritation.

She tried to sit up and Tessa breathed a sigh of relief, realizing Casey could move.

"Looks like you got the wind knocked out of you is all. Come on, let's get you on your feet." Tessa quickly pulled Casey into a standing position.

Tessa pressed the flat of her hand against Casey's diaphragm. "Breathe as deep as you can."

Casey tried to take a deep breath and gasped.

"Again," Tessa said.

Casey tried again, and as Tessa pressed her hand more firmly against her belly, she felt the tightness ease up. By degrees, the spasm ended and Casey was breathing normally again. By this time, her father and the visitors made it to the spot of her humiliation.

"Cassandra." Andreas Meridio had Casey in his arms and pulled back to look at her. "Did you break anything?"

"Only my pride, Pappa," she said with embarrassment, rubbing her sore back.

"She's fine. She's a tough one, Mr. Meridio. She just got the wind knocked out of her," Tessa said.

Yamen chuckled aloud. "Perhaps you should have had sons, eh, Meridio?"

He smacked Meridio on the back as if it was a friendly joke. Meridio could do little else but take it that way or risk offending his guests. Tessa saw through Yamen's words. He'd been waiting all day to find something he could use to his advantage, to stroke his ego, and this was it.

Tessa took Casey by the elbow and led her back to the gelding.

"Do you hear them laughing over there?" Tessa asked in a low voice. "You know what they're laughing about?"

"I've got a pretty good guess," Casey hissed.

"You feel good enough to ride *Mávro* back to the stable?"

Casey nodded.

"You don't have to do anything but ride back in. *Do not*," Tessa cautioned Casey, "take any more jumps. It'll go a long way if you don't let them see you cave, that way we win."

Casey understood the *we* to be women, so she gave a little grin and stuck her left foot in Tessa's clasped hands, positioning herself once again on top of the gelding's back.

Meridio turned and saw Casey in the saddle once again.

"What in the hell is she doing?"

"No problem," Tessa said offhandedly, just loud enough for Yamen and his clowns to hear. "She just shook it off. She's fine."

Tessa watched as Casey rode the gelding in the direction of the stables. Suddenly, Casey turned the horse and they picked up speed. Even from a distance, Tessa could see the look of wild determination on Casey's face as she sped toward the five-foot jump. The horse and rider sailed across the fence with at least three inches to spare. Casey then took the gelding through the rest of the course, trotted back, and pulled up in front of the group.

"Nothing to it." Casey smiled.

"Impressive," Yamen had to admit before he turned away.

The men walked away and Meridio turned to Tessa. "See to it she gets home. I'll see that our guests find their way out."

Meridio left and Tessa looked up and raised an eyebrow at Casey. "You follow directions so well."

"Sorry, but I couldn't help myself."

Tessa tried to look angry but just couldn't keep the expression going. Casey atop the horse looked so contrite that Tessa had to smile back at her.

"Hey, race ya back to the barn!" Casey took off before Tessa knew what was happening.

It didn't take long for Tessa to jump into the saddle and come even with Casey and the bay gelding. Once she passed Casey, she barreled out ahead, flying over the fences like they weren't there. Casey was mesmerized and pulled *Mávro* up to a canter. The white stallion and Tessa moved like one animal, absolute fluidity and strength. Finally, Tessa realized she was alone and pulled her horse to a stop, waiting for Casey to catch up.

"What's the matter?" Tessa asked.

"I had to stop and watch, it was...it was like...magic," Casey hesitated.

A slow blush crept up onto Tessa's face.

"Where on earth did you learn to ride like that?"

"My father taught me when I was little," Tessa said, feeling the heat on her face. She wasn't used to being complimented, even if it was by her new lover.

"Then I have to meet him because I would surely love to be able to jump like that."

Tessa's face immediately turned to stone, the hard edge of her mouth rising in a tiny sneer.

"He's dead," she said abruptly as she turned her horse away and spurred him on into the stable, leaving Casey in the middle of the field.

Casey cursed herself for speaking without thinking. *Great, Case, your second stupid move of the day. How was I to know he was dead?*

By the time Casey got to the stable, Tessa was already gone. Once she made it back to the house, Tessa was nowhere to be found.

"Olympia, did Tessa come through here?"

"Yes, miss. I saw her go around to the guesthouse a few moments ago."

Casey found herself at Tessa's door, knocking like she was a stranger. She knew Tessa was there because she could hear the strains of Puccini's *La Bohème* playing loudly. She knocked and called Tessa's name, but Tessa wouldn't answer.

"Fine!" Casey stalked off with a small limp from her sore back that wasn't getting any better as time went by.

Tessa couldn't answer the door, not with the state she was in. It was like a dam breaking and she barely made it back to the guesthouse in time. One thought of her father while looking into Casey's gentle eyes had been enough to open a flood of emotions that Tessa had managed to keep under her tight control for so long. She sat on the floor next to the couch, her arms wrapped around her legs that were bent tight against her chest. She sobbed as if her heart were breaking. She couldn't seem to stop, so she turned the music up louder to cover her cries.

She wanted so much to open the door and let Casey in. She wanted to feel her arms around her, soothing her with a gentle touch and loving words. But she couldn't let Casey see her like this. In her condition, Tessa knew she would say too much. She would tell Casey everything, and when she did, Casey's ability to love her would grow cold.

Chapter 11

“Just set up the table anywhere,” Casey directed, a slight grimace of pain flashing across her face.

The masseuse was a woman in her twenties, pretty and athletic looking. Casey would usually notice something like that, but between the ache in her back and her worries and anger where Tessa was concerned, she was oblivious. Casey came back out of the bathroom with a sheet wrapped around her. This time, she did notice the way the woman took in her figure. The surreptitious gaze didn’t go completely unrecognized by Casey.

A knock at the door drew her attention away just in time.

“Come in.”

The door swung open and Tessa’s dark figure stood framed in its outline, taking in Casey’s attire and the masseuse with a raised eyebrow. Casey had the sudden need to explain, especially when Tessa’s eyebrow continued to arch high up under her ebony bangs.

“I’m getting a massage...for my back.” Casey couldn’t understand why her response was so weak.

Tessa pulled out her billfold and placed a generous amount of money in the woman’s hand.

“Pack up your things and go,” Tessa ordered.

The masseuse didn’t hesitate. She picked up her belongings to leave.

“Wait a minute. This is my room. Stay.” Casey pointed to the woman, who set the table down again, glancing between the two.

"Take off," Tessa hissed.

"Stay," Casey repeated.

The woman was in a near state by this time, watching Tessa and Casey stare each other down. "Please, miss," the woman begged of Casey.

"I hope you're happy. You've scared the hell out of the poor girl." Casey seethed.

"Goodbye." Tessa growled in a low ominous voice.

The masseuse knew who was in charge now. She scooped up the rest of her things and rushed through the open door, which Tessa closed and locked behind her.

Casey was fuming at Tessa's intrusion, mostly for treating her like a child again in front of someone else. She turned her back on Tessa and stood there feeling the blood flowing through her veins grow hot. It didn't take long before she felt Tessa's presence close behind her. Tessa placed her hands on Casey's arms to pull her closer.

"Don't touch me." Casey tried to make it sound like she meant it, but the truth was she was desperate to feel Tessa's arms around her.

Tessa deepened her embrace, enclosing Casey within her arms.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Tessa said so softly it was nearly a whisper.

Casey sighed and turned in the embrace. Looking up into the repentant woman's face, Casey noticed how red and swollen Tessa's eyes were and realized she'd been crying. *Oh, God, that's why she didn't answer the door.*

"Am I responsible for this?" Casey's fingers stroked a tanned cheek, her anger melting away.

Tessa took the fingers in her hand and brought them to her lips. "It wasn't you, only some sad memories. I just...I couldn't be around anyone."

"Even me?" Casey asked.

Especially you, little one. Tessa kissed the top of Casey's head and rested her chin there, enjoying the warm softness of the woman pressed against her chest.

"I'm not...I'm not really used to this, you know?" Tessa

faltered. She was a woman of action, not of words. She hoped the woman in her arms could feel what she meant rather than what she said. "I don't like...feeling weak."

"Is that what you think it is to show your emotions in front of someone who cares about you? Oh, honey, I'm not one of those nut cases you do business with. You don't have to worry that I'll use your vulnerabilities against you. Come here."

Casey took Tessa by the hand and led her to the sofa across from the French doors. The view was a peaceful one, the sun sinking in the horizon.

"Just a second." Casey ran into the bathroom. She came out wearing a white terrycloth robe.

"I think I liked you in the sheet better."

"I'll just bet you did."

They sat on the couch, and when Tessa moved to pull Casey into her embrace, Casey shook her head. Throwing a pillow behind her back for comfort, she settled herself into the corner of the couch and beckoned Tessa into her arms. The look of indecision on Tessa's face nearly bordered on fear as she thought about what the action implied.

"You're thinking about it too much. Try to give up just a tiny bit of that control. You don't have to be on your guard in front of me."

Oh, but I do, little one. She hesitated, but something deep inside her told her that she did want to be held by this woman. Just once, it would be nice to have someone worry about her.

Casey was patient; she could see Tessa at war with herself. Eventually, she was rewarded with a miniature smile and a pair of sparkling blue eyes. Tessa allowed herself to be enfolded in the deceptively strong embrace.

"Your heart beats so fast," Tessa said sleepily.

"Only when I'm around you, my love," Casey said.

Little by little, Casey could feel Tessa's body relax. They looked out onto the sparkling blue of Tourlos Bay and watched the pelicans flying over the water, following the last of the fishing boats as they dropped anchor for the evening. Tessa couldn't remember a time when she felt more at peace with herself and the

world around her. Casey's delicate touch never stopped moving over the naturally dark hue of Tessa's skin. The small hands ran gentle fingers through the long ebony locks until, at last, Casey could feel Tessa's deep, even breathing. She looked down and was struck at Tessa's intense beauty. In sleep, gone was the persistent scowl, her face unlined from the worries and the past that plagued her during her waking moments. The smooth brow and the lips, slightly curled upward in a relaxed smile, caused Casey to think she had seen this face before. Not the woman with the hard edge to her, but tranquil just as she was now. Sort of like a little girl.

"I don't care what you say, Nikki," Casey whispered, looking into the beautiful tanned features of the woman in her arms. "I *have* seen you in my dreams. I can feel it."

She placed a gentle kiss on Tessa's forehead, then Tessa murmured something unintelligible in her sleep, snuggling deeper into Casey's embrace. Casey leaned her head back and watched as the sun dipped farther in the horizon, filling up the room with its golden brilliance.

Tessa jerked herself awake, and a moment of panic flooded through her at her unfamiliar surroundings.

"It's okay, you've only been asleep for an hour," Casey reassured her.

Tessa sat up with a sheepish grin and ran her hand through her hair. She could see that the last sliver of the sun hung just above the water.

"I've never done that before...just fall asleep like that, I'm sorry."

"I feel flattered then that you felt comfortable enough. Besides, I think it's exactly what you needed." Casey stood to stretch the muscles in her back.

"Hey, are you still hurting?" Tessa regretted throwing the masseuse out of the room, but her jealousy got the better of her.

"It doesn't hurt, just stiff I think. Maybe I can work it out tomorrow."

Tessa moved her hands to Casey's hips and gently drew her forward. "I could work it out for you tonight. I have a whirlpool in my nice big bath."

"Mmm, but I have a whirlpool here, too," Casey said, her hands running through the long dark mane.

"Yes, but yours doesn't have a nice warm cushion to lie against, namely my body. Plus, I owe you a massage. I could make it one you won't soon forget."

"Sold," Casey said without further thought.

Tessa stood and kissed Casey. "Come down to the guesthouse after dinner. Make sure no one sees you, okay? I'll leave the back door open."

They kissed once more, then Tessa was gone. Casey smiled as she dressed for dinner. She was starving...in more ways than one.

"What will you do tonight, *Máhtia Mou*?" Andreas Meridio asked Casey as they shared a cordial of *sournáda*.

Casey had been daydreaming about a certain dark-haired woman and of the ways she might be able to work off the wonderful dinner Olympia had prepared. Olympia winked at Casey when she set down her plate with a large portion of *Kléftiko* in the middle. It was goat meat wrapped in parchment paper and cooked so that the juices and flavors were sealed in. It was one of Casey's favorites. By the time she got to the dessert of *Sýka sto fóurno me Mavrodáfni*, or fresh figs baked in *Mavrodaphne* wine, she was done in.

"Oh, I think I'm going to soak in a hot tub for a couple of hours, then go straight to bed," Casey said truthfully. *Hey, he didn't ask if I'd be alone.*

"I think I'll call it an early evening, too." He rose and kissed Casey's forehead. "I'll be in the upstairs study for a while if you need me, then off to bed. *Kalinýchta*, my dear, you were very impressive out there today."

"Good night to you, too, Pappa, and thank you."

Casey quietly made her way down to the *koozéna*. She put a few fresh figs in a bowl and tucked a bottle of *Gentilini* under her arm. She slipped across the back lawn and slowly opened the rear door to the guesthouse.

"Nikki?" she said quietly, leaving the wine and the figs on the counter.

"In here," Tessa called out.

Casey followed the sound of Tessa's voice and made her way into a large bathroom. The lights were dimmed and burning candles of varying scents and sizes were scattered throughout the room. When she peeked around the corner, she met with a sight that took her breath away.

Tessa was lying in the large marble tub, leaning against the side, one knee raised and her eyes slightly closed. A bottle of champagne and two glasses sat on the wide rim of the bath. Half-closed eyes opened lazily and a lopsided grin emerged.

"*You* are the best thing I've seen all day." Casey smiled, leaning down to capture a pair of willing lips.

"*You* are highly overdressed for the occasion," Tessa said, breathless from their kiss.

"Oh, I think I have a solution to that problem." Casey removed her clothes in the same torturous fashion Tessa had the night before.

Tessa didn't try to disguise her hunger as she watched the display before her. Her eyes became heavy-lidded as they broke away from the lush green gaze that held her, traveling down the lithe body. Tessa held out her hand and Casey took hold, stepping into the steaming water and seating herself in front of Tessa. With Casey's back resting against her chest, Tessa gently turned Casey's face, and their moist lips met in a searing kiss, probing tongues taking their time to tease and arouse. Casey brought her hand up to a muscular bronze thigh, stroking the skin delicately, finally running her nails along its hardness.

The two women broke apart, breathless.

"Hey, you're supposed to be in here for the miraculous whirlpool properties," Tessa breathed into Casey's ear.

"Mmm, I feel better already." Casey squirmed.

"Here, this will be better on your back, sit forward," Tessa directed and flipped a switch on a console pad near the head of the tub. The water bubbled and swirled, and Tessa adjusted a nozzle directly at the small of Casey's back. As the water hit the spot, Tessa lightly massaged the area in small circular motions.

"God, that feels good," Casey said.

Tessa rubbed Casey's back and let the warm water flow against her skin. Finally, she turned off the jets and flipped on the whirlpool, leaning back and pulling her lover against her once more. They shared some of the champagne before settling in again.

"Just relax for a while," Tessa purred.

The feel of her Tessa's body and the warmth of the moving water, coupled with the hum of the whirlpool, sent Casey's body into such a relaxed state that she promptly fell asleep.

"I can't believe you let me fall asleep," Casey chided.

"Hey, paybacks, little one," Tessa reminded her.

The two conversed briefly at the breakfast table on the patio before Meridio arrived.

"I picked you up, dried you off, and put you to bed. I did think about ravishing you in your sleep, considering how good you looked, but decided I'd be honorable." Tessa smirked.

"And I never woke up once during all of that?" Casey asked in amazement.

"Nope. You're the soundest sleeper I've ever come across. On the other hand, I think you needed the rest."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Tessa whispered. "I enjoyed being able to hold you in my arms all night."

The sky blue eyes softened when they met the deep green of Casey's and a quiet message was passed. Tessa abruptly pulled her gaze away and looked down at her paper, taking a sip of her coffee as if Casey weren't there. Casey finally saw her father moving to the table long after Tessa heard his footsteps.

"Good morning, ladies," Andreas Meridio said as Casey poured his coffee.

Tessa and Meridio spoke briefly, and Casey let her mind wander. She didn't recognize any of the names or understand a thing they were discussing, so she retreated within herself, hearing their conversation from a distance. Casey was getting an idea. Once the other two were finished with their conversation, Casey took a shot at her plan.

"I'm going to Athens for the weekend," she said abruptly in her father's direction.

Tessa raised an eyebrow and looked in Meridio's direction.

"I have a couple of meetings set up with the museum curators. We have to get together before the dig begins."

"Cassandra..." Meridio began.

"Pappa," Casey interrupted, recognizing that tone. "I only have another two weeks of vacation, then I'll have to constantly be back and forth between Mýkonos and Athens. I'll have to get an apartment there at least for a little while. This is my job we're talking about."

Meridio gave an exasperated sigh and nodded. "But Tessa goes with you."

"I do not need a babysitter," Casey complained.

"She's not a babysitter," Meridio countered, getting aggravated by the situation. "She'll go with you and help you find an apartment. Do you have a problem with that, Tessa?"

"No, sir. As a matter of fact, I have a meeting in Athens day after tomorrow, it would work out well."

"Fine." Meridio wanted the conversation to end. "Take Alex if you need him, too."

"Excellent idea, Mr. Meridio," Tessa said, wondering how they were going to get out of bringing Alex along.

"Pappa, please. One babysitter is bad enough, please don't make me go with two," Casey grumbled.

"Oh, all right. But Tessa absolutely goes. And please, young lady, stop calling Tessa a babysitter." Meridio swallowed the last of his coffee and rose to leave. "When will you go?"

"This afternoon, I should think," Casey said.

"Come say goodbye before you leave." Meridio kissed the top of Casey's head. "Tessa, I'd like to meet with you also before you leave," he said before he walked away.

Waiting until the man was out of sight, Tessa turned to Casey, a smug smile of victory displayed on Casey's face.

"Oh, you're good," Tessa said.

Chapter 12

“Hey, I thought we were staying at the Grande Bretagne?” Casey asked when Tessa sped past the Plateía Syntágmatos.

“We are. Well, according to the hotel register, we are.” Tessa smiled at the surprised woman. “I have an old acquaintance who just so happens to be the concierge there. He owes me a favor, and he’s very trustworthy. You said you needed an apartment, right? Was that for real or just part of your plan?”

“Well, I will need an apartment to live in when I work over here, and I thought...it could be somewhere we could get away...” Casey trailed off uncertainly.

“We won’t be able to do that,” Tessa said.

Tessa turned to look at Casey and immediately noticed the wounded look on her face.

“Hey.” Tessa put a hand on Casey’s cheek. “I didn’t mean it like that. I do have a place in mind for you to get an apartment, but it wouldn’t be smart for me to be seen there. If I know your father, he’ll have someone keep an eye on you when I’m not around. We can’t risk getting caught together like that.”

“Oh.” Casey saw all her plans of romantic getaways dissipating quickly. “So what do we do, don’t we ever get to be alone?”

“Of course we do, baby,” Tessa said, shifting gears as they climbed a steep hill. “Just sit back and all will be made clear in a few minutes. Trust me?” She grinned at the frowning blonde.

Casey thought about that question, but it didn’t take her long.

She had known this woman all of a week, yet she knew she would trust her with her life.

"Of course I do." Casey slid her hand within Tessa's grasp and squeezed gently.

Tessa squeezed the smaller hand in return and as always, thanked whomever was responsible for the happiness she was experiencing. She sat in wonder at the optimistic woman. Tessa had never felt this kind of unconditional trust from a lover before, and it made her feel safe.

"Welcome to your second home." Tessa stopped the car in front of a two-story wood and brick building that was nestled back among a grove of olive trees, partially hidden from the road.

Tessa opened the passenger side door, took Casey's hand, and led her to a side gate that was securely held shut. Tessa punched a series of numbers into the computer console on the wall, and the iron security gate clicked open. Tessa still held Casey's hand and they walked to a back patio that surrounded a beautiful swimming pool with a cascading natural rock fountain at one end.

"Who lives here?" Casey asked, turning around and taking in the beauty of the place.

"I do...and you, I mean, if you'd like." Tessa added the last part softly. She couldn't believe her own ears. Here she was, determined not to add any complications to the already confused puzzle of her life, and she just asked the most dangerous piece in this chess game to move in with her.

"You own this?" Casey seemed confused.

"I didn't always work for your father. I was a successful businesswoman before I became the Meridio *Karê*. And even I need a place more private than the guesthouse. Look around, see the cliffs up there?" She pointed above them. "And that area over there, how it's surrounded by trees? No one can see the estate without me seeing *them* first. Besides that, the entire place is wired with a security system of my own design."

Tessa crossed the patio to the sliding glass doors and pushed another series of buttons. "Lastly, I have two bodyguards. Stand still," Tessa commanded.

Casey wouldn't have dreamed of disobeying Tessa's command

when she saw two large Dobermans heading for the patio at a full run, nearly knocking Casey over in their attempt to get to Tessa. She wrestled with the two huge animals for a few moments, then commanded they sit with a gesture of her hand. Both dogs obediently sat, never taking their eyes off their mistress.

"My two bodyguards. They're better than anyone you could possibly hire," Tessa said. "Watch. Heads up."

Both dogs immediately took a position in front of Tessa, barking and baring their teeth at some unknown foe. Casey jumped back at the sudden intensity in the animals.

"Down!" Tessa said, and the dogs instantly obeyed, backing off and lying down.

"Wow. That would sure make me think twice," Casey said a little shakily.

"I'm sorry, honey...I didn't mean to scare you, but I want you to know what these girls are capable of. They're extremely intelligent. Come here." Tessa held out her hand and Casey came closer.

"That big girl over there is Mahogany, and this is Cinnamon." Tessa dropped to one knee and encouraged Casey to do the same. "She's a good girl. Aren't you, Cinny? Here, she likes to be scratched under her chin, right here." Tessa demonstrated and soon Casey was playing with the dog, which seemed more like a happy puppy now.

Tessa leaned over and kissed Casey's neck, working her way down to her shoulder, pushing aside her dress to kiss the bare skin.

"I want her to see how close we are," Tessa murmured against Casey's tanned skin.

"Mmm, another thirty seconds of that, and she's going to get a good look at how close we are." Casey moaned in reply.

Tessa chuckled and pulled Cinnamon closer. "See, Cinny? Heads up, okay?" She repeated her directions a few more times while pointing the dog's head in Casey's direction.

Tessa stood and pulled Casey up alongside her, stopping to kiss her passionately. Then she pulled away and moved toward the house.

"Oh, Nikki, you're not going to kiss me like that and stop, are you?"

Tessa smiled in return. "There's more where that came from, I promise you, but I need to test this out first. I want to make sure you'll always be safe here if you're alone. Okay, they're going to bark again, are you ready?"

Casey scrunched her face up in preparation, causing Tessa to laugh out loud. "Didn't you have any dogs when you were a kid?"

"Yes, but I had a golden retriever. He was cute and fluffy."

"Well, these two ladies are cute and tough."

Casey giggled. "Kind of like their owner, huh?"

Tessa winked. "Okay, here goes. Heads up," she commanded.

Again, the dogs jumped to their feet instantly. This time, Mahogany stood her ground in front of Tessa, while Cinnamon pressed herself against Casey's legs, determined to fend off the imaginary threat.

"You give them the command to back off," Tessa said loudly over the barking.

"Down!" Casey shouted. The dogs obeyed Casey at once, coming to lie at her feet as if she had always been their mistress. "Wow," Casey exclaimed and praised the animals that lapped up the attention that was being lavished on them.

Tessa watched and emotion tugged at her heart. Casey would be the only woman these animals would treat like this, other than their owner. She didn't know why, but somehow she was certain of it.

"Hey, what about me? I *did* train them." Tessa stood directly in front of Casey.

"Oh, did you want your tummy rubbed, too?" Casey teased.

"No," Tessa said in a throaty voice, pulling Casey against her body and wrapping her arms around the slim waist. "I have something else you can rub, though."

Tessa reached around and unzipped Casey's dress, the zipper stopping just above her shapely backside. She pulled Casey against her hips and let her tongue run along the outside of Casey's ear.

“Would you like to take a swim?” Tessa whispered in invitation.

“You know,” Casey was finding it difficult to control her breathing, “I spent two hundred dollars on this dress, and you haven’t said a word about how it looks.”

“Mmm, baby, you look wonderful in it,” Tessa murmured against Casey’s skin, pulling the dress off each shoulder. “But I think you would look positively beautiful *out* of it.”

Casey’s eyes closed and she allowed Tessa to slide the dress down her body. “You’re very different out here.”

Tessa sucked hard on the skin at Casey’s neck, not caring about the mark it would leave. “I guess I’m just more in my own element. I feel more comfortable in my own home.”

“Then I think we should come here often.” Casey whimpered softly against Tessa’s shoulder.

The two women sat on a rug in the living area clad only in their bath towels, sipping white wine. They’d spent all of the late afternoon in the pool, playing like teenagers one moment, passionately caressing each other the next. They eventually made their way into the bedroom, both towels ending up in a heap at their feet.

Tessa allowed Casey to take her by the shoulders, pressing her down to the bed and onto her back. Casey captured Tessa’s lips in a kiss Tessa was becoming accustomed to. Her muscles quivered helplessly, and she was glad they were lying down. Tessa became a prisoner to those lips, then that tongue. Soon, Casey’s whole body was expertly teasing Tessa’s overloaded senses. *My God, how in the world does she do this to me?*

“Casey? Baby?” Tessa murmured between kisses.

“Yes, love?”

“I...oh, yeah...I was wondering...ugh, God, you are such a talented lover,” Tessa finally blurted out.

Casey stopped her caresses and looked into Tessa’s face. “Are you asking me how I became that way?”

Suddenly, Tessa realized how that sounded. *Okay, this is why you should just keep your mouth shut.* “Oh, no, I-I didn’t mean it

like that. It's just I haven't come across that many women who enjoy the same...I don't know, who have the same, um...*appetites* as I do."

A smile crossed Casey's face. "So you're asking me if I sleep around or what?"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry, God, this was stupid to even bring up."

Casey settled on her side and rested her head in the palm of her hand. She continued to stroke Tessa's dark skin, running a teasing finger around a brown nipple.

"Can I tell you something without you laughing at me?" Casey asked, a serious expression on her face.

"Of course," Tessa said with an equally sober expression.

"I've never been this way with anyone. Not that I didn't want to be. I had my fantasies, but that's all they were. I never felt comfortable enough with anyone to tell them what I wanted or even take what I desired. I've certainly never felt relaxed enough with a lover to use a...well, to try sex different ways. Everything you and I do feels so damn natural. It's like I'm not afraid to experience any kind of pleasure with you. I guess I'm not afraid to be myself around you."

Casey finished, but she hadn't yet looked up into the blue eyes that watched her with deliberate scrutiny. The blue gaze softened, and Tessa found herself unable to hold back. She took hold of Casey, rolled them both over, and eased her body carefully over Casey's frame.

"I wouldn't change one thing about you. Not one thing."

She leaned in and pressed her lips to the waiting mouth that parted quickly for her thrusting tongue. Tessa made sure there wasn't a portion of Casey's body that didn't feel the touch of her lips or caress of her tongue.

Casey spread her legs and Tessa was enveloped in a heat that spread through her body. Tessa teased Casey's aching nipples with only the tip of her tongue. After what seemed like an eternity of torture to Casey, Tessa sucked each tight nub of flesh into her warm and inviting mouth.

Slender fingers reached between Casey's legs and delicately stroked the outer lips, an arousing wetness already trickling from

Casey's inner folds. Tessa pulled away slightly and looked deep into Casey's eyes. Seemingly having made a decision, Tessa reached off the edge of the bed to the bedside table and pulled open a drawer. The item she took from the wooden table was laid on the side of the bed as Tessa resumed her hungry mouth's caresses.

Casey watched out of the corner of her eye as the long, cylindrical object was pulled from the drawer. Her heart raced, and she felt a distinct increase in the wetness between her thighs. She heard an involuntary whimper escape from her own throat as she watched Tessa casually lay the toy to one side.

