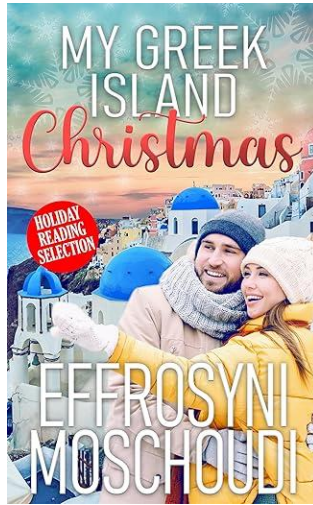




My Greek Island Christmas

A clean holiday romance

by

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Chapter 1

Cathy had never been to Santorini before. And now, sitting in the plane that was taking her there, she gave an audible gasp as it came into view through the window.

She had seen images of Santorini many times in glossy magazines, but it had never looked anywhere near as breathtaking as it looked right now.

The plane was about to land and was now flying low over the capital, Fira. It was the late afternoon and people seemed to wander all around the town's intricate web of tiny whitewashed lanes. Cathy marveled at how quaint it looked.

This wasn't the height of summer, