

To Gus and Ginny, who taught us to treasure and cherish family.

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Prologue

June

A black casket, shiny and ornate, sat upon the altar, and pallbearers in dark suits quietly led the mourners to their seats as the church continued to fill. The chanter's hypnotic singing droned on. It was a muggy one hundred and five degrees, but inside the dark sanctuary, cut off and remote from the outside world, it was cool and still. The air in the Annunciation Cathedral was heavily mingled with the sweet scent of carnations and the burning sting of incense. Rays of sunlight, muted by tall stained glass windows, cast uneven shadows on the walls of the church. From the huge pipe organ flowed the somber strains of a Byzantine lament.

"*Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.*" In automatic response, Sophia Zaharis, seated in the front pew, crossed herself. He was too young, she thought sadly, her eyes never leaving the coffin. An accident, they said—unexpected, tragic. She reflected on another funeral, which had taken place more than sixty years ago on the small island of Ikaria in Greece where she grew up. She could still see the smiling face of her father as he held her little brother's hand and waved to them from the fishing boat. She unconsciously reached into the small pocket on the inside of her purse and fingered the frayed and worn photograph. Her father had been just thirty-six years old; her brother, with dark curls spilling over his collar and smiling eyes, a mere seven. And then the accident. She shuddered, flooded with feelings of grief and pain that were undiminished with time. It was a blow from which her mother never recovered and Sophia understood that she, too, was affected by the double loss in ways more profound than she knew. She had married Andreas and left Greece a few short years later to come to America. Perhaps that was the hardest thing of all—to leave her mother an ocean away, alone and mourning. There is something wrong in the order of nature when a parent buries a child, even if that child is an adult, she thought, lifting her eyes to the casket once again.

Andreas, as if reading her mind, put his arm around her shoulder, holding her close to his side, and she felt a warm suffusion of gratitude move through her body. She was thankful for this kind, strong man who had never let her down, whose love she trusted implicitly. They had begun a new life in America and the years had been good to them, long years filled with memorable times and children of their own. Today, however, they were paying their last respects to a man whose life was cut

short. He would miss so much. She thought about all the family milestones and celebrations still to come. If it were up to her, no sorrow would ever touch her children, but no matter how hard she tried to protect them, in the end, all she could do was be there to comfort them, just as her mother had been there for her.

The Greek Orthodox priest appeared from behind the lattice-carved wooden screen dressed in his vestments, and, carrying a large gold-encrusted Bible, turned to face the congregation. She still couldn't believe he was dead. So much had happened in one short year. She closed her eyes and thought back to that perfect last summer in Ikaria.

CHAPTER 1

ONE YEAR EARLIER

IKARIA, GREECE - JUNE

Soon they would be back in America and in September Theodora would marry the wrong man. Nicole should be happy for her, but she knew that her sister was about to make the biggest mistake of her life. Nicole sat on the front porch of the small white house, the book she was reading lying open on her lap as the sun rose over the tranquil Aegean Sea. The fishing boats had gone out hours ago, before dawn, while the rest of the island slept. A gentle breeze ruffled the pages of her book, the welcome coolness of early morning that would soon turn to searing midday heat. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the wicker chair. They were near the end of their summer idyll, she and her grandparents. Her brows came together in a frown, the corners of her mouth turning down. If only we could stay here, she thought, and put Stewart and the wedding forever on hold.

Her grandmother Sophia had always believed that America was her savior, but Greece was the essence and strength of her soul. This ancient land of her ancestors was a part of her soul too. It was here, summer after summer, that she had learned of childish romances and heard the melancholy chords of a lone mandolin dancing across the warm night air. It was here that she felt at one with herself.

She would miss these summers on the island. They had been some of the best times, with just the four of them. They had made this annual pilgrimage since she was ten. The summers together here had served to forge an even closer bond than already existed between the sisters. Nicole, bold and daring, and Theodora, the younger but more serious of the two, known affectionately by the dotting islanders as ‘the Parsenis girls.’ As small children they had explored the far reaches of the island, discovering hidden trails and paths that took them from dry rocky hills to the glorious white beaches of Armenisti on the other side. Together with their friends, they’d ferried to Mykonos, Samos, and Santorini, carrying their lunches of hard cheese, crusty bread, and bottled water. Their Greek improved each year until they were easily able to converse with even the most rapid-speaking of the natives. The burley grocer in Ayios Kyrikos always made sure he saved the ripest and juiciest peaches for them, and Ari, the long-haired

eighteen-year-old who rented motorbikes, never failed to flirt and give them the newest and shiniest of the lot. They were popular and well-liked, equally at home with the aging compatriots of their grandparents or their own young friends.

The clattering of dishes startled her and she sat up. Sophia must be making breakfast. Nicole rose, leaving her book on the chair, and went inside.

“Good morning, *agapi mou*. What would you like for breakfast?” Her grandmother’s thick gray hair was pulled back in a bun. At almost eighty, Sophia moved with an inherent elegant grace. She was a handsome woman, tall and solid, her face remarkably unlined for her age.

“Just some coffee, Yiayia. Not very hungry.”

Sophia turned from the coffee pot and looked at Nicole, her eyes narrowing. “What is it, my girl? Something is bothering you.” She gestured for Nicole to sit, poured some coffee for each of them, and then pulled out a chair for herself.

“It’s nothing. I guess I’m just not ready to go back yet. You know, sad it’s our last day.”

“But Nicole, there is so much to look forward to with the wedding and starting your new job. You should be excited, no?” Sophia’s thick accent had a lilting cadence to it.

“What do you think of Stewart, Yiayia?”

Sophia hesitated, surprised by the question. “Well, I do not know him well yet, but he seems like a hard-working and responsible young man. Why do you ask me that? Is there something we do not know about him?” There was concern in her voice.

Nicole looked down at the table and thought about what to say. Her fingers spun the mug in circles as she sat in silence.

“Tell me, Nicole. What is it you are keeping from us?”

Her grandmother was no one’s fool, she thought. If she couldn’t confide her fears to her, then to whom could she?

“This may seem like nothing to you, but, Yiayia, I’ve watched how he treats Theo; he just seems so controlling to me. I know he’s ten years older, but he acts like she’s not capable of making a decision without him. There are times he treats her like a child. I can’t understand why she doesn’t see it.” Her tone was angry now.

“Sometimes I feel like the only reason he grabbed onto Theo was to go to work for Dad.”

Stewart had utterly ingratiated himself with Nick, their father, and had been comfortably ensconced in the family contracting business since last year. Nicole hadn’t heard any complaints at the office, but then, she was, up to this point, just a part-time employee, a graduate student and the boss’s daughter. When they returned to the States, she would assume a full-time position at Parsenis Contracting and then she would be working with Stewart every day.

Sophia straightened in her chair. “Have you spoken to your sister about this?”

“How can I, Yiayia? What would I say? She’s so happy and in love.”

Sophia was quiet as she considered this. “Are you sure you are not seeing things that are not there? That perhaps you are a little sad that things are changing?”

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“No Yiayia, it’s not that. Really. I want to be happy for her, but the more I’m around Stewart, the more I dislike him.”

Just then Theodora came shuffling into the kitchen still in her robe. “You two are up early. What time did you get up anyway?”

Nicole and Sophia locked eyes briefly while Theo poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down.

“I think I’ll go put my suit on. Last day, can’t stay inside when the beach is calling.” Nicole rose just as Sophia also got up.

“Was it something I said? Everybody’s disappearing.” Theo yawned and ran her fingers through her long golden-flecked hair.

“I’ll take towels and water out for both of us,” Nicole said. “Come down when you’re ready.”

Theo stretched and took a sip of the hot coffee. “Okay,” she said lazily, “see you in a bit.”

Sophia busied herself at the stove, disturbed by what Nicole had told her.

“Are you on a coffee only breakfast like your sister?”

“Afraid so, Yiayia. I have a final fitting when we get back. Don’t want to bust a seam.”

“Nonsense, you do not have one extra ounce on you.” Sophia hated the low-fat, low-carb, low-everything mentality of her daughters and granddaughters. Life should be enjoyed. Everything in moderation, she believed, even moderation.

Morning quickly turned to afternoon as their final day in Ikaria melted away. As the sun moved lower in the sky, Nicole and Theo walked home along the narrow road that ran between the sea and the small waterfront houses.

“You’ve been awfully quiet all day.” Theo looked over at her sister as they strolled past the local grocery.

“Guess I’m just thinking about leaving and everything we’re going back to.” She looked straight ahead as they walked.

Theo slowed. “Something’s bugging you. What is it?”

Nicole found herself without words. How could she tell her sister how much she disliked Stewart? It wouldn’t change anything and would just put a strain between the sisters. She stopped and turned to Theodora. “You just graduated from college. Are you sure you’re ready to get married?”

“I’ve never been more sure in my life. Stewart is everything I’ve ever wanted.” She squeezed her sister’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’m not disappearing off the face of the earth. We’ll still have lots of time together.”

Nicole realized that her concern had been misinterpreted. “I know you will always be there for me. I just wonder if you really know Stewart well enough to make such a serious commitment.”

Theo looked at her sister in surprise. “Don’t know him well enough? We’ve been together for two years. How much more could I know him?”

Nicole plunged in. “Don’t you think he’s just a little bit bossy? He kind of steamrolls over you and what you want sometimes.”

Theo's voice turned sharp with anger. "Just because I respect his opinion and don't feel the need to lead him around by the nose doesn't mean he tells me what to do. Maybe if you didn't always have to get your way you wouldn't be alone right now." She regretted her harsh accusation immediately.

The words hit Nicole like an arrow striking its mark. She picked up her pace and they walked beside each other in silence. Theodora spoke first.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. But you've got it all wrong. Stewart's a great guy. You'll see. Please don't worry. Come on, let's not ruin our last night here."

Nicole wasn't reassured, but she smiled at her sister. "You're right. We'll make it a night to remember."

When they reached home and entered the plain interior, the temperature was at least ten degrees cooler than outside. The thick white walls kept the fierceness of the late afternoon sun at bay, and the cool tile floors were a persuasive invitation to remove their dusty sandals.

It was funny, Nicole thought, how much they loved this unassuming little island house. Back home in the States, her grandparents' beautiful old home in the city and apartment on the beach firmly established the fact that they had attained prosperity and success in their chosen land, but those places, though modern and comfortable, never got under her skin the way this simple dwelling by the sea did.