The sound caused Tessa to pull away and look down into the deep green eyes, gone dark with desire. Tessa had a look akin to amusement in her sparkling eyes.

"Are you going to use that...on me?" Casey asked hesitantly.

"Perhaps...if you'd like."

"Will I use it on you?" Casey tried a different approach with her suddenly uncommunicative lover.

"Hopefully."

Tessa captured a perfect earlobe with her teeth, putting gentle pressure on the sensitive flesh and delighting in the shiver that ran through Casey's body. *God, how I love being back in control. I know exactly what I want and how I'm going to get it. No surprises, everything predictable.*

"Do you have a harness for it?" Casey boldly asked.

"Huh?" Tessa looked up, her composure slipping.

"I asked if you had a harness for it."

"I heard you. I just...I mean, I didn't..." *Wake up, woman. She's asking, so deliver.* "Do you want me to get it?"

Casey nodded slowly but enthusiastically, a seductive grin on her lips, then watched as Tessa went from total confidence to flustered embarrassment to awkward shyness in a matter of seconds.

Their gazes locked, and the fire that was turned on high within Casey's body transferred itself to Tessa's belly. Tessa gave a small grin and leapt from the bed. After pulling open the top drawer in a solid oak chest, Tessa searched for the black leather harness.

Casey couldn't stifle the giggle that arose.

"What?" Tessa turned toward the sound.

"The last time I saw you move that fast, you were saving my life."

A deep, even blush spread across her dark skin. Tessa turned away to retrieve the leather item and could feel her own heart racing along. This was becoming a common occurrence, being tongue-tied around this woman.

Returning to the bed with the object, she was suddenly at a loss as to how she was expected to play this scenario.

"Uh...do you want me to wear it or do you..." She trailed off.

Casey rose to her knees. Picking up the toy, she moved to the edge of the bed where Tessa stood, harness in hand. Casey took the harness and tossed it on the bed next to her. She kissed and nipped Tessa's neck, working her way down the well-muscled torso.

"Mmm, why don't you go first, then we'll...improvise," she said with what, to Tessa's eye, appeared to be a thoroughly mischievous grin.

Casey nudged Tessa's thighs apart slightly and teased the swollen folds by pressing the large end of the dildo into her wetness, running the head along the moist slit. Rising up on her knees, the two women met in a kiss, their tongues warring for dominance. Casey continued the teasing motion of the phallus in her hand, swallowing Tessa's groans within her kiss.

Casey turned the toy around until she was pressing the smaller end up into the dark curls. Tessa widened her stance even more, a silent plea for Casey to continue. The smaller end of the object was slowly slipped inside Tessa's slick opening, and the accompanying protrusion fitted against her clit. Casey held the dildo and slid her hand up its length, pressing against Tessa as she did.

"Oh, God!" Tessa moaned, wrapping strong arms around Casey's waist, burying her head against the smooth skin of Casey's neck. "You know exactly what you're doing to me when you do that, don't you?" she asked knowingly.

Casey's only answer was an enormous smile.

Casey picked up the leather harness, and it took only seconds for Tessa to find the equipment held snugly to her body. Each time Casey leaned her kneeling body into Tessa's, Tessa could hear herself moaning as the smaller end slid inside her and the protrusion rubbed against her swollen clit.

"Have you used this on many women?" Casey's voice interrupted Tessa's fantasies.

Tessa wasn't sure how to answer. She decided the truth would be best. "Actually, no. I haven't used it on anyone but myself. I've never even used the harness before. Look, baby, if you don't want to, we—"

"Shh," Casey whispered, receiving the answer she wanted to hear. Tessa watched as Casey slid down to the bed, her lips and tongue leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

Tessa's brow arched about as high as was possible as Casey swirled a pink tongue around the head of the phallus. Casey made sure to press against the object and could feel it move against Tessa.

"Yes," Tessa moaned, her head falling back against her shoulders and her hips rolling forward.

Casey could taste her lover's essence on the toy, and she moaned herself as the truth of Tessa's words was manifested. The thought of Tessa using the toy on herself seemed to arouse Casey even more.

Tessa felt the delicious pressure again, and her eyes snapped open to watch the woman between her legs. She usually wasn't this verbal, but Casey had her groaning like the world was coming to an end. She didn't know which was more erotic. Watching Casey's movements as she wrapped her lips around the head of the object and slid its length into her mouth or the feeling of the small end that slid inside the increasing wetness of her own sex. Alternating between gentle and firm pressure, Casey took more and more of the phallus until she stopped and let the object slide out, but not completely. She moved her head backward and forward; the pressure that the forward motion placed on Tessa's aching sex brought her pleasure to a quick peak.

Tessa couldn't believe this was happening or how turned on she was by Casey's actions. Casey slid her hands up the back of Tessa's thighs, clutching at the hard muscles of her buttocks. Casey used her handhold to pull Tessa's hips closer, taking more of the dildo into her mouth.

"Oh, baby, yeah." Tessa moaned loudly as her hips took on a life of their own.

Tessa buried her fingers in the short blond locks, encouraging Casey's mouth to keep doing exactly what it had been doing. Tessa's hips pumped wildly, her thighs trembling as she felt the distinct pleasure of electrically charged sparks shooting up and down the backs of her legs. Throwing her head back, Tessa released a growl of pure pleasure.

"Casey!" Tessa exclaimed breathlessly.

Tessa let loose a moan, then her undulating hips froze momentarily as she allowed her orgasm to sweep her away, her heavy-lidded eyes snapping open to reveal blue irises glazed over with passion. She plunged her hips once more, then twice into the talented mouth, finally exhaling the breath she now realized she'd been holding. The gasp came out as a loud groan, and she brought one knee up to the bed to steady herself, leaning over Casey.

Casey helped Tessa ease her tall frame onto the bed. Tessa lay on her back as Casey snuggled close.

"I don't know...how this...happens," Tessa panted. "I start out trying to seduce you, and I inevitably end up flat on my back, gasping for breath and begging for mercy."

Casey laughed aloud at Tessa's predicament.

"Are you complaining?" Casey chuckled.

Tessa pulled away to look into Casey's eyes. With a smile of satisfaction, Tessa rested her head on the pillow.

"Never," Tessa finally said. "Hey there." Tessa caught Casey's roaming hand in her own as the small fingers were about to grasp the phallus. "Are you *trying* to kill me?"

"Some big tough *Karê*," Casey teased.

In a move so fast Casey never saw it coming, Tessa grasped the hands of her lover and rolled until Casey was pinned beneath her.

“No fair!” Casey laughed and tried to squirm away at the same time, with no success.

Tessa nudged Casey’s knees apart and Casey complied. Tessa could see the desire burning within the green depths of Casey’s gaze, but she figured turnabout was fair play. She leaned in and hungrily kissed Casey’s mouth until Casey matched her fervor, then she abruptly pulled away. Tessa repeated the process with other parts of Casey’s body, keeping Casey’s hands in her strong grasp. Tessa would use her lips and tongue to light a fire on Casey’s overheated skin, then she would suddenly stop.

“Nikki, please...” Casey finally whimpered, arching her body in an attempt to increase the pleasurable contact.

“Mmm, please what, baby?”

“More” was all Casey’s fevered brain could think to utter.

“More? More of what, love?”

“Oh, God, more of...everything!” Casey blurted out.

“Ah, everything,” Tessa said in a low, husky voice, kissing and nipping at Casey’s neck and shoulders. “Don’t you really mean more of this?”

Tessa pressed her hips into the apex of Casey’s legs and her own belly clenched at Casey’s throaty moan. Casey felt like her body was in another dimension. Her small frame shivered as the phallus slid across her wetness. Her hips rose off the bed to prolong the contact, and a quiet grunt of satisfaction came from Tessa as the small dildo inside her pressed against her already sensitive flesh.

“Tell me,” Tessa whispered against Casey’s ear.

The moist breath and the sound of Tessa’s rugged voice vibrated against her skin, causing Casey to whimper involuntarily. Casey understood what Tessa was requesting, and she was powerless to do anything beyond giving in to her demands. Casey’s head told her to hold out, her heart whispered that she would do anything to please her lover, and finally her body overrode the other two by absolutely demanding the pleasure Tessa was promising for her obedience.

“Please,” Casey repeated her plea.

“You know what I want to hear.” Tessa pressed her hips

against Casey once again. "Tell me what you want, Cassandra."

Tessa's throaty whisper in her ear and the abundant wetness between her legs combined to produce an ache that transcended above all her other wants and desires. The final straw was when Tessa whispered her name, rolling the syllables in that incredibly low, sexy voice of hers. Casey could feel her brain sparking like it was on overload. Then Tessa's hand guided the head of the dildo, pressing it against her opening.

Small hands suddenly realized they were free and entwined themselves in long strands of ebony hair. Casey looked into the flames of blue fire that danced in Tessa's eyes and whispered the words she wanted to hear.

"Please...fuck me."

In one smooth motion, Tessa slid the length of the phallus inside Casey and stilled her hips, letting Casey become accustomed to the sudden fullness.

"Sweet Mother of God!" Casey exclaimed as Tessa's hips slid the dildo in and out in a slow, torturous fashion.

"Do you need me to stop?" Tessa asked in alarm.

"Oh, no. Please, don't stop," Casey cried out.

Tessa took in the expression of rapture on Casey's face and her hips set their own pace as each movement brought about pleasing sensations within her own body. Casey's hips rose from the bed to meet each thrust and bury the object even deeper inside. Her breath came in pants, and she had to fight the urge to explode in immediate orgasm the moment Tessa's lips fiercely took her own. Casey's whole world narrowed to the feel of Tessa's tongue in her mouth and the friction of the object sliding between her legs.

Tessa continued her penetration, delighting in the feel of the woman under her. Each forward thrust of her hips caused the same motion of the phallus within her own body, and soon the sensations caused her to feel as if she were actually inside Casey. The more she thought about it, the more it felt like it. Soon, Tessa was groaning at the imaginary feel of Casey's warmth surrounding her as she buried herself in the soft wetness.

Tessa and Casey moved to an age-old rhythm, one their bodies instinctively knew. No words were spoken, no tender endearments

or promises bartered back and forth. The raw excitement and passion crackled in the air around them. There would be other moments of tender lovemaking, but this moment of passion was one of carnal pleasure alone. Harder, faster, and deeper were the only verbal pleas exchanged.

Casey pressed her nails into strong shoulders and felt Tessa's responding growl before she heard it. Not a sound conceived out of anger but the seductive rumble of pleasure borne of pain. Casey raked her nails sharply across the broad, muscled back, and the sound rumbled forth from Tessa's chest again. Strong arms wrapped around her, and the biceps bulged against her. She ran her hands down Tessa's torso and the muscles in her hips tightened and flexed with each thrust inside her. In her mind's eye, she could see the thighs that pressed against her open legs, all hard muscle covered in the softest dark skin. How could Casey tell Tessa later that it was not only her voice, but the image of Tessa's overpowering, muscular physique that sent her careening over the edge into climax?

"Come for me, baby." Tessa moaned the words breathlessly as her own orgasm could be held back no longer.

Their bodies shuddered together as waves of release rolled through them as one, their cries swallowed up by their kisses. Tessa finally collapsed onto Casey. Sliding the phallus from her lover's haven, she rolled over onto her back. Long moments of silence existed as each woman struggled to regain her composure.

Casey turned and snuggled against Tessa's side, an arm quickly wrapped around to pull Casey closer. Tessa turned and gently kissed the top of the golden head.

"Casey...I-I—" Tessa was caught again. She so much wanted to tell her how she felt, but a breath-stealing panic gripped her heart at uttering the words.

"I love you, too," Casey finished, kissing her collarbone, then looking up at Tessa with a lazy smile on her face.

Nearly a half hour went by as they caressed and bathed in the afterglow of their passion.

"Are you going to sleep in this?" Casey finally spoke.

"I think it's welded to me," Tessa said dryly.

"Let me help." Casey unfastened the harness, at last sliding the toy from within the dark curls.

"Oh." Tessa couldn't hold back the languid moan as Casey slid the object from her body.

"You're still so wet," Casey said.

"Well, you're responsible for that, so I guess you should be the one to do something about it," Tessa tossed back.

The next thing Tessa realized, Casey was nestled between her legs, her warm tongue tenderly lapping up the juices there.

"Good God, woman!" Tessa exclaimed but spread her legs farther apart, doing nothing to discourage her.

Casey used as tender a touch on the swollen flesh as she could, avoiding the sensitive areas altogether. The taste of Tessa seemed to explode on her tongue, and it was all she could do to keep herself from burying her face in the sweet flesh. She ran her tongue softly along each fold, pressing the warm muscle slightly into Tessa's opening in a teasing motion. Tessa's hips picked up a slow, sensual grind in counter-rhythm to Casey's tongue, and eventually, long slender fingers found their way into the golden locks and Tessa pressed Casey against her harder.

"Please, baby...now," Tessa pleaded in a hoarse voice.

Casey wrapped her arms around the bronze thighs and pressed deeper. Her tongue found its way to the swollen and sensitive clit. Casey pressed the flat of her tongue against the tender bundle of nerves and could feel Tessa's orgasm begin. The trembling thighs spread wider, and Casey took the nub of flesh between her lips and sucked hard, releasing it to let it slide against her tongue.

It was a good thing they decided to stay in the apartment as opposed to the hotel because Tessa let loose a roar loud enough to make Casey's ears ring. Tessa half sat up as the force of her climax hit her. Dropping back down to the bed, her muscles continued to jump and quiver.

Pulling Casey up to lie half against and half on top of her, Tessa kissed her soundly, delighted at her own taste on Casey's lips. When they pulled apart, Tessa flung her arms wide on the bed and groaned.

"Mercy," she said in surrender.

Casey chuckled slightly. "I told you it wasn't my fault you taste so good."

Tessa had to laugh at Casey's logic and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"You are extraordinary," Tessa whispered.

"You're not so bad yourself," Casey murmured sleepily, cuddling closer.

Tessa closed her eyes in exhaustion and pleasure, but her brain still worked for a few moments until sleep took her. Tessa never felt so utterly loved, so entirely satiated, and so much in love in her life. Incredible, she thought, absently tightening her hold on the woman in her arms. Her large muscular body and Casey's smooth, lean figure seemed in complete contrast to each other, but as they lay together, they seemed to fit so well. To Tessa's mind, it seemed so right.

A fleeting moment of negativity tried to rise up in Tessa's brain just before sleep claimed her. Being a natural pessimist, Tessa knew that anything good in her life was quickly followed by the bad. That was the way it had always been. For the first time in her life, she pushed that thought away instead of embracing it. She didn't want to think about what the future held for them. She only wanted to focus on the reality of the present. The reality was that she was in love and held a woman in her arms who loved her. For Tessa, that was more than she ever dreamed she would have.

Tessa was unaware of how quickly it could all unravel.

Chapter 13

Casey took the car early the next morning to drive to the National Archaeological Museum in Exárcheia. Tessa tried to entice her back into bed, and it took all the willpower Casey had not to give in to Tessa's seductive advances.

Later, returning up the same road to Tessa's home, Casey pinched the top of her nose to try to ward off the pain of the headache the meetings caused.

She detested dealing with museum administrators, and the fact that they were all men didn't help, either. She was second in command of the dig; her associate, another professor from the University in California, was in charge. Cyrus Bennington was a nice man and more knowledgeable than anyone in the field of Cycladic sculpture. In his seventies, he was still from the old school and fit in perfectly with the Greek curators at ignoring nearly every suggestion Casey made. She was not only furious, but her head was filled with a dull throb. God, this is going to be one long dig, she thought, pulling into the stone driveway of the estate.

"It's me," she said into the wireless console at the gate and listened as a click released the lock on the entrance.

After pulling the gate closed, she turned to find two Dobermans bounding toward her, tennis balls held snugly between ferocious-looking teeth. The small nubs of their tails whisked back and forth quickly.

“Hey there...where’s your mom?” Casey tried to fend off the wet animals with her briefcase.

Tessa heard the exchange from her seat by the pool. She smiled slightly at the domestic feel of it all. A sudden frown pulled her brow together as she thought of the future again. There would be no domestic life for the two of them, of that she was certain. She shrugged away the feeling of hopelessness. She refused to think about what would come later, at least not this weekend. This weekend, she would enjoy being in love, for the first, and most definitely, last time in her life.

“Hey, you look wiped,” Tessa said.

Tessa wore a loose-fitting tank top and shorts, and sandals on her feet. She grabbed the tennis balls from each of the dogs and threw them into the pool. Both animals leapt into the water, splashed, and swam around the shallow end for a few moments.

“Come here.” Tessa held out her hand.

Casey removed her jacket and unfastened a few of the buttons on the pale green sleeveless top she wore. She slipped out of the low-heeled pumps and set them on top of the patio table. Tossing her jacket over the back of another chair, she slid into Tessa’s lap. Tessa ran her hands along Casey’s arm, raising goose bumps in the wake of her touch. Casey leaned her head on Tessa’s sun-warmed shoulder and let out an easy sigh.

“I hate dealing with men.”

“Do I need to go in there and knock a few heads together for you?” Tessa asked teasingly.

That caused Casey to laugh. “How do you do it? I mean, after two hours, I wanted to beat the crap out of those sexist assholes.”

It was Tessa’s turn to laugh. “Take a number, honey. Women have been waiting in line for centuries expecting men to wake up and treat them as equals. I figured out a little sooner than you that it’s not going to happen. The time for being the woman *behind* the man is over. It’s time to take what you want.”

“But how? I can see how you do it, but I don’t think I’ve got the physical presence to cause men to shake in their boots.”

“No, you’re never going to be able to strong-arm men. I can

because I can be physically intimidating, but it's more than that. I watch men and I understand the ways they think and how they'll react in different circumstances. The truth is, whether all feminists want to believe it, that men *are* different from women. Men react differently to fear. They have a completely different agenda in life and things that terrify them. One commodity that is common in almost all of them is that their pride or machismo will always be their downfall."

Casey lifted her head and listened intently.

"I can strong-arm men, but you'll never be able to do that. You do have abilities that I'll never possess. You're an extremely intelligent woman. You're knowledgeable about what you do, don't let that intelligence hide under a rock. Secondly, you have a wit and charm about you that could disarm an entire regiment of soldiers. Use what you have and don't worry so much about what you don't."

"How did you get so smart?" Casey smiled, and Tessa's stomach flipped at the love her smile radiated.

Tessa smiled in return and they kissed softly.

"I think your girls feel neglected." Casey motioned for the two dripping dogs to come out of the shallow water of the pool.

"Mmm, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Tessa said with a knowing grin.

"Why?"

The two massive canines shook the water from their fur, drenching the two seated women.

"Oh, God!" Casey laughed, now soaked to the skin.

"Warned you." Tessa was nearly shaking, trying to hold back her laughter.

"Oh, some warning." Casey couldn't stop laughing until Tessa gave in and joined her. "This is just the way my day is going." Casey threw her hands up in defeat.

Tessa stood, easily holding Casey in her arms. Tessa turned to the sliding glass doors.

"Where are we going?" Casey asked.

"To the bedroom. I'm going to help your day get better," Tessa said seductively.

Chapter 14

“You like wearing dresses, don’t you?” Tessa asked Casey, who stood in front of the closet.

“Yeah, I’m not sure why, but I guess I do,” Casey said, unsure of the reasoning behind the question.

The two spent the better part of the afternoon making love and lying around the house listening to music. Tessa suggested they go somewhere nice for dinner to get out of the house and enjoy the warm evening. Casey was in the process of laying out her clothes when she placed a low-cut, cream-colored dress on the closet door, preparing to dress.

They spent the day together, dined together, and eventually showered together, and still Tessa felt like she couldn’t get enough of Casey. She watched as Casey moved about the bedroom, clad only in her short terrycloth robe. She admired the sleek, tanned legs and was secretly glad Casey was one of those women who felt comfortable in a dress or skirt.

“Dresses show off your legs. You have great legs, by the way,” Tessa complimented, lying across the end of the bed, her head in her palm.

“Short legs, you mean,” Casey countered.

“Uh-uh, just right. Damned near perfect.”

Casey turned around. “You’re prejudiced.”

“Yep.” Tessa grinned.

“I bet you haven’t worn a skirt since you were twelve,” Casey teased.

"I'm just not the type. You'd lose that bet, though. I went to Catholic school in England until I was seventeen. Wool skirts were the standard issue."

"Tell me about it. Same thing on Long Island." Casey smiled in commiseration.

"Come here, love." Tessa smiled as she sat up on the edge of the bed. "You're so beautiful," she said as Casey walked over and slipped her hand in the one Tessa held out in offering.

Casey stood over her and Tessa pulled her close, enjoying the way Casey shivered in pleasure at her touch. Tessa untied the knot at Casey's waist and pulled the robe open slightly, revealing her naked figure. Strong arms wrapped around the slim waist and Tessa kissed the taut skin across her abdomen. She reached out a pink tongue and slid the tip against Casey's skin. Tessa moaned softly.

"God, you taste so good," she murmured, nuzzling the underside of Casey's breasts.

Tessa pulled Casey down to sit next to her. She maneuvered to her knees in front of Casey, spreading Casey's legs apart. Tessa shrugged out of her silk robe and pressed her body close until she could feel Casey's wet center against her belly. Another moan and Tessa kissed Casey as if it were the first time. Tender and soft, she caressed her lips with her tongue before pressing harder, requesting entry. When she moved her kisses to Casey's neck, she pulled the cloth robe from Casey's shoulders with a delicate glide.

"I need to know if you taste this good everywhere," Tessa murmured into her kisses.

"You tell me," Casey said, hoping Tessa meant what she thought she did.

In all their lovemaking, this was something Tessa hadn't shared with her yet, and Casey was desperate to experience this pleasure with her. Tessa never stopped Casey from going down on her, but she never reciprocated. Casey shrugged it off initially. It wouldn't be the first time she'd been with a woman who enjoyed experiencing the pleasure but refused to perform oral sex. She didn't understand why Tessa waited so long, but Tessa seemed downright frantic about it now.

Tessa held Casey's face in her hands and kissed her for all she was worth. Casey's whimpers of delight struck straight at Tessa's heart and her stomach flipped in anticipation. She nuzzled the warm skin of her lover's neck and let her tongue play enticingly with a sensitive earlobe.

"I want my tongue inside you," Tessa whispered, unsure of how the words would affect Casey. She smiled when she received the answer she had hoped for.

"Oh, yes, Nikki, please," Casey pleaded, guiding the dark head down her abdomen.

A low growl emanated from the depths of Tessa's very being at the first luscious scent of Casey's arousal as she brought her head between Casey's legs. Casey leaned back on one elbow, her other hand pressed atop the raven head between her thighs. Tessa hovered over her glistening sex, waiting for Casey's gaze to meet her own. The moment it did, Tessa ran her tongue along the entire length of Casey's sex.

"Yes." Casey's hips rose from the bed to follow the source of the delicious pleasure. "Please...don't tease me...I need you."

Casey's impassioned plea drove all thoughts of games or teasing from Tessa's mind. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Not waiting for an answer, Tessa retraced her tongue's path along outer lips that glistened with sweet moisture. The tip of her tongue gently spread inner folds apart, and she lovingly explored each crease and crevice. She avoided the swollen bundle of nerves, even though she could hear Casey's frustrated whimpers. She continued her tongue's tender caresses until Casey's whimpers changed to throaty moans and her hips thrust against the tongue that slipped inside of her.

"Oh, God, please...oh, please...don't stop," Casey begged as Tessa concentrated on her swollen clit.

Casey writhed and drove her hips in tune with the strokes of Tessa's tongue; faster and deeper, the muscle filled her until Casey knew she wouldn't be able to prolong the pleasure any longer. Casey finally allowed herself to give in to the absolute surrender Tessa demanded.

"Oh, God, yes! Nikki...Nikki!" Casey cried out.

Tessa plunged her tongue deep inside, wanting to feel the convulsive spasms of her release as they rolled throughout her small frame like a never-ending wave. Casey cried out as she exploded in orgasm, her whole body tensing, then releasing in jerks and shudders.

Tessa ran her tongue gently through the quivering folds, gathering the sweet nectar Casey's climax produced. She rose from her knees, climbed up to the bed, and pulled Casey against her. Casey delighted in the feel of her lover's arms around her, and when she tilted her head and felt Tessa's smooth lips on her own, she could taste her arousal on Tessa's lips.

"Thank you," Tessa whispered.

"Shouldn't I be thanking you?" Casey asked in wonder.

"Not this time, baby. I've wanted you that way from the moment I met you. I couldn't even explain it to myself. You see, it's not something I usually do."

"Well, you sure picked it up fast." Casey grinned, leaning up on one elbow to look down on Tessa.

Tessa smiled sheepishly, and a light blush worked its way up her neck. "I hope you enjoyed it." Tessa seemed genuinely worried.

"Enjoy wasn't the word. You're serious, aren't you? You never do this for other women?" Casey asked in surprise.

"Women do that for me, but I...Well, it's such an intimate act. I've rarely felt enough for anyone to...Casey, sex has never been about anything more than feeling good for me. I used women for what I needed. There were never *any* emotions involved." Tessa turned her head away in embarrassment. *You should have never opened yourself up this way. She's history for sure now.*

"Hey," Casey said softly. "Hey," she repeated, taking Tessa's chin in her hand and turning it toward her. Casey watched as tears uncharacteristically rolled down the high cheekbones. "I know how hard this is for you...opening up in front of someone else. I'm not going anywhere, though. I already knew you weren't about to win any Mother Teresa awards. You don't have to hide your past from me. Those other women...we are talking past, right?" Casey asked hesitantly.

Tessa displayed perfect white teeth in a smile meant only for Casey. "Yes, baby. They're all in the past."

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

"Anything, love."

"Can we go eat now because I am *really* hungry."

Tessa laughed and pulled Casey tightly against her body and kissed Casey passionately. "By all means, let's get you fed. Besides, you'll need your strength...for later."

Dinner was a fantastically romantic affair as Tessa seemed to have acquaintances all over Athens. Tessa and Casey had a private meal on the rooftop of one of the most elegant restaurants in Greece. They took a long walk down the shop streets, doing nothing more than talking and enjoying each other's company.

Tessa watched her companion ooh and ahh over the jewelry displayed in the shop window. Large diamond wedding sets were displayed prominently, but Casey seemed the most impressed with the small delicate pieces. Tessa stood close behind her until Casey could feel Tessa against her back. Tessa spoke in a tone so soft and low only Casey could hear her.

"I'd like to see you wearing one of those for me someday."

Tessa could scarcely believe her own ears. *Did I just ask her to marry me?*

"All you have to do is ask, love," Casey said, realizing *that* time might be a long way off for them. *Oh, please, ask me someday when you're serious.*

Tessa was once again thrown for a loop by Casey's response. Casey seemed to take everything in stride. Nothing Tessa said or mentioned as a part of her horrible past seemed to set her back. For perhaps the hundredth time that weekend, Tessa tried to push down the fear that rose like bile in her throat. *There will come a time, little one, then I'll be the cause of your pain.*

Tessa quickly squeezed Casey's shoulder. It took a great deal of control not to wrap her arms around Casey right there on the street. She had to remember who they were and *where* they were. Athens may not be Mýkonos, but it was damn close. Too close to take chances in spots where prying eyes might be keeping tabs.

So far, nothing they'd done in public could be misconstrued as anything more than the fact that the two women were perhaps becoming close friends.

Casey felt the contact as Tessa squeezed her shoulder and she leaned back against her just slightly in reply. Tessa explained the way they would have to act in public, and while Casey hated the idea, she understood. She'd been there before, anyway. It wasn't like it would be any different in the States. The one difference in Athens was that everyone seemed to know Tessa. Business owners, students, even women on the street nodded and greeted her using her title, *Karê*.

They decided to take a break and sat outside at one of the local *tavérnas* to enjoy a glass of *retsína*. The owner led them to the best table without having to be asked.

"How does everyone know you here?" Casey asked.

Tessa searched Casey's eyes and another piece of that wall around her soul gave way. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Casey understood the logic in that question. Tessa was asking her if she wanted to hear about that horrible past she kept referring to.

"Yes, I want to know all of you. The good and the bad."

