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## Exclusive FREE chapter from **The Amulet**

On her first day off work, Katie visited the village of Asimi to explore. The stunning beauty of its picturesque paths and old, often decrepit buildings enchanted her. When she passed a small rent-a-scooter business near the main road, she decided to rent one and explore further. Visiting a series of quaint little villages she got as far as the island capital, Apollonia, a marvel of whitewashed yards and quaint shops. After her lunch at a taverna in the generous shade of a dense vine trellis, she walked around a little more, then got on the scooter to head back to Asimi.

She was riding along the highway, marvelling at the ragged beauty of the sparkling coastline when she heard a loud noise, then the scooter started to veer along the road. She stopped at the roadside, frustrated to see her back tyre had been punctured. The culprit, a rusty old nail, was still lodged in the tyre. Panicking, she looked at the deserted road. It was late afternoon, but the sun shone brightly, scorching the world around her with fervour.

Katie laid the scooter down on the dusty roadside, beads of sweat dripping heavy from her brow. With a little effort, she

managed to dislodge the nail from the tyre, and now, she was desperate. *What am I going to do?* Her eyes lit up when she remembered the paperwork the nice young man had given her at the shop. *I can call for assistance!* According to the last road sign she'd passed, Asimi was less than five kilometres away. She took the document and her mobile out of her backpack, but the smile of hope soon froze on her lips. *Damn. No signal.*

'Aaaargh!' Katie stood upright and pulled the scooter up holding it by its handlebars. She ran a hand through her hair, the rushing wind sending the long strands to twist and whip against her fluttering eyelids. Her eyes were gritty from the dusty ride and salty air, and that didn't help her spirits.

Grunting, she began to walk, holding the scooter, rolling it alongside her. It was a strenuous task, seeing that the tyre was now totally flat. She started to worry that moving the scooter could ruin the tyre totally but what was the alternative? Who knew when another vehicle would drive past? And even then, would they stop to help her? It was best to keep moving and to get to Asimi before the sun began to set. She had no idea how long it would take at such a slow pace but it was worth a try. A minute later she took the mobile out again to check for a signal, but to no avail. 'Aaaagh!' she shouted again, her lips twisting. 'Damn it! On my first day off!' She raised an indignant fist towards the sky. 'That's not fair. I need help and I need it *now!*'

'Hi!' came a jovial voice from the other side of the road, a mere moment later.

'What the—' mumbled Katie. The fields across the road were at a lower level and someone had just appeared to stand on the roadside, waving both hands at her. Katie squinted her eyes against the glaring sunlight. *Who is that?* It looked like a young man. He'd just repeated his earlier greeting and was now crossing the empty road, rushing towards her. She couldn't make out a face or even a clear frame through the glare and that made her grow numb as he came closer. *Please don't be a weirdo!* She gripped the handlebars, her knuckles turning white, but then they relaxed as she raised a hand to return the greeting.

‘Hi, sorry, I didn’t recognize you earlier!’ she said with an open smile when the man stopped before her. It was the handsome guest from the hotel. She ran an urgent hand through her hair, her lips twitching. *I must look horrid in this darn beat!*

‘What’s happened? Do you need help?’ Aggelos reached out with both hands and took the handlebars from her. Katie took a step back, admiring his strong naked shoulders. He wore a sleeveless top and khaki shorts, his fine hair dancing in the breeze, lips sweet like honey, eyes sparkling like diamonds. She stood there for a few moments, speechless, just thinking how weightless the scooter must feel in his strong hands.

Aggelos gave a frown. ‘Are you okay, Katie?’

Katie gave an awkward smile. ‘Yes, I—’ Her lower lip twitched, eyes narrowing. ‘How do you know my name?’

He shrugged. ‘You told me yesterday.’

‘No, I didn’t!’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘If I told you my name, then how come I don’t know yours?’

‘Sorry.’ He offered his hand. ‘It’s Aggelos. Pleased to meet you.’

‘Aggelos?’ She chuckled, amused, although she still was quite sure she’d never mentioned her name to him. But she decided to let it go. After all, he was a guest at the hotel. Perhaps he’d overheard her name from someone else there. It would be an honest mistake if he had the impression she’d been the one to tell him.

‘Yes. Why is that funny?’

‘You know . . . because Aggelos means “Angel” and you turned up just as I needed help.’ She gave a huge grin, her eyes twinkling.