By seven o'clock they were dressed and ready for dinner with their grandparents, who awaited them on the tiny stone terrace.

"Come my girls, it is our last night here. Let us go have a good dinner," Andreas said.

They walked together to the center of town and the island's largest restaurant.

"So, today you say goodbye to all the island boys whose hearts you break?" their grandfather teased.

Andreas Zaharis, still a virile man at eighty-one, hadn't lost his craggy good looks. His thick hair, completely white, made his coal-colored eyes appear even darker, and the strong prominent nose gave his face an imperiousness that could be intimidating. The patriarch of the family, powerfully protective of his loved ones, Andreas had a soft spot for his only two granddaughters. His sometimes gruff teasing was his way of showing affection. They had long known this about him, and when he tried to appear angry with them, his eyes always betrayed him.

"I'm sure they'll get over it," Nicole laughed.

"I don't know about that. Stefano was crushed when you refused to go to the taverna with him last night. He's been moonstruck ever since you got here,"

Theodora closed her eyes and clutched at her chest as if heartbroken.

"Ach, animal. I do not like these wild boys hanging around you. He has hair like a girl," Andreas grumbled.

"Don't worry Papou, I'm saving myself for someone like you," Nicole replied, her voice filled with affection.

As the lane narrowed, Andreas put his arm around his wife's shoulder and they moved ahead of the girls. Sophia and Andreas still made a striking couple. Both had been born on this island and together since their marriage at eighteen and twenty.

The restaurant came into view and at once fragrant smells from the kitchen filled the balmy evening air. Georgios, the owner, stood outside the door.

"*Yasas, elate mesa*, come inside," Georgios called to them as he waved them in. "Come see what delicious foods we prepare for you tonight."

They made their way into the kitchen to look at the evening specials. Heavily seasoned *souvlaki* rotated on a skewer. Mixed salads of onion, plump tomato, and feta cheese sat in large wooden bowls. Fresh cleaned fish marinated in pans on the counter next to the huge oven. The smells melded into one mouth-watering aroma that piqued their collective appetites.

Georgios called a waiter over. "Give my good friends a table overlooking the sea," he told the young boy.

The view from the restaurant was magnificent. Bleached white rocks disappeared into the sparkling blue water, and the setting sun cast its amber glow over the calm surface. Theodora looked around as if to memorize every detail.

"*Koukla mou*, soon we will be dancing at your wedding," Sophia said.

Andreas looked at Theodora. "Well, you did not pick a Greek *gambro*, but at least you picked a nice boy, eh?"

Nicole looked at her grandmother and then quickly away as the widow Despina, Andreas's cousin, dressed all in black, came swooping in and stopped at their table.

"*Yasas!* I am so sad to think you are leaving tomorrow." A black scarf covered her head.

"Despina, please sit with us," Andreas said as he stood and pulled over a chair from the next table.

"Just for a minute. I must go back and serve dinner, but I will come back later with the others and have coffee with you," she said in Greek.

Looking at the girls, she said to Sophia. "Your granddaughters are very beautiful." Turning to the ground she spat twice "Ftew, Ftew."

The old Greeks believed in the superstition of the evil eye, fearing that harm would befall the person paid a compliment unless this ritual followed the compliment. After some chatting, she stood up. "I will see you later tonight."

As she left, Georgios approached the table with a carafe of *Retsina*.

"Here my friends, let us have a farewell drink together," he said as he filled their glasses. "*Yasas!* Here is to a safe trip home and a return to our beautiful island next summer."

"*Efharisto*, thank you Georgios," Andreas said.

He raised his glass to his granddaughters.

"To my two precious gems, thanks to God for the joy you bring to our lives. This is the last trip we will have both our granddaughters to ourselves," he toasted, and his eyes shone with restrained tears.

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Sophia's face registered surprise at the sentimental toast. Age had softened him. This summer marked an end to a fifteen-year tradition. To Sophia, this was reason enough to be sad. Knowing her husband as she did, she suspected it was more than the maturing of their grandchildren that was saddening him. Perhaps it was the knowledge that comes to all men and women past their prime, that their time left on earth is coming to an end. This was something she had been thinking about for a while. Sensing this sudden revelation in her husband was disconcerting. It made the inevitability of their eventual separation more real and frighteningly closer. After sixty years of marriage, the thought of living without her beloved Andreas was unbearable. She felt her chest constrict and pressed her nails sharply into her hands to dull the sudden emotion that flooded her. She turned her attention to her granddaughters and lifted her glass toward Theodora.

"Let us drink to a long happy marriage for our Theodora," she said with forced cheerfulness. She prayed that the words of her toast were not empty wishes.

CHAPTER 2

September

Stewart thought he might poison them all if he had to spend every Sunday for the rest of his life at a family dinner. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy being with Theo's family; it was certainly more pleasant than his own family dinner table where silence and hostility reigned. It was just that enough was enough. He resented having his Sundays scripted for him from here to eternity. But he endured it for the time being. It wouldn't do to upset the balance of things before he was an official member of the family. And so he went along with Theo, a smile on his face and resentment in his heart. He'd given up a lot to fit into what the Parsenis clan expected, or what he believed would endear him to them. Attendance at all family functions, the weekly dinners, blind devotion to his job and to Theo's father, Nick, and finally, notably, his conversion to the Greek Orthodox faith. Not that it was a big deal for him. He had no allegiance to any particular religion, had not attended church since the days when he was dropped off at the Church of the Redeemer for Sunday school as a small child. Faith had never been high on the order of things in the Elliott family. The altar at which his father worshipped was located inside the walls of Johns Hopkins Hospital. He had never forgiven him for his absence at almost every major event of Stewart's life.

By the time Stewart graduated from Gilman, his only thought was to go away to college and be on his own, away from the cold war his mother and father persisted in carrying on. But Cornell had not proved to be far enough, and thus his decision to attend graduate school in California. He threw off his East Coast reserve, but never lost his sense of entitlement. He rented a small condo in Palo Alto, spent hours at the Café Venetia on University Avenue, and celebrated the thousands of miles that separated him from Ruxton and his parents. He might have stayed permanently if it had not been for that one incident that stood like a black mark on his time there. But Elliott money and a quick exit had taken care of that—unfortunately, before he completed the coursework for his MBA. The last thing he had wanted was a return to Baltimore, so he'd spent the next few years drinking and screwing his way through Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico on his mother's dime. Finally his father put his foot down. "I don't give a damn if it *is* your mother's money, the gravy train stops here. You get your sorry ass back here right now or make your way out there, because you're not getting another penny from here." The words had the effect his father hoped. With the decision made for him, Stewart returned home and half-heartedly began attending business seminars. When he met Nick Parsenis something

clicked and he knew this could be the beginning of something big for him. The fact that his mother and father would hate the idea of his going into business was a further enticement to go all the way.

Now he sat at the Parsenis dining room table listening to Nicole talk about some neglected kid she was working with as a volunteer advocate. He looked up from his plate, bored.

“She is such a sweet little child and wants desperately to be with her parents, but they just can’t get clean,” she was saying. “Today was the hearing for placing her in foster care and I thought my heart would break for her.”

Stewart couldn’t stay quiet. “You’re wasting your time Nicole. Her parents are addicts, it’s all she’s seen and she’s going to grow up to be a user, have kids, and keep the whole damn cycle going. What a waste of time and resources.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. In fact, everyone at the table looked at Stewart in uncomfortable disbelief.

Nicole’s eyes flashed with anger and her voice rose. “So you’re saying we forget about these children, just leave them to fend for themselves and come what may? You don’t believe they can be saved and go on to have a better life?”

“No, I don’t believe they can. I don’t know why you spend all that time with that outfit, what’s it called, CASA? I bet if you look at the long-term stats, they’d show just what I’m saying. Almost all of those kids wind up on the street with criminal records.”

“I can’t believe what a cynic you are. Not to mention ungenerous.”

“I think he means that since so many of these kids get sent back to the parents, they get caught up in the same stuff.” Theo attempted to defuse the argument.

“You don’t have to defend me,” Stewart looked around the table, sensing that he might have gone too far. He didn’t for a moment think these kids would rise above the garbage they were born into, but he wisely back-pedaled.

“Maybe you’re right Nicole, maybe I’m being a bit too cynical.”

“Okay, okay,” Nick broke in. “Everyone’s entitled to an opinion, but how about we calm down and maybe change the subject.” He was surprised, though, at what seemed a vast lack of compassion or belief in humanity on Stewart’s part. Nick glanced at his wife, who looked disturbed by the whole exchange.

Dinner and conversation resumed rather perfunctorily until it was time to clear the table. Theo believed Stewart would change his views if he only knew more about the organization and all they accomplished with abused and neglected children. Nicole, however, sat silently, boiling with unspoken rage.

CHAPTER 3

BALTIMORE - September

Caroline Elliott, Stewart's mother, had decided to have the rehearsal dinner at her home. She hadn't felt up to dealing with all the tedious details of using the country club or even hiring a room in a restaurant. She knew that her husband would lend no support and so the arrangements were all handled by Julia, her housekeeper, who had long ago learned that running the Elliott home was something Caroline was only too happy to hand over.

She rose late on Friday, the day of the rehearsal, and came downstairs to a flurry of activity. The florist was delivering huge baskets of white gardenias in full bloom, and the fragrant aroma that filled the dining room nauseated her. Men and women in black uniforms carried trays of delectable food as they set up the chafing dishes that would keep everything warm. Caroline's china and crystal sparkled on the five round tables for eight that had been brought in, and place cards sat in exquisite Limoges holders. She walked toward the kitchen nodding her head curtly at the caterer who greeted her from across the long hallway. The noise and confusion were already getting on her fragile nerves, and she lit a cigarette before pouring her first cup of coffee. She wondered how she would make it through the long weekend ahead without being able to retreat to her bedroom and her secret stash of vodka.

"Julia, did you see Dr. Elliott this morning?" Caroline asked.

"No, ma'am, he was already gone when I came."

Caroline couldn't remember anything that had happened after eight o'clock last night. Graham had not come home for dinner, which wasn't unusual, and she had started her heavy drinking earlier than normal. An hour after a dinner she barely touched, she passed out on her bed. She wondered if he had made it home at all. Graham and Caroline had maintained separate bedrooms for the last fifteen years. She drew deeply on her cigarette and exhaled slowly, dipping the ash with a perfectly manicured nail. They had come to a tacit agreement years ago that Graham would leave her alone, and she would ignore his occasional dalliances as long as he was discreet. In public he was solicitous of her, but in the privacy of their home they barely spoke a word to each other. They were simply two people living under the same roof who had long ago ceased to have anything in common.

"Can I get you another cup of coffee, Mrs. Elliott? Perhaps you'd like to sit by the pool and drink it." Julia wanted her out of the way.

"Yes, that would do nicely. When are these people going to be out of here?"

"I imagine they'll be here 'til late afternoon, ma'am."

"Oh God, I don't think I'll be able to endure all this commotion until then. And there's still the party tonight!" she complained.

She walked out onto the flagstone patio shaded by tall oak trees and down the hill to the swimming pool. The white lounge chairs stood out against the shimmering blue-green water. Large navy ceramic pots were filled with ruby red geraniums and trailing ivy. Caroline walked to the far end of the pool and sat down. From her position she could look straight up to the house sitting high on the hill and watch the activity from a safe and quiet distance. Her parents had built the house for Graham and her when they were newlyweds. It was an immense brick and limestone mansion in the Georgian style that had taken over two years to complete. No detail or expense had been spared in the building of the impressive three-story estate. Looking up at the magnificent structure, Caroline thought how many people envied her, and she laughed bitterly to herself.

Her marriage was a sham, and her son had his own life. Nothing was required of her in managing her home, there was ample paid help for that, and so her days were spent in a hazy, alcoholic blur. She remembered her own party so many years ago. How had the time passed so quickly? She no longer bore any resemblance to that hopeful young woman desperate to leave a household full of quiet strife. Graham's manner had been refreshingly genuine. She had grown tired of the young men in her circle with their prep school accents and cookie-cutter personalities. Graham had passion and purpose. She admired his zeal for life and desire to help others. He would be her ticket out of the emotional coma she had endured her entire life. How was she to know it would prove to be impossible to shed her upbringing? What a cliché she had become. The arrival of their son had both exhilarated and terrified her. She didn't know how to be a mother. With little familial support she quickly became overwhelmed and depressed. After medical school, all of Graham's time was spent at the hospital and Caroline was left alone to ponder her inadequacies. She finally gave in to her mother's insistence that she hire a nanny, and it wasn't long before she turned to her mother's favorite pastime and began to find her comfort in a bottle.

She reached for her coffee cup with a shaking hand and it fell to the ground, shattering into jagged pieces. She stood, staring at the broken china for several moments before going back to the house. The French doors leading from the kitchen to the patio were propped open for the caterers, and Caroline walked over to Julia, who was directing the flow.

"There's a broken cup on the deck. See that it's taken care of."

"Certainly, I'll send someone right down."

"I'm going to my room. I don't want to be disturbed." She walked away without a backward glance.

Her bedroom suite was her haven. She opened the drawer of the table next to her chaise lounge and pulled out a small silver flask, took a long swallow, then rested her head on the pillow. She continued her maudlin reminiscing. Her only passion was her son Stewart, on whom she had always doted. Feelings of resentment and jealousy welled up inside her as she reflected on his decision to marry Theodora. She

hadn't been alarmed when he brought her around the first time. She was used to beautiful women flocking to her son. She never bothered to remember their names because he always tired of them after a few months. In retrospect, she saw that Theodora was unlike any of the other girls. She was more naïve, less worldly, and she worshipped Stewart. Caroline suddenly realized that the look of admiration in Theodora's eyes mirrored her own. Perhaps that's part of the attraction—he thinks she will always idolize him, she thought. But Caroline knew better. There was a time she saw that same look of awe in her husband's eyes. It wasn't long before it was replaced by blankness. How could the same person who once made you feel like the center of the universe suddenly make you feel invisible? It had been that way her whole life. She was never quite special enough. Until Stewart. The look of adoration on his face when she entered a room was unlike anything she had ever known. The one thing of which she was certain was his abiding love for her. She took another long drag on her cigarette. Her love for him was the only thing that had sustained her through the years. If only that had been enough. No matter how great her love, it hadn't been enough to stop her from drinking or from raising him at an emotional distance. Somewhere between feeling and expression, the sentiment was lost. What did they say about the road to hell? She took another long swallow. Soon she was in blessed numbness, and the hours passed without her awareness.

A steady, light tapping on the door awakened her. "Caroline, are you up?" Graham never entered her room without an invitation.

She was confused, not knowing if it was morning or night, and turned to look at the clock. Four thirty. Then she remembered. They had to be at the church by six for the rehearsal. She had less than an hour to pull herself together.

"Yes, I'm up. I'll be ready to leave in an hour," she called through the door.

"Caroline, may I come in?"

She quickly glanced at the table to see that her flask was out of sight before answering. "Yes, come in Graham," she answered with annoyance.

He opened the door and came just a few feet into the room. "Have you bothered to check what's going on downstairs?"

"Why, is something wrong?"

"No, everything looks fine, but this happens to be a big night for Stewart. Couldn't you have at least kept an eye on things for God's sake?"

She had meant to rest for only an hour. She rubbed her temples.

"Really Graham, Julia and the rest of them are perfectly capable of taking care of everything. Besides, we certainly haven't any need to impress the Parsenis clan. Now leave me alone so I can get dressed."

He looked at her in disgust, shook his head, and left the room without reply. Why hadn't he left her years ago? He'd admired her in the beginning. She was everything he had ever aspired to be. He was going to show her how to enjoy life, real life, outside the safe confines of her secluded and privileged world. She would smooth his rough edges and together they would have it all. How soon she tired of his rawness and he of her refinement. Articulating his feelings in an impassioned manner was commonplace to him but alien to her. He never knew what she was

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feeling; her reaction was always the same—impassivity—regardless of whether it was in response to misfortune or joy. Their differences were evident early on, but he had chosen to ignore them and concentrate instead on his career and his image. He couldn't deny that he had loved living in this house at a time when his colleagues were still struggling to pay rent. Now it was just a place to hang his hat. They had never made it a home, but there was nothing to be done about it now. He was too old for regrets.

CHAPTER 4

With his arm around her waist, Theodora and Stewart walked into the lavishly-decorated room beginning to fill with family and friends. He was a striking complement to Theo, his six-foot frame tanned and athletic. A stray lock of blonde hair brushed his forehead and his crystal blue eyes were startling in their clarity. A ready smile revealed even, white teeth that looked almost too perfect.

Graham rushed over to his son. "Well, well, here's the couple of the hour."

"Hour is right," Stewart replied, "I think that's how long that complicated ceremony we just walked through took. What a rehearsal! Man, point me to the nearest drink."

Nicole, standing nearby, couldn't help overhearing. "Don't worry, if you play your cards right, you only have to do it once."

"Once is all I need, sister-in-law." He flashed his movie star smile but his eyes gave Nicole a look of steel.

Caroline appeared looking drawn and distracted. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a French knot and the belted, blue silk dress accentuated her extreme thinness.

"Stewart, darling," she gushed as she embraced her son and merely nodded to her other guests. "You look so handsome tonight."

She linked her arm in his as she led him to the bar, leaving Theo standing by herself. As the rest of the party began drifting in, the sounds of conversation and laughter filled the house. Sophia watched from her seat at a table near the front of the room as Nick and Eleni, Theodora's parents, moved from one group to another, making sure they took the time to greet everyone. Sophia had liked Nick from the moment her daughter Eleni first brought him home. She had known instinctively that this strong and dynamic young man would be the perfect partner for her kind and gentle daughter and she had been right. They were a handsome couple, completely at ease with each other after thirty-five years of marriage. Eleni had the beautiful dark eyes that ran in the Zaharis family. Nick stood beside her, not much taller than Eleni, but with the solid build and confident air that made him a presence in any room.

She continued to watch as her grandson Paul walked over to greet his parents. Nicole and Theo had always adored their older brother Paul, and Sophia had to admit that he held a special place in her heart as well. When she looked at him she saw the shadow of another Paul who was lost so many years ago. She liked to think that this is what her brother would have grown to be, a fine man full of warmth and intelligence. She shook her head. Enough of the past, she thought as she rose to join Nick and Eleni at the other end of the room.

Constantine

"Well, the big day's almost here. How're you two holding up?" Paul asked his parents.

"I've got so much on my mind about tomorrow that I almost wish it were over. I don't remember my wedding being this much work," Eleni said

"Well no wonder," Nick laughed, "we were only engaged for two months. You've been planning this for almost a year and you've spent more money than we thought existed when we got married."

"Are you talking about money again, Nick?" Eve joked as she and her husband Dimitri came up to the threesome. Eleni's sister Eve had an easy relationship with Nick. The two couples were fond of each other and spent much of their free time together. When their children were small, they never missed a summer at the beach, the two sisters going ahead with Yiayia and the children, and the men joining them on weekends. Eve's dry sense of humor and cutting wit were the perfect foil for Eleni's quiet and unassuming nature. Her reserved demeanor had caused those who knew her to react to her marriage with surprise. Dimitri, a hefty man in his early sixties, would have made the perfect "Zorba."

"This is quite a house," Dimitri commented. "Takes big bucks to keep a place like this running."

"It's magnificent, isn't it? Have you been here before?" Eve asked her sister.

"You remember, Caroline invited me to lunch after Stewart and Theodora became engaged. The Christmas tree was probably about twenty feet high. The house looked beautiful."

A waiter in a white starched shirt and black tie approached the group to let them know dinner would be served.

"You all go ahead. I'll refill this drink and be right in. Anyone else need anything?" asked Dimitri, who enjoyed his whiskey.

"No thanks, we're okay." Eve rolled her eyes at Eleni. "He's in heaven. Two parties right in a row. By Sunday he'll be exhausted."

"He's such fun, always the life of the party," Eleni said as they walked into the dining room.

"Oh sure, but he pays for it the next morning."

Eve always complained, but Dimitri's ability to let go and jump in with both feet was what had fascinated her about him. She looked over at him and winked as he came into the room with his drink freshened. Under the buzz of conversation came the soothing sounds of a four-piece string ensemble. As Dimitri approached, Eleni turned to the Elliots.

"Graham, Caroline, I'm not sure which of the family you've met. I think you know Theodora's grandparents," she said nodding to Sophia and Andreas. "Have you met all of Theodora's aunts and uncles?"

"I've had a great time wandering around introducing myself to everybody. Now, don't give me a test on how everyone's related, but I think I have the names down," Graham said.

"There certainly are quite a lot of you," Caroline added.

Constantine

"You haven't seen anything. Wait 'til the wedding tomorrow," Dimitri gave Eleni a conspiratorial look.

"I'm positively trembling with anticipation," Caroline said.

Graham attempted to soften his wife's rudeness. "Caroline's a little overwhelmed," he said. "I'm an only child and she has just one brother. We're not used to such a big family. I'm a little envious, actually. It must be wonderful to have so many relatives."

"What is wonderful is that we care about each other," Andreas said, looking pointedly at Caroline. "That is what family is all about. I am surrounded by my children and grandchildren, and they are here to share my Theodora's happiness. God blessed me when he gave me Sophia. I am a lucky man." Andreas smiled at Nicole seated beside him and placed his hand upon hers.

"You are a lucky man, Mr. Zaharis," Graham said. "It's a rare thing to see a family so close."

It was a rare thing, Nicole thought, and she sometimes took it for granted. It was clear from her brief exposure to Stewart's family that his familial experience was vastly different. Nicole's anxiety about this marriage was heightened when she met Caroline. Theodora had her work cut out for her. Her attention was drawn to Graham as he rose from the seat next to her. Despite the receding hairline and the extra twenty pounds, he was still attractive, she thought. Nicole found him warm and sincere and was hopeful that in him, Theodora would find a strong ally. He cleared his throat and raised a glass.

"I'd like to welcome all of you on this happy occasion and present a toast to the bride and groom. Theodora, I couldn't have asked for a better daughter-in-law. Caroline and I welcome you into the Elliott family with open arms. I know our son will be happy with you by his side. And Stewart, even though my dream for you was to be a part of my practice, Nick Parsenis will not only be a terrific father-in-law, but a great boss as well."

Stewart tensed at his father's words. Would he ever stop taking every opportunity he could to remind Stewart how disappointed in him he was? He never should have come back east. But then he wouldn't have met Nick and he wouldn't be working at Parsenis, engaged to the boss's daughter. His father had talked to him endlessly about taking the MCATs and trying for medical school, but Stewart had no interest. In reality, there was nothing he felt especially called to, no grand plan he envisioned for his life. In some ways that made things easier. He just needed to be the shrewdest at whatever it was he decided to do, and Stewart was nothing if not shrewd. Nick was handing him a golden opportunity and he intended to take full advantage of it, his father be damned. The day would come when Graham would have to admit that Stewart had accomplished something, that he *was* something.

At the sound of glasses tapping, Theodora's father was on his feet.

"Thank you for your gracious words Graham. The way I feel about Stewart is no secret. He's become a valued part of my company and I'm happy that now he'll also be part of the family." He turned to look at his daughter and Stewart. "You kids have everything going for you. Here's to a marriage filled with health, happiness,

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and prosperity.” He took a sip and put down his glass. “Now let’s have some dinner and then we’ll teach you some genuine Greek dancing.”

Nick sat down and turned to Stewart.

“You do know that you’ll lead the first circle dance at the reception, don’t you?”

“I’ve been completely and expertly trained by Theodora. No one will suspect I’m not Greek. I even have my handkerchief pressed and ready,” and he took it from his pocket and waved it in the air.

“He’s asked the ushers to break plates on the floor while he’s dancing,” Theodora teased.

“Really, Theodora, that isn’t funny. We’re not in some Ionian village for heaven’s sake,” Eleni said.

“Mother, I’m only kidding—just a little ethnic humor,” Theodora replied.

She found it amusing that some traditions were completely acceptable, while others were strictly forbidden. Crashing pottery would horrify her mother, just as she would never permit those little lace doilies on the arms of her furniture. She wondered if there were some Hellenic Emily Post to whom all their mothers referred about just how Greek they should be.

“Theodora, dear,” Caroline asked, “Stewart’s father and I don’t have to do one of those little native dances, do we?”

“My dear lady,” her grandfather said to Caroline, “you will not want to stop the Greek dance, you will see. You will cry when the music stops. Come,” and he took her arm and pulled her from the table, “I teach you now.”

Caroline looked stricken as she stood rigidly next to Andreas in the middle of the floor.

“Pavlo,” Andreas yelled to his grandson Paul, “start the music.” And soon the sounds of the rhythmic bouzoukis and mandolins poured into the room.

Andreas held firmly to Caroline’s hand. “See, is not so hard. Watch my feet and follow me.”

In the next few moments the entire party was on its feet and a part of the line that wound snake-like around the tables. Those who didn’t know the steps danced with the most enthusiasm, their feet tripping over each other as they tried to learn. That’s the way it always was, Theodora thought. Once they started they didn’t want to stop.

Caroline was surprised to discover she was enjoying herself. As the tempo increased, the sea of laughing faces became a happy blur. Their merriment was infectious, and it felt good to lose herself in the moment. No wonder Stewart spends so much time with them, she thought; they are everything we’re not. But her elation quickly disappeared, swallowed up by the old fear that rose within her. She was about to lose the one person she truly loved.

CHAPTER 5

Theodora wouldn't be wearing that rapturous smile if she knew what her fiancée had done last night, thought the woman in the third row. She almost felt sorry for her. *Almost*. It could have been her up there—would have been—until she'd discovered that Stewart's abundance of charm and good looks was in perfect proportion to his lack of character and moral fiber. Not that she really cared all that much for morality. She did, however, care about being made a fool. Stewart was enjoyable, like an expensive meal, as long as you knew what you were buying. She'd made the right choice when she'd left him and married his best friend. Her husband's devotion was unwavering and she squeezed the hand holding hers gratefully. How sweet of Caroline to invite them and how generous to insist they stay with her and Graham. It had been reminiscent of old times. The second to last step leading to their old hiding place still squeaked. Of course, with everyone else sound asleep, they were the only ones who heard it.

Nicole's gaze swept across the church, filled to overflowing and bathed in white roses and baby's breath. Sun poured through the tall stained glass windows, intensifying the grandeur of the gold candelabra and icons. She glanced down at the white crowns waiting to be placed on the heads of the bride and groom, and was struck again by the ritual of the Greek Orthodox wedding ceremony. There was no mistaking the joy on Theodora's face, and Nicole thought that maybe she had misjudged the situation. Theodora was always the more levelheaded of the two. Perhaps she was feeling more left out than she thought. She was standing up here as her sister's maid of honor and she would choose to be happy for Theodora and embrace her new brother-in-law. She caught Theo's eye and they smiled warmly at each other.

The priest nodded at Paul, signifying that it was time for the rings, and taking them, made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of Stewart and Theodora. This was performed three times. He then handed the rings to Paul, who stood before the couple and placed the gold rings on their fingers. While the priest chanted a prayer, the rings were interchanged three times. The crowns were then placed on their heads and also interchanged three times, all in the name of the Holy Trinity.

Sophia dabbed at her eyes with a corner of the white handkerchief she held in her hand. She looked away from her granddaughter and remembered her own wedding sixty years ago. The small village church had been packed with all those who lived on the island. Her mother spent months working on the handmade dress Sophia had worn. She was just a child, she thought, with no idea of the magnitude of the vows she was taking. It seemed as though only a moment in time had elapsed and

yet she sat here where her children had been baptized and married. Now it was their turn. How did the years disappear so seamlessly? Soon she and Andreas would be gone, only a memory to their children, as her parents now were to her. Sophia had never seen her mother again after she and Andreas had come to America, and she felt the loss deeply through the years. There was no mother to go to when she was unsure of herself, when she needed comforting or support. So many times she felt hopelessly ill-equipped and had longed for the relationship that exists only between a mother and daughter. She felt Andreas move next to her and smiled at him as he covered her hand with his.

Across the aisle Caroline was trying hard to focus, but the figures at the altar looked blurred and distant. She grudgingly admitted to herself that Theodora was one of the most beautiful brides she had ever seen. The ceremony was interminable though, and she looked down at the program in her lap to determine when it would end. Sighing quietly, she tried to concentrate on the scene before her. They look like actors in a Roman play with those crowns on their heads, she thought. It had angered her that Stewart agreed to be married in the Greek Orthodox instead of the Episcopal Church, but no matter how hard she tried to dissuade him, he remained firm. The final insult was his decision to convert to Orthodoxy a few months before the wedding. She looked at Graham beside her and was frustrated by the blissful smile on his face. He never had any reservations about Theodora and made it plain from the beginning that he approved of Stewart's choice. How like him, she thought. He wouldn't listen to any criticism from her, didn't care, really, how she felt. When had that happened? On her wedding day hadn't she been as radiant and excited as Theodora was today and hadn't Graham looked at her with adoration in his eyes? There was nothing but rancor between them now. She saw Stewart's wholehearted embrace of Theodora's family and faith as a desertion, a desertion that didn't seem to alarm Graham in the least. The prospect of losing her son to this large and animated family terrified and infuriated her. I will not cry, she thought, and squeezed her eyes tightly against the hot tears ready to spill over.

The ceremony reached its conclusion with the circling of the altar table. The newlyweds, with Nicole and Paul, followed the priest around the table three times to signify their vow to forever preserve the marriage bond. This was the first time during the entire ceremony that Theodora and Stewart faced the congregation. The beaming couple stood for a moment and then, arm in arm, descended the platform with a light and joyous step. It was all a blur to Theodora, a warm smile here, a familiar pair of eyes there, the row upon row of faces both disjointed and merging together at the same time. Stewart put his arm around her waist, drawing her closer to him as they reached the back of the church, and she was filled with such an exquisite sense of happiness and contentment she thought she might burst. He leaned down to kiss her lips when they stopped but they were quickly pulled apart by parents and members of the bridal party eager to embrace and congratulate them. Theodora had no idea how long they stood in the receiving line, greeting guest after guest, but she never tired of hearing the same congratulatory words or the usual expressions of love and best wishes; each one further reinforced the fact that she and Stewart were

married, that their future was together. By the time the last guest came through the line, her face was sore from smiling but her spirit was soaring.

"Boy, that one's a cold fish," a guest remarked to her sister-in-law, after shaking Caroline Elliott's hand and reaching the end of the receiving line.

"I hear she's an alcoholic," said the other.

"Well, the groom's sure gorgeous. If the mother-in-law isn't the greatest, she'll just have to put up with it. We sure had our share with the dragon," came the reply.

They both made a face at the memory of the mother-in-law they had shared, a demanding, complaining widow who never got enough from her sons, no matter how hard they tried.

The two elegantly dressed women walked out into the glaring sunlight of the church's courtyard where the four hundred guests noisily milled about. Only the young and very old indicated this might be an ethnic gathering. The teenagers with their shiny black hair, dark brown eyes, and olive skin looked as if they could be brothers and sisters.

At the other end of the spectrum were a few, a very few, of the remaining old guard; those who had left Greece in their twenties and come to America with their husbands to start a new life. They spoke broken English and displayed their age without shame, their lined faces and gray hair badges of wisdom. The large group in between, however, this first generation of sons and daughters, was without question mainstream America. Although they clung to their heritage, did in fact consider it their identity, they had already blended into white, Protestant America. There was hardly a dark head of hair to be seen. Frosting and blonde streaks reflected the rays of the late afternoon sun. The dress was elegant and understated, adorned by just a few good pieces of jewelry. Only because it was September and over eighty degrees were their luxurious furs not in evidence. The men, all in black tie with hair turning a distinguished silver, looked comfortably at ease. They had graduated from the row houses of their immigrant parents and worked hard to become doctors, judges, and business owners. They had given their wives and children the American dream and were fiercely protective and proud of the positions they had attained.

Amid showers of confetti, the bride and groom entered the waiting limousine and sped off to the reception.

"Well Mrs. Elliott, you've made me the happiest man in the world," Stewart said.

"Mrs. Elliott! Doesn't sound like it's me you're talking about." She leaned over and kissed him. "I hope I always make you the happiest man in the world."

CHAPTER 6

The dazzling ballroom of the Hyatt Regency was resplendent with white orchids and candlelight. Lush mounds of fresh, tropical fruit were piled high on tables amid the huge assortment of tempting hors d'oeuvres. It was impossible to walk more than a few inches without being met by one of the myriad waiters carrying trays of appetizers.

The bridal party was sequestered with the photographer in a separate room and their guests mingled in noisy prelude. These people had known each other all their lives, had celebrated each other's births and weddings and mourned in loss together. But tonight the mood was festive, and the party spirit infectious. In this close-knit community, the grandeur of Theodora Parsenis' wedding would now be included in future discussions of noteworthy occasions. In small clusters, one by one, the guests seated themselves. The music stopped, and as if on cue, conversation dropped to a low murmur.

"And now, for the first time as husband and wife... Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Elliott!" a voice boomed over the microphone as the band played a drumroll. When they walked into the room, the crowd stood up to clap and cheer. They were led to the center of the ballroom, and the band played "Unforgettable," the song they had chosen for their first dance.

At tables surrounding the dance floor the spirited talk went back and forth between English and Greek as the family recounted stories from their own wedding days. They joked about their innocence and how little they knew when they got married.

"Poor Mom and Dad," Eleni laughed. "They barely knew each other before their wedding."

"That is the good way," Sophia said. "What do young people know about choosing a husband and wife? No, it is much better when the parents decide. They know better."

"I can just imagine who you would have picked for me, Mom," Eve said, "I'll take marrying for love anytime."

"You can learn to love anyone," Sophia insisted, "but if you have your head in the clouds, you make the foolish decisions."

"Ach, you have really hurt me," Dimitri teased his mother-in-law. "And here I thought you approved of me all these years."

"Dimitri *mou*, my daughter made a good match, but that is only because she was lucky to have a very smart mother to learn from."

Everyone laughed at Sophia's deft refusal to admit that the old way wasn't necessarily the only way.

"One thing is true," Andreas said, "in our day, when you got married, you stayed married. None of this divorce nonsense!"

"Well Papa, that's because you all came here and left your in-laws in Greece; no one to interfere or give you a hard time," Eve teased.

Sophia cleared her throat, a sure sign of a coming pronouncement. "You can joke all you wish but I will tell you something. One of the reasons our marriages last is because we are all Greek. Our friendships go back so many generations, and we share friends and relatives that we have known all our lives. We share a faith and customs and food and you know, all of you, that I could go on and on listing all that we have in common. Having things in common, that is a very important part of success in marriage because the more alike you are, the more you can share, the stronger the bond will grow."

There was an uncomfortable silence until Eleni spoke what most of them were thinking.

"What you say might be true Mom, but look at our kids. Most of them are marrying non-Greeks, and that doesn't mean they can't be happy."

"Of course it does not mean that," Sophia quickly replied, "I am only saying that the more a couple's background is the same, the better they can understand each other. What I am saying, my dear, is that your Papa and I know each other's history inside and out, and that joins us together in a way that would be impossible otherwise. You know what I am talking about—you have the very same thing with Nicko and so do all of you. Why your children have chosen to go in another direction, I do not know, and I hope they will choose wisely and be happy, but I do know they will never have our depth of connection."

"Come now," Dimitri jumped in, "we're talking about kids who are American, not Greek. Of course they can have the same bond—they grew up in the same country, just as you and Andreas did."

"Dimitri, my boy, you can never shake off your heritage whether it is Greek, Irish, Italian, or whatever."

Sophia, in her maturity and wisdom, knew that all living beings are inexorably tied to their history. No one exists on only one plane or has roots in only the here and now. The past follows us, is inextricably woven into the fabric of our being until even we no longer recognize the diverse and infinite facets that have come to make up who we are.

They were interrupted by the sound of tapping spoons against glasses, a signal for the bride and groom to kiss.

"Where in heaven's name did this stupid custom start?" Eve asked in irritation.

The American band, who had been playing soft background music throughout dinner, was replaced by the Greek band as the meal ended. The two groups had been hired to alternate throughout the evening. The beginning of the Greek music signaled the leading of the first circle dance by Theodora and Stewart, and they were on the

dance floor after just a few bars. In quick succession, the bridal party added themselves to the line, followed by the rest of the family.

"*Yasou, koukla mou,*" Andreas yelled to his granddaughter as she once again took the lead.

"Come on, Papou. You lead now," Theodora motioned to him.

The dance floor was never empty, and everyone was surprised when it was time to cut the cake and throw the bouquet. Paul came up behind Nicole and rested his hand on her bare, suntanned shoulder. "Here's your chance little sister. You could be next."

She wrinkled her nose and gave him a long look.

"I'm quite happy solo, thank you very much. Besides, I hate that gaggle of females squealing and elbowing each other trying to catch the stupid thing."

It wasn't altogether true that Nicole had little desire to follow her sister's footsteps down the aisle to the marriage altar. She did, in fact, feel a bit left out, like an outsider among her married friends, and she hated the idea that her relationship with Theodora was now forever changed. It wasn't just the two of them any longer—no more talks long into the night. Theodora would reserve her first loyalty and confidence for her husband, and although Nicole knew that was right, it didn't make her any less sad that her sister's attention would be so divided. She wasn't sure she believed she would ever find the man who could inspire her to make that commitment, but weddings have a way of making those who are unmarried feel somehow less than whole. That fact, however, was less on her mind than the echoes of a conversation she'd overheard earlier in the evening. Stewart was huddled at the bar, his arm draped lazily around the shoulder of his best man, Todd Davies, a fraternity brother with whom he had shared countless late nights partying, and the two men were feeling no pain. So engrossed were they in their conversation that they didn't notice Nicole come up behind them.

"You always were a lucky s.o.b. Should have known you'd go out in style. She's gorgeous." Todd's words were slurred and laden with spittle.

"She's top-notch alright. I'm nuts about her." Stewart grinned broadly. "And it doesn't hurt that her old man's the boss."

They collapsed with laughter into each other's arms and Nicole, white with anger, watched Todd repeatedly pat Stewart on the back as if in congratulations. She quickly walked away, not wanting to hear any more than she already had, wondering if perhaps she was taking too seriously something she hoped was said in jest. Maybe Stewart was trying to be the big man on campus again, reminding his friend that he had it all: a beautiful wife who was crazy about him and a rich father-in-law welcoming him into the family business to sweeten the deal. Stewart's behavior, his tipsiness, his spoiled and immature ranting, disturbed and troubled her, but what troubled her more was how charming and endearing he could be one moment and how utterly caddish the next. How would you ever keep your balance with a man like this, she wondered.

She looked around the large ballroom and saw her father lead Theodora to the dance floor for their last dance. The circle of guests surrounding father and daughter

entertained the private thoughts and memories evoked by this sentimental custom. Nicole's eyes filled with tears as she imagined the bittersweet mixture of emotions her father must be feeling.

"I love you, baby. I'm really going to miss you," he whispered in Theodora's ear as they danced. She was so young, he thought as he held her tighter, still a child. But then, hadn't he been just as young when he and Eleni married?

Theodora felt a thickness in her throat. "I love you too, Dad. She pulled away slightly and looked up at him.

"I'm happy Dad, and excited, but a little scared. I want it to be like you and Mom, and Yiayia and Papou. Do you think it will be?"

He looked into her questioning brown eyes and was filled with overflowing love for this youngest child of his, squeezing her hand more tightly in his own. He wished he could assure her of a future secure in happiness and contentment, that he could wave a magic wand and guarantee nothing would ever hurt her.

"More than anything that's what I want for you sweetheart, a lifetime of happiness." Stewart was a fine young man, he thought, and he silently reassured himself that her future was in loving and careful hands.

She put her head on his shoulder, and he felt an intense and momentary sadness as they slowly waltzed across the shiny wood floor. And then it was over. Stewart was at her side and people were hugging and kissing them goodbye. They walked hand in hand to the elevator that would take them to their suite for the night.

"Do you feel any different?" Theodora asked Stewart

"Not really, why?"

"I feel like I'm pretending. It doesn't seem real."

"I think we can change that in just a few minutes," he said, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her to him.

The elevator doors opened and they turned down the hallway leading to their room. Stewart unlocked the door and Theodora stood there.

"Aren't you going to carry me in?" she smiled.