Tessa motioned to the owner to leave the bottle when their drinks were brought around. She wasn't sure where to start. She couldn't tell her too much, but she didn't want to lie about who she'd been, about who most people thought she still was. Tessa shook her head, tossing her bangs from her eyes, and cleared her throat.

"Athens used to belong to me," she said. "I controlled everything that came in and went out via the docks. The men in the unions were loyal to me, not because they wanted to be, but because they were afraid of me. Everyone paid me to control the city. From the prostitutes to the police, I ran their entire lives through my own reign of terror that lasted for nearly ten years. These people are not being polite because they respect me. They're doing it out of fear. Because they know what I've done... what I could do again."

Tessa watched the deep green eyes as she spoke, searching

for some sign of revulsion or abhorrence. What she found nearly melted her stoic will. Tessa saw her own pain mirrored in Casey's eyes, which filled with tears and radiated a depth of emotion that Tessa hadn't had directed toward her since she was a girl when her father was alive. It was unconditional love.

"How did you become that way?"

Tessa thought about how to answer. The truth was that on an Easter day, twenty years before, she had her world pulled out from underneath her. Everything she'd been taught about honor, trust, and integrity became a lie. In the space of a few moments in time, an eleven-year-old Tessa Nikolaidis found out that only the strong got what they wanted, that wealth and power were the ultimate weapons of destruction, and that there was only one thing people understood. Fear. How could she tell Casey she spent the last twenty years becoming the kind of person who existed for only one thing—revenge?

"I guess it started when my father was murdered. I became a little disillusioned after that."

Casey became light-headed and couldn't take her eyes off the red awning behind Tessa. Tessa watched as Casey flinched at some memory, her face taken over by a far-off expression.

"Casey, are you okay?" Tessa reached across the table and covered the smaller one resting there. "Your hands are ice cold. Casey?"

Casey shook her head to clear the cobwebs and locked on to the blue eyes in front of her that were filled with concern. The red awning behind where Tessa sat filled up her field of vision.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm just getting one of those weird feelings, you know? It seems to be passing." Casey finally lifted her head. Her bright smile eased Tessa somewhat. "Would you mind if we just went back home?"

Tessa smiled slightly at the sound of that—home. Coming from Casey's lips, it had a sound of love and permanence to it. "Yeah, I think that's a good idea. Let me settle the bill. Will you be okay here for a few minutes?"

Casey nodded. "I'm fine now, really. Pick up a bottle of *retsína*, too."

Tessa rose and with a worried glance at Casey, walked inside the small *tavérna*.

Casey sipped the rest of her wine and pushed the empty glass aside. An older woman in her forties scooped up the glass and set in on a tray.

“*Efcharistó*.” Casey smiled, thanking the woman.

“You do not belong with her,” the woman said softly.

“I beg your pardon?” Casey said.

“The *Karé*, you don’t know the kind of woman she is. The kinds of things she does.”

Casey’s voice took on a hard edge. “I know exactly what kind of woman she is, thank you. She is trying to forget what happened in her past.”

Casey added this last, and she wasn’t sure why she felt like she should explain to this stranger. The woman looked toward the door, watching for Tessa’s return.

“You think it is her past that haunts her? Do you call a few days the past?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know what happened to the young men who shot at you on Sunday?” The woman looked again at the door and leaned closer to Casey. Casey’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Yes, I know who you are, Cassandra Meridio.”

The woman juggled her tray in one hand and pulled a folded piece of the *Ta Nea* out of her apron pocket. She held the newspaper clipping out for Casey to see. Casey’s picture was displayed next to a feature on the incident in front of the church.

“What happened to them?” Casey asked hesitantly, suddenly afraid of the answer.

“All but one returned, the man who shot the gun. No one has seen him since the day Tessa took him for a car ride here in Athens. It is rumored that his *arkhédhias* were delivered to your father in a sack.”

“You’re wrong.” It was all Casey could think to say, but it came out weakly.

The older woman spied Tessa coming back to the table. She took a rag and pretended to wipe the table clean. “If you’re so sure

she has changed, ask her what became of George Mikolo,” she added quickly before turning away.

Tessa walked back to the table and thought that Casey looked even worse than when she left.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” Tessa frowned.

The quick ride back to the estate passed in silence. Casey wanted nothing more than to discount everything the stranger said. But something nagged at her insides; something told her Tessa wasn’t being completely honest with her. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but the thought fluttered quickly in and out of her conscious mind for days now. She knew Tessa was protecting her from certain aspects of her dark past, but she wondered if that was the only reason Tessa shut her out.

Tessa drove with both hands on the wheel, pondering Casey’s silence. She bit her lip, cursing herself silently for bringing up her father. It seemed like it would only take the tiniest of things to jog Casey’s mind, and once again, she would be thrown into the horror of that day. Tessa watched Casey’s pain at not being able to remember, yet so sure something was wrong. It broke her heart that she couldn’t ease her suffering, but if she revealed everything, wouldn’t it only cause Casey more needless pain? *You’re lying to yourself again. Is it really Casey’s well-being you’re worried about or that you know if you tell her what you’re really about, she’ll leave you?*

The five-minute car ride seemed to last an eternity for both women.

Tessa set the cup of hot tea on the end table by the overstuffed doublewide chair Casey sat in. “This will warm you up at least.” Tessa knelt in front of Casey and rubbed her hands to get some warmth into the freezing limbs.

Casey didn’t look up and finally Tessa stood to move away. Casey’s hand shot out and took hold of Tessa’s long, slender fingers.

“Sit here with me,” she said, moving over in the large chair.

Tessa smiled softly and tossed her jacket over the sofa. Casey watched as Tessa also removed her pistol from the small of her back. Tessa eased her frame into the chair, and Casey easily slid

into her lap. The contact Casey established seemed to calm Tessa's fears considerably, and Tessa wrapped her own warm embrace around Casey.

"Honey, what can I do?" Tessa asked.

Casey's body shook slightly, and Tessa realized it wasn't the shiver that occasionally ran across Casey's skin when Tessa touched her. Casey was trembling. Tessa pulled her closer, thinking at first that it was the memories of that day causing Casey's condition. *Oh, little one, if I tell you why you have these dreams, it will only cause you more pain.*

"Talk to me, Casey. Tell me what's wrong."

Casey buried her face against the smooth, dark skin of Tessa's neck. She loved the scent of Tessa's skin. Casey shook her head, unable to speak. *How can I ask her? It will change everything if I do. If I ask her, isn't that the same as telling her I don't trust what she's been telling me, and if I don't ask, will I ever be able to trust her completely?*

Tessa felt tears on her neck and knew that this was more than just a piece of Casey's old nightmare brought to life.

"Honey, what is it? Are you having second thoughts about us...about being with me?"

Casey nodded against Tessa's shoulder as her tears continued. Tessa took in a deep breath and held it momentarily before releasing it. She could feel the hot tears burning the backs of her eyes, but she didn't want to give in to them. She never knew it could happen so fast or that it would hurt this much. She swallowed down the pain that clutched at her chest and tried to sound sympathetic, although her own heart was breaking.

"It's all right, baby, shh. I'll take you to the hotel. You don't have to stay here tonight, I understand."

"No, that's not what I mean." Casey sobbed as she lifted her head to look into Tessa's tear-filled gaze.

"What?" Tessa gently brushed the tears from Casey's cheeks. "Has someone hurt you? Have I done something to hurt you?"

Casey shook her head but still the tears rolled down her cheeks. "I need to ask you something, but I'm afraid of what you'll think of me after you hear what it is."

Tessa tilted Casey's head up to look into her eyes, brimming with tears. "Is it something about my past?"

Casey nodded.

"Something you've heard that I've done?" Tessa asked knowingly.

"Yes." Casey nodded again.

Tessa pulled Casey close and she tucked her head snugly under Tessa's chin. "You can ask me anything you need to. I won't ever judge you for that."

"Do you promise your answer will be the truth?"

Tessa searched the room as if unconsciously seeking a way out. *Can I tell the absolute truth?* The woman in her arms shook with her sobs, and Tessa's heart felt like it was being ripped from her chest. She knew then what the answer to any question Casey asked of her would be. Even if Casey guessed, Tessa would own up and admit the truth to ease Casey's hurt.

"On one condition," Tessa said softly, pulling Casey's head up to look at her. "Only if you'll stop crying for me, all right?" Tessa whispered tenderly and kissed Casey's forehead.

They sat that way for a while until Casey calmed her nerves and stopped the flow of tears. Tessa sat back and ran her fingers through the short blond hair, holding on to Casey tightly with her other arm. "Nikki," Casey started without raising her head. "I need to know who George Mikolo is."

Casey felt Tessa's body tense under her. She said nothing more, waiting for Tessa to respond. She felt in her heart that when Tessa gave her word to tell the truth, she would.

Tessa froze at the sound of the man's name. *Where did Casey hear about him?* Tessa searched her brain for the few people they'd crossed paths with since dinner. The woman at the *taverna*. Now she remembered how the woman had moved away quickly when Tessa made her way back to the table and how Casey had looked rather ill. The question was...who was the woman?

"He's the man who shot at you last weekend," Tessa said.

"Did you kill him?"

"No, love, I didn't kill him," Tessa said softly.

"Did you hurt him?"

"Well, that depends on your definition. I think I scared the holy hell out of him, but no, Casey, I never touched him."

"But that woman back at the *taverna*, she said you cut off his balls and delivered them to my father as proof that you murdered him. Why would she say that?" Casey raised her head and looked into Tessa's eyes.

"Because that's what your father asked me to do. That's what I used to do. I told you the men in Athens feared me. It's because that's the way I handled disloyalty. It was my trademark."

A small shudder ran through Casey's body.

"My father?" Casey whispered, but she seemed to be directing the thought at herself, so Tessa remained silent. "Why is George Mikolo missing?" Casey asked after digesting the last bit of horror.

Tessa knew she was in deep now. It would all be over because now that she started, she knew she had to confess everything. Tessa needed to explain who she was and most of all...who Casey's father was.

"I can only tell you that he's alive, but I can't demonstrate that fact right now. If you'll trust me until Monday, I'll prove it to you." It was the only thing Tessa could say, the only answer she could give. "Do you still trust me?" she asked in a vulnerable-sounding voice, so low that it was barely a whisper.

Casey looked into Tessa's face and saw something new there. She looked tired and defeated, as if for the first time, Tessa was experiencing what it was like to be unsure and afraid. As gently as she knew how, Casey kissed the lips in front of her.

"I'll do more than trust you, my love. I'll believe in you," Casey whispered.

Tessa held Casey to her in a fierce hug and kissed her temple.

"You are everything to me, Casey...everything."

Tessa laid her body down alongside Casey's naked figure, and they did nothing more than kiss for a long time. Their lips' caresses were sensual and unhurried, neither woman wanting to rush into the flames, rather they wished to enjoy the smoldering

embers of their passion. Tessa began by stroking the smooth skin of Casey's body, from mid-thigh to her waist. Slow and relentless, Tessa ran her fingers in feather-light strokes across Casey's body.

Casey was amazed at how gentle Tessa could be. Looking at Tessa from afar, one could only see the hard edge of her demeanor. Her body, cut through with its muscles and sharp angles, looked as though it had been chipped from stone. Casey's hands found appearances to be deceiving, however. Tessa's skin was smooth as silk, her lips warm and inviting, and her touch so much more tender than anything Casey ever felt before.

Tessa lavished Casey with more attention than Casey had ever experienced from all her past lovers combined. Tessa seemed to take her pleasure in pleasing Casey, who after hours of delicious torture was eventually begging for release. Tessa held Casey's body on the edge for what seemed like an eternity, bringing her passion to a peak, then slowly drawing back, time and time again until Casey could no longer hold back the tide that welled inside her.

When Casey's body shook with the first tremors of orgasm, Tessa followed her lover over the precipice. It wasn't enough for Tessa, and once again, she slowly built the fire within Casey, this time encouraging her release. Again and again, Tessa slowly brought her to another peak. She wanted to give everything to this woman who had slipped past the defenses of her dark heart, just as she wanted everything from her. Tessa asked for Casey's complete surrender as she eventually brought her body to a point of delirious exhaustion.

This was all Tessa had left to give, so that Casey would at least have memories of their tender lovemaking. Casey would always be able to look back on one night and know that Tessa had given her everything of herself.

It was nearing dawn and Casey slept soundly in Tessa's arms. Tessa watched Casey in sleep, running her fingers through the impossibly soft, golden hair. At length, Tessa slipped from the bed and listened as Casey murmured a protest at the loss in her sleep. Tessa placed a kiss on Casey's cheek and the half-smile returned to her sleeping face.

Tessa walked out the sliding doors of the second-floor bedroom onto the wooden balcony, followed by the two Dobermans. She sat on the floor of the deck and leaned her back against the house. The dogs padded over and lay pressed against her. As she leaned her head back and looked up into the gray early morning sky, the tears fell. Tessa did nothing to try to stop them.

So there is penance to do in this life, after all, she thought. This would be hers, to finally give her heart away, only to lose it. To experience the ecstasy of someone as wonderful as Casey loving her, ready to forgive her dark past, only to have to give it up. In her life, she had been beaten and shot, but the pains of those incidents were nothing compared to the anguish that poured over her at that moment.

She couldn't lie to Casey any longer. She could no longer pretend that they would have a life together. The next day, she would give Casey the last piece of herself. She would take her to the center and show her who she was, what Casey's father was, and where Casey fit into the chess game. They wouldn't like it at the center. They weren't too happy when she showed up with Mikolo, but Tessa thought Jack could explain it to Casey. If she tried, she might lose her nerve halfway through or she would be tempted to take the woman in her arms and sugarcoat it. Jack would know what to say and how to say it. He had daughters; he would understand Casey's pain and confusion. Then again, Jack could be a heartless bastard when he wanted to be.

Tessa absently scratched behind Cinnamon's ears as the animal lay her head in her lap. Still the tears fell, and Tessa closed her eyes tight to the pain as realization washed over her. She just made love to Casey for the last time.

Chapter 15

Tessa woke with a start, lying in the middle of the king-size bed alone. It was at least midmorning by the way the sun streamed in through the windows.

“Casey?”

“Down here,” Casey said from the floor below.

Tessa breathed a sigh of relief. She thought Casey was gone. She pulled on a robe and wandered downstairs, catching the tantalizing aroma coming from the kitchen.

“You got out of bed last night...I mean, early this morning,” Casey accused, once she felt the warm presence at her back.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep.”

Casey turned and slipped her arms around Tessa’s waist. She looked up into red-rimmed eyes and suspected the reason for Tessa’s early departure. They kissed, and Tessa closed her eyes at the sweet taste of Casey’s mouth. When they ended the kiss, Casey wrapped her arms tighter around the slim waist and rested her head on a soft, warm chest. Tessa kissed the top of her head and held her tighter.

“So what are we having for lunch?” Tessa asked.

“Something I think you’ll like,” Casey said secretively.

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Yep, if you make it a quick one.”

By the time they sat for their meal, Tessa was cleaned and dressed, and Casey set the table outside. When she set the plates of food down, Tessa’s eyes widened and she grinned.

"*Keftédes*! These are my favorite," she cried, referring to the fried, meatball-like items made of pork. "How did you know and where in this house did you find the ingredients?" Tessa asked in wonder. "You know the only person who makes these for me is my mo—" She stopped abruptly, catching herself, but Casey didn't seem to notice.

Casey served the *keftédes* on a bed of fresh mint along with saffron rice. "I'd love to say it was kismet or something, but Olympia told me. I learned to make these a long time ago in her kitchen. I've already been down to the market and back this morning, sleepyhead."

"I'm sorry, honey. I could have gone with you."

"You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to wake you."

"I can't believe I didn't wake up when you left. I've never felt comfortable enough around anyone to let down my guard like that," Tessa confessed.

"I know." Casey smiled. "I hope it was okay, but I took Cinnamon with me. She just sat in the car with the top down and looked menacing whenever some guy would hit on me."

"Good girl, Cinny," Tessa said to the animal, scratching under her chin and looking up with a lopsided smile at Casey.

"Go on," Casey said with a smile. "Eat before it gets cold."

The lunch was wonderful and Tessa ate more than she had in a long time. She supposed part of her was making such a prolonged affair of the meal to put off telling Casey the truth about herself. She realized that she put it off as long as she could.

"I need to take you somewhere today." Tessa placed her coffee cup back onto the table, afraid to look up.

"To tell me more about who you are?"

"Yes." Tessa finally looked up, the fear evident in her eyes. "I need for you to know the whole truth about me. There are things you'll hear...about me...and about your father that you won't want to hear. I'd like to give you the chance to back out if you want. I won't think badly about you. Frankly, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to call it quits...between us...right now."

"I'm not about to give up on you. I told you before, I love you...*all* of you."

“You won’t after today,” Tessa said ominously.

Casey took a deep breath and wondered if she really was up for this. “It’s so terrible then...what I’ll hear?”

Tessa nodded, that same wounded look haunting her expression. “I’m going to bring you to meet some people I know, that I work with. The things they tell you will all be true, you have to trust me on this. I want you to at least hear them out, then I’ll answer every question you have.”

“All right,” Casey said, not realizing yet that day would be the last day she would proudly call herself Meridio’s daughter.

The car ride into the historic district of Kolonáki was a relatively silent one, both women lost in private thoughts. Tessa pulled the car into a modern underground garage, and they walked the two blocks to a four-story brick building.

“A travel agency?” Casey asked when she saw the sign, then wondered why a travel agency would need such a large building.

“Not really.” Tessa held the door open for Casey to enter.

They exited the elevator on the fourth floor, and Tessa led the way through a small maze of offices. Finally, she stopped in front of an older woman’s desk. The stranger had thick-rimmed glasses and auburn hair that had long ago lost its natural color.

“Tell Jack I’m here, I’ll be in the conference room,” Tessa said briefly, then ushered Casey into a room that could be considered a conference room.

“Have a seat, I’ll be right back. Do you want something to drink?” Tessa asked.

Casey shook her head and watched as Tessa closed the door behind her. Casey surveyed her surroundings and couldn’t put it together. The supposed conference room looked the part, a large table surrounded by high-back chairs and an ornate mirror on the wall. *A travel agency that looks nothing like a place of business?* Casey silently pondered.

Tessa stood with her arms folded in an adjoining room that was completely dark. The mirror in the conference room allowed her to view Casey without Casey seeing her. She watched and could see the wheels turning inside Casey’s brain.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" a male voice hissed from behind her.

"Afternoon, Jack," Tessa said, not taking her gaze off Casey.

"I'd really like to know, have you completely lost that Greek mind of yours bringing her here?"

"She needs to know the truth."

"Bullshit! You need redemption and you think because you're screwing her, it's time to come clean."

Tessa turned her head and her blue eyes went pale. "You're watching me now?"

"I'm watching *out* for you. You happen to be a valuable commodity within our organization—"

"Which is why I ought to be able to make a few demands now and again," Tessa interrupted.

"I think you're wearing them out. Just what in the hell did you think that Mikolo business was?"

The man walked closer to the mirror and rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, sighing heavily. "Yeah, well, it's easy to see what the enticement is. Tell me, Tessa, how bad is it?"

"I'm in love with her," she said. *There, I said it. So why can't I say it to her?* "This wasn't the way this was all supposed to go down, you know?" she said almost to herself. "I want you to tell her the truth."

"You know, she's going to tell her old man once I do. No way is she going to just sit back and watch. No, forget it."

"This is not a negotiable point," Tessa hissed, turning an angry face to the man.

"And just which truth do you want me to tell her? The way I see it or the way you see it?"

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, do I tell her you plan on whacking her old man?" He growled.

"You only need to tell her what she needs to know."

"So I tell her you're setting up Meridio, but I don't tell her that in return, I'm gonna turn my head while you put a bullet in his brain for what he did to your old man."

Tessa grew silent and lowered her head, bringing her hand up

to rub the back of her neck. Jack was harsh, but she knew the man dealt in harsh truths every day. She admired him, and Jack told her numerous times that he was sorry the Bureau hadn't found out about her sooner. He said they would have made a great team on the right side of the law.

"Just don't say anything about my father, okay?"

"She was there, how can she not know about it already?"

"She was a kid. She doesn't remember what happened that day. She has nightmares, and I don't want to set anything off we're not equipped to deal with," Tessa said truthfully.

"Oh, wonderful," Jack said. "I get stuck with the tough dyke *and* her loony girlfriend."

So fast he never saw it coming, Jack's body was slammed against the wall, Tessa's strong arms holding him in a vise-like grip.

"She's a lady, and you damn well better treat her that way," Tessa rasped.

"All right...all right," Jack said hoarsely.

Tessa loosened her grip, and Jack tried to collect himself. "Come on," he said at last.

"I thought maybe you dumped me here," Casey said.

Tessa came back into the room followed by a man in his late forties, maybe fifties. He was fit and trim with a little gray at the temples. Casey thought the man reminded her a great deal of her father.

"Never." Tessa took Casey's hand in her own. "Cassandra Meridio, I'd like you to meet Jack Armstrong."

"Armstrong?" Casey asked with an amused smile.

"Don't even think about it." Jack shook the small hand offered to him.

"Oh, please," Casey couldn't resist.

"Okay," he said, rolling his eyes because he'd heard this line a million times.

"Jack Armstrong...the All-American Boy?"

Even Tessa chuckled at the amusement Casey displayed and the discomfort Jack exhibited.

"My father had a wicked sense of humor," Jack said.

Once Casey and Tessa settled into their seats, Jack put on his game face and began.

"Ms. Meridio, I'm a special agent working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States. I'm here in Greece to head up an operation to catch a criminal that has managed to stay one step ahead of the law for a very long time now. We're here working with members of Interpol because this criminal represents a threat to the national security of more than one country. That criminal's name is Andreas Meridio."

"This must be some kind of mistake. My father isn't a criminal," Casey said haltingly, looking from Tessa to Jack. "Nikki?"

Tessa placed a hand over Casey's. "I told you these things would be very hard to hear. I didn't want you to find out this way, but I care too much about you to see you stuck in the middle like this."

"Ms. Meridio, do you know what an arms dealer is?" Jack asked.

"Guns? You're telling me my father sells guns?" Casey asked in a stunned voice.

"Not just guns. Military weapons, everything from hand grenades to light missiles, tanks, M-50s, air to ground missiles, high-caliber weapons of destruction. Now he's beginning to do a lot of business with Third World countries. We're afraid he may have gotten his hands on some nuclear weapons."

"The Libyans?" Casey asked almost in a whisper.

"Smart lady. Yes, the people you lunched with the other day are among the people we're worried about. We're at somewhat of a stalemate. We know where Meridio sells the arms once he gets them, but what we need to know is who he gets them from. Without actual proof, extradition will be all but impossible."

Casey looked like she was trying hard to digest the information. When she looked up, Tessa had her head lowered, staring at the hands in her lap.

"What do you have to do with all of this, Nikki?"

"Ms. Nikolaidis works for our organization. We set her up as the Meridio *Karê*," Jack intervened.

"And Tusky...was his car bomb really an accident?" Casey asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Let's just say that Mr. Tuscadaris's demise was fortuitous," he said ominously.

"It sounds to me like you people aren't a whole lot better than the people you're out to catch," Casey said sardonically.

"Believe me, Ms. Meridio, we are." Jack perched himself on the table in front of her. "These men kill people. Men, women, children, it doesn't matter who you are if you get in their way."

Armstrong backed off as he caught the blue fire emanating from Tessa's eyes. Tessa used to be a heartless killer, and he wasn't in a hurry to push her to her limits.

"Ms. Meridio, do you know that small arms, like the kinds your father deals in, claim over 200,000 lives every year? Do you know why so many civilians are dying in supposed military conflicts? In World War I, for instance, over ten million people died, and eighty percent of them were soldiers. In World War II, sixty million died and half were soldiers. Since 1945, thirty million have died in wars and eighty percent of those were civilians. Men who deal in small arms are personally responsible for keeping some parts of this region of the world in an almost permanent state of war or civil war."

"All right, that's enough," Tessa said between clenched teeth. "Let's stay on track, shall we?"

"So all this talk about your past?" Casey looked over at Tessa. "You're really a government agent?"

"No, honey. What I told you is true. I-I..." Tessa stammered.

"Ms. Nikolaidis is working for us in exchange for immunity for any crimes she may have committed while living in the Greek Islands," Armstrong jumped in. "She didn't exactly come willingly. She got her hand caught in the proverbial cookie jar, smoking gun and all."

Casey looked at Tessa, who lowered her gaze. Casey returned her questioning gaze to the agent in front of her, a silent request to continue.

"She just happened to have killed a boy...the wrong boy."

"Nikki...you killed a boy?" Casey asked as Tessa's head shot up to glare at Armstrong.

"He was twenty-three."

"He also happened to be a diplomat's son," Armstrong added.

"He was killing working girls down by the docks." Tessa turned to Casey to explain. "He'd hire a whore, then he'd slit her throat for the fun of it, to watch her bleed. It's how he got off. The police wouldn't do anything about it, so I did."

"The embassy was handling it," Armstrong cut in.

"So they were going to send him back to his own country where he could do it to girls there? Where is the justice for the women who were murdered here?" Tessa hissed.

Casey understood that these two must have had this conversation before as each backed off to a respective corner. Neither looked about to acquiesce on the point, but Casey felt somewhat relieved as to why Tessa would kill a man in cold blood.

"Well, it became a moot point." Armstrong turned back to Casey. "Turned out Tessa had an underling who was just dying to become boss. He set her up. The gun was literally smoking when the police showed up. So that's when I entered her life. Her position within Meridio's organization affords us the perfect opportunity to bring this empire down. It's taken almost five years, Ms. Meridio, to get to this point, so you'll forgive me if I ask this most indelicate question. You see, I'm rather interested, what will you do with this information I've given you?"

"I-I don't know," Casey said honestly.

"Fair enough. It's a lot to digest at once. We have three ways we can play this. Let me tell you what your options are from here on in. First, you can go back to America, and you'll be notified when it's all over. Your father will most likely spend the rest of his life in prison. Second, you can continue to live in Greece, but should you breathe one word of our operation to your father or anyone that might tell your father about it, you leave me no alternative but to prosecute you also. That means it's likely that you'll end up in an adjoining cell with your father."

"All right, I don't think she needs any threats thrown at her," Tessa stepped in.

"I'm merely explaining what her options are," Armstrong said.

"You said there was a third option?" Casey asked in her tough as nails, California attitude voice.

"Yes. You can join us."

"No!" Tessa shouted, standing up.

"I think that's her decision. She could deliver what we need. She might be able to get that extra step closer."

"You're fucking pushing it, Jack." Tessa growled.

"That's enough," Casey said loudly.

Casey stood and walked over to one of the windows and thought it odd that such a distasteful place would have such a beautiful view of Athens. She shook her head to clear the pensiveness and finally looked up at the man.

"Mr. Armstrong, apparently, you've gotten a bad impression of what being Greek is all about. I have no intention of going against my family at this stage. You've told me a great many things, but you haven't offered me one shred of evidence to back up these accusations."

"Touché, Ms. Meridio. You're right, but I think we can provide you with that." Armstrong turned toward Tessa. "Why don't you show her a few things in the file room?"

Tessa took that to mean their time was at an end. She held out her arm, more for Casey to walk in front of her than to be able to touch. In her heart, she could feel what Casey must be thinking about her. Without warning, Casey slipped her hand into Tessa's grasp and squeezed it gently. Tessa rewarded Casey with a small smile that was flooded with equal parts relief and amazement.

When the two women walked out the door with a slight backward glance in his direction, Jack caught the look on each of their faces. Once they closed the door behind them, Jack dropped into the chair with a groan.

"Those two are gonna ruin my career, I just know it," he said with an exasperated sigh.

Casey watched as reel after reel of grainy eight-millimeter film played on a white projection screen in front of her. Hundreds of videotapes were stacked around the room all marked *Meridio*. Tears fell as she viewed her father, the man she grew up worshipping, as he held center stage in each scene. They were all shot undercover so the quality left something to be desired, but there could be no mistake. She looked at hundreds of still photographs and listened to taped conversations until Tessa could see that Casey had reached her limit.