‘I see.’ Aggelos scratched his jaw and rested his eyes, those sparkling lagoons of brilliant blue, upon her, causing her to stare helplessly back at him for a few more moments. The effect he had on her was indescribable. She felt dizzy looking into his eyes so she pointed at the flat tyre to take the attention away from herself.

‘See? Totally flat. So glad you came. I tried my mobile but there’s no signal. Do you have one we could try, by any chance?’

Aggelos shook his head. ‘Sorry. I don’t own a mobile.’

Katie’s eyes turned huge. ‘What? How is that even possible?’

‘I don’t like them. Simple as that.’

‘But what do you do if you want to communicate?’

‘I use a landline, I guess.’

‘And what about emergencies when you’re out and about?’

‘I count on the kindness of strangers.’ He gave a chortle. ‘You have a mobile. It didn’t do much for you today, did it? But trust a kind stranger to always turn up.’

Katie let out a giggle and pointed at the scooter. ‘So, kind stranger, any ideas about how I could get this thing back to Asimi?’

‘Wish I could fix it for you but I don’t know how. But maybe we could stop a car and get some help or a free ride.’

‘That would be nice, except . . .’ she stretched out both hands ‘there’s no one about.’

Aggelos gave a lopsided smile and laid the scooter down on the dirt. ‘Oh, ye of little faith . . .’

Katie was about to give him a cute comeback about faith being one thing but the twilight zone another when she heard a horn-honking sound. She turned around and saw an open truck coming to stop in front of them. She turned again to face Aggelos. He had an arm up, signalling the man behind the wheel to move a little closer. The truck had come out of nowhere. She hadn’t heard it coming. Speechless, Katie watched as a burly man in a baseball cap jumped out of the vehicle and strode towards them.

‘Hi, love! What seems to be the problem?’ he asked, a benevolent smile spread across his face.

‘Oh hi! Thank you for stopping. It’s the back tyre. It has a puncture.’

The man dashed to his truck and, moments later, returned with a spray can to apply some kind of foam in the tyre.

‘Thank you so much,’ said Katie, then turning to Aggelos, ‘I guess this is my lucky day!’

Aggelos gave a chuckle but said nothing. At the same time, the man stood back on his feet.

‘This should fix it temporarily,’ he said as he replaced the cap on the spray can. ‘And it was nothing. Glad to help! Just ride the scooter slowly and carefully now. Where you off to?’

‘Only Asimi,’ said Katie, ‘I’m returning it to the rent shop there.’

‘You’ll be all right then. Well, goodbye!’ He gave a bright smile and hurried back to his truck to the sound of Katie’s heartfelt thanks.

As soon as he left, Aggelos pulled the scooter up in one swift, effortless move, and Katie jumped on it, her face bright with relief. ‘He was a helpful guy, albeit a little strange, don’t you think? He never said a word to you!’

Aggelos sniggered and looked away. ‘I don’t mind. I stopped him for *you*, after all.’

Katie shrugged. ‘So, what are you waiting for? Hop on! I’ll give you a ride.’

Aggelos shook his head but Katie beckoned frantically. ‘Come on, it’s the least I can do to thank you.’

‘But I don’t need a ride. Besides, we don’t know how safe the tyre is with the quick fix. You’d better ride alone.’

Katie raised her brows. ‘Are you sure?’ What he said made sense but she’d still risk it if he’d only change his mind. He was so delicious. The very idea of him riding the scooter with her, holding her by the waist, made her reel with the sheer desire to be near him.

‘Yes, I’m sure.’ He gave a dreamy smile. ‘I was hiking through the fields when I saw you. Now I can pick up from where I left off.’

‘You’re hiking?’ Katie’s brow furrowed when she dropped her gaze to his feet. ‘In sandals?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, deadpan. Katie put up a hand, pretending to rub her nose but what she really did was try to suppress her amusement. He was adorable and she felt more drawn to him by the second. *He doesn’t own a mobile and bikes in sandals through open fields?* His intricate quirks made her head spin, but even so, she found it all contributed to his charm.

‘So, off you go. I’ll see you later,’ he said as he came to stand by the scooter, putting a light hand on her shoulder. A blast of warm heat bloomed inside Katie’s chest, then coursed down her spine.