"I'm going to carry you right to the bed, my dear, and not let you up 'til it's time to board that ship in the morning."

CHAPTER 7

Theodora never tired of the scene when she pulled into downtown Annapolis. The historic City Dock was alive with people and activity, and there were always a few Naval Academy middies wandering around in their crisp, white uniforms.

She turned onto Duke of Gloucester Street and searched in vain for a parking spot, finally pulling into a public lot. The building which served as campaign headquarters for Peter Demetrios was a narrow, three-story house built in the late 1800s. Its grand, old interior had high ceilings and beautiful, carved moldings covered with layer after layer of paint accumulated over years of numerous owners. Theodora often envisioned how the house might look with the right hands to restore it to its former grace and beauty.

The front door was unlocked, and she knew that if anyone was in at this hour, it would be Michael Pendleton.

"Morning, Michael. You're here bright and early." She paused for a moment in the office doorway of Peter's chief of staff and campaign manager.

"Well, well," he said, his blue eyes dancing mischievously, "I didn't think newlyweds got out of bed this early."

"What can I say? True dedication to the cause," she said over her shoulder and walked down the hallway to her office.

He was glad she was back. Theodora's was a calming and soothing presence in a hectic, fast-paced environment. She had that most uncommon trait of grace under pressure and was able to extend, almost as if by osmosis, a quiet confidence to her co-workers. As the November election for senator grew nearer and the pace and workload intensified, Theodora's competence and efficiency took a tremendous load off him. He looked around his office at the stacks of mail, press releases, campaign photographs, and voter lists and thought wryly that politics was the last place he would have imagined himself when he was in law school. He had joined the Annapolis law firm of Morton, Dunlap & Demetrios right after his graduation from Harvard at twenty-five and had been with the firm for the last six years. His curly black hair was always just a tad too long, but that added a rakish look to the otherwise clean cut appearance he presented. At the office he was impeccably dressed, but away from work he could be found on his sailboat in old shorts and a softly worn T-shirt. When Peter Demetrios, the senior partner, decided to run for the U.S. Senate, the natural choice for his right-hand man had been Michael. He was smart, reliable, and had mountains of common sense. It didn't hurt that people found him warm and friendly. He was the perfect front-man for Peter, and their relationship was relaxed and comfortable, with a mutual respect and regard. As the months of hard work were

drawing to a close, Michael realized how disappointed he would be if they didn't win in November, but there were more pressing things to think about now, and he buzzed Theodora's office.

"When you have time this morning, can we go over some details on the fund-raising dinner?" he asked.

"You're reading my mind again, Pendleton. I've been gathering up a whole pile of stuff to go over with you. How's right now, while it's still nice and quiet?"

"Perfect."

She quickly checked her voicemail and then grabbed her iPad. The offices were empty, but it wouldn't be long before volunteers would line up at the desks in the front room with telephones and voter rolls. The thought of the largest fund-raiser of the campaign filled her with anticipation and excitement for more reasons than one. For Peter and the rest of the staff it would be one of the highlights of the last eight months, but she also had a personal reason. She was hoping that when Nicole and Michael met they would see how perfect they were for each other. After working so closely with him all these months, she had come to greatly admire him. He was very much his own man, secure in who he was and because of that, accepting of others. His easy-going, cheerful nature and wry sense of humor would make him the perfect partner for Nicole. Her whole family planned to attend, but Theodora was careful not to mention Michael to her sister. She knew Nicole's reaction would be to ignore him if she thought she was being set up, so she kept her mouth shut and hoped for the best.

Michael looked up and smiled at her as she came into his office. She looked tired to him, but he supposed she hadn't yet hit her stride after the wedding and honeymoon.

"Let's sit at the table in the corner. I think it's the only surface in the room with a few inches of uncovered space."

"This is starting to look like my brother's bedroom when he was a kid," she said.

"Isn't this where I say, it may look disorganized, but I know where everything is?" he laughed.

"Yeah, what a shame it's not true. Here," she handed him some paperwork, "take a look at these publicity spots and tell me what you think."

He quickly scanned the sheets. "Looks good. How about the newspapers? Are they up to speed?"

"They have the press releases, which they'll run next week, and we have coverage promised on the eleven o'clock news from all three T.V. stations," she said.

"Good. Looks like everything's on target there." He leaned back in his chair. "How 'bout the fat cat reception before the dinner? Do we have a number on that yet?" This was a select and private reception to be held in a suite of the hotel before the dinner itself. The gathering was for the largest contributors, those whose sizable contributions merited more time and attention from the candidate.

"Should be about forty," Theodora said. "We have the final list and, so far, everyone's said yes."

"Great. Peter should be in around ten and then he has an appearance in Silver Spring at four. We'll be able to sit down with him for at least an hour sometime through the day."

They sat that way for another half hour. When Theodora got up to leave, the outside offices bustled with activity. She had been so focused she hadn't heard anyone come in. With characteristic warmth, she stopped at every few desks, chatting with volunteers, inquiring about their children and answering questions. Her interest and enthusiasm made her a popular figure at headquarters and it took her a while to get through the room and back to her own office. Her voicemail was full and she knew there would be no let-up until the day was over. She quickly took care of each call and then phoned her sister.

"Hi, sis. How are you doing?" Nicole's voice came on the line.

"I'm up to my neck with this thing at the Marriott next week. I just wanted to make sure you have it on your calendar. You are coming, aren't you?" Theodora asked.

"I think this will be the fifth time I've told you I'll be there. Does that count as a yes?"

"I am getting a little obsessive, aren't I?"

"Just a little. Anyone interesting going to be there?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. Gotta run."

"Okay. Talk to you later," Nicole said.

Theodora picked up the phone again, but before she could dial out, Peter Demetrios stuck his head into the doorway.

"You look awfully busy this morning. Any fires I need to know about?" he asked.

"No, so far everything's on schedule. Are you all set for this afternoon?"

"Michael just briefed me. He said he wanted the three of us to get together today. How about doing it over lunch, my treat."

"That sounds good. What time?"

"Oh, about 12:30. We'll walk over to the deli," he said and tapped the doorframe as he walked away.

She watched his figure recede and thought once again what a good senator he would make. He was scrupulously fair and his idealism was mixed with a healthy sense of reality. His years as a litigator had given him an appreciation of both sides of an issue, and he remained open-minded until all the facts were presented. She had been impressed with him the first time he guest-lectured at her university, and when he had announced his candidacy, she had been quick to offer herself as a campaign worker. Peter was a tireless, dynamic campaigner and the experience had been demanding, exhilarating, fascinating, and exhausting, but one she wouldn't have traded. She saw first-hand the political groupies and hangers-on, women who wanted to be near perceived power, and she respected Peter's graceful yet distant handling of them. His outgoing personality and charm attracted people to him.

Having lived in Annapolis all his life, Peter was not a part of the Baltimore Greek community, and so a part of Theodora's job had been to woo the support of his

fellow countrymen. She had begun with an introduction to her father, who took an immediate liking to Peter and became his entree into that group. Peter now had wide-reaching support from the Baltimore region and they would be well-represented at the dinner. Her work on the fund-raiser was reaching crescendo proportions, her day racing away from her with non-stop telephone calls and interruptions, and she could hardly believe it when she looked at her watch and saw that it was already 5:30. If she finished up what still had to be done, she could be on her way by six. She wanted to get home before Stewart, and if she hurried she'd have time to freshen up and have a tidy little dinner waiting for him to boot.

Stewart's car was parked in the garage when she pulled in. Damn, he had beaten her. There was music coming from the bedroom and he was just getting out of the shower as she entered the room. Beads of water glistened on his muscular tanned chest, and a blue towel was wrapped around his waist.

"You look nice and cool, and pretty appetizing, too," she said and went over to give him a kiss. "I'll grab a quick shower, and then we can have a drink before dinner."

"I wish I could, sweetie, but I have a meeting tonight." He saw her expression change and said quickly, "How about a rain check tomorrow night? I promise to be home early."

"Sure, tomorrow. Who's your meeting with?"

"A new HVAC sub-contractor who's been trying to get Parsenis' business for years. I think I can save the company a lot of money on heating and air."

Theodora sat on the bed and watched him knot a yellow and blue paisley tie in the mirror. "Do you think you'll be late? I'll wait up."

"Don't do that. There's no telling how long I'll be." He turned to face her as he put on his navy blazer. "Do I look business-like enough?"

"You look great." There were times that his startling good looks took her breath away. He was in high spirits and seemed eager to be on his way. He walked over to the bed and leaned down to kiss her.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, this came up suddenly or I would have called to let you know." He massaged her back. "On second thought, why don't you go ahead and wait up for me." His hand moved to the small of her back and he pulled her body close to his. "And if you do happen to fall asleep, I'll wake you in a most delicious manner."

Mollified, she pushed him away with a smile. "Hurry up and get going so you can hurry and get home."

Stewart gently eased his car out of the driveway and headed down Falls Road toward the city. He was meeting two of the principals of the company at a popular Fells Point restaurant. There was no doubt his father-in-law was a good businessman, but he was living in the past. Old loyalties were costing him money. There was no place for friendship in business. Stewart would show them all, including his father.

CHAPTER 8

Nicole was packing up her old bedroom, the floor littered with boxes and her bed piled high with clothes. She had already moved most of her things to her new townhouse, but still had winter clothing and a few odds and ends at her parents'.

"Hi, honey, how're things coming?" her mother came into the room.

"Almost finished. I never realized what a packrat I am. That whole corner is going to Goodwill."

"You get it from me. I think I still have the dress I wore on my first date!"

Eleni laughed.

"Well, now you'll have more room to store all your stuff," Nicole said.

"I'd much rather have you living at home. Why do you want to move downtown all by yourself? At least here you come home to a nice dinner after work and have some company. I don't like the idea of your being all alone with no one to take care of you."

"That's the problem. You took care of us all so well I don't know even know how to sew on a button! You've done everything for me." She smiled as she sat down on the bed next to her mother and put her arm around her shoulder. "It's time for me to be on my own, Mom, as tempting as it is to stay here and be treated like a queen."

"What's wrong with that? Plenty of girls stay home until they get married."

"Who says I'll get married anyway?"

"What are you talking about? Of course you'll get married. Everybody gets married. Why wouldn't you want to get married?"

"I didn't say I don't want to get married, but who knows if I will. Maybe no one will come along."

"Don't be ridiculous. You find someone you want to marry and then you go after him. Don't be a dummy. You have to be bold, even do a little chasing."

"Don't you think things should happen a little more naturally than choosing your target and zeroing in for the kill?"

"Let me tell you something," Eleni said, "when Basil and Connie Patrides were dating thirty years ago, her mother went to his parents after six months and demanded to know what their son's intentions were, because she didn't want her daughter's reputation hurt. A month later they were married. And John Sarnas' mother told him she'd drink poison if he didn't marry Mary. I don't have to tell you how long they've been married."

"I would have handed her the glass. He must have been crazy to believe that."

"People listened to their parents in those days. But I'm with you. He should have told the old bat to go ahead and drink it," Eleni laughed.

"If I recall correctly, you didn't orchestrate Dad's proposal," Nicole said.

Eleni smiled at her daughter. "You're right, but I had a crush on him from the time I was sixteen. Every Sunday my girlfriends and I sat in the front row of the balcony at church. Your father always sat on the other side and boy, it was the highlight of my week, seeing him for that hour and a half." She laughed, a faraway look on her face as she visualized the young Nick sitting across from her.

Nicole knew the rest of the story, but she never tired of hearing her mother tell it. "Go on, what happened next?"

"Oh, you know the rest. He finally noticed me, this 'older' man. Five years is a big difference when you're sixteen and he's twenty-one. Anyway, I was twenty at the time and working at Hutzler's in the perfume department. One day he just materialized at my counter and I thought I would faint. He must have tested thirty different fragrances. Told me it had to be just the right one because it was for someone very special. I can tell you, I was crushed. Imagine helping the man you've always been crazy about choose perfume for another woman. I wanted to break the bottle he finally chose!"

"You're coming to my favorite part," Nicole said.

"Mine too. The bottle arrived the next day with a note asking me to dinner, and the rest, as they say, is history. Your father has always been a man who knows what he wants and isn't afraid to go after it."

Nicole laughed. "That's an understatement. He proposed after your first date!"

Eleni blushed at the memory. "And I said yes."

"And you call me impulsive," said Nicole.

"He wasn't exactly a stranger. You have to remember, our families had been friends for years," Eleni reminded her.

Things had been so different then, Nicole thought. So many times she and Theodora sat in the kitchen with their mother and Aunt Eve and listened to the stories of their growing up. Their socializing had been only with other families in the community. It was like one large, extended family. Something was always going on through the church. There were dances every other month, elegant affairs in hotel ballrooms with live bands. There were clubs for every segment of the church community. AHEPA for the men, Philoptochos for the ladies, and for the young men and women, the Sons of Pericles, the Daughters of Penelope and GOYA, the Greek Orthodox Youth of America. These clubs hosted annual national conventions, where groups from surrounding states gathered for weekends of parties and fellowship. Their mother told them that as a young girl she had more evening gowns than everyday dresses.

Nicole had listened to the endless stories and envied parts of that bygone era. Everyone knew where he or she fit, where they belonged. They were so innocent. At some point in time they had all dated each other until settling down in marriage. Nicole was always amazed when she heard one of them say, "Oh yes, I used to go out

with him, and he also used to date Betty Landros and Penny Constant.” None of them married outside of the community, and they still socialized almost exclusively with one another.

Nicole's generation had broken the mold. As her parents' circle grew more affluent, they left their small enclaves in the city and spread out into the suburbs. They exchanged their Sunday mornings in church for a game of golf or relaxing at home. They stayed connected with each other, but their children had meshed into the outside world. Now their parents wondered why these children didn't have the same bonds with one other.

"Mom, I almost forgot, today's Wednesday," Nicole said. "What's the latest news?"

Every Wednesday her mother, her Aunt Eve, and four of their closest friends—Georgia, Tessie, Christina, and Froso—met for lunch. These sessions lasted well into the afternoon and were guaranteed to provide all of the most up-to-date news on everything going on in the community. These were women who had known each other all their lives. They knew everything about each other—where the family skeletons were and the tragedies each family had survived. They had shared joy and congratulations at each other's weddings, births and christenings, and had grieved with each other at funerals. They considered few details of their lives too intimate to share.

Eleni smiled, "We do notice everything, don't we?"

"Notice? You give substance to the expression ‘Telephone, telegram, tell a Greek!’”

They were both laughing now.

They heard the front door open and Nick call out, "I'm home."

"We're upstairs," Eleni answered.

He came into the room. "Hi, sweetie, how are you?" Eleni said to him as he leaned over to kiss her, then Nicole.

"Great. How're my favorite girls?"

"Good," they answered in unison.

"Nicole, are you staying for dinner?" he asked.

"Sorry Dad, I've gotta run. I've still got tons to do at home." They walked downstairs together and Nicole left.

Eleni turned to Nick. "How about a drink before dinner?"

"Sure. I'm going upstairs to change." He stopped before he was out of the room. "Why don't we eat by the pool and have a nice romantic evening?" he said before climbing the stairs.

As Eleni started cooking she thought how far they had come. There had been some tough times through the years, times when she wondered if they'd make it. But they had, and learned in the process to let go and be thankful for the good times. This was a good time and she was grateful.

CHAPTER 9

Stewart paced the floor waiting for Theodora to get home. She was barely through the door when he began an angry assault.

“What the hell were you doing at the office this late?” His face was crimson.

Theodora was shocked. “What’s wrong with you? You know we’re getting ready for the big fundraiser next week. I told you I’d be working late.”

“It’s ten o’clock. No wife of mine is going to be out gallivanting until all hours of the night.”

She tried to calm him. “Stewart, we worked ‘til nine. You know my drive takes an hour. You work late all the time. I don’t understand why you’re so upset.” She fought back tears.

He relaxed slightly. “I’m sorry Theodora, it’s just that I worry about you on those lonely roads in the dark. Anything could happen. Why do you have to work somewhere with such a long commute? If you worked around here we could be together more.”

Since returning from their honeymoon, the television had been a better companion than he. Now all of a sudden he wanted to be together? She took a deep breath.

“I love my job. I believe in Peter, and what I’m doing is important.”

“Peter. If I didn’t know better I’d say something was going on between you two,” he said spitefully.

“Stewart! How can you say that to me? My God, we just got married.”

“What do you expect me to think? You’re at the office all kinds of crazy hours, you talk about how wonderful he is all the time. Any man would be suspicious. I won’t be made into a laughing stock. If you’re too selfish to put your husband before your career, there’s nothing I can say. Some wife you’re turning out to be.” He stormed out of the room.

Theodora dropped her briefcase on the hall table and ran into the bathroom. She shut the door and sank to the floor in tears. How could he speak to her like that? He’d never even raised his voice to her before. His cruel words reverberated in her mind and she felt sick. As the sobs racked her body her anger was replaced with a sudden insecurity. Was she being selfish? She thought he was proud that she had a career. They had never argued about it before. She thought about her own parents. Were they happy because of their traditional roles? Would her father have minded if Eleni had a job that kept her from home? But things were different today. Men didn’t expect their wives to sit at home waiting for them. Or did they? Maybe marriage hadn’t changed all that much and she was expecting too much from Stewart.

A light tap on the door made her look up.

“Sweetheart, open up. I’m sorry. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Go away,” Theodora whispered.

“Theo, please. Come out. I feel terrible. Please, please talk to me.”

She examined her face in the mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen and her skin blotchy. She wet a towel and pressed it to her face.

“Give me a minute.”

When she finally opened the door Stewart pulled her into his arms. She tried to move away from him but he held her tightly.

“Baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean what I said. Please forgive me. I just get so damn worried about you. You’re so beautiful and trusting and men can be such bastards. My imagination got carried away. I can’t bear the thought of you with anyone else.”

She was still upset. “I’m not with anyone else. What do you want me to do, stay away from all men?”

“Of course not. Let’s just forget it, okay? I promise, I’ll never complain about it again. It’s stupid of me, but Bob’s wife just left him for another guy and I went nuts thinking about what I would do if that were you. Then when you were so late, my thoughts got away from me. I just love you so much, I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Theodora was mildly appeased. She forced herself to relax in his embrace and was relieved the tension was gone. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing him either. Maybe she could try to get home earlier on the nights he wasn’t working late. She would make an extra effort to cook his favorite meal and make him feel special.

CHAPTER 10

The suite of the Annapolis Marriott was filled to capacity by 6:15. Peter Demetrios was scheduled to arrive at 6:30 with his wife Pat and have a quick half hour to circulate at the small reception before going downstairs to the Grand Ballroom, where the fundraising dinner for two hundred and fifty was being held. A dozen waiters dressed in black tuxedos circulated throughout the room. The talk and laughter grew louder as the crowd enjoyed the good food and drink and looked forward to the arrival of the candidate. Theodora worked the room with Michael, making introductions and thanking people for their support. She was talking with the president of Maryland United Bank when she saw her brother and sister come in. Nicole looked magnificent in a strapless, black crepe dress that clung to her body and stopped just above the knee. Her lustrous black hair was piled on top of her head and the minimal make-up she had expertly applied emphasized her high cheekbones and smoky almond-shaped eyes. Paul's arm was at her back, gently guiding her as they entered. Nicole scanned the room and smiled when her eyes found Theodora.

"Please excuse us," Theodora said to the group. "Someone's just come in I'd like to introduce to Michael. Thanks for coming tonight." She smiled graciously.

"Come on, it's time for you to meet some of the family. My brother and sister just arrived," she said to Michael and led him over to them.

"Finally! I've been looking for you since this started," Theodora said and hugged them both.

"This is some bash," Paul said looking around. "As usual, the two most gorgeous women in the room are my sisters."

"I'll second that," Michael said, captivated by Nicole's presence.

"Michael, this is my sister Nicole and my brother Paul," Theodora made the introductions.

"Michael worked with Peter at his law firm and came on as his campaign manager," Theodora said.

"This must be pretty exciting for you, Michael." Nicole took in his good looks. He couldn't remember when a woman had made such a powerful impression on him. It was difficult for him to take his eyes off her.

"It's been great," Michael said to her. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It's crazy busy though. I really missed your sister when she went on her honeymoon, and I have reams of paper in my office to prove it."