The two women walked at a leisurely pace through the lower gardens of the Acrópolis. Not a word was said about the day's earlier incident as they steered in the direction of the Propyláia, which housed the Temple of Athena. After walking up the long flight of stone steps, Casey turned right to stand before what was left of the great temple. She pulled out a twenty-drachma coin and placed it gently on the wall as she always did. She had no idea who picked up the coins, but since she was a child, every time her mother brought her to the Acrópolis, she taught Casey to pay homage to the ancient Greek goddess.

"My mother told me that if I believed with all my heart, Athena would make me strong," Casey explained. She sat heavily on a stone block and wept. "I don't feel very strong."

Tessa held Casey against her as she wept. There were no words that she could offer, but little by little, the love and strength within Tessa transferred itself into Casey.

By the time they arrived back at Tessa's estate, their silence became comfortable and no longer fearful and strained. They spent most of the evening in companionable silence, wrapped around each other on a large rug in the living area. Tessa opened the patio doors to let in the cool night air so they could light a fire in the fireplace and watch the flames dance hypnotically across the walls.

Tessa lay stretched out in an old T-shirt and boxers, Casey leaning back in her arms wearing a short, silk chemise. Casey ran her hands along Tessa's strong arms, delighting in the feel of

muscle under her fingertips. Her touch turned into a caress and soon her hand traveled down the hollow between Tessa's breasts.

Tessa, in the meantime, was trying hard to remember how to breathe. She knew in her heart that Casey wouldn't want her that way again, that she had destroyed the trust that existed between them. Tessa was content to hold Casey and try to be a friend to her. The only problem with that plan, as Tessa saw it, was that Casey didn't seem to be cooperating. She seemed to have an agenda of her own.

"Casey?" Tessa asked, raising Casey's face. The look she saw there made her heart beat faster, and she was suddenly confused. "I thought...I thought you wouldn't want me anymore..." She trailed off, unsure how to verbalize all she felt.

Casey looked deep into the sapphire eyes that questioned her and worked up the best smile she could under the circumstances. "I told you, Nikki, I love you. I thought maybe you didn't want to be with me."

"What? Honey, what would make you think that?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do about all of this. I'm not sure what I should do. I'm still Meridio's daughter."

"Casey." Tessa lifted Casey's chin again to look into her eyes. "I'll understand no matter what you decide to do, love." Then she wrapped Casey in her arms, and she leaned into the powerful touch.

She still wants me, Tessa thought in utter amazement. Tessa was stunned at Casey's infinite capacity to feel...to feel for *her*. This new awareness thrilled and terrified her at the same time.

Casey's hands eventually resumed their journey along Tessa's dark skin. She lifted the shirt to let her fingers run in circular patterns on the taut skin of Tessa's abdomen, letting them wander and make lazy circles. She smiled to herself when the muscles clenched under her touch. Suddenly, an overwhelming desire washed over her. She wanted this woman. She wanted to take her, not with a gentle, loving hand, but in a way that she'd never expressed her passion before. She had the strangest feeling that Tessa would be more than happy to comply. She lifted the shirt higher and ran her tongue across a nipple that was already erect

with desire. She nibbled on the tight flesh, producing a groan from Tessa.

“Oh, yes, baby.” Tessa moaned as Casey sucked harder, biting down on the tender flesh.

Slender fingers entwined in Casey’s hair. Tessa arched her back and pressed Casey’s head firmly to her chest, delighting in the rough touch. Somewhere in the back of Tessa’s brain, she thought that she should be taking control of their lovemaking, but Casey seemed to have a sense of determination, and the physical sensations being produced within her body were so overwhelming that she could do no more than comply.

Casey slipped her hand into the loose-fitting waistband of Tessa’s shorts and realized that Tessa wore no underwear. Her fingers played with the silky dark curls, not straying any lower yet. Casey moved quickly to her feet.

“I’ll be right back. Make sure you have these off by the time I get back,” she commanded to a stunned Tessa.

“Oh, baby. Now you have to get up?” Tessa panted.

By the time the words were out, Casey was halfway up the stairs. Tessa let herself fall back onto the floor, but when she heard Casey’s footsteps coming back down the staircase, she realized she was still dressed. Tessa wriggled out of her shorts and tossed off her shirt, remembering Casey’s parting order.

Wait a minute, Casey’s ordering me to get naked? Hmm, Casey ordering me around, this could be interesting.

When Casey reached the living room, she caught her naked lover staring into the fire, the most erotic grin on her face.

“So are you going to share this fantasy?” Casey asked.

Tessa finally noticed Casey standing in front of her. Casey tossed a folded blanket to the floor.

“That was the big emergency?” Tessa asked, sitting up.

“In case I get cold,” Casey lied, grasping the hem of her chemise and pulling it over her head in one swift motion.

She straddled Tessa’s muscled thighs and sat down, just as Tessa reached for her. Tessa pressed Casey closer to her, and Casey wrapped her fingers in the raven tresses and pulled the waiting mouth to her own. It was a small fight for dominance. Tessa gave

in quickly, understanding Casey's need to be in control on this night. It wasn't the easiest thing she'd ever done, but the fire Casey was igniting and the throbbing ache at her center convinced her to let her have her way.

Casey realized the power the submissive partner had when it came to pleasure. Their fantasies and appetites were what kept the scenario playing along. Fortunately, Casey knew Tessa's body well enough to continually tease her to the brink, only to slow the rhythm to a frustratingly unhurried pace. Holding Tessa's wrists and not allowing Tessa to touch her, she sucked, bit, and nipped at her skin until Tessa whimpered for release.

Casey reached into the folds of the blanket she procured earlier and removed the dildo she hid there. Lying atop Tessa, she held the toy in her hand and pressed the large end into Tessa wetness, teasing her with a small circular motion against her sex. Tessa's intense reaction was all she could have hoped for.

A low guttural moan escaped from Tessa's lips. "Oh, God, yes!" Tessa arched her back and spread her legs wider. "Oh, please...please, baby, do it!" she begged.

There was little tenderness involved. Casey slid the phallus in one swift motion, burying the object inside. Tessa cried out in pleasure as her slick inner walls expanded and the shaft was pulled halfway out, then pushed forward again. Casey was soon following the rhythm Tessa's hips set as she begged to be taken harder and faster. Casey's hunger equaled if not exceeded Tessa's, and her thrusts increased in speed and force until Tessa clutched at the rug on the floor as if to have something to ground herself to. Tessa's hips met each thrust, burying as much of the phallus as she could take, her breathing coming in ragged gasps.

Casey never felt this out of control or *in* control for that matter. She'd never taken a woman this way, and the adrenaline rush involved in watching Tessa writhe underneath her was enough to bring her close to the edge. She straddled a bronze thigh and let her wet center slide across the muscled leg until the friction was more than she could stand.

Tessa groaned when she felt Casey's wet sex rubbing against her leg. The only sensations surrounding her became the feel of

Casey's legs wrapped around her thigh and the delicious pounding between her own legs.

Both women nearly screamed when Tessa's orgasm hit her, her body bucking into the intense pleasure, the tremors from her body causing Casey to follow after her.

Casey's body slumped onto her lover, both women trying desperately to draw much-needed oxygen into their lungs. Casey slid the toy from her lover's body, producing another series of shudders from the woman below her. Casey rolled over onto her back, and without a word, Tessa turned over and snuggled against the soft skin of Casey's neck. Casey wrapped her arms around her lover, and within moments, each woman fell into an exhausted slumber.

Chapter 16

“Morning,” Tessa mumbled sleepily.

She opened her eyes to see Casey watching her intently. Tessa was surprised that Casey woke before her. She was more puzzled because she usually didn’t sleep like this. Her customary sleep routine was to rest for three or four hours, then ready again for action. Now each night she spent next to Casey, she ended up being so relaxed that she slept soundly throughout the night.

“Morning,” Casey said, but her brow creased together with an expression of worry.

“What’s wrong?” Tessa leaned up on one elbow, sure it was something she’d done.

“I-I guess I’m a little surprised you’re still speaking to me this morning.”

“Wha—? Honey, why would you think I wouldn’t be talking to you?”

“After last night...” Casey trailed off.

“I personally thought last night was incredible.” Tessa arched one brow and gave a tiny smirk. “I’m sorry I fell asleep so fast on you. You definitely wore me out.”

“I...well, I didn’t mean to...I’ve never...”

“You’ve never made love that way before?” Tessa prompted.

Casey nodded. “I didn’t hurt you or anything, did I?”

“Oh, honey.” Tessa pulled Casey into her arms. “You did *not* hurt me.”

“I feel like I took you against your will or something.”

Tessa pulled away and put on her best indignant stare. "Cassandra," she drawled, "do you honestly think you could *take* me against my will?"

Finally, Casey looked up, and a sheepish grin relaxed her features.

"Okay, point taken." Casey smiled. "I don't know where that came from. It's like, all of a sudden, I had this desire to be with you that way. Like I needed to be able to wield that kind of power or control. Is that terrible? Do you feel like I used you?"

Tears pooled in Casey's eyes, and Tessa pulled her close against her. "No, baby, I don't feel anything like that. What I do feel is very loved."

Tessa wondered how she should combat Casey's fears. *Should I tell her about the sex that I'm accustomed to? How in the world do I explain the concept of rough sex and the pain that turns to pleasure under the right circumstances?* Tessa didn't have to wonder much longer as Casey beat her to the punch.

"Is that the kind of sex you're used to with women?" Casey asked, suddenly feeling naïve.

"Yes and no. Yes, I'm used to rough sex. I don't think I ever made love to a woman before you, Casey. No, because I've never let another woman take me before. In a strange way, you're my first." She paused to reveal an embarrassed grin.

"Then why did you let me?"

Tessa stared intently into the Casey's eyes and answered with her heart.

"Because I knew I could let down my guard in front of you. In my mind, I've always equated being submissive during sex to being weak. In my business, people make it a point to find out your weaknesses and use them against you. I just trained myself never to give up control to anyone. I'm glad you proved that theory wrong. I gave that up to you last night because I knew you would never use it against me."

Casey ran a hand across the tanned skin of Tessa's face, tracing the line of her cheekbone with her fingers.

"I would never think of you as weak, in bed or anywhere else, for that matter. It takes an incredible amount of strength to place

your heart, everything you are, in another's hands. Thank you for letting it be me. I love you, Nikki," she whispered as Tessa held her close.

"Me too," Tessa said, her voice catching, hoping that Casey would realize what she meant. When she felt Casey smile against her skin, she relaxed, knowing Casey accepted her form of the sentiment.

When they eventually separated, Casey sat up. "I'm thirsty, do you want something?" she asked, rising from the floor.

"Why don't you let me make you breakfast for a change? Contrary to popular belief, I can cook some things."

"No, don't get up, let's lay here together for a while. I just want something to drink."

"Okay." Tessa chuckled at Casey's pout. "I'll take some juice then."

The lithe figure disappeared into the next room, and Tessa sat up, stretching muscles that weren't accustomed to sleeping on a hard floor all night. In mid-stretch, she heard Casey's frightened scream and a glass crash to the floor. It took Tessa all of a half-dozen strides to make it to the door that separated the two rooms, ready for action.

When Tessa rushed through the door, she found Casey trying to cover her naked figure with a dishtowel from a very flustered man who couldn't seem to take his eyes off Casey.

"What in the hell are you doing here? You weren't supposed to be back till tomorrow," Tessa shouted.

"I-I-I..." he stuttered.

"Turn around." Tessa growled as his gaze stay fixed on Casey.

He spun on his heel and muttered apologies and something about forgetting a book he needed. Tessa, in the meantime, ran into the living room and returned, tossing Casey her slip.

"Okay," Tessa said gruffly, "you can turn around now." She pulled her own shirt on.

"I'm very sorry. I thought I could slip in and get my book before you were awake." He lowered his head in embarrassment.

"Um...remember me?" Casey said in Tessa's direction.

Tessa gave Casey a grin and introduced the two. "Cassandra Meridio, meet George Mikolo."

"You're George Mikolo," Casey said in amazement. "You didn't..." she finished, looking at Tessa.

"I told you I could prove it on Monday, *when he was supposed to return*," Tessa enunciated these last words, staring hard at him.

"Forgive me." George raised sincere eyes to Casey. "And not just about today, miss, but for my actions against you. I didn't mean to shoot you, I simply wanted to stop—" He looked up abruptly at Tessa before continuing.

"She knows," Tessa said softly.

"I wanted to stop what your father was doing. Too many people are dying because of the weapons he sells. I mistakenly thought you were here to join in the family business...I thought you were just like your father."

"I'm nothing like my father," Casey said coldly. She wasn't looking at George but out the window into her own past.

Casey shook the thoughts away and turned toward the two, the sunny smile on her face once again. Tessa came up to stand behind Casey, placing her hands protectively on her shoulders. Casey leaned back against Tessa, making it clear they were lovers.

"George is living here for a while. He takes care of the dogs and looks after the place for me. That is until next week, then he takes a trip, eh, George?"

He smiled broadly, nodding enthusiastically. "I'm going to America," he announced. "To the University in California. Mr. Armstrong says it will be just like Greece, that the sun shines and they have earthquakes all the time."

"You will love it there," Casey said.

"Mr. Armstrong says you will make it possible for me to return to my homeland again someday?" He looked anxiously between the two women.

"I...uh..." Casey stammered until Tessa stepped in.

"We'll do our best. You just need to spend your time concentrating on your studies for a while," Tessa said for Casey.

"I should leave you now. Again, I'm terribly sorry for startling you."

"We should be gone by midday tomorrow, George. You've got the key," Tessa said before closing the door behind him.

The two women looked at each other and started laughing.

"I'm not usually a screamer, but he scared the shit out of me." Casey laughed even more.

Tessa wrapped her arms around Casey and rested her head on top of her chin. "One thing you have to admit. Life with me will never be dull."

Casey pulled away slightly to look up at her. "I do believe that statement had a hint of commitment in it."

"I'm sorry if I've made you feel any other way," Tessa said.

"You haven't," Casey said, "but sometimes it's nice to hear it out loud."

"Nikki?"

"Hmm?" Tessa was turning some skewers of lamb on the grill as Casey sat on the edge of the pool. They decided to do nothing more than be together and lounge about the house, resting their minds, as well as their bodies.

"You never did tell me how you got out of delivering poor George's...well, you know, to my father."

"I didn't get out of it. I delivered them in a sack just as he asked."

"But—"

"It's an amazing thing really how very similar sheep's testicles are to the human male's. Another unsurprising fact is that few men are actually willing to pull them out of the bag and look at them. Kind of strikes too close to home for them," Tessa said with a wink.

"Gross. That's enough to make me lose my appetite."

"Oh, yeah, right...like anything could make you lose your appetite."

"Hey." Casey put on a mock display of indignation and splashed some water in the standing woman's direction.

"*Náh!*" Tessa exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Casey asked, turning around.

"Oh, some grease spat up from the grill and got on my shirt. I'll be right back. I'm going to go throw on an old T-shirt. Will you watch the grill so the meat doesn't burn?"

"Sure, hon, got it covered." Casey rose and took the grill utensil from Tessa.

By the time Tessa returned, only a minute or two had passed. "Thanks." Tessa kissed Casey's cheek, taking the utensil back.

"No prob—" Casey started as she turned to give Tessa a kiss.

The red T-shirt Tessa wore overwhelmed Casey's field of vision as a staggering sense of fear, bordering on panic, clutched at her.

"What's wrong?" Tessa asked. She realized that Casey was slowly remembering some of the events from that Easter.

"It...um...it must be the glare on that shirt...it seems so bright," Casey stammered, her face turning pale and her breathing deepening. "Could you...do you think you could change into something else?"

Tessa reached over her head and grasped the back of the shirt, pulling it off, leaving her clad only in her bra. "Is that better?" She tossed the shirt into one of the chairs.

Just as suddenly, Casey's nausea disappeared. Casey nodded in response.

"I don't understand it. I've never reacted to anything red in quite that way before. Wait a minute, the other night at the *taverna*. The awning behind you was red, I remember because I started to get sick then, too."

"I'm sorry, honey." Tessa held Casey close to her, feeling her clammy skin warm slightly. *I need to tell her what happened. It's got to be better than putting her through this torture, doesn't it? How can I say I love her when I won't tell her the truth? Forgive me, Casey, but I can't stand the thought of losing you, not yet.*

"Hey, why don't you run inside and get me another shirt to wear, get out of the sun for a few minutes, okay?"

"I don't know...I kind of like you dressed like that." Casey grinned lasciviously.

"I'll just bet you do, but standing naked over a hot grill leaves me feeling a little vulnerable."

Casey chuckled and walked into the house, feeling as if nothing happened to her a few moments earlier. When she finally returned, she handed an old *cinzano* T-shirt to Tessa. Tessa looked up to thank her and smiled at the baseball cap on her head.

"You look pretty damn cute in that."

"Okay, so tell me, how does a Greek woman educated in England wind up with a Chicago Cubs baseball cap?" Casey asked.

"I went to Chicago on business once. Some associates took me to a game at Wrigley Field. The sound of the stadium...and the grass was so green. It took my breath away. I've been a fan of American baseball ever since."

"You are an amazingly complex woman, do you know that?" Casey kissed Tessa's lips.

"Yeah, I bet that's what you say to all your Greek lovers," Tessa said gruffly, removing the meat from the grill as she spoke.

"Pretty much." Casey smirked.

"Oh, that's it, no food for you." Tessa smiled as she carried the plate into the house.

"Hey, don't tease me about food," the suddenly contrite Casey called after her.

"This place is beautiful, but do you really think the owner will rent it to me?" Casey asked.

They stood in the middle of the large two-bedroom apartment that Tessa recommended as a place for Casey to stay once she had to work in Athens. The large two-story wooden building was divided into three apartments, two on the lower level and the one they now stood in, that took up the top level.

"I think it's pretty much a certainty." Tessa stood behind Casey, slipping her arms around her waist. "You happen to have an in."

"Oh, really? Do tell."

"Yeah, the owner happens to have a thing for you." Tessa placed a soft kiss on Casey's neck.

"Do you—?" Casey spun around to face Tessa. The grin on Tessa's face told Casey who owned the building they stood in.

"I'll say it once again. You are an amazingly complex woman, Tessa Nikolaidis," Casey said softly, right before she soundly kissed the woman above her.

They spent the rest of the late afternoon getting an extra set of keys made and having the utilities turned on. They finished by doing a little dry goods shopping for items that Casey would need. By the time they left the apartment, Tessa thought it already had Casey's distinctive look about it.

"You're not sleepy at all, are you?" Casey asked the woman who held her in her arms.

"I'm sorry, hon, I'm just not used to getting as much sleep as I have the last few days," Tessa said. She knew that she'd been fidgeting for the last hour, and Casey was sensitive to every one of her moves. "Would you mind terribly if I got up and read or something? I'll be right next door in the den."

"Of course not. You don't have to be with me every minute of the day to show me you love me," Casey said sleepily.

Tessa got up and put her robe on. She placed a gentle kiss on Casey's cheek. "Trouble is, I pretty much want to be with you every minute of the day."

Casey smiled and curled up against the pillow Tessa abdicated, breathing in the scent of the woman and thinking how much she loved the fresh clean scent of her skin.

There are many senses that exist within the human body that capture memories, none so strong as the sense of smell. By the time Casey was entering the dream stage of her sleep, the cells in her brain were still processing the scent that triggered the recollection of a day long forgotten by the sleeping figure.

"Can I ride him now, Pappa?" Casey jumped up and down in her excitement.

Andreas Meridio scooped up the five-year-old and held her in his arms. "Máhtia Mou, this is a big pony, and you're still a small girl."

"But you said he was my Easter present!" Casey pouted while a fiery determination burned in her green eyes.

"Yes, Cassandra, but he is large, and you are small. You have to train him so he'll be gentle and not throw you. Remember, he'll be a grown horse long before you," he poked Casey lightly in the belly and she giggled, "are a grown woman."

"But, Pappa—" Casey complained as her father set her back on the ground.

"Enough," he said sharply, dropping to one knee in front of Casey. "I'll tell you what, if one of the older children will ride double with you, you can mount him. How does that sound?"

Casey jumped into his arms and hugged him fiercely. "Thank you."

"Cassandra." Casey turned her head to see a petite blond woman coming down the path. "It's time for lunch, sweetheart."

"Coming, Mána," Casey called out to her mother. The girl kissed her father's cheek and ran up the stone path to her mother's waiting arms.

"It should be me that rides with Casey, I'm the biggest," a tall boy said, pushing one of the youngsters aside.

"I think Casey should pick. It's her pony," Casey's friend Maria spoke up.

"She's too little to decide," another boy chimed in.

"I'll be the one to ride with her." A dark-haired girl walked into view and stood in front of the first boy as if daring him to argue with her. She was eleven years old but every bit as tall as he was. "That is, if she wants me to."

Kneeling to Casey's level, she smiled into the green eyes that looked up at her in awe. "My name is Tessa. Would you like me to ride with you?"

Casey liked the way the older girl's blue eyes sparkled, just like the water in Tourlos Bay. Casey wished she could be big like this girl; she didn't act like she was afraid of those boys at all. Casey nodded eagerly and held out her hand.

Tessa rose, took Casey's hand, and walked over to the stable that held the pony. She sat the youngster on a bale of hay and

explained to Casey all that she was doing as she saddled the pony. She sat mesmerized and promised herself that she would remember everything Tessa told her. Casey knew she would, too. She may have been the smallest girl in her kindergarten class, but she was smart and could remember things well. She never gave up when the bigger children did, and it was this fierce persistence that allowed her to keep up when the older children let her join them.

Tessa jumped into the saddle and told Casey to stand on the bale of hay. Tessa maneuvered the horse into position and told Casey to put her left foot in the stirrup. Grasping Casey's arm in a strong grip, Tessa practically lifted Casey onto the saddle behind her.

"What do you think?" Tessa asked as they departed the stable and walked the pony around the field.

Casey looked down. "It's pretty far if you fall, huh?"

"Then don't fall," Tessa said with a chuckle.

After a time of trotting the pony around the grassy field, Casey stopped Tessa. "Can we go fast now?"

"You want to gallop, huh? Okay, but you'll have to put your arms around me and hold on tight."

Casey slipped her arms as far around Tessa's waist as she could.

"You'll have to hold on tighter than that, little one," Tessa said, half-turning in the saddle.

Casey tightened her grip and Tessa prompted the pony into a speedy gallop. It was a short burst by most standards, but it was enough to make Casey happy. When they returned to the stable, Tessa showed Casey how to remove the saddle and small blanket and to rub the horse down to relax the animal's muscles.

"Tessa, come on, we're gonna play ball." One of the older boys burst into the stable and shouted.

Casey hung back, knowing the older children never let her play ball.

"Come on, little one." Tessa placed a protective hand on Casey's shoulder, and Casey beamed up at her new friend.

Casey stood in a group of children, as captains were chosen

and teams were about to be selected. Casey was elated that she was going to play, but she felt miserable waiting to be picked. She was always selected last, and it was usually more of a burden to whatever team got stuck with her. It started to wear on her, and her self-esteem wasn't very high.

"I'll take Casey," Tessa announced.

"Oh, boy, we're going to win for sure now!" the older boy shouted.

Tessa's face gave nothing away as she motioned for Casey to stand by her side. Teams were finally settled and the children began a game of háhso, a Greek version of dodge ball. Tessa pulled Casey to stand by her.

"Do you know how to play, little one?"

Casey nodded. "I don't let the ball hit me," she said proudly.

"But, Tessa...I don't catch good."

Tessa smiled down at Casey, who only came up to her waist. "That's okay, I'll catch the balls. You just stand out in front and make what ya got work for you."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that you're small and fast, there's no way those stupid boys are going to be able to hit you. Jump out of the way and I'll be behind you to catch the ball."

Casey did exactly as Tessa directed. She hopped around and Tessa faithfully caught every volley that came at them, until they were the only two left from their team. Tessa picked up a ball and with a moment of precise aim, rocketed the object toward one of the two boys left on the other team. The ball hit the first boy squarely in the back and bounced off, smacking the second boy in the legs.

"Game over, we win!" Tessa's teammates shouted.

Tessa had a look of triumph as she looked down at her partner. Tessa spit in the palm of her hand and raised it to Casey. Casey did the same, and the two girls slapped their hands together in victory.

Casey had always wanted to do that. She'd never won any sport before and always watched as the victors celebrated with the powerful handshake. She grinned broadly, even though it felt

a little slimy. Casey wiped her hand on her shorts and trotted off behind Tessa.

Tessa walked away from the group of children. Everyone knew that Tessa liked to go off by herself once in a while, but Casey trotted faithfully beside her friend, jogging to keep up with Tessa's long strides. Tessa was used to being alone most of the time. She looked out of the corner of her eye and caught sight of Casey running to keep up with her. She slowed down to a stroll for the youngster. Tessa didn't have any brothers or sisters, and this one was kind of fun to be around, even if she was just a little kid. There was something she liked that reminded her of herself. Casey had a lot of heart and used her brains. There was also a look in those green eyes. Kind of like they were telling Tessa that Casey trusted her. Tessa smiled to herself. Whatever it was about the girl by her side, Tessa had an overwhelming urge to protect Casey. She didn't know why, it was just a feeling she had.

"My pappa works for your pappa," Tessa finally spoke. She waited to see what Casey would say. She remembered the last time she made friends with the son of the man her father worked for. He thought he was better than her because of it.

Casey jumped up and down slightly. "Does that mean you can come over and ride the pony with me again?"

Tessa laughed aloud at the excited expression on Casey's face. "Sure, little one." Tessa paused before continuing. "You know, you can call me what my pappa calls me, if you want. He's my best friend, and I only let my best friends call me this...Niko."

Casey smiled brightly. "Niko, can I be your friend?"

"Absolutely." Tessa smiled down at Casey.

The two wandered down into the olive groves, and Tessa taught Casey how to skip rocks across the water of the pond. Casey couldn't make it work, but she clapped in delight as Tessa made the flat rock bounce across the surface of the water. When they came to the top of a grassy ridge, they looked down on a group of men, perhaps twenty feet from where they were hidden by the tall grass.

"Let's pretend we're spies," Tessa whispered.

Casey nodded silently, wondering what spies were.

"See," Tessa whispered in a low voice, "that's my pappa over there."

Casey followed her friend's hand, pointing out a tall, dark-haired man. "That's my pappa next to him," Casey said.

The two girls watched as the action below suddenly changed. The two girls' fathers engaged in a heated exchange, and even though Tessa couldn't hear what was being said, her brow creased into a frown. The movement of Andreas Meridio's hand happened quickly, but to the girls watching, it was agonizingly slow.

Meridio's hand came up with a pistol in it. He never paused, firing three shots into the taller man's skull before he slumped to the ground.

"Pappa!" Tessa shouted as she stood and ran toward the group of men.

Casey was frozen in place. She had watched the movies where people killed each other, but her mother insisted that it was all pretend. She told her they were actors, and when the camera turned off, the people got up and walked away. Casey waited for Tessa's father to get up, but he didn't. She heard Tessa cry out again. The frightened Casey watched as her own father backhanded Tessa away from him with a single blow. She jumped back up and was suddenly out of control. One of the men caught her from behind and held on to the kicking and screaming wildcat. That's when Casey acted.

"Niko!" Casey shouted as she rushed down the hill toward her friend.

Casey had no idea what to do, but the action was without thought anyway. She thought she heard her father calling her name, but she could barely hear over Tessa's screams. Casey rushed up to the man holding onto her friend and kicked him hard in the shin. The startled man yelped in pain and shoved Casey away from him, roughly knocking her to the ground.

Casey's fall was broken by something soft, and when she rolled over to discover what it was, she came within inches of what was left of the face of Tessa's father. More than half his face was missing from the force of the gunshots, and Casey realized she was covered in blood. Casey let out a terrified scream as another

man grabbed her by the neck and pulled her up.

Tessa's grief turned her into a wild animal. She watched as the man who held Casey slapped Casey in the head. That's when what little awareness was left in Tessa snapped. She bit down hard on the man's hand, trying to cover her mouth, and kicked back sharply, the heel of her boot connecting with the man's knee.