Reluctantly, Katie waved and left him behind. The scooter behaved well. As she rode away, she checked her mirror, over and over again, marvelling at his distant form. In the sweet, afternoon sunlight that bounced off the tarmac causing it to glisten, he seemed like a mirage of awesomeness. Already, she was daydreaming about their next encounter. *How lucky he should arrive when I needed him the most! A proper 'Aggelos', indeed!*

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When Katie arrived back at Hotel Asimi the sun was slowly gliding towards the horizon against a pastel-coloured sky. She was strolling past the hotel's thatched umbrellas, making her way towards the entrance when her jaw dropped. Sitting on the bottom step was Aggelos. He was holding an orange juice carton, drinking through a straw thirstily.

Katie put her hands on her hips and gawped when she stopped to stand before him. 'Aggelos! How did you do that?'

Aggelos beamed at her and pulled a long tendril of silky hair back from his brow. 'How did I do what?'

'How did you get here before me? It was a good five kilometres out of Asimi where I left you. Did you hitch a ride?'

Aggelos pointed at his feet. 'Yes. On those babies.' He chuckled and winked. 'I'm a fast walker.'

'But . . .' She scratched her head. 'You can't be faster than the scooter I was on, surely.'

Aggelos stood and scrunched up the carton, then hopped up the few steps to the bin. He tossed it inside and shrugged when he returned to her at the bottom of the steps. 'Nah, you've been gone ages. I bet you wandered around the village and lost track of time.'

'I did buy an ice cream . . . and lingered at the village square for a while,' she mumbled.

Aggelos tilted his head. 'See? Not Superman, after all.'

'I never said you're Superman. But, I *have* noticed you tend to save the day.'

Aggelos put up a finger. 'Now, that's a compliment and a half! Thank you, Katie.'

Katie heard the sound of her name on his lips again and it made her knees weak. Earlier, when he was drinking his refreshment she couldn't take her eyes off his pouted lips around the straw. She'd tried to imagine there and then how it would feel to kiss them. Now, as he gazed at her, his wide smile exposing perfect pearly whites, she shifted her weight from foot to foot, wondering if she had it in her to ask him out. She decided it was too soon. After all, she'd never done this sort of thing before. As she contemplated all that, Aggelos was telling her about the beauty of the places he'd explored that day. She kept nodding and making the odd comment and, all the while, marvelled at his perfectly sculpted features.

###

Matina came out of her office and walked up to Spyros, who was manning the reception desk at the time. It was getting up to six o'clock and he'd just booked in a large group of tourists.

'Are you done for the day, Spyros?'

'Just booked in the last group and I'm wrapping things up. I tell you, I'm ready for a shower. Want to get to bed early tonight. Going off fishing early tomorrow.'

Matina nodded happily. 'Before you go, Spyros, can you help me with something, please? The printer's playing up again. Where is the phone number for the technician who fixed it last time?'

Spyros opened the telephone book to look for the number. Absentmindedly, Matina turned around and looked at the front entrance. Her eyes lit up to recognize Katie standing at the bottom of the stairs outside, but the sight intrigued her as well.

She took a few steps closer to the entrance and tilted her head, watching her employee. Moments later, she turned on her heels and approached the desk again. Spyros handed her a scrap of paper where he'd jotted down the number she wanted.

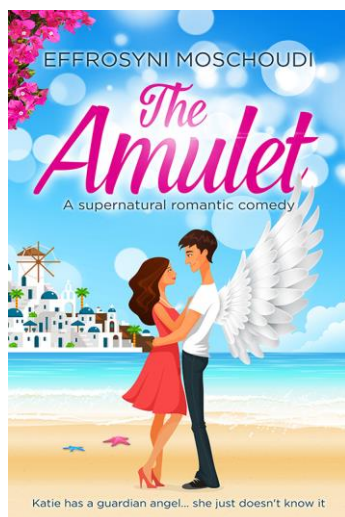
Matina thanked him, then shook her head. 'I think our new employee is a bit loopy.' She pointed to the exit with her eyes.

Spyros craned his neck and saw Katie standing outside but nothing else that seemed strange. 'Why do you say that? It's her day off. She's entitled to stand outside if she wants to.'

‘She’s not just standing there, Spyros! She’s mumbling to herself. Look! She’s talking to the rosemary bushes! She nods at them and everything! You don’t think she’s one of those funny hippy types, do you?’

Spyros chuckled. ‘I hear it’s beneficial to talk to plants. Couldn’t hurt them, you know.’

‘Really, Spyros! Sometimes I think you’d give anybody the benefit of the doubt!’



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