"Theo is definitely the one to count on when you're up against it," Nicole said.

Theodora's unfailing loyalty had always been a source of comfort to Nicole. Her compassionate nature made her a perfect confidante, and Nicole depended on her for emotional support. She was the one person Nicole trusted completely and felt unconditionally accepted by. There were many occasions over the years when Nicole would have been in hot water with her parents if not for Theodora's help, and more than once, her level headedness had stopped Nicole from one sort of foolishness or another.

There was a buzz of activity at the door to the suite, and the four of them looked over to see that Peter Demetrios was at last making his entrance. In a moment he vanished in the crush. It was clear from the expression on his face that he loved the limelight. Michael reluctantly excused himself and strode over to his boss' side.

"Well, what do you think of him?" Theodora asked her sister.

"I haven't even met him yet," Nicole said.

Theodora looked puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"The man just walked in the door and you expect an opinion from me?"

"I'm talking about Michael. How did you like him?"

"Oh, he seems nice enough," she said distractedly.

Theodora hid her disappointment. She had seen Michael's face when he met Nicole, and there was no mistaking the attraction. She was sure once Nicole spent some time talking to him that she would return his interest. It suddenly occurred to her that Stewart hadn't come in with them.

"Where's Stewart?" she asked her sister.

"He called about a half hour before I was leaving and said he had some work to finish up, so he'd get here on his own rather than make us late."

Nicole didn't know what could be so important that he would let it interfere with Theodora's big night, and she could see from her sister's expression that she wondered the same thing.

"Theo, is everything all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, everything's okay, he's just working a lot lately. I never realized what a slave-driver Dad is."

"I didn't have any trouble getting here on time." As soon as the words were out of her mouth Nicole regretted them. "I guess this project is taking more of his time than he figured," she tried to recover.

"Don't let it upset you, he'll be here soon. Why don't you take us over and introduce us to the big guy?" Paul said to Theodora.

But Michael, along with Peter and his wife, was already moving in their direction. The trio was continually stopped along the way as Peter paused to shake an outstretched hand and hug an enthusiastic supporter. He lit up the room with that star power so hard to define. His handsome face glowed with pleasure and his wide grin bedazzled. He loved people, he loved the crowds, and it showed. As they finally made their way over, Peter put his arm around Theodora's shoulder and gave her a friendly squeeze.

"You've done a wonderful job," he said with appreciation. "I don't know what we would do without you."

"I've loved every minute of it," she smiled. "Peter, this is my brother Paul and my sister Nicole," and turning to them, added, "and this is Peter's wife Pat."

Nicole was overwhelmed by the electric presence of candidate Demetrios. He was larger than life with his broad shoulders and long lean body. His dark eyes seemed to penetrate to her very soul. It was impossible to look away.

"I can certainly see the family resemblance," Peter said. "It's a pleasure to meet you both." His eyes rested a few seconds longer on Nicole.

"Hello," was the simple response from his wife. She was a tall and slender blonde, obviously once a classic beauty but now somewhat faded and quiet. It was plain to see she was uncomfortable in this large gathering with so much attention lavished upon her. The months of campaigning had been difficult for her, and she had refrained from attending as many political functions as his office would have liked.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your support here tonight," Peter said to the group.

"It feels good to be able to back someone in whose values you believe," said Nicole. "And judging from most of the people I've talked to around town, this is going to be a landslide victory."

Peter laughed. "I like your attitude. Have you given any thought to volunteering? We can always use that kind of enthusiasm, can't we Michael?"

"Say the word. I'll put you right to work," Michael agreed.

"Sounds exciting." Nicole turned to Pat. "I imagine the next two months will be a whirlwind for you."

"I'll be happy when November comes and we can try to settle back into some sort of normal routine again," she said, looking at her husband.

Nicole felt a sudden pang of sympathy for her. It was painfully obvious that while Peter loved the attention and interaction with people, Pat only endured it for his sake. Nicole had the urge to rescue her, to somehow make her feel more comfortable and enjoy the evening.

"Yes, that seems to be a very common feeling among the families of those running for office. It's always a little frightening to be in uncharted waters," Nicole said.

Pat stiffened. "I don't believe it's something you can comment on until you've experienced it."

Nicole was taken aback at the slight. "I'm sure you're right. It was foolish of me to think I might understand how it feels."

Peter looked at Nicole with interest. He was embarrassed by his wife's insult, but surprised by the poise and grace of this beautiful young woman.

"Theodora always raves about her family, and now I can see why. I hope we'll have the chance to chat again, but right now we have to circulate," Peter said, his attention drawn back to the purpose of this night. They walked away together and Nicole saw Pat's hand encircle Peter's waist, drawing him closer to her.

"I'm going to do a little wandering too," Paul said to his sisters.

"Checking out the available females?" Nicole asked.

"Can you suggest something more interesting?"

"Go to it, Romeo. We'll watch from the sidelines," Theodora smiled.

"You two are never on the sidelines," he said as he walked away.

"I'm going to get another drink. Do you want one?" Nicole asked her sister.

"No, I'm still working on this one. Well, what do you know? My errant husband just walked in. Excuse me while I see what the big emergency was."

Nicole walked to the bar, nodding hello to familiar faces along the way.

"A gin and tonic please," she said to the bartender. She looked around the room. Theodora and Stewart were standing off to themselves deep in conversation. She knew things weren't right, and it bothered her that Theodora wasn't being honest with her. They never kept things from each other, but Nicole felt her slipping away. She turned away and her gaze fell upon Peter Demetrios as he moved around the room greeting people. His intoxicating charm and charisma oozed from every pore.

Many of the guests had moved outside where small round tables had been set on a terrace overlooking the Annapolis harbor. The sun was beginning to set and a cool refreshing breeze blew. Nicole made her way through the crowd and leaned on the balcony. She took a deep breath of the night air and exhaled slowly, enjoying the feel of the light wind on her face. Below her, in the harbor, boats large and small were docked, their lights shining. The sounds of laughter, muted conversations and halyards clanging against masts filled the darkness and she envied the intimacy and calm that seemed to emanate from below.

"There you are," Paul said to Nicole. "We've been looking for you." She turned reluctantly from the railing and her brother took her hand. "May I escort you to dinner?"

As they entered the ballroom, Aunt Eve and Uncle Dimitri approached them.

"Well, don't you look beautiful tonight," Dimitri gave Nicole one of his bear hugs.

"You do look lovely, my dear," said her Aunt Eve. She leaned over to kiss Nicole and gave Paul a peck on the cheek. "It looks like everyone is starting to go downstairs."

"Well, what are we waiting for? I'm starving, let's go eat before there isn't anything left!" Dimitri said.

They followed the throng down wide escalators leading to the Grand Ballroom. The entrance was surrounded by hundreds of white and blue balloons. Men in dinner jackets and women in glittering evening dresses quickly filled the room. Theodora waved Nicole over to their table, and Nicole took a seat next to Michael.

"Can I get you another drink?" Michael asked her.

"I'd better eat something first. One more and you'll have to carry me out of here."

"Anyone else?" Michael asked.

"Vodka and tonic," Stewart answered.

Michael returned with the drinks and sat down.

"Theo tells me you just moved to Federal Hill. How do you like it?"

"I love it. It's terrific being so close to the harbor."

"That's what I like about Annapolis. I spend most of my weekends on my boat."

"That sounds great." She thought back to the scene she had just viewed from the balcony. "Something so relaxing about having all that water around you."

"You should come down one weekend." He smiled at her.

"Maybe I will."

The voice amplified by the microphone drowned out conversation at the table. The candidate was walking towards the dais. Peter looked around the room smiling at those he passed on the way to the front of the ballroom. His stride was quick and

purposeful. Nicole was transfixed, her eyes following his every move. He took the microphone and looked out at the crowd.

"Good evening friends, thank you so much for coming tonight and giving me your support..." He spoke passionately for the next twenty minutes, never looking at his notes, and when he was finished the room exploded into applause. As he descended the platform, he was surrounded, and the band moved into high gear.

"Dance?" Michael asked Nicole.

"Love to."

He put his arm around her waist and led her to the dance floor.

"They make a nice-looking couple," Paul remarked to Theodora.

"Don't they," Theodora answered, looking pleased.

She might have been dancing with Michael but Peter was never long out of Nichole's sight, her attention involuntarily and continually drawn to his whereabouts. The strength of her attraction to him was both unexpected and alarming. Her reflections were cut short when her father tapped Michael on the shoulder to cut in. As they whirled around the floor, familiar faces smiled at him. Her father always attracted attention. She idolized him and was a little in awe of him. He was the yardstick against which she measured all men, and they always came up short. He made her feel like the most important person in the world and she knew his love for her knew no bounds. Who would she ever find to love her that way? She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, relaxing in his protective embrace. When the song ended, she straightened her shoulders and looked up to see Peter standing there.

"Nick, I want to thank you for coming tonight and bringing your family."

Nick grasped his hand in a firm handshake.

"It's my pleasure, Peter. Have you met my daughter, Nicole?"

"Yes, Theodora introduced us earlier. You must be very proud." He'd been watching her from a distance all evening.

"You're right, I am."

"I'm very grateful for all your support. You've opened a lot of doors for me and I won't forget it. I'm looking forward to speaking at the Home Builders Association dinner next week."

"So are we."

Nicole stood between the two men, thinking how alike they were. Both exuded that distinct attitude of complete self-assurance unique to powerful men.

"Excuse me Peter, there's someone I'd like you to meet," Senator Parker interrupted.

Peter turned to Nick and Nicole.

"Thanks again." And he was gone.

Soon it was midnight and the crowd had thinned significantly. Theodora finally relaxed, pleased that the evening had been a success.

As Theo and Nicole began to gather their purses and wraps, Peter came over to them. "I was just telling Michael what a sensational evening this was, Theo. You did a great job."

"Thanks, Peter. You must be exhausted. The only time I saw you sitting was during dinner."

"I could say the same for everyone at your table. I think your group was on the dance floor all night." He smiled at them both, his eyes lingering on Nicole as Pat approached the three of them.

"Can we go now?" she interrupted peevishly, ignoring Nicole and Theodora.

The sympathy Nicole felt for her earlier completely vanished.

"I should be going too, I didn't realize it was so late." Nicole turned on her heel and walked away.