He immediately released his hold and Tessa flung herself at the man holding Casey. Tessa kicked and bit until the man dropped his small bundle to grab at Tessa. Both men took hold of Tessa and she shouted.

"Run, Casey!" It was only a fraction of a second, but Casey realized her friend had sacrificed herself so Casey could get away.

"Run!" Tessa shouted again.

This time, Casey moved so fast the men didn't know she was running until she was halfway back up the rocky hill.

"Get her," Meridio shouted.

Casey turned around only once, when she reached the top of the ridge. When she quickly looked back, she saw her father strike the girl who was held securely between two men.

"Niko!" she screamed even as she turned and ran until her five-year-old legs refused to run any longer.

"Niko!" Casey screamed.

Tessa was dozing in the leather chair, a book lying open in her hands. She bolted up and the book flew out of her lap. Rushing through the door, she wasn't prepared for the sight that met her. Casey was screaming as if completely unaware of her surroundings. Tessa flipped the light switch and grabbed Casey, who sobbed against Tessa's chest. Casey cried for nearly an hour, and Tessa held her tightly, allowing her to purge the violent images from her mind's eye.

"Niko?" Casey finally asked weakly.

"Yes, baby...it's me."

Chapter 17

“Oh, God, he killed him. There was so much blood,” Casey cried tearfully, and Tessa realized why Casey developed an aversion to the color red.

“I know, sweetheart,” Tessa said quietly, gently stroking Casey’s head.

“I don’t understand...why didn’t you tell me that we knew each other?”

Tessa took a deep breath and sighed. She brushed away the damp tendril of hair from Casey’s face. “When you were twelve, you and I met, do you remember?”

Casey shook her head, trying hard to remember and amazed that she could have forgotten the girl who, in one day, had come to mean so much to her.

“I was visiting my mother at your father’s estate and you came running into the kitchen from outside. You’d been to the beach and I remember how sunburned your cheeks were. I was just leaving and I opened the back door, and you ran right into me. I had short hair and I was wearing sunglasses. I just graduated from high school and was getting ready to start at Oxford.”

“And you took your sunglasses off and stared at me,” Casey added, suddenly remembering that day.

“Yeah. You looked at me, and for a second, you acted like you were going to say something, but you just smiled and introduced yourself. You had no idea who I was...it broke my heart,” Tessa

said sadly. "My mother said you never remembered what happened that day. She said it was a gift from the Virgin, and she made me promise that if I cared anything about seeing you grow up healthy and happy, that I would let the past go. So I did. I could never let you go completely, though. Sometimes, when I was home for the summer, I would follow you just to see what an amazing woman that five-year-old grew up to be. I could never even explain to myself why, but I couldn't get you out of my mind."

Both women were crying by this time. Casey finally looked up, and in a voice so soft that Tessa barely heard her, she asked, "Can I still call you Niko?"

"Yes, love," Tessa said just as softly. "I'd like that."

"Niko, who was your mother? You said you were visiting her that day. Did she live on the estate?"

Tessa smiled a bittersweet smile and saw no reason to hold back the information at this point. "Casey, you've known my mother all your life."

Casey pulled away and looked into Tessa's eyes, still filled with tears. She searched Tessa's face and saw the answer etched in the lines of a face that had become so beautiful to her. The same proud, angular features, the hair streaked through with gray now, and the term of endearment that had obviously been passed from mother to daughter...*little one*. Casey smiled with recognition when she thought about the one other person who ever called her that name.

"Olympia is your mother," Casey said slowly, more as a confirmation to herself than to ask if she were correct.

Tessa smiled, too, once Casey fit the puzzle together.

"Oh, Niko...I'm so sorry. My family has caused the two of you so much pain."

"There's another side to that, love. You have been responsible for so much of our happiness also. During the years when my mother was ashamed to admit she had a daughter, you were there for her to love. And just when I thought I would spend the rest of my life alone, never knowing what it felt like to be in love, to have someone love me, you were there."

"I don't understand, why do the two of you work for my

father? How could he even hire you? Doesn't he remember who you are?"

"My mother never knew what happened that day. Meridio's men took my father's body to the docks, and it was made to look like he was murdered during a robbery. It was a great many years later before I could bring myself to tell her the truth. By then, what could she do? She's an Old World woman who tries to live her life in a male-dominated society with as much dignity as she can. Besides, your father paid very well for my silence. He was the one who had me sent to England. He paid for my education all those years," Tessa admitted.

"But when you agreed to work here, didn't my father try to explain or justify his actions at all?" Casey asked in amazement.

"By then, I had become the woman I told you about. I hid my emotions well. I was told not to take it personally, that it was just business."

Tessa ran a hand through her long hair. Her silence and accompanying scowl said more than words.

"There's more to this, isn't there? More you're not telling me?" Casey asked.

"Yes, and I don't know about you, but I'm bone tired. Let's talk more in the morning, okay?" Tessa said.

Both of them lay back on the bed, emotionally exhausted. They settled in to sleep, facing one another, their arms wrapped around each other. This time, it was Tessa's nightmares that kept them awake. Tessa cried out in her sleep, and each time, Casey ran a comforting hand along her back, calming her. Once Casey thought she heard Tessa murmur, "Run, Casey!"

At length, Casey slept, and in keeping with the night, dreamed about the last piece in the puzzle.

"Never again, Andreas...never again. I'm taking my daughter and we're getting as far away from this place as possible."

Casey's mother sat on the child's bed and ran a hand through the golden locks. By the time they found Casey huddled in a corner of the stable, she was in shock. When Eva Meridio saw the blood covering Casey, she screamed in fright, thinking it was her

daughter's blood. The doctor was called and the child was given a mild sedative, but even through the medication, Casey could overhear her parents as they spoke above her bed.

"Wait just a minute, Eva, this is my daughter, too, we're talking about," Meridio whispered sharply.

"My God, Andreas, what if Cassandra had been hurt? What if she never gets over this?"

"Don't even think that. Do you think I want my daughter scarred like that?"

"Poor Olympia. What will she and Tessa do? How could you have?" Eva cried as she stroked Casey's head.

"It was business," he said sharply. "Olympia will be provided for. As for that hellcat of a daughter she has, I'll make sure she gets shipped off to a good school. I won't let Olympia suffer because of her husband's disloyalty."

"Please, Andreas...if you've ever loved me, let me take Cassandra away from this life. I give you my word that she can return to visit as often as she likes, but please...let us go. It isn't safe for her here."

Meridio turned away from his wife and daughter to stare out the window. He knew he should be strong and demand that his wife stay; his father would have, but he knew that his business put everyone he loved in danger.

"Every summer," he whispered at last in defeat. "I want Cassandra here every summer." Upon saying that, he turned and walked out of the room.

"Hey, you got up without waking me." Casey leaned down to kiss Tessa's tanned cheek.

"Sorry, but I wasn't all that quiet and you still wouldn't budge, so I thought it was meant to be. Kafé?" Tessa asked.

"Yes, thanks."

The silence was deafening, and Tessa finally raised her head to see tears rolling down Casey's cheeks.

"Oh, honey, please don't." Tessa left her chair to kneel in front of Casey. "Casey, none of it was your doing."

"I'm sorry I didn't recognize you...I should have remembered you," she said with a growl.

"You were five years old, cut yourself a little slack here. The human mind is a lot like a computer. When too much is fed into it at once, it doesn't know how to process it, and it shuts down. A five-year-old brain just wasn't equipped to handle what happened that day, and it shut down. I still think it was the right thing to do, not telling you. You were able to grow up without the visions I've had to see in my head every moment of every day since then. I always thought you were the lucky one."

Tessa ran the backs of her fingers across Casey's cheek and her smile was so filled with sadness and pain that Casey had to know.

"Last night, you said there was more. What aren't you telling me, Niko?" Casey asked.

The pained expression deepened. It was the pet name that added to the hurt. Tessa knew that she was about to betray Casey's confidence and trust in her, but she knew of no other way to pay her debt. It was a matter of honor, and she was afraid that Casey would never be able to understand that. Betray her lover or her father's name. Those were the two choices she was faced with. Tessa stood and crossed to the other side of the patio table, looking up into the cliffs. She squeezed her eyes closed and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Do you know what it was like for me? I had just seen my father murdered, I couldn't tell my mother for fear of what she would try to do, and I was shipped off to a foreign country, strangers everywhere. Every single day, the vision of that afternoon replayed inside my head. Some days, it was all there was. Pretty soon, it was the only memory I had of Greece. Then one day, I made a vow, and after the words were uttered, I was finally able to focus on something else. I was able to concentrate on my studies, talk to my mother, and finally remember what my homeland looked like, all because of one thought, one thought that was able to keep me going for twenty years."

"Revenge," Casey whispered solemnly.

Tessa looked at Casey and saw realization dawning on Casey bit by bit.

"It became all I had. It was the only thing to keep me company during school breaks when other children would go home to be with their families. It gave me a focus and a will to live again...it became my whole life, the only reason I had for living."

As Tessa spoke, her voice turned hard and determined as if she were focusing all that energy on getting through every day, just putting one foot in front of the other, like she did as a girl. Casey didn't want to know this; she feared the answer, yet she had to ask.

"You're going to kill my father, aren't you?"

Tessa turned her head in Casey's direction; she at least owed her that much.

"Yes, I am," she said softly.

More silent tears welled up in the green eyes and spilled over onto tanned cheeks. "When Mr. Armstrong said my father would go to prison, that was just a lie then?"

"You were right about them the first time. In a way, they're not much better than the people they fight against. Their purpose may be higher, but they use the same methods. Once Jack has your father's connections, Andreas Meridio becomes expendable, and Jack doesn't care what happens to him."

"You would do this to me?" Casey could think of nothing else to say.

"Oh, God, Casey, I don't want to. I made a vow, it's a matter of honor," Tessa said weakly.

"I thought you loved me. I know you never said the words, but I thought you felt it."

"Oh, baby, this is the hardest choice I've ever had to make," Tessa said as tears filled her eyes. "I never expected any of this to happen between the two of us. In a million years, I never would have thought it possible that you would love me."

Casey rose and the two women stood facing each other in the sunlight.

"It's a matter of my honor," Tessa repeated.

"Murder is not honorable. Your father would be the first one to tell you that," Casey said sharply.

“It is payment for a *hahré*!” Tessa shouted, slamming her hand on the table.

Tessa used the ancient Greek term and turned her back, once again looking out onto the cliffs. Casey knew there would be no arguments that could convince Tessa not to take the action she had envisioned for twenty years. If not exactly a woman of honor, Tessa was a woman of her word, and Casey knew that her father’s life was already over, he just didn’t realize it yet.

“Does Olympia know what you’re planning?”

“No, and I’d prefer she didn’t find out.”

“I don’t know what to do about this.”

“Don’t do anything,” Tessa said, her back still facing Casey.

“I can’t just...let this happen.”

“Please, don’t interfere...I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You...you would hurt me?” Casey seemed amazed at the admission.

Tessa wheeled around and faced the woman whose tears matched her own. “Never,” she hissed. “I would never hurt you.”

Casey wiped the tears from her cheeks and returned the bittersweet smile. “Only by breaking my heart,” Casey rasped, turning and rushing into the house to pack.

Tessa heard the patio doors slide closed and slumped down into a chair. She held her head in her hands and let loose the sobs she had been holding back.

She wanted it to go on forever, this wonderful feeling of loving and being loved in return. She took it as far as she could, but finally, the day she cursed was here. How could she go back on her word and refuse the *hahré* now? If she lost her honor, what would she have left?

Not a word was spoken between them. Their bags were packed. On the pretense of having forgotten something, Casey ran back inside while Tessa placed their luggage in the trunk.

Casey wanted to take one last look around. Her glance fell on the rug by the fireplace where they made love, and she turned to see two pair of eyes looking at her through the patio doors. Mahogany and Cinnamon stood there, their tail nubs twitching

back and forth. Casey wondered in her heart if she and Tessa would ever return here together. It would never be the same, she would never be the same, and the ache in her heart was so intense that she wanted to lie down and die.

Tears filled her eyes and she brusquely wiped them away. She refused to cry anymore, not in front of Tessa. If Tessa could be strong and heartless, she could be, too. She pulled the door closed, and Casey walked to the waiting automobile.

The moment they walked into the house, Olympia knew something went wrong between the two women. It was obvious they had been crying, and the pained expressions on their faces were like matching bookends.

"Your father is away for the rest of the week, miss. He asked that you ring him at this number should you need him," Olympia said.

"Thank you, Olympia. Will you excuse me please? I have a headache, and I think I'd just like to lie down for a while."

"Of course, miss. Perhaps some of the *Karé's* tea?"

Casey raised a pain-filled glance in Tessa's direction. "No, I think I'll just ride this one out."

Tessa stood beside her mother, silently watching as Casey walked the flight of stairs to her room. Olympia made sure she heard the door to Casey's room close shut before she spoke.

"Tessa, what have you done?"

Many years passed since Olympia saw her daughter cry, but Tessa sobbed into her mother's arms as she did twenty years earlier. Olympia couldn't get a straight answer from Tessa as to what happened over the weekend, so she held her and petted her and let the tears flow until Tessa had no more left in her.

"Do you love her?" Olympia asked.

"With all my heart. It's circumstances...Casey can't be with who I am right now," Tessa said as honestly as she could.

"You need to leave this life. We need to leave this place, you and I and Casey. You need to take her somewhere far away where Andreas Meridio cannot find you."

“It’s not that easy. I can’t just ask Casey to give up her life for me, to leave everything she knows.”

“Would Casey go if you asked her?” Olympia pushed harder.

“Yes,” Tessa said in defeat, running her fingers through her hair. “Yes, I believe she would.”

“Does this life hold that much for you then that you would give up this chance at happiness? With a woman as wonderful as Casey?”

“You don’t understand.” Tessa hissed. “It’s just not as easy as all that.” Tessa walked into the guesthouse bedroom, effectively ending the conversation.

“Nothing is ever that hard, little one,” Olympia whispered to the empty room, “if you want it badly enough.”

A knock at her door brought Casey out of her thoughts.

“Yes?”

Olympia opened the door, carrying a small tray with a pot of tea. She deposited it on the table where Casey sat, and Casey noticed the *koulourákia*, small decorative sweet rolls.

“I brought you some hot tea with a few herbs in it to ease the headache. Probably due to stress, eh?” Olympia stroked Casey’s head.

Casey looked up at Olympia and saw it so plainly. They were indeed Tessa’s eyes looking back at her. Casey’s eyes filled with tears, and they spilled down her cheeks.

“Tessa told me who you are...I’m so sorry, Olympia.”

“Nonsense. Come here, little one.” Olympia sat on the sofa and patted the space next to her.

Casey sat tentatively next to Olympia. When Olympia gently placed her arm around Casey, it loosened a new flood of tears, and Casey was soon sobbing into the woman’s arms just as Tessa did earlier.

“My father ruined your life,” Casey began.

“Cassandra...Casey, look at me.” Casey looked up and Olympia lightly kissed her forehead. “I’m going to tell you the same thing I told you when you were seven years old. Remember the summer you refused to wear a shirt because the boys went

around without theirs on? You wanted to prove they were no better than you.”

Casey smiled weakly at the memory. She remembered distinctly Olympia chasing her around to put a blouse on her. When Olympia finally caught up with her, she sat Casey down and had a sincere talk with her about the birds and the bees and why boys and girls were different.

“And when you still complained, do you remember what I told you?” Olympia asked.

Casey’s smile was tinged with sadness as she nodded. “That’s just the way life is,” she repeated the words from so long ago.

Olympia wrapped strong arms around Casey. “Well, that’s just the way life is, Casey. If you want to experience the good, you have to be willing to accept the bad, as well. Tell me something, little one...do you love Tessa?”

Casey was surprised and a little embarrassed at confessing her feelings for Tessa to the woman’s mother, of all people. “I-I...” she stammered.

Olympia chuckled at Casey. “I’m not a fool. I think I knew before the two of you did. That day when you met, it seems a hundred years ago now, doesn’t it? Through all of Tessa’s grief over her father, every day, she would ask about you. When your mother took you away and Tessa went off to school, her letters would always ask if I had heard from you or your mother yet. I’ll never forget the day you saw her in the kitchen. You were just becoming a teenager, and she was a young woman of the world, but if you could have seen how her heart broke when she realized you didn’t remember her. I think it was fated before the two of you were born that you would be together someday, in some way.”

“I do love her, Olympia,” Casey admitted. “I love her so much it hurts. I can’t be with her...not...” Casey paused, unsure of how to explain herself or the rift between she and Tessa.

“I told you I wasn’t a fool,” Olympia said to the sudden silence. “I think I know what has come between you. I think I’ve known what Tessa had planned all along, but I didn’t want to believe it. I want to believe it even less now. I find it hard to accept, knowing how much your heart means to her, that she would choose revenge

over your love.”

Casey underestimated Olympia all these years. She was wise beyond Casey’s understanding. She knew her daughter and what Tessa was about better than Casey did.

“Things change, little one. Don’t give up on Tessa’s heart just yet.”

Casey slowly opened the door to her father’s office and peeked in. Tessa’s voice could be heard from the other side of the door, and Casey wondered who her unfortunate victim was.

“Goddamn it, Alex, see that they sign it this time. You tell those assholes that if I have to come down there, it will be a sorry day for them. Go on, get out of here.” Tessa growled.

Alex walked to the door just as Casey was pushing it open. He rolled his eyes to Casey, and she smiled, laying a gentle hand on his arm as he passed by. Her look said she was sorry.

Casey stepped into view, and the hard lines in Tessa’s face softened when she looked up at Casey.

“Is your head feeling better?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, thanks.”

Tessa rose and moved to the other side of the desk. Standing in front of Casey, she tried to touch her, but Casey pulled back. The hurt in Tessa’s eyes was mirrored within Casey’s.

“I do love you, Niko, that hasn’t changed, perhaps it never will. But if you choose to follow this path, I...I can’t be with you... I can’t be your lover.”

“He killed my father, Casey,” Tessa said passionately. “He deserves to be dead.”

“I’m not sure I disagree with you,” Casey said. Tessa raised surprised eyes in Casey’s direction. “The things he’s done are unforgivable, and you have every right to wish him dead, but it’s not up to us to play God. We aren’t the ones who should be judging whether he lives or dies...it’s not our place.”

“I’m making it my place.” Tessa growled.

A few more moments of silence reigned before Casey gave voice to what they both knew would come next.

“I do hope that once the *hahré* is repaid, your life becomes

everything you wish it to be. But if you go ahead with this plan of revenge, I won't ever be able to share that life with you."

"So be it," Tessa lashed out with words to hurt in the same manner that she was hurting.

"So that's the way it's to be with us then?" Casey asked with a cold edge to her voice.

"That's the way it's to be, Ms. Meridio," Tessa returned just as callously before walking out the door and leaving Casey standing in the middle of the room looking very much like that scared, confused child from so long ago.

Chapter 18

The standoff lasted for three days, each woman carefully avoiding the other. Casey sequestered herself in her room, preparing for the first phase of the dig to begin. She e-mailed and called, but it was soon apparent that she would have to start spending time in Athens. She hated the idea for more than one reason. Athens would always remind her of Tessa, and the only apartment she had was the one that belonged to Tessa.

Casey also thought a lot about her father, wondering when the moment would come. Would Tessa put a bullet in his brain as she'd demonstrated that day they were on the boat? She said that was the only way a real gangster would kill a man, when he could see it coming. She pondered on the man that, she realized now, she barely knew. Actually, she didn't know him at all. She came to realize he was the kind of man who could kill in cold blood without a thought or a trace of guilt. If her father ever felt remorse over his crimes, he didn't show it. *He killed Tessa's father right in front of her, then had the audacity to hire her later, saying it wasn't personal, it was just business. What kind of a monster does that?*

Tessa kept herself just as preoccupied behind Meridio's office door. She worked long hours, then shut herself up in the guesthouse, usually drinking until she fell asleep. The previous night, she got so drunk that Alex had to carry her from the Kástro back home. She felt like she was being torn in two. Her love for

Casey and her thirst for revenge were pulling her in opposite directions.

Tessa rose and walked to the safe and deposited the books and the money as she did every evening. She was leaving when Casey walked into the office, nearly colliding with Tessa.

"I'm sorry, but I needed to speak with you a moment," Casey said, wondering how the two of them could be so distant when they'd made love only a few days before.

Tessa stopped and Casey realized Tessa was waiting for her to continue.

"I...I guess I just want to know if I..." Casey paused and searched the blue eyes, looking for some signs of the lover she knew. What she saw were eyes that were as filled with pain as her own. "I guess I need to know if I should look for a different apartment in Athens or—"

"That apartment is yours to do with as you wish. I'd like to think you would still use it. I have an old friend who takes care of the place. At least I know you'd be safe there," Tessa said.

"Thank you," Casey said softly, not knowing what else to say. "Thank you," she repeated, then turned and left the room.

"You're welcome," Tessa whispered to an empty room. Looking down at her hands, she realized that they were clenched into fists to keep them from shaking.

"Alex!" Tessa called sharply out the door.

He showed up immediately. "What's up?"

"Come on." Tessa growled impatiently.

"Where are we going?" Alex asked, pulling on his jacket.

"To get drunk."

Casey hadn't been sleeping well, so when the pounding on her door began, she jumped up to see who it was. Pulling open the heavy wooden door, Casey found Alex nervously shifting from foot to foot.

"Please, miss, I need your help...it's the *Karê*."

"I'll be right out," Casey said as she closed the door. She threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt and reopened the door.

Alex quickly told her, as she followed him downstairs, about

the fights Tessa had been in at more than one bar that evening.

"She's in the dining room. She has one of her guns out and she's playing Russian roulette with it."

"Dear God!" Casey rushed into the dining room to find Tessa loading another bullet into the thirty-eight's chamber.

Casey walked to the table and placed her hand over Tessa's. Tessa looked up, and for a second, Casey didn't think Tessa was going to recognize her. Tessa blinked hard twice, then recognition dawned.

"Please, Niko...don't do this," Casey pleaded softly. It was the first time she used the nickname since their estrangement.

"It's okay," Tessa slurred, holding up a bullet. "I only used two."

"Please put away your gun...it scares me."

As she looked into Casey's eyes, Tessa knew that she was the cause of the pain that both women were experiencing. She looked back down at the small hand that covered hers and the tears returned, the ones she couldn't keep from shedding lately.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. Looking up at Casey, she tried to convey the depth of her emotion through her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she rasped.

Casey could barely stand to watch the woman she loved fall apart in front of her. She slipped an arm around Tessa's shoulders, and Tessa leaned her head against Casey's body. With her other hand, Casey easily slipped the pistol from her grasp.

"Don't take my gun, Casey," Tessa implored weakly.

"I'm not taking it, love. I'm putting it into your holster," Casey flipped the safety on and eased the pistol into the holster at the small of Tessa's back. She patted it gently. "Feel it? It's right where you always carry it. Okay?"

Tessa nodded and Casey stroked the long dark hair. She bent down and placed a tender kiss on top of Tessa's head. Tessa slipped her arms around Casey's waist, and they stayed that way for a long while with Casey whispering a litany of words to calm Tessa.

"I'm so tired," Tessa said at last.

"I know, sweetheart." Casey motioned Alex from the shadows

to help her. "Come on, love. Alex is going to help us, and we'll go to the guesthouse and get you in bed."

Tessa allowed the two to assist her in standing. As they slowly walked across the lawn, Tessa leaned heavily on both of them for support. Once inside the house, they deposited Tessa on the bed. Casey removed Tessa's holster and shoes and pulled a quilt up over the woman. Casey walked into the living room and picked up the clothes that Tessa uncharacteristically left strewn about the room, while Alex stood there unsure of what to do.

A crash from the bedroom brought Alex out of his frozen stance. He rushed in to find Tessa trying to get out of bed. Casey rushed to the door, but Alex waved her back.

"I have to get up...I need to talk to Casey," Tessa muttered.

"Hey, Nikki, take it easy, huh? She's already gone, so relax and lay back down, okay?"

Tessa looked past Alex into the darkened living room, unaware that Casey stood just outside the opening to the bedroom. "She's gone?"

"Yeah, so what do you say we call it a night, huh?" Alex coaxed Tessa back into bed. She lay there, one arm flung across her eyes.

"Don't ever fall in love, Alex. People in our business aren't meant to fall in love...at least not with nice girls. Casey's a nice girl." Tessa's voice broke and tears fell from her eyes. "You know what the worst part of it is?" Tessa looked absently at Alex as she cried. "I never told her how much I loved her." Tessa choked on the last few words, and she cried out loud. "I was too scared...now she'll never know that she's everything to me."

Alex looked back and could see Casey's silhouette just outside the bedroom door. He couldn't tell, but he figured it was a sure bet that Casey was crying, too. They must have had one hell of a fight to break up a good thing like they had going. Both of them seemed miserable. He'd never seen Tessa act this way.

"Don't worry, Nikki," Alex said. "I bet she knows."

"Do you really think so?" Tessa mumbled sleepily.

Alex looked back at the bedroom door, but Casey was gone. "Yeah...I'm positive."

Casey slipped from the guesthouse, unable to listen to Tessa's weeping any longer. Her heart was breaking at the sound. Once behind her bedroom door, she paced the floor, cursing her father. She realized that the cold demeanor Tessa displayed was a mask to cover up emotions that she thought would make her appear weak.

Goddamn you to hell, father! You've caused all of this. You are responsible for that woman over there. You made her what she is, made her in your own twisted image the day you murdered her father. It's no wonder she's on the verge of a breakdown. All her life, she lived only for revenge. She grew up to be just like you, a cold, heartless killer. Now she knows there might be something out there besides power and control, and she doesn't know whether to follow her head or her heart. I hate you, Andreas Meridio...I hate you!

Casey fell heavily into the cushioned chair, pulled her knees up, and wrapped her arms around her legs. Now that she knew Tessa was so torn between her love for her and what she thought was the keeping of a vow, she knew that Olympia's words were true. Olympia seemed so sure of what her daughter's actions would be.

Things change, little one. Don't give up on Tessa's heart just yet.

Casey knew that she had to keep Tessa from going through with her *hahré*. She had to give her a chance. She had a feeling that when it came time to place the cards on the table, Tessa would do the right thing if Casey were involved. It would be one thing for Tessa to kill Meridio behind closed doors and quite another to do it in front of Casey, but it had to be Tessa's decision. She bit her lip and sourly thought about what she would have to do. If she were to keep Tessa from destroying the rest of their lives, she would have to become involved in the situation. As distasteful as it was to her, she knew there was only one way to do that.

Casey laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. The last thing to cross her mind before sleep claimed her was that she had just chosen Tessa over her father, the woman she loved with all her heart over the man who tainted their lives with his need

for wealth and power. In her mind, it became her own form of *hahré*.

Casey walked into the travel agency with as much authority as she had when she walked through the doors with Tessa. The same dyed-from-a-bottle redhead sat at the receptionist's desk.

"Would you please tell Jack Armstrong that Cassandra Meridio would like to speak with him?" Casey asked.

The woman looked over her glasses at Casey and smiled politely. "I'm sorry, miss, but there's no Mr. Armstrong that works here."

"I only want to talk to him briefly...I'm sure he could spare me a moment," Casey said between clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry, miss, bu—"

"Look," Casey hissed, slamming her hand onto the desk and leaning in to be sure the woman heard her. "I want you to walk through that door right there and into the conference room, tap on that pitiful excuse for a two-way mirror, and tell Mr. Armstrong that if I don't see his sorry ass out here in a matter of minutes, I'm going down onto the street to start telling everyone that the Albanian Mafia has an office here. Then I'm going to stand back and watch them burn this place to the ground. Now what part of that don't you think he'll understand?"

Casey stepped back as the flustered woman rushed through the door of the conference room.

"Well, did you want to see all of me or just my sorry ass?" Jack Armstrong said from where he stood outside the conference room, his arms folded in a gesture of impatience.

"Mr. Armstrong, we need to talk," Casey said, not budging an inch.

"I think we've done about all the talking we need to, Ms. Meridio. I can't think of anything you could say at this point that could interest me."

"Oh, I bet you're wrong." Casey grinned devilishly at the man towering over her.

"I heard you would have quite a headache this morning," Olympia said as Tessa held out a shaky hand for a cup of coffee.

"I can't keep any secrets from you anymore, can I?" Tessa said with a weak smile.

"It seems I miss all the interesting happenings around here."

"That will teach you to go play cards at the café."

"Oh, Casey left a message for you this morning. She said it couldn't wait, but she had to go to Athens and she asked if you would come by the apartment." Olympia gave Tessa the entire message in one sentence.

"She went alone? Didn't you try to stop her?" Tessa stood quickly.

"Well, dear, it isn't exactly my place—"

"No, it's my place," Tessa said. "How did she go?"

"She said she was taking the ferry."

"I'll be back later. Phone me if Meridio gets in today," Tessa called back to her mother.

Olympia smiled as Tessa rushed out the door after Casey.

Casey had stopped by Olympia's room earlier that morning to thank her and to tell her she wasn't about to give up on Tessa's heart just yet. She said she couldn't give details, but she decided that Tessa belonged to her and she was going to fight for what was hers.

Tessa ran up the wooden steps to the second floor of the apartment building. On the door, Casey had tacked a note; it was in Casey's hurried scrawl.

T.

I had to go see the travel agent about a trip...meet me there.

Casey

Is she going back to America? Meet her there...there, where? What in the—Oh, shit.

Tessa flew down the stairs and took off toward the center.

Tessa paced back and forth like a caged animal. Jack's office

was so small that she only took two strides before she had to turn around again.

"Well, I hear you and your girlfriend had a little rift." Jack chuckled as he came through the door.

Sometimes he regretted opening his smart mouth. This was definitely one of those times. Tessa slammed him back into the door and held him there in a crossover hold. The fire in the blue eyes turned as pale as ice, and Jack regretted his decision more and more. He forgot that Tessa wasn't one of those people you teased...about anything.

"Back off, Jack...back way the fuck off!" She growled under her breath, releasing her hold. "Where is she?"

Armstrong crossed the room and opened a door, nodding.

"Tessa, meet your new partner," he said as Casey stepped into the small office.

"No!" Tessa shouted. She looked at Jack in amazement. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" She turned her gaze on Casey. "Are you?"

"There's nothing you can say that will make me change my mind," Casey said.

"Casey, you know what these people are like."

"I think so...I can trust them to keep their word so long as I'm still standing in the same room...or until I become *expendable*," she enunciated the last word carefully, turning toward Armstrong.

"Now that hurt," Jack said with a smirk.

"Casey!" Tessa was at a loss for a good argument, except for the fact that the woman she loved could wind up dead this way.

"Niko." Casey stared hard at Tessa. "There isn't anything else to say. I suggest we take this topic home so we can talk in private." Casey motioned with her eyes to Jack.

"This is not over, Jack." Tessa growled as the two women left the office.

Since both women had a car, Tessa followed Casey back to the apartment. Casey pulled the BMW around to the back garage and Tessa parked on the narrow street. Just as Tessa was about to get out of the automobile, Casey walked up and leaned her hands on the passenger side of the red convertible.

“As much as I’d love to argue with you, I’m dead tired. I didn’t sleep a wink last night, and all I’d really like to do is take a nap.”

“Oh, sure.” Tessa acknowledged that Casey did look wiped out, but she felt like she was being given the brush-off. “Here,” she scribbled on a piece of paper, “here’s my cell phone number. I’ll stay at the estate tonight, and if you feel like...um, talking... call me.”

“Thanks,” Casey said. She smiled and turned to go inside.

Tessa still sat there after Casey entered the apartment. She was thrown by Casey’s behavior. Casey acted like Tessa was just another friend.

What the hell do you think she’s going to act like? You just dumped her a few days ago, remember...or did you forget that you chose revenge against Meridio over Casey?

“Ah, hell!” she said aloud and sped off up the hill.

The old grandfather clock in the living area struck eleven, and Tessa threw the magazine onto the coffee table. She had been reading the same passage in her favorite sailing magazine for the last three hours. She concentrated on little else but Casey that day. She tried to do a number of little things around the house she’d been putting off, but she would find herself staring into space, daydreaming about Casey. She felt certain Casey was going to call, but so far, no word. Casey gave her the brush-off; that much was clear.

Tessa was exasperated and walked over to the patio door and turned the outside lights out. She looked down at the two dogs at her feet. “Looks like we’ve been stood up.”

Tessa froze at the faint sound of metal ringing against metal. Both animals had their ears turned forward and were growling low in their throat. “I know. I heard it, too,” Tessa said aloud.

She pulled open the drawer of the china cabinet and removed her Glock pistol. After checking the clip, she silently slid open the patio door and released the Dobermans. She waited for a full minute but heard no sounds that would indicate the dogs had cornered someone. Could have just been the wind, she thought.

Damn weird that it happened just when the lights went out, though.

She slipped outside and moved around to the back gate, sure the sound came from that direction. Just as she expected, she saw the silhouette of a figure, small, probably just a kid. Tessa was so focused on sneaking up on the intruder that she lost sight of the dogs. Finally, she was within reach. She lifted the gun and pulled back the hammer, pressing it against the back of the stranger's head.

"Don't move or I'll blow your fucking brains out," she hissed.

"Jesus Christ, Niko!" Casey's trembling voice came at Tessa from the darkness.

"Casey?" Tessa finally realized that both dogs were sitting at Casey's feet. Tessa immediately pulled the gun away from Casey's head. "Holy shit, Casey. I could have shot you!"

Tessa was breathing hard with the realization of what happened. Without thinking, she pulled Casey to her, and Casey's arms slipped around her waist.

"I thought I'd surprise you," Casey whispered weakly.

"You surprised me all right. I'm so sorry, baby." Tessa kissed the top of Casey's head.

It was as if the estrangement of the past few days didn't exist. Once the two women were locked in an embrace, all the rules of proper behavior seemed to fly out the window. They held tightly to each other, Casey running her hands up Tessa's muscular back.

"Casey?" Tessa asked.

"Hmm?" Casey murmured, enjoying the feel of Tessa's arms around her again.

"What is that sticking me in the ribs?"

"Oh, God." Casey pulled away, and she held out a mashed bouquet of roses. She tried to straighten a few broken stems, but they promptly fell back over. Tessa, in the meantime, was trying hard not to laugh at the expression on Casey's face. "They're... for you."

Suddenly, Casey looked indignant. She slapped Tessa across the arm with the rumpled flowers. "Why did you turn the lights out on me?"

“Hey,” Tessa exclaimed, rubbing her arm, “in case you’re not wearing a watch, it’s after eleven o’clock. Frankly, I thought you blew me off.”

“I just woke up,” Casey admitted sheepishly.

Tessa smiled at the contrite woman. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’ve never had a woman give me flowers before...thank you.” Tessa accepted the crumpled bouquet and wondered what it all meant. “Do you...want to come inside?” she asked tentatively.

“That was kind of my plan.” Casey slipped her hand into Tessa’s grasp, and they went in through the patio door.

Tessa walked out of the kitchen with the roses in a pale blue vase. “I think they came through all right.” She placed the vase on the coffee table.

She had to admit she was nervous. She wasn’t sure how Casey wanted to play this. Were they just friends...ex-lovers...what? Tessa sat on the arm of the sofa, bringing herself down to Casey’s level.

“Casey...”

Casey stepped in and slipped her arms around Tessa’s neck, firmly kissing the stunned Tessa. It was an involuntary reaction for Tessa to pull Casey closer and moan into the kiss, but it was all the encouragement Casey needed. In seconds, Tessa was being kissed in a way that caused all her other senses to nearly shut down. When they pulled apart to catch their breaths, tears filled Tessa’s eyes, and she stroked Casey’s cheek.

“Oh, Casey, I’m so sorry...I never meant to hurt you.”

“I love you, Niko.” Casey brushed her lips lightly against Tessa’s. “I don’t care what’s gone on in the past or what will happen in the future. I only know that I love you too much to give you up...I can’t...I won’t.”

“Honey, do you know what you’re saying? I haven’t changed my mind about what I’m going to do.”

“Do you mean, do I know that I’m choosing you over my father? Then the answer is yes. I won’t live the rest of my life without you. I feel like I’ve been living in some sort of limbo for the last twenty years, stuck halfway between being alive and actually living. I know you’re afraid I’ll get hurt or worse, in all of

this mess, but I have to do it this way, can't you see? If something happened to you, I wouldn't be able to go on. My body might keep going, but my heart would die along with you. I don't want to have to live the rest of my life that way. If anything should happen, I want to be with you. Where you go, I go." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I guess the last question is...do you still want me?" Casey asked, not looking up.

Tessa clutched Casey and held her tightly. She breathed in the scent of her and reveled in the texture of the soft hair against her cheek.

"I should tell you no," Tessa rasped. "I should tell you I don't love you, that I've just been using you. I should break your heart. Maybe that way you'd pack your things and go back to America. It would kill me to be without you, but at least I'd know you were safe," Tessa said, placing gentle kisses along the side of Casey's neck and face. "Forgive me, Casey, but I do want you," Tessa whispered tearfully. "I want you and I need you."

"Then it's settled. Let's go to bed," Casey whispered into Tessa's ear.

"You've been sleeping all day," Tessa said, wiping away Casey's tears.

"Sleeping wasn't exactly what I had in mind." Casey smiled up at Tessa with a mischievous grin.

Tessa turned out the remaining lights, and the two women walked up the stairs arm in arm.

It was an early start for both women the next day. Casey felt like she'd just gone to sleep, but she was trying hard to concentrate on everything Jack Armstrong was telling her. He told her what things to look for—memos, invoices, anything with a contact name or country. If it was handwritten, all the better. They already suspected the main suppliers were the Libyans, but until they had the physical proof, Interpol refused to act. By the time they took a break for lunch, Casey's head was swimming.

She and Tessa rode back to the estate to have lunch. Tessa called Olympia to confirm that Meridio was still doing business in Turkey and would probably be gone through the weekend.

He didn't seem distressed that Casey went back to Athens once Olympia told him that Tessa accompanied her.

Tessa scooped up their plates and came back with a wooden box in one hand and a tray of *frappés* in another. Casey took a sip of the iced coffee as Tessa pushed the wooden box toward her.

"I picked this up this morning while you were with Jack."

"A present ...for me?" Casey lifted the lid.

"It's not really that kind of gift," Tessa said, catching the expression on Casey's face as she peered inside the box.

"Gee..." Casey hesitated. "A pistol...how romantic."

Tessa smirked at the comment. "I told you it wasn't that kind of a gift. It's a nine-millimeter Beretta Cougar. I want you to carry this from now on. Do you understand?" Tessa asked, noticing the distant look in Casey's eyes.

"It's...I guess I was just thinking that this is the kind of thing we're fighting against." Casey sat staring at the barrel that wasn't much longer than her hand.

"Well, this one may just save your life someday, so don't knock it. I want you to carry it with you all the time. Keep it loaded, but keep the safety on till you're used to carrying it around."

"I know this is a small pistol as guns go, but where am I going to carry it?"

"In your purse," Tessa said without thinking.

"In case you haven't noticed, I hardly ever carry a purse."

Tessa thought for a moment. "Yeah. You have a laptop. Is there any room inside the case for it?"

"Yeah, that'll do," Casey said.

Tessa spent the rest of their lunch break showing Casey how to load and care for the pistol. It fit perfectly in the inside pocket of the laptop case and Casey tucked it away as they prepared to head back over to the center.

Casey drove the BMW as Tessa played passenger, listening to Casey's tales of her morning with Jack Armstrong and all that he expected her to remember. Tessa tried to concentrate on everything Casey was saying, but her thoughts wandered. She hated the idea of Casey wearing a gun. Tessa knew that if she couldn't find a way to reconcile what Meridio did to her father,

by the time they found enough evidence for Jack to move in, she would end up doing something that might destroy her relationship with Casey. No matter what Casey *said* she felt, Tessa knew in her heart that murdering Meridio might eventually be the wedge that would drive them apart.

Armstrong spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening drilling Casey on what she'd learned so far. He knew he was being hard on her, but he only had a short amount of time to get Casey to start thinking like an agent. Tessa helped and, much to Armstrong's amazement, showed a remarkable amount of patience with Casey. They went over exactly what they expected Casey to do and what things, under no circumstances, did they not want her to attempt. Armstrong explained carefully, mostly for Tessa's benefit, that they weren't working alone now. They were to keep each other informed, no surprises. Jack looked especially long at Tessa after he said that. He knew what a rogue player she was. He was reminded of the beauty and the beast as Tessa sat, nodding and agreeing with everything Jack said. Casey obviously held the power to tame the beast.

The last thing Jack did was to confiscate Casey's laptop. He grinned wryly as he handed Casey her Beretta before turning the computer over to one of the techs from downstairs. He was having an encryption program loaded on Casey's machine. She could use her regular electronic mail program for all her normal correspondence, but she was to use the special program for conversing with anyone from the center.

Jack also explained that it wasn't safe for Tessa or Casey to come to the center any longer. Their communication was to go solely through the e-mail program. Jack handed a plane ticket and a bag of brochures to Casey.

"A ticket to France." Casey fixed a seductive expression on her face and leered up at him. "Jack, I thought you were married." She smiled.

"Oh, that's very funny. Geez, you've been hanging around this one too long." He jerked a thumb in Tessa's direction. "You're getting to be just as much of a wise-ass as she is."

That made Tessa smile. She remembered her first few

encounters with Casey, during the last couple of weeks. “Hey, I didn’t have anything to do with it...she came that way,” Tessa said.

“*That* is a ticket and some travel brochures. Leave them lying in plain sight in your room on Mýkonos. That way, if it ever comes back that you were here a couple of times, simply say you were planning on a little R&R for yourself, and someone at the museum mentioned this travel agency.”

“*You* people think of everything,” Casey joked as she accepted her returned laptop from a woman from the computer department.

Jack leaned down, and with an expression that was heartbreakingly serious, he said, “Just remember, Casey, now you *are* one of *us* people.”

Chapter 19

The next two weeks sped by at an alarming pace. Casey's work at the museum demanded more and more time, while Tessa was deeply involved with Meridio's everyday matters. Casey was spending about every other day in Athens. Of course, Meridio was less than enthusiastic about Casey being out from under his protection, which Tessa interpreted to mean out from under his control. Therefore, Meridio occasionally sent his *Karé* on errands to the mainland as a pretense to look out for Casey. Tessa smiled when Meridio wasn't looking. Who was she to turn down a direct order? She had to wonder what the man was using for brains, but she enjoyed the fact that he was gullible enough to send the fox into the hen house...with his blessing no less.

From the computer in her home in Athens, in which Jack's boys installed all the necessary encryption software, Tessa would e-mail Casey when she arrived in town. Casey became very good at watching the world around her, and making sure there was no one following, she would go to Tessa's estate.

It was funny in an odd sort of way. Casey and Tessa talked about anything and everything during these times together, everything but the subject at hand. They agreed it was almost like talking business in bed, and neither seemed eager to bring that part of their lives into their bedroom. So they would wait until they were lunching or out for a drive to discuss particulars.

Late one afternoon, Andreas Meridio caught Casey in the pool, relaxing by doing laps.

“Well, don’t tell me I actually caught the eminent archaeologist at home,” he joked.

“Very funny, Pappa.” The bile rose in Casey’s throat each time she had to use that term of endearment on her father, but Jack said not to change anything about herself or her habits. Because of this, she plastered a smile on her face and acted like nothing was amiss.

“I wanted to tell you that we’re going to do some entertaining for the weekend. Some business associates will be flying in, and I thought I would have a party on Friday night. There’ll be around a dozen in their party, and they’ll be staying in the guest rooms for the weekend.”

Casey was dying to know who the business associates were. *Could they be the arms sellers?*

“Are they your Libyan associates?” Casey casually asked, walking from the pool and tying a towel around her hips.

“No, they’re gentlemen from Turkey,” Meridio said flatly.

Casey raised an eyebrow and didn’t hide her surprise very well.

Meridio caught the expression and called her on it. “Don’t tell me that a modern woman such as yourself harbors ill will toward our neighbors?”

“No, no, of course not. I guess I’m just a little surprised that you’re so open to it,” Casey said.

Old World Greeks like her father had a habit, it seemed, of detesting Albanians and Turks. It was a feud as old as the Catholics and the Protestants. Few Greeks ever forgot that centuries ago, the Turks, or the Ottomans as they were known according to ancient history, captured Constantinople, renamed it Istanbul, and made it the capital of the Ottoman empire. The Turkish military partially destroyed the Parthenon in the late 1600s, an unforgivable sin to historians. For 150 years, the Greeks lived under Turkish rule until their domination ended in the 1800s. Most of modern-day Turkey belonged to Greece at one time.

“These gentlemen are different. We’ve been associates for a very long time, and we have developed an excellent working relationship. I would like you to do me a favor, *Máhtia Mou*.”

"Look pretty and charming at your party?" Casey asked, trying hard to disguise the contempt in her voice.

"Well, there is that, yes, but I was thinking of something else. I would like it if you would stay in the guesthouse with Tessa for the weekend. The guests here will be all men, and I don't want anyone making free with my daughter. I'll speak to Tessa."

"Sure, I have no problem with that arrangement." Secretly, Casey was jumping up and down with joy. "Like your Turkish associates, the *Karê* and I have also developed a comfortable working relationship."

Casey smiled sweetly as her father reiterated his thanks and walked off. Inside, she had a grin on her face that would have made the Cheshire cat look like the Mona Lisa.

"Are you sure he said Turks?" Tessa asked Casey for the third time.

"Okay, is it that you don't believe me or is there another reason you keep asking me that?" Casey said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, hon," Tessa said, slightly distracted.

They were having a late lunch on the patio of a local *tavérna* on Mýkonos. Casey told Tessa the conversation with her father, but she hadn't yet told Tessa who her roommate for the weekend would be.

"What's the deal, Niko?"

"The *deal*, as you put it, is that I was unaware that your father did business with anyone from Turkey anymore."

"I know you're the Meridio *Karê*, but surely my father doesn't tell you everything that goes on in his dealings?"

"No, but up to this point, I didn't know that. Frankly, I didn't think your father was that smart. You see a good *mángas* never tells those underneath them *everything* that goes on in their business. Even when I ran my own racket, I never told any one person everything. Meridio's a little smarter than I thought."

"You said anymore," Casey paused as the waitress brought their food out and placed it on the table, resuming her conversation when the waitress walked away. "Did he do business with the Turks at one time?"

“Yeah.” Tessa tried to remember the details. “About two years ago, we stopped getting any kind of sales from one of our major clients in Turkey. Rumors went around, and I happened to catch a few of them. I told Meridio, but at the time, we blew them off.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“That our friends in Turkey decided to move up in the world. They supposedly had connections and were going to start selling, and not just handguns, either...big ticket items like—”

“Nuclear weapons,” Casey finished softly.

Tessa touched the tip of her index finger to her nose. “Correct. I reported it to Jack, but at the time, everyone just laughed. The Turks didn’t have the money, power, or contacts to pull it off. Most folks in the business thought they were pissing in the wind. Funny thing about that, though, if the rumors were false, then who *do* the Turks buy from?”

“You think they could be father’s suppliers instead of buyers?”

“It could go one of two ways. Giving Meridio the complete benefit of the doubt and providing what he told you is true, then perhaps two years ago, the Turks found a new supplier and maybe that connection has dried up for them. So now they have to buy from us again.”

“Now tell me the scenario you really believe.” Casey arched an eyebrow at Tessa.

“That the Turks did start selling, and they became Meridio’s big connection. Only Meridio, being the smart man I’m suddenly discovering him to be, keeps it to himself. He does business as usual with the small dealers, I’ve got a name for every one of them, but he does an extremely private business with the Turks. He makes millions of U.S. dollars reselling things like Titan missiles. He becomes wealthier and wealthier by giving Third World countries the capability of creating their own nuclear holocausts.”

“Do you actually keep books with sales receipts and the like?” Casey asked, somewhat amazed.

“Business is business, whether it’s legal or not. The more anal and paranoid you are, the better your silent partners like you. Everything that comes in and goes out gets marked in the books.

That's why I know we haven't done business with the Turks. It's beginning to look like your father is keeping a second set of books even from me."

"I still don't get the concept of keeping books in the first place. I mean, what if you're caught? Isn't it just fodder for the prosecuting attorneys?"

"When you deal with business people, you have to keep business records. Your father doesn't come up with the cash to buy a weapon the size of an American fighter jet all by himself. He has silent partners that put up the capital. If those guys feel like you're cheating them, you damn well better have books to show them you're not."

"So you're saying he's got invoices somewhere that you haven't seen?" Casey asked for confirmation of her theory.

Tessa leaned forward, and there was a gleam in her eye. "I think this is it, Casey. I feel it. I think the men that are coming to Mýkonos for the weekend are the final piece in the puzzle."

"So if we can find some of those invoices, anything that confirms all this, we turn it over to Jack and it's enough?"

"Yes, but that's not going to be as easy as it sounds. Meridio must have a place in his office I don't know about. Damn, can you believe we find this out now? We just had a whole week without him here when we could have looked through the place."

"Are you sure it's his office? They could be anywhere in his private rooms upstairs," Casey said.

"No, he'd have them somewhere close to where he does business during the day."

"The safe is the obvious choice."

"Too obvious. I'm in there almost every single day. I know every inch of that safe and I've never seen anything out of the ordinary."

"Niko, couldn't we just wait until my father goes out of town again?"

"If the Turks are the ones and we can get proof while they're still in this country, then Jack can have Interpol arrest them and they'll have them here. That way, they won't have to go through the extradition process. I don't have to tell you that the Turkish

government is about as likely to turn them over to the Greeks as we would be if the positions were reversed.”

“So we have to find a way to search my father’s office before the weekend is over.”

“Correction. We have to find a way for *you* to search his office,” Tessa said. “Look. If I get caught rummaging through any place that exceeds my authority as *Karê*, I’m made immediately. If you get caught looking in one of your father’s desk drawers, you can bat your eyes and say you were looking for a pencil and the chances are good he’ll believe you.”

Casey nodded in agreement.

“We’ll have to figure out a way to slip you away from the party tomorrow night and into his office.”

“Where do I start looking first?”

“Let me think,” Tessa said, trying to visualize the office in her head.

“Oh, I got it,” Casey said excitedly. “I bet he keeps them in a hollowed-out book on the bookshelf.”

Tessa didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She settled for a loving smile.

“Casey, this isn’t an Agatha Christie novel.”

“I don’t know. I just figured it works for Jessica Fletcher.”

“Who is Jessica Fletcher?” Tessa asked.

“Don’t you ever watch television?” Casey said. “You know, *Murder She Wrote*...Angela Lansbury?”

Tessa couldn’t help the grin. Here they were in a most serious and complex situation and Casey was drawing on expertise from fictional crime solvers.

“Yeah, I know who the character is. I always remember thinking that the last place on earth I wanted to be was that little town she lived in.”

“Why?”

“Did you ever notice how people had a habit of dying there?”

Both women released a burst of nervous laughter that helped ease the tension of the moment.

“Okay, once you get into the room, go for the desk drawers

and the small file cabinet just to the right of the safe. They should at least be good places to start. Casey?" Tessa asked.

Casey looked at Tessa expectantly. "Yes?"

"I want you to remember to be very careful. Please remember this is not James Bond stuff. It's serious and people have been killed within the Meridio organization for less. If you're caught doing anything, just keep denying until you're blue in the face. Okay?"

"Niko, do you think my father would have me killed if he found out what I was doing?" Casey asked softly.

Tessa leaned her elbows on the table and bent her body toward Casey. "You've heard the saying blood is thicker than water? You've disproved that theory by choosing me over your father, realizing what I intend to do. I just don't want to find out what Meridio will do in the position of having to choose you or the money."

Casey looked down at her hands. She looked up again at Tessa. "How do you know so much about what my father will do?"

"Because I *was* your father." Tessa didn't have to think about it before she answered. "I was just as heartless and every bit as cruel."

Tessa paused as Casey looked down once again. Tessa waited for her to say it. Tessa dropped her own gaze into her lap. *Go ahead and say it, Casey. If I was just like your father, then why does he deserve to die and I don't?*

Tessa was almost afraid to look up, afraid of the judgment she would find in Casey's gaze. Tessa willed her eyes to meet Casey's, but what she saw nearly stopped her heart from beating. There was that smile, that wonderfully bright smile.

"I'm still hungry...let's have dessert," Casey said matter-of-factly.

Tessa couldn't help but smile, mostly at the irony of the whole situation, her whole life for that matter. The smile creased into a small frown as Tessa thought about her own past. *I've killed men in cold blood before. Did any of them ever leave a wife and children behind? What makes me so different from him? Am I any better?*

The smile Casey flashed only for Tessa turned brighter.

Tessa's frown disappeared as she stared at her. *What are you doing to me, Casey? For twenty years, I've had only one thing to keep me focused. Now you walk in and suddenly nothing else is as important.*

"Come on, let's go." Tessa smiled, rising and throwing a generous amount of bills on the table.

"Hey," Casey complained, "what about my dessert?"

Tessa put on a seductive grin and leaned down on the table. "Let's go home...I've got something you can have for dessert."

Tessa walked away without looking back, assured Casey would follow closely behind. Casey jumped from her seat and was on Tessa's heels, a smile filled with anticipation on her face.

"Don't you look nice?" Casey looked at Tessa's reflection through the mirror.

Tessa stood behind Casey and ran a brush through her hair as Casey finished applying her makeup. Tessa wore a cream-colored suit and a burgundy silk blouse.

"Admit it," Casey teased, walking to the bedroom of the guesthouse to get into her clothes. "You're just wearing such dressy slacks so you can wear heels. You love intimidating the hell out of those men by towering over them."

"Hey," Tessa called from the bathroom, smirking into the mirror. "I use what I got."

"Is that what you're wearing tonight?" Tessa asked dumbfounded as she walked into the bedroom.

Casey stood there, indicating Tessa should zip up the back of the short black dress. The neckline plunged a little more than Casey was used to, but she figured if she could keep their eyes there, she would have a better chance at getting what she needed.

"No, I thought I'd go bowling in this and wear jeans to the party. What kind of a question is that? Doesn't it look good?"

"No, it looks great...too great. Now I'm going to have to spend all night worrying about you *and* keeping guys from hitting on you," Tessa said with a crestfallen look.

Casey chuckled and turned her back. Tessa slowly zipped the dress and slipped her arms around Casey's waist.

"Just remember, I better not see you using any of what you've got tonight," Tessa whispered in a husky voice. "At least until we get back here."

"Only for you." Casey turned in the embrace and lightly kissed her.

"You remembered to e-mail Jack, right?" Tessa asked as an afterthought as they headed out the door.

"I did it as soon as I woke up this morning. He knows what we know."

"Which isn't a whole heck of a lot." Tessa held the door open for Casey. "Shall we?"

The evening went by quickly. The Turkish men were a great deal more cordial to Tessa than their Libyan counterparts. The men, who appeared to be the leaders, seemed quite interested in the Meridio *Karê*. Tessa suspected they were looking to hire her based upon her reputation, and she wouldn't be surprised if an offer came before they packed up at the close of the weekend.

Tessa did something she rarely did. She took center stage and entertained, as well as informed. She not only talked about being a woman in this business, but also told of her experiences when she ran the docks in Athens. Within two hours, she was plying them with *ouzo* and challenging a few of them to a drinking game.

Casey caught Tessa's eye just before Casey slipped from the party. She had already made up a story in case her father caught her. *Just say you wanted a few minutes of silence...you were looking for something to write with, that's why the drawer is open.* Casey said it over and over to herself so it would sound natural and not forced. She silently entered her father's office, never seeing the figure that shadowed her.

"Okay...you're Jessica Fletcher," Casey whispered aloud.

Tessa told her not to be gone more than ten minutes at a time and she'd been in here for fifteen already. Unable to find anything that looked like it had a Turkish name printed on it, she stood in the center of the room and looked around. Her father's bookshelves were in perfect order, nothing out of place. Perhaps that was why

the large, leather bound copy of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* seemed so out of place with its spine pulled out about an inch farther than the other books. Casey pulled the large tome from its resting place and opened it. Casey smiled brightly. *Uh-huh...this will teach her to laugh at me.*

She opened the volume and there resting inside a hollowed-out cavern of pages, were three packets of yellow slips. Quickly leafing through them, she recognized one of the names as a man she'd been introduced to earlier that evening. *Jackpot!* She carefully removed the rubber bands. Tessa told her if she found anything not to take the first or the last one, take some from the middle. That way, they wouldn't be missed for a while. She quickly took two slips from the middle of each bundle. Folding them over carefully, she lifted her dress and tucked them into the waistband of her panties. Smoothing the dress back down and carefully replacing the book exactly as she had found it, Casey turned in time to see the door to the office opening.

Casey could feel the heat in her face, and she was sure whoever was there could hear the furious pounding of her heart. She willed her breathing a little slower and nearly cried in relief when she recognized one of the Turkish men from the party.

"I thought perhaps we could share a dance," he spoke haltingly in Greek.

"Of course." Casey smiled nervously. "Why don't we go back to the party and I'd be happy to."

Casey noticed the man's bloodshot eyes and could smell his breath. She knew he'd had more than his share of drink already. Casey started to walk past the man, but he put his arm up against the door.

"I was thinking of a private dance," he slurred.

"Tessa, where's my daughter?" Meridio asked.

That's just what I'd like to know.

"I honestly don't know, Mr. Meridio." Tessa led Meridio from the dining room out into the hall to talk. "She said she was going to the powder room."

"I'm depending on you to keep an eye out for her." Meridio

was getting an exasperated edge to his voice.

"I know, I—"

Casey walked out of her father's office, not seeing Tessa or her father down the hall.

"Look, no means no, okay?" Casey said forcefully to the young man who made a move for her anyway.

That's when Casey saw her father and Tessa staring at her. Tessa's gaze darted back and forth as if looking for a way to get them out of this.

"Kiss me," Casey whispered to the delighted Turk. He didn't have to be asked twice. With his back to the onlookers, he slipped an arm around Casey's waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

Casey pushed the man away with a powerful shove. Drawing back her hand, she slapped him hard across the face. The stunned man reeled back from the force of Casey's blow and cursed in Turkish. He grabbed Casey's arm but neglected to see Tessa, who was suddenly towering over him.

Tessa had no idea if Casey planned it or not, but she was down the hallway in a half-dozen strides. She struck a forceful blow to the man's wrist. He howled in pain, releasing Casey's arm. By the time he looked up, Tessa had her arm cocked back. Tessa's fist connected, and the man stood there, teetering back and forth, looking in amazement at Tessa's fist, which was drawing back for another blow. He stared at her like she'd hit him with a bar of lead instead of her fist. That's when his legs got the message and crumpled underneath him, and he fell into an unconscious heap on the floor.

"Cassandra, are you all right?" Meridio rushed up and pulled Casey into his protective embrace.

"Yes, Pappa, I'm so sorry. I hope I didn't ruin your party." Casey added a tremor to her voice and conjured up a few crocodile tears to go along with her act as the terrified female.

"Ms. Meridio, I'm so sorry. I should never have allowed you to go off to the powder room alone," Tessa apologized for Meridio's benefit, also explaining to Casey where her father thought she was.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue. He was following me

around, and I thought if I slipped into your office,” Casey looked at her father, “that he would leave me alone. I didn’t realize he’d try to force himself on me.” Casey was playing the helpless woman to the hilt.

“Forgive me, *Máhtia Mou*,” Meridio apologized. “I should never have asked you to come to the party this evening. There are some men who just don’t know how to behave in front of ladies. Are you feeling all right now?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m feeling a little shaky after all that,” Casey lied. “Would it ruin your evening too much, Pappa, if I just called it a night and went to bed?”

Tessa was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Had the situation not been so deadly serious, it would have been comical.

“Of course not. Tessa will go with you. Tessa, I want to see you by Cassandra’s side every minute of the day and night for the rest of the weekend. I do not want a repeat of what happened tonight.”

“You can count on me, Mr. Meridio. I won’t let her out of my sight.”

This time, it was Casey’s turn to bite her lip and fight off the smile that threatened.

“You are truly gifted,” Tessa exclaimed once they were inside the guesthouse.

“I got them, Niko.” Casey looked up at Tessa.

“Are you kidding me? From the desk?”

“From a hollowed-out book,” Casey said smugly.

“Oh, quit fooling...really?” Tessa was stunned. She slipped her arms around Casey. “I swear, I will never make fun of your American television shows again.”

Casey kissed Tessa and broke away, lifting up her dress slightly to retrieve the invoice slips. Tessa scanned them quickly.

“This one.” Tessa held up one of the slips. “He’s the bald guy you met tonight.”

“I thought that was his name.”

“Okay, first things first. Get on your computer and e-mail

Jack. Tell him what we've got and ask him how long we stick around now."

Tessa turned and walked into the kitchen. She pulled out a plastic baggy and placed the slips inside. After scanning the room for a moment, she opened a flour canister and tucked the package inside, burying the plastic bag in flour.

Casey typed the message to Jack, but she suddenly became uncharacteristically quiet. It all happened so fast and now their question was *how long do we stick around?* It became a rather anticlimactic moment for Casey, realizing that now her life as Cassandra Meridio, at least the life she enjoyed in Greece, was over. The burden that Casey didn't want to look at yet still weighed heavily on her. If this is it, when will Tessa do it? Should she ask or just hope that Tessa grew to see past her vow?

As the two women lay in bed together, waiting for sleep to claim them, each became surrounded in the same thought, only looking at it from a different perspective.

When will she do it?

Will I still do it?

It was after four a.m., but that didn't seem to matter to Jack. He remembered those missions in the jungles of Guatemala where he'd stayed awake for a week, barely sleeping ten minutes a day. He was dozing off when he got the call that Casey e-mailed. Casey said they found the proof, handwritten invoices, which implicated the Turks, who happened to be spending the weekend at the Meridio estate. The center was thrown into high gear with the news.

"Oh, she's good," Jack muttered to himself. They couldn't have possibly timed it any better. Now they could grab the Turks in this country and tell the consulate in Turkey to go to hell.

"We got a little bit of a problem here, boss."

Jack turned to the computer whiz kid the Bureau sent him. The kid was an agent, but how he got through the academy was a mystery. He had computer nerd written all over him. What pissed Jack off the most was the kid continued to call him *boss* after he told him he would break his kneecaps if he did it again.

“What the hell do you mean, a problem?” Jack asked.

“Well, the cameras we nixed at the Greek’s place...they’re in the know again,” the whiz kid said.

“What the hell is he saying, in English?” Armstrong asked the woman next to him. She was Korean, but at least he could understand her.

“The cameras in the Meridio estate. Tessa said no one ever looked at the cameras or the tapes, they were only running in case of a break-in, then they’d run it back. So we disabled them. We had one of our guys go in for a phone repair and slip a magnet inside the taping mechanism of all the cameras.”

“I know all this...get to the *we’re in trouble* part.” Jack growled impatiently.

“Somebody must have cleaned them out, the magnets I mean. See, we set up a little satellite so we can see what they see. They didn’t catch that when they did their housecleaning.”

The woman opened a laptop computer and with a few keystrokes, scrolled through all the camera views on the Meridio estate. All were in fine working condition. The computer tech blushed when they landed on the camera view from Tessa’s bedroom in the guesthouse. Tessa lay sleeping with Casey wrapped protectively in her embrace. The tech quickly scrolled past them.

“So how did you find out at four in the morning that the cameras were working again?” Jack said, tired of waiting for the punch line to this scenario.

“That’s the *we’re in trouble* part,” the woman said. “We get an indicator when someone is using the system. Someone is viewing the cameras and replaying some recorded tapes.”

“What?” Armstrong shouted. “When?”

“Right now.” The tech indicated the flashing red light at the top of the screen.

“Where...which cameras?”

“Um...Meridio’s office...the daughter’s bedroom, and uh...” She pressed a few keys on the keyboard. “The guesthouse.”

“Jesus Christ! Out, we need to get them out of there now!” Armstrong practically screamed at a half-dozen agents milling around the room.

Instantly, the room became a flurry of activity.

"The phone, get me the number to Tessa's phone," Jack shouted, frantically flipping through numbers in the computer index.

"Cell phone and house phone are unsecured, boss," the annoying computer nerd said calmly.

"You stupid fuck," Armstrong shouted. "It doesn't matter now...they've already been made!"

"It's ringing on three," another agent shouted over the din.

Armstrong grabbed the receiver and punched line three.

"Yeah?" Tessa's sleepy voice growled on the third ring.

"Tessa, it's Jack. Get outta there, get out now...you're made."

Chapter 20

Andreas Meridio was dead tired. He'd stopped drinking about two hours before, but his guests wanted to stay and party all night, it seemed. He was under obligation to be a good host, and that's what he did. He stayed until the last one retired. He only had another hour or two until the sun came up, and he desperately needed to take advantage of the last couple of hours of night that were left. Meridio's breath caught as he walked in and saw the flashing red light on the console of cameras in the outer suite of his rooms.

This was the first time that happened. It was a small security measure and known only to him. He sat and brought the screen in his office to life. He had the alarm system installed when he first thought of the idea. He kept his private invoices in the book and had some computer company come in and hook up the book to a sensor alarm. Funny thing was that while they were there, they found that none of the cameras was capturing to tape. The two men who found the problem showed him a bunch of tiny magnets, explaining that it was probably done on purpose. Meridio didn't fret too much over it; he was constantly having the place swept for new bugs and cameras. Interpol was nothing if not persistent, but Meridio smiled as he rewound the tape from his office to the time the alarm went off. It would take a lot more than what they had to cause him to worry. Once he hit the play button and watched the scene unfold, his smile quickly faded.

Of course, seeing Casey caught on tape was about as stunning as it got. At least that's what he kept saying to himself. He punched in a series of buttons on the console, trying to bring up all the times Casey had been in the house. What he saw on more than one tape shocked him into speechlessness. He knew in his heart that Casey wouldn't do this of her own free will. There must have been someone else behind Cassandra's actions. He reversed the tapes farther, attempting to capture Casey in a room at the same time with the person he immediately suspected. What he saw happen between his *Karê* and his daughter told him all he needed to know.

"That fucking bitch!" he hissed venomously.

"Alex," Meridio said into the phone's receiver once he calmed himself enough to speak. "Get Stefano and come up to my room. We have a traitor in our midst. Stop by Peter's room and bring him, too," he added as an afterthought. In case Tessa wanted to put up a fight, he would add a little muscle to stop her.

His thoughts went back to Casey, and he cursed himself for putting the innocent girl in the path of Tessa Nikolaidis. He was certain that Casey had no idea what she had gotten herself into. He also suspected that Casey had been seduced by Tessa's beauty and charm as so many other women on Mýkonos had been. Meridio wondered why Casey never suspected that Tessa was just using her as a piece in her game of revenge.

"Casey!" Tessa whispered sharply. "Wake up...right now."

Tessa was already out of bed and throwing clothes on. She grabbed her gun and shoved her keys into her pocket. Casey was scared awake by the tenor of her voice. Casey grabbed for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, lacing her shoes before even asking for an explanation.

"What is it?"

"We've been made, that was Jack on the phone. He told us to get out of here fast."

Casey knew in an instant that the situation had deteriorated as they slept. Somehow, the missing invoices had been discovered and they were in serious and immediate trouble. That would be

the only reason for Jack to call in the wee hours to tell them to get out.

“Don’t turn on the light,” Tessa whispered as she went out to the living room. Looking toward the main house through a carefully parted curtain, she saw Stefano and Alex walking this way. Peter Tsigaris, the large bodyguard, walked slightly behind them. They still had some distance to cover and the small grove of olive trees surrounding the guesthouse would hide what she planned next.

She silently moved back into the bedroom and grasped Casey’s hand, pulling her into the darkened kitchen. Tessa retrieved the invoice slips from the flour canister and shoved them deep into Casey’s pocket.

“Do you know how to get around the olive grove and over the break wall?” Tessa asked.

“I’m not leaving you, Niko,” Casey said adamantly.

“Casey...sweetheart,” Tessa whispered, holding the woman’s face in her hands. “Remember when I told you that I can take care of myself, but only if I’m not worrying about you? I told you that I would need you to do everything I said exactly when I said it... remember?”

Casey’s eyes filled with tears and she nodded. “I know how to get over the break wall,” she said in defeat.

“Do you think you can climb up to your bedroom terrace from there?”

Casey nodded again.

“Okay, make sure you don’t enter the house through any of the main doors. Grab a jacket of some kind, your gun, and your passport. I need to ask you to get Olympia out of there.” Tessa opened another canister on the kitchen counter and pulled out a large roll of bank notes. She pulled the keys to her car from her pocket, picked up her cell phone, and thrust them all into Casey’s hands.

“My car isn’t in the garage. It’s parked down on the hill by the pond. Just don’t turn on the lights until you get on the road into Mýkonos Town. Take the road up to Ano Merá...you remember how to get to my house up there?” Tessa asked, reminding Casey

of the night that became a turning point for the two women.

"I think I remember."

"If you have Olympia with you, she'll know the way. No one knows I still own that property. It's the home we lived in when my father was alive. Use the cell phone and punch in star-seven-seven, that's Jack's secure line. Tell him where you are and I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

Tessa opened the door slowly and Casey threw her arms around Tessa's neck. Tessa held Casey, then pulling away slightly, she kissed her passionately.

"I love you, Niko," Casey whispered.

"Right back at ya, baby," Tessa said. *Jesus, I'm as close to the end of my rope as I can get and still I can't tell you, Casey.* "I'll see you later," Tessa added softly, touching her fingertips to Casey's cheek and stepping outside.

Tessa motioned for Casey to stay put until she saw that the men had not yet arrived at the guesthouse. Waving her hand, she kissed Casey quickly and pushed her in the direction of the break wall. Tessa couldn't keep from smiling as she watched Casey disappear into the darkness. *Just like when we were kids, little one...you always were small and fast.*

Tessa moved silently around the right side of the house and watched as Peter tried to peer in through the front window. She couldn't catch sight of the other two men.

"Is this a social call?" Tessa drawled.

The bodyguard spun around and smiled stonily at Tessa. He smiled because she was unarmed and hand to hand was his specialty.

"Meridio said he wanted you and his girl brought to the house. Looks like your days of being top gun here are over. Of course, he didn't say what kind of shape you had to be in." Peter cracked his knuckles and moved toward the woman.

Tessa pulled her gun from her back and gave the man an evil smile. She won the upper hand and was surprised at how easy it had been. Just when she thought she might get out of this alive, she heard the click and felt the gun's barrel against the back of her skull.

“Don’t do anything stupid, okay, Nikki?” It was Alex’s voice.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, Alex,” Tessa practically whispered to her young protégé.

“Yeah, it does,” he said.

Tessa turned her head slightly to look into his eyes. “Just don’t let them hurt Casey. Please, Alex, don’t let them hurt her,” Tessa said so softly that only Alex could hear.

Tessa lowered the Glock that was pointed at Peter and handed it by the barrel behind her to Alex. Peter took a step forward and Tessa braced herself for the blows to follow. She never expected it to be from behind. She struggled to stand and her knees gave out as she fell heavily to the ground.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Peter yelled at Alex as he fitted a set of handcuffs around Tessa’s wrists at the small of her back.

“Because Meridio said he wanted them brought to the house. He didn’t say anything about beating the crap out of them beforehand,” Alex yelled back.

Peter was about to make Alex sorry for butting in, but he noticed the new glare in his expression. If Tessa had indeed fallen from favor, this kid was next in line to be the Meridio *Karé*. Even Peter realized that it would be easier for Meridio to find another bodyguard than a trusted right-hand man. The beefy man raised his hands in a gesture of defeat and gave in.

“Come, on,” Alex said. “Let’s get her to the house. Get Meridio’s daughter, then find Stef and give me a hand.”

“Jesus.” Stefano panted a few minutes later as they dragged the dead weight of the unconscious woman’s body toward the main house. “This girl is huge. Who would have thought she’d weigh so much.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that as much as what Meridio’s gonna say when we tell him his girl got away.” Peter was huffing slightly, too.

The men were just entering the olive grove with their restrained burden when Casey pushed open the French doors to her bedroom.

Casey pulled the Beretta from her laptop case and tucked it into the waistband of her jeans. She pressed her ear against the door to the outside hall but was greeted with nothing but silence. She opened the door, hoping she could come back and get the rest of what she needed, but Olympia was her first priority.

Casey made her way carefully down the stairs. She surprised herself at how quickly but silently she could move when she had to. She reached the back of the first floor where Olympia's rooms were but found the bedroom empty. The bed was made and Casey suspected Olympia was in the kitchen already beginning her day. That's where she found her, preparing to make coffee as the darkness outside turned gray.

"Shh." Casey held her finger to her lips and whispered to Olympia, "We have to leave...we have to go right now."

Olympia was a smart woman and she could see by the pistol tucked in Casey's jeans that this was no game. She nodded. "Tessa?" Olympia asked, fearful of the answer.

"She's okay" was the only answer Casey gave, wondering if that was still true. "Go out through the kitchen patio and go around the side toward the stables. Tessa put her car out by the pond. I have to go back upstairs, but if anything happens or if I don't show up in the next twenty minutes, take these," Casey dug in her pocket for Tessa's car keys, "and get to the house in Ano Merá...that's where Tessa will meet us."

Olympia had no idea how the two young women had been found out, but she knew in her heart that Andreas Meridio would let none of them live if he felt betrayed. She nodded her understanding and followed Casey's instructions down toward the pond.

Casey flattened herself against the wall in the hallway as the door into the dining room opened noisily. She heard the sound of men's voices and scraping sounds. She peered around the corner, staying in the shadows of the dark hall but couldn't tell what they were doing inside the room that was as dark as where she stood. She silently made her way back up the stairs to the second-floor landing when she heard the click of her father's office door opening below her. She moved farther into the shadows and watched as

her father went into the dining room, then she turned and quickly entered her bedroom.

Meridio came closer to the unconscious woman and fairly shook with rage. He wanted to put a bullet in her head just like he'd done to her father, but he tried to control his passion. That kind of death would be too good for her. He wanted to see her suffer, watch her die very slowly, with as much pain as possible.

"Where is Cassandra?" he asked, looking around the room.

"She wasn't there," Alex said. "Stefano said her car is in the garage so she's probably on the grounds somewhere."

"Find her!" Meridio growled. "Then get back here. I don't want to mess up the carpet, we'll take her to the warehouse."

Alex and Stefano left to search the house, leaving the other two men in the room with Tessa. The sun was peeking out from behind the eastern hills when Alex opened the door to Casey's bedroom. Stefano searched the room next door, walking into Casey's bedroom just as Alex opened the door to the walk-in closet.

Casey pressed herself as far back into the shadows as she could, but Alex flipped the light switch on the closet's wall and Casey might as well have been in the middle of the large space. Alex met the frightened green gaze and they both froze there for what seemed an eternity.

"Anything there?" Stefano asked.

Alex narrowed his gaze and sighed loudly. He looked at the gun in Casey's hand and knew she could have shot him if she wanted to.

"No," he called out to Stefano, never releasing Casey's gaze. "Nothing here...I'll meet you on the first floor."

Alex opened his jacket, pulled Tessa's Glock from his waistband, and handed the gun to Casey. "He wants us to take her down to the docks...it'll be warehouse number forty-seven. I'll do what I can, but I can't hold them all off." He turned and walked out of the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

Casey grabbed her jacket and stuffed her passport, wallet, and Tessa's cell phone in the deep pockets. She focused on the task at hand and tried not to fall apart. She and Alex would be the

only hope Tessa had, and Casey wouldn't allow herself to think about the alternative. Hearing a car pull up to the front of the house, Casey ran to the window over her bed and bit her lip at the sight below. Her father and Alex got into the front of the car, Stefano and the bodyguard carried Tessa's unconscious body and placed it in the backseat. They drove off and Casey sprinted into action. She made a quick stop in her father's office, and no longer worried about being seen, she burst out the kitchen door. She made a mad dash across the field and past the stables, running full out down the hill toward the pond. She barely stopped for breath as she ordered Olympia into the vehicle and jumped behind the red convertible's steering wheel.

Casey drove like a woman possessed. She punched the numbers into the cell phone Tessa gave her. Jack answered on the first ring.

"Tessa?" His voice sounded worried, on edge.

"Jack, it's Casey. They've got Tessa."

"Casey, where are you? Have you got the invoices?"

"Jesus Christ, Jack, did you hear what I said? They have Tessa!" Casey shouted into the phone as she cut the wheel hard, spitting dirt and rocks in the car's wake as she sped up the road to Ano Merá.

"Yes, I heard you. Now where are you and where are the invoices?"

"I'm on my way to Ano Merá. I'm dropping off Tessa's mother, then I'm going to go get Tessa." Casey looked over at Olympia. Olympia had a death grip on the dash in front of her, but if she was as scared as Casey was, she didn't show it.

"Calm down," Jack tried to sound nonchalant. "We have a chopper ready to leave now, but I can't be in two places at once, here's the way it's got to happen—"

"Goddamn it, Jack, you listen to me...here's the way it's *going* to happen—shit!"

Casey hit the brakes as she slid past the long gravel road up to the house. She backed up and turned right onto the drive. Braking hard, she stopped in front of the small cottage.

"You are going to get that chopper here and pick up Olympia

first. I need to know she's safe. Then I'll expect a little help down on the docks. They've taken Tessa to a warehouse there."

"Look, Casey—"

"I want your word. If you don't, I swear I will eat every one of those fucking invoices and you can all go to hell!"

"All right, all right!" Jack shouted back. "We'll be in the air in sixty seconds...you keep your head down, kid."

It was the nicest thing Jack could think to say to this stranger who seemed to have more balls than he'd seen on a lot of special agents.

"I have to go," Casey said to Olympia, who was already out of the car and standing next to the driver's side.

"I understand. Hurry, Casey." Olympia hugged Casey and stepped back from the car.

"Jack Armstrong is the name of the man who's bringing the helicopter here for you. Go with him and you'll be safe," Casey said, and without any more of a farewell, she took off down the gravel road.

Chapter 21

"She's still out," Peter said, letting the dark head fall forward again.

"That's a little too long for a tap to the skull, especially for one with such a hard head. Come on, Tessa...I know you're awake," Meridio's voice said evenly, and Tessa knew she could no longer play possum.

"You bitch," Peter muttered as Tessa looked up and winked at him.

Meridio slowly came forward until he stood in front of her. Tessa had her wrists and ankles handcuffed to the heavy metal chair. She'd seen plenty of these chairs in the days when torture was an everyday occurrence. Tessa smirked at the man above her.

Meridio hit her hard with his fist. It connected with her jaw, and he heard the satisfying sound of pain come from the woman. The blow rocked Tessa's head back, but she tried to act unaffected by the powerful strike. She locked her pale blue eyes on Meridio and spit the blood in her mouth down on his shoes. Punishment for the willful act was swift, and three more punches followed in quick succession. Blood came from her mouth and trickled from her nose. It wasn't broken yet, but a few more hits like the last one and she knew it soon would be.

Tessa knew that she was gone. She'd tried, but at least she would die with honor. She had repaid the *hahré* in her attempt. Now all she had left was to die, but she was never going to give

Meridio the satisfaction of thinking he'd won. He might kill her, but he'd never succeed in breaking her.

"All this because I fucked your daughter?" Tessa said dryly.

All three of the hired men looked up at Meridio. When they saw the look on his face, they knew what Tessa said was the truth. Alex tried to look as surprised as the others did, but he knew what had been going on all along. Peter and Stefano looked at the ground instead of up at Meridio. Andreas looked around in embarrassment. Tessa grinned as her comment hit its mark. Meridio was losing face in front of other men, and that was never a good thing for a *mángas*.

"She spread her legs so damn fast for me...she never even knew I was using her." Tessa's head snapped back two more times as Meridio punched her, then crossed the floor to a sink and washed his hands.

He obviously felt that his control of the situation was slipping. The longer he stayed there, the more Tessa would embarrass him. He suspected that the enigmatic woman had seduced Casey and now he had the confirmation. Cassandra was about to realize, however, that there would be consequences for her actions. As much as he loved Casey, he would still have to show her that disloyalty came with a price...a very high price.

Meridio put his suit coat back on and walked toward the door.

"Meridio!" Tessa called, and he stopped and turned. "Casey was the best fuck I ever had." Tessa grinned up at him.

Meridio's eyes narrowed and his gaze went cold. "Kill her... make it last a very long time. By the way, make sure she tells you where the invoices are before she dies." Meridio smiled back at Tessa and walked out the door.

The sunlight glared in their eyes as Meridio stood there, half in and half out the door. His attention seemed caught by something outside. He looked back at Tessa, and if looks could kill, Tessa would be lifeless. Meridio glowered toward the door again and, raising his hands slightly, backed into the warehouse.

Casey held her Beretta in front of her and kept it leveled at her father's chest as he continued to back up. Tessa had to blink to

figure out if her mind was playing tricks on her. *Oh, Casey...baby, you're going to get yourself killed. Please don't do this.*

"Cassandra, do you really expect me to believe that you would kill me?" Meridio asked as Alex, Peter, and Stefano pulled their guns.

"Father...knowing the things that you've done in your life... I'd just be a chip off the old block, wouldn't I? Besides, I really don't think you're prepared to say, with absolute certainty, that I *won't* shoot you, are you?"

Meridio looked in Casey's eye and damn if he couldn't tell for sure. That dyke bitch had brainwashed Casey but good.

"Cassandra, you don't understand who Tessa is—"

"I understand that you killed her father. I was there...I saw it." Casey tried to calm the tremor in her voice.

"Yes, I did, but that's what she wants revenge for. She has only been using you to get to me, Casey." Meridio rarely used her nickname, but he wanted to get through to her. "Even if you kill me, one of them will put a bullet in Tessa's head. She'll still be dead, and you will have to live with the guilt of murdering your father. Ask her...ask her now. She knows she's a dead woman, she has nothing to lose."

Meridio saw the flicker of doubt in the green eyes and knew he was getting through to her.

"Ask her, *Máhtia Mou*," Meridio said softly.

Tessa watched in horror as Casey looked in her face. *Please understand, baby...this is the only way for you to get out of this.*

"Niko?" Casey asked quietly.

"You're a beautiful woman, but that's all you were to me, Casey. You were just a way for me to get closer to Meridio."

Casey's brow knit in confusion at Tessa's words. Suddenly, she didn't know whom she should believe.

Meridio saw the perfect opportunity presenting itself. How better for Casey to take her place within his organization and to vindicate herself in his eyes? He smiled slightly when he looked into Tessa's eyes and saw that Tessa realized what he had in mind.

A stab of pain clutched at Tessa's heart. If she hurt Casey

enough, wounded her to the heart, would Casey shoot her? Part of Tessa's brain thought it would be a sweet release in comparison to what Meridio had planned for her, but the other half of her couldn't let Casey bear the unspeakable pain that would follow from that action. She needed Casey to know that she was only saying those things for Casey's own protection.

Tessa caught the flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye and watched as Alex stepped closer to her, giving himself what appeared to be a clean shot at Peter and Stefano, who stood on the other side of her chair. It could be just wishful thinking on her part, but at least if she could get Casey to understand what she was about, Casey would be prepared to help Alex and take one of the men standing beside her out of commission.

"Cassandra, I didn't want you to know you had been used in such a vile way by this woman. I know she has humiliated you, but there is a way for you to pay for the hurt."

Meridio spoke in low dulcet tones that seemed to be having a hypnotic effect on Casey. Casey stood looking at Tessa in dismay, then anger etched across her features.

"Who is to say, Cassandra, whose bullet will end your pain?"

Tessa watched Casey and saw the suffering swirling within the green depths. Then she saw Casey's gun hand twitch slightly. She knew she was only going to get one chance, and it came to her in a blinding flash.

"Don't tell me you actually believed me all those times I told you I loved you," Tessa said with a sneer.

Casey's brow knit together, and Meridio held his breath as he watched Casey's gun hand rise until the barrel of the pistol was pointed in Tessa's direction. Her next movement was so quick it was over in the blink of an eye. In a fraction of a second, Casey raised her other hand to the pistol, spread her stance open, and pointed the gun at Peter Tsigaris.

The popping sounds from the Beretta echoed in the open warehouse. Casey fired two rounds in rapid succession, one into Peter's kneecap and the other in Stefano's hand as he made a move with his gun. Stefano's movements seemed slow in comparison to the precise actions of Casey. Peter tried to reach for his pistol,

and Casey quickly put another round into his other leg. Both men howled in pain as Casey whirled and caught her father standing in exactly the same spot, frozen in place.

"You've sealed your fate," Meridio said over the moans of the fallen men. "I'm afraid Alex will have to kill both of you now."

Alex stood with his revolver still in hand, but he seemed to be hesitating, weighing his options. Reaching into his pocket, he removed the keys to the handcuffs and released Tessa.

Tessa's legs were a little shaky when she stood, but once the blood circulated a bit, she seemed as steady as ever. Casey ran into her arms, and Tessa squeezed her tightly.

"I thought you said you couldn't shoot," Tessa said.

"I said I don't like guns...I never said I couldn't shoot," Casey said with tears in her eyes.

Casey ran over to the sink, wet a towel, and brought it back over so Tessa could wipe her face of the blood.

"It's okay," Tessa said softly to Casey's concerned look. "I've been used as a punching bag before. Alex, do you have my gun?"

"Here." Casey reached to the small of her back where she'd tucked the Glock into the waistband of her jeans.

Tessa accepted the pistol and slowly walked over to Meridio. Tessa raised the gun and the man never flinched, only closed his eyes as the barrel was pressed against his temple. She stood there like that until he opened his eyes and spoke to Casey.

"You're going to let her do this, *Máhtia Mou*?" he asked.

Tears spilled from Casey's eyes as she took in the sight. She said nothing, but even she knew that not answering was as good as saying yes.

Tessa pulled back the stiff hammer and poised her finger on the trigger. When she fired the shot, she watched as Meridio's body jerked forward. She continued to watch as he realized the round was fired over his head. He spun his head between Casey and Tessa in disbelief.

Tessa grabbed his collar, and although he was several inches taller, he surrendered to the rough treatment easily.

"Know this, Meridio, she's the only thing standing between

you and death.” Tessa growled, and he knew Tessa meant Casey. “It’s over...go home.” Tessa motioned for Casey to join her.

Casey ran into her arms, and they walked toward the exit. Tessa stopped in front of Alex and held out her hand, offering a smile to him.

“I owe you, my friend,” Tessa said quietly.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Nikki, ’cause I’m going to be needing a job, considering I just pissed my life away here.”

“Wherever I go, you’ll always have a place. You may have to improve your English a little considering we’re not too welcome here in Greece anymore.”

Tessa put an arm around Casey, and they continued on their way. Meridio, not looking like a man who was just defeated, called after them.

“You’ll have to run for a long time, Cassandra. My partners will not take kindly to this. It will be a long while before you can stop looking over your shoulder.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Casey said dryly, pressing her body closer to Tessa.

Meridio looked up at the sound of tires bumping along noisily on the old wooden dock. “That must be them now.” He smiled, and suddenly Tessa understood why he looked so smug.

“The Turks!” She grabbed Casey’s hand and they ran for the far door.

“I’ll take the sedan, maybe we can split them up!” Alex shouted as they burst out into the sunlight.

Two cars were heading their way. The second vehicle stopped and Meridio left the warehouse and entered the auto. Casey tossed the keys to Tessa, and they ran for the red convertible.

“Where the hell is Jack?” Casey shouted.

Gunshots rang out and Tessa heard the glass of a taillight exploding as the bullet shattered it. Casey felt a deep searing pain in her thigh, and she stumbled as she reached the car. She fell into the vehicle as Tessa gunned the engine. Tessa fired a few rounds and shattered the windshield of the first car. Looking over quickly at Casey, she saw the dark red stain spreading across Casey’s jeans.

“Jesus Christ, Casey, you’re shot!”

"I'm okay," Casey said between clenched teeth.

Tessa pushed the sports car as fast as it would go and lost the heavier weighted sedans up through the twisting gravel roads to Agios Stéfanos.

"I'm going to try to outdistance them by the cliffs, that way Jack can get to us by the road or the sea," Tessa said, wondering how in the hell they were going to get out of this one, but hoping Casey couldn't hear the fear in her voice. "Use your belt and tie it tight around your thigh like a tourniquet."

There was only one car following them now, the other must have gone after Alex, who headed off in the opposite direction. The dark sedan was closing in, having made up the lost time on the straightaway portion of the road. The next turn was a hairpin, and Tessa purposefully sped up, knowing the larger car wouldn't be able to make it. She cut the steering wheel hard to the right, stepping on the accelerator the whole time. The larger car spun off the road and landed in the soft sand near the edge of the cliffs. Its back wheels spun around, creating a high-pitched sound as they turned without finding purchase in the slippery sand. By the time the men were jumping out to push the car back onto the road, Tessa was gone.

They sped toward a small village, and as they hit the edge of the town, a small child ran into the road that Tessa's car was careening down.

"Shit!" She spun the wheel and locked up the brakes to avoid the boy. The momentum of the vehicle caused it to flip over once before landing upright again.

Tessa never remembered being thrown from the car, but she couldn't have been out long as the boy was still standing in the road. She shook the cobwebs from her mind and tested her arms and legs.

"Casey?" She looked around, jumped to her feet, and searched the area.

Casey had been thrown farther from the car, and she screamed in pain as she rolled over. Tessa dropped to her knees and with only a quick look, could tell Casey's leg was broken in more than one place.

“Don’t move, sweetheart.” Tessa tried to think what to do. Any minute the Turks would be coming up the road. “This is gonna hurt like hell, but we have to get out of here.”

Tessa was right, and when Tessa scooped Casey into her arms, Casey screamed in agony again. By the time Tessa moved toward the home in front of them, Casey passed out.

Tessa didn’t wait; she kicked open the door and shouted the first thing she knew would bring help. “There are Turks after us!”

Two young men jumped up to help her, and an older woman motioned for her to bring Casey into a backroom. Tessa watched as a gray-haired man pulled a pistol from the top drawer of a bureau. He closed the door and peered through the shutters.

Casey regained consciousness and wished she were still knocked out. The pain wasn’t nearly as bad now that she was quiet again. The bullet wound was bleeding worse than ever. When she looked up, she saw that Tessa had a large open cut across her cheek. The blood ran down the side of her neck, soaking into her shirt. Tessa’s arms were a mass of scrapes and cuts, but she smoothed back the hair on Casey’s forehead and smiled at Casey like none of this was happening.

“Do you have a phone?” Tessa asked, knowing what the answer would be before the old woman shook her head.

“I do.” Casey attempted to reach into the large pocket on her jacket but gave up in pain.

“Here,” Tessa leaned over Casey and fished through the pockets. She brought out the phone and three packets of papers that she could only stare at. “Holy shit, when did you get these?”

Casey gave a weak smile as Tessa stared at the invoices from her father’s office. “Well, there was no one there, and I figured if some were good, then all of them must be better.”

Tessa kissed her forehead and punched Jack’s number into the cell phone.

“Where the hell are you two?” Armstrong shouted.

“I could ask you the same question. We’re in a small village just at the edge of the cliffs, past Agios Stéfanos, first house on the corner. Look, Jack, Casey’s hurt. She needs to get to a hospital

right now. She's losing a lot of blood." Tessa turned away from Casey and muttered the last sentence.

"We can have the chopper there in two minutes. We're at Meridio's estate. Your mother is safe and we just picked up a guy named Alex who says he helps you."

"Yeah, he's with me," Tessa said.

"Oh, great, another one. Where are the invoices? Does Casey still have them?"

"She's got the whole damn bundle in her hands, which means you don't get them till you get over here and pick her up."

"She's one hell of a girl, you know?" Jack shouted, and Tessa could hear the whine of a helicopter motor through the phone and knew they were taking off.

"Yeah, I know," Tessa said, brushing the backs of her fingers against Casey's dirty cheek. "Just get your ass here and pick her up."

"Where will you be?"

Tessa looked up just as the gray-haired man with the gun placed his fingers to his lips and motioned for silence. She could hear men's voices outside.

"I have something to finish up." Tessa clicked off the phone in case Jack was tempted to call back about her cryptic message.

Tessa looked out the shutter and could see the men milling about the road, looking at the red convertible. She hoped it still ran and that the keys were there. She walked back to Casey and that familiar pain clutched at her chest as she knew what she had to do and that Casey wasn't going to like it.

"Sweetheart." Tessa knelt by the bed and Casey opened her eyes, biting her lip against the pain. Tessa spoke in English, and the old woman turned away as if understanding their need for privacy. "Jack's on his way, but those guys are outside, and they're going to start busting down doors because they know we're here."

Tessa licked her lips and Casey knew what Tessa was going to do before she said it.

"And you're going to try to draw them away," Casey whispered.

"I need to say something to you."

“No! Goddamn you, Tessa Nikolaidis, you are not going to tell me you love me now, then go out there and let them blow you all to hell. I don’t want to hear it until you get back, and if you don’t come back and tell me, I swear I’ll never forgive you.” Casey sobbed.

Tears filled Tessa’s eyes and she kissed Casey’s forehead and smiled down at her, stroking the short locks. “It’s a deal,” Tessa said, then she kissed Casey as if it would be the last time and both women felt it.

“I’m so proud of you, Niko...for the choices you made today,” Casey said softly.

“I lived for so long with revenge as the only thing worth living for. You gave me something else to live for.” She rose and pressed her index finger to Casey’s lips, then she turned and was gone.

Tessa still had her Glock and checked the clip out of habit. Once the old man showed her the door that led to the alley, she pressed the roll of bank notes into his hands. He shook his head, but she only turned and slipped out the door.

It was a small village, but the two-story stone houses hid her from view of the main road. The alleyway was a dirt path, but it was lined with bushes and trees. She pressed through the line of bushes and ran the remaining distance to the convertible.

Jumping into the driver’s seat, she thanked the Virgin that the keys were there. She revved the engine and hit the gas, throwing dirt and rocks and enveloping the road in a cloud of dust. She heard shouts behind her, then fired a few quick rounds from her pistol so they would know it was her. She coughed at the dirt in the air surrounding her but figured that if they couldn’t see the car, they would think she and Casey were inside the vehicle. She smiled one of her feral, adrenaline-stoked smiles, knowing she’d just bought Jack the time to get his agents into the village. She refused to think about the possibility that Casey wouldn’t get to a hospital in time. She knew in her heart that it wasn’t Casey’s time.

The helicopter landed right in the middle of the street about thirty seconds after Tessa sped off in the convertible, the sedan

following her. Two paramedics hastily worked on Casey in the room of the house where they found her. They began IVs, shot her full of something for pain, and stopped the bleeding from the bullet wound at least long enough to get her loaded onto the helicopter.

Jack ran alongside and helped carry the litter as a sudden explosion, a fireball rising in the sky, rocked them all. Black smoke billowed up into the sky as agents ran back to give Jack a report.

“Two cars...looks like the rest of our Turks. They took a dive off the cliffs...not much left of them,” the young man shouted over the helicopter’s blades to Jack, who was inside the vehicle sitting next to the stretcher Casey lay upon. He looked down at Casey and just stared at her.

“No...” Casey shook her head. “Please...no,” she pleaded as tears spilled from her eyes.

Jack didn’t like this part of the job; in fact, he hated it. He hated losing good people, but as badly as he felt, he knew it was nothing compared to what Casey was experiencing. He squeezed her hand and was glad for the roar of the engine as it drowned out the heartbreaking sobs of Casey, who lost her father and her lover in the same ill-fated moment.

Chapter 22

Casey spent seven hours in surgery as the physicians worked to remove the bullet that was embedded in her left thigh and to repair the broken bones in her right leg. From her hip to her ankle, she'd broken the limb in six places. The surgeons explained to Jack that Casey would require a few more surgeries and that she would more than likely walk with a limp for the rest of her life. For three days, she lay unresponsive in the Athens hospital, Olympia never leaving her bedside. Jack had the American government fly Casey's mother, Eva, to Greece to be with her.

Jack watched as Olympia and Eva met again for the first time in twenty years. They cried and shared their pain. Jack shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable with women, as well as their displays of emotion.

No one knew how to come right out and tell Casey about Tessa and her father. There were no survivors found at the crash site, and the remains were charred beyond dental recognition. Casey's behavior told everyone around her that she already knew. Casey barely spoke, and when she was able to eat solid food again, she only stared at the fare in front of her until they had to restart her IVs to be sure she was getting nourishment. A very nice therapist came to see her three times a week, but Casey just stared out the window, unwilling or unable to talk about her pain.

Finally, the doctors went to the mothers for help, for it did seem like Casey had two mothers. When one rested, the other kept vigil, and every day, they tried to get Casey to say more than

three words in a row. Olympia brought all of Casey's favorite food dishes to the hospital, and occasionally, Casey would hastily take a bite or two, but just as quickly, her eyes would fill with pain, and she would turn back toward the window.

Olympia walked into the room just as she did every day. This time, she sat next to the bed in front of the window Casey spent all her time gazing out of, so Casey would have to look at her.

"Tessa would be very disappointed to see you behaving like this," Olympia said sharply. "Is this what my daughter gave her life for? Shame, Cassandra."

It was the sound of Tessa's name that broke through Casey's pain. The sound of a name that she remembered as being the sweetest sound she'd ever heard. Casey took in a ragged gasp and tears pooled in her eyes, spilling over the edges. And as Olympia moved to hold Casey in her arms just as her daughter had done so many times, Casey released a cry of pain and anger and finally wept for her dead lover.

The Meridio estate changed a great deal over the next six months, mostly due to Eva Meridio's return. It was as if a cleansing breeze swept through the mansion, the combined force of Olympia and Eva erasing any trace of the man who ran the household previously. Every piece of furniture in Andreas Meridio's private rooms and office was removed. Since Casey still remained in a wheelchair even after her third surgery, Eva prepared the estate with special access doors and ramps, even though Casey told her time and again that she refused to let her body stay in the chair.

A paved walkway was added, connecting the house to the guesthouse and the driveway extended to reach back to the private dwelling. Casey was adamant about living in the guesthouse, even though the older women warned that she might not be ready for such a move. It was true, Casey still had occasional nightmares, and crying was at least a once a week occurrence, but she was taking one day at a time. No longer did the mere mention of Tessa's name send her into a depression. On the contrary, she enjoyed Olympia's stories about her.

Casey dropped the dumbbell into its place on the weight rack.

She was glad Tessa had the weight room put in the guesthouse. This meant Casey didn't have to go up to the main house every day. She loved her mother and Olympia, but being mothers, they could certainly wear on one's nerves. She reached her arms over her head and stretched, feeling her muscles complain at the extra workout she'd put them through that day. She grew tired of taking it easy with such slow physical therapy on her legs and asked the therapist for exercises so she could work on her upper body from the wheelchair. Now the muscles rippled under the soft skin as she stretched, her long hours of weightlifting starting to show.

Casey moved to the window as she heard a car in the driveway. She maneuvered her chair onto the patio once she recognized the familiar face of the man getting out of the van.

"Hello, Jack."

"Hey there, kid. How's tricks?" Jack asked matter-of-factly.

He was suspiciously absent of late, and Casey assumed he finally had some time to spend with his wife and daughters. He held a large manila envelope in his hand and was getting that *I'm uncomfortable as hell* look.

"Don't beat around the bush. It doesn't suit you at all." Casey smiled.

Jack remembered the first time he ever saw that smile. It was like someone opened a curtain and let the sunshine in. He watched then and realized the smile was now tempered with a deep-seated pain.

"Okay, here it is." He opened the envelope. "Tessa made me executor of her will."

"When did that happen?"

"The day you were in Athens, in training down at the center. She left most of her dough to her mom, but she named you in the will, too." Jack looked up, and not seeing any kind of response, he continued. "She left you a sizable chunk of money in a couple of Cayman Island accounts, then there's this." He handed the photograph to Casey.

It was the *Apógevma Nóstimo*, Tessa's catamaran. Tears welled in Casey's eyes, and she couldn't stop them from rolling down her cheeks. She had only been on the sailboat once, but if

she closed her eyes, she could see the sunset in her mind's eye that she and Tessa shared that day.

"There's one more thing." He rose and walked over to the van. Casey's curious gaze followed. He opened the side door and two Dobermans bounded out the door and ran around Casey's chair. The animals sat close to the chair and licked Casey's face. Casey cried as she hugged Cinnamon and Mahogany.

"Yeah, well, I guess she made the right choice. I had to drug them just to get them over here." Jack reached over to place a hand on Casey's arm but froze with his hand in midair as the dogs growled and bared their teeth at him. "Okay, then...I can see *that's* gonna get you a lot of second dates. Guess I better be going."

Casey laughed at his nervous behavior and realized that this was the first time she'd laughed since the accident.

"I hear you're going to be heading back to the States pretty soon," Jack said from a careful distance.

"Yes. There's a center in Connecticut where I'm going for the rest of my rehab. They're supposed to be able to perform miracles, and they think I have a good shot at being out of this chair within a few months."

"You know I'll miss you, kid," Jack said softly.

"Thanks, Jack," Casey said, absently scratching behind Cinny's ears.

"You know, once you get back on your feet, if you find you ever need a job, you might think about giving me a call."

"Jack, are you seriously asking me to join the FBI?" Casey smirked.

"Hey, Quantico could use a cadet like you."

"I don't think so, but thanks for the offer." Casey smiled sweetly and held out her hand to him.

When at last he looked in the rearview mirror, he smiled sadly at the way life had to go sometimes. His last glimpse of Casey was of her leaning down from her wheelchair, gripping the dogs in a fierce hug.

Epilogue

One year later...

Long Island, New York, U.S.A.

Casey was trying to stuff additional items in her backpack. She topped it with a small bag of treats for the dogs and an extra bottle of water for herself. She was almost to the kitchen door when Olympia's voice reached her. *Damn, I almost made it.*

"Casey, you're going to eat something before you leave, aren't you?" Olympia asked.

Eva came in from the patio and almost ran in to Casey.

"Casey, you're not going out dressed like that, are you?" Eva walked past, indicating the sweatpants and sports bra Casey wore.

"It's official," Casey whispered to the two Dobermans who sat obediently at her feet. "We're in hell."

The two older women planned their day; they were off to go shopping for antiques. Being fostered by *two* mothers was almost more than Casey could handle some days, but she wasn't complaining. Since Olympia came to America to live with them, she found her mother was actually getting a life. The two old friends became the life of the community, doing everything from playing bridge to gardening. Casey was happy that her mother was showing signs of forgetting about the past.

Tessa's fortune allowed Olympia to realize some dreams of her own. Casey pleaded for Jack's help in eliminating the red tape of getting Olympia citizenship in this country, and of course, Jack

always seemed to come through for her. He did it so well that Casey hit him up a few months later to get Alex in, too.

Olympia opened her own restaurant on Long Island and initially spent long hours turning the business into an eatery with an impeccable reputation for authentic Greek food. Alex managed the establishment and found that he had a natural aptitude for that kind of business. In the last few months, Olympia taught cooking classes at the local community college and became a big hit. Olympia was a godsend for Eva when Casey went to Connecticut for her rehab. Now all three women lived in the spacious Long Island home, and even though Casey had to bite her tongue about once a day, she wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'll be home late...I'm taking the boat out," Casey called back to the women.

"Be careful," both women said in unison.

"Yes, mothers." Casey made sure to tease as she closed the door.

Casey set her pack down and bent to unlock her bike. She slipped the backpack over her shoulders and hopped on the narrow seat. Her time at the rehab center was rough, mentally as well as physically. They said they could work miracles, but Casey soon realized they meant they could make *her* work the miracles. The program was intensive and she was still just getting over her losses. Sometimes she would cry herself to sleep, missing her mother and Olympia. Once, when she was having a particularly rough day, she looked up across the grounds and thought she saw the outline of a tall dark figure. When she blinked her eyes and looked again, the vision was gone. It was enough, though, to remind her of Tessa and give her strength to go on for another day, which turned into two, and soon six months had gone by.

Her strong legs pedaled the bike up the steep hill, Cinnamon and Mahogany loping along beside her. She'd tried to keep the animals at home when she went sailing, but her mother said they howled the whole time she was gone. Even though it was Tessa who trained the Dobermans, they obeyed every word from Casey. Soon, she took them everywhere she went. It was a satisfying feeling having the animals as bodyguards, almost like the feeling

of being safe within Tessa's strong embrace.

Casey shook her head and chided herself. She promised she wouldn't do this anymore. She caught herself the last time staring at Olympia. Olympia's hair earned a few extra streaks of gray so she had her hair colored. It made her look years younger, but it had a different effect on Casey. Sitting in the living room, enjoying a glass of wine, Casey noticed how much Tessa favored Olympia. Once Casey realized she'd been staring, she turned away, blushing in embarrassment.

They reached the private docks and Casey smiled as Mr. Peterson opened the gate for her so she didn't have to fish around for her own key.

"Mornin', miss." Peterson waved and Casey waved back. She left the gate to her slip open, knowing she would have a visitor.

Casey hopped aboard the *Apógevma Nóstimo* and hoisted the mountain bike into the air easily with her powerful shoulder muscles over the boat's rail. She went about the task of preparing to set sail. Casey moved about the boat with the efficiency and skill of a seasoned sailor. She still had the slightest limp to her right leg. It was barely noticeable, and the doctors told her she would more than likely have to live with it. It took about a half hour to get everything set up the way she liked it. She tugged on the side stays, as was her habit, to test the tightness of the wires supporting the mast from the side of each hull.

That's when she heard the low growls from the dogs as they lay passively on the deck of the boat.

"I know, let him get a little closer." Casey muttered under her breath. "Okay, heads up," Casey said louder.

The dogs leaped gracefully from the boat's deck onto the dock and bared their teeth menacingly at Jack Armstrong.

"Shit! I hate when you do that, Casey," he said, backing up along the dock.

Casey laughed aloud. "Down," she said quietly, and the dogs immediately ran up to the man and licked his hand in apology. "Jack, what in heaven's name was so important you couldn't e-mail me?"

"Well, I have this application, now before you say no—"

"I'm saying no. I do not want to join the FBI. My answer was no yesterday, last week, even when you sent me an application in my Christmas card, which was really pathetic, I might add. My answer will be the same a week or a year from now...it will always be no."

"All you do is work out and sail this damn boat around, or you just come out here and sit in it while it's tied up. You live with your mother, you never see anyone...you're young, Casey, don't you think it's time you took your life back?"

Casey could have been angry with him, but she understood how Jack felt about her. She was only five years older than his oldest daughter, and he felt a certain fatherly responsibility toward her. That and the guilt over having gotten her into this mess in the first place.

"Yeah, well, just in case you change your mind," he held out the application.

"Goodbye, Jack," Casey smiled and turned her back, "have a nice weekend."

"You're not from around here, are ya?" Peterson asked the stranger.

"No," the low voice said, trying to step back into the shadows of the harbormaster's office.

"Look, ya come by here every day to watch her, and if you're thinking about starting any stalking kind of trouble, then ya should know I never forget a face."

Peterson watched as the face broke into a small smile that seemed to be tinged with irony. He was getting on in years, and he guessed there might be a few faces that he forgot, but this one wouldn't be one of them. She was as tall as he was with long dark hair that fell into her eyes. Those eyes were what he'd remember. Pools of blue like the sky, but they had a look, kind of like a wounded animal that doesn't know whether to run away or just lie down and die. She had a long thin scar that ran along one cheek, and she hardly ever took her gaze off Casey on the sailboat.

"Like I said...if it's trouble—"

“No. It’s nothing like that,” she said. “Do you...have you known Casey long?”

“Well, let me see...I was here the day she put her first Hobie Cat in the water. She was just thirteen that year, I guess. Pretty long, why?”

“Does she...does she seem happy...when you talk to her?”

“I guess if you knew her well enough you’d know that she had a bit of trouble when she was in Greece. Pretty bad accident. I heard her father was killed...big mess. I don’t know what all happened, but I do know that she ain’t the same girl she used to be.”

The stranger stepped farther into the shadows when she saw the man’s car coming toward them to leave the gate. She held her breath, waiting as he rolled past, but the car stopped suddenly with a jerk and the passenger side window was powered down.

“You’re not supposed to be here...hell, you shouldn’t even be in the country,” Jack’s voice called out from the car.

The stranger stepped forward into the sunlight and leaned her head down to the window.

“I had to see her...I couldn’t—” Her voice broke and she thrust her hands into her jeans to try to calm herself. “I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

“Two years, Tessa. We agreed it would have to be for at least two years. If everyone thinks you’re dead, Casey is safe, but if the Turks ever get wind that she knows where you are—”

“I know...I know. It’s been so long and I was afraid...afraid she forgot about me.”

Jack watched as tears filled Tessa’s eyes. He’d seen those eyes filled with a lot of emotions...anger, hate, and even pain, but this was a new look. Tessa swallowed and looked back out to the boat where Casey sat on the deck. Her eyes filled with abject despair, and he wondered if he could do what Tessa had. Could he have let his wife believe he was dead, watching as she tried to put her life together, only to hope that there would still be room in it for him when he came back?

Jack sighed. He always sighed like that when he was about to do something that could possibly get him fired.

"Aw, hell...two years, eighteen months...seems pretty damn close to me. Go on." He met Tessa's gaze and finally saw a spark of life in them.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, what are you gonna say to her?"

Tessa smiled and Jack felt better about his decision already. Tessa knew just what she would say. She made a deal and there was nothing on earth that could keep her from saying the words now.

"It's okay, Mr. Peterson...she's one of us," Jack called out to the harbormaster standing close by.

"Jack." Tessa reached a hand through the window and placed it gently on his arm. "Thanks...for everything."

He placed a hand over Tessa's and squeezed it briefly. He drove off as soon as Tessa stepped back from the car.

Casey leaned against the mast and closed her eyes, feeling the sun shining down on her and thinking of the time when Tessa held her in those strong arms as she slept, here in this very spot. She kept her eyes closed tight, but the tears squeezed from behind her lids to cover her cheeks in their wetness.

A strange sensation passed through her, almost like a tingling up her spine. She heard footsteps on the dock behind her and uttered the same words she always did in these situations. "Heads up!"

Cinnamon and Mahogany jumped on to the dock, but they were whining, as if they didn't know what to do with the command Casey gave them. Then Casey had that feeling again. She turned around slowly and met the vision that consumed her sleeping, as well as her waking, dreams. The dream that it was all a horrible misunderstanding and Tessa never did die. Her therapist said it was a natural response and it would go away eventually, but it never did.

Tessa gently scratched Cinnamon behind one ear, never releasing Casey's uncomprehending gaze. Casey felt that if she was going to go crazy, this is the way she wanted to go.

Casey didn't realize she was still crying. "Are you real?" she asked the vision.

Tessa smiled at that, that sexy smile that revealed those perfectly white teeth and ended in an all-knowing grin.

"Yes, baby...I am *very* real."

Casey didn't hesitate, dream or not, she didn't care if people thought she was crazy. She jumped over the boat's railing. When she hit the dock in front of Tessa, Tessa scooped Casey into her arms and held her in a crushing embrace.

"Oh, Niko, you came back to me!" Casey sobbed against the woman's chest.

Tessa held Casey that way, stroking her hair and wiping the tears from her cheeks. Finally, Tessa pulled away to look down into the beautiful face. She cupped Casey's face within her hands.

"We made a deal, remember?" Tessa said.

Casey looked up at her with a confused expression.

"I promised I'd come back to say the words. I love you, Cassandra," Tessa drawled. "I have always loved you."

The two women held each other tightly, tears of joy shed as they kissed for the first time in so long. Tessa remembered her first impression of Casey's kiss, and she still thought it was the sweetest taste she'd ever known.

Tessa came so far to find something worth living for, other than revenge. Now standing there on a dock in the middle of summer, twenty years, and thousands of miles from where they started, they each found something worth living for.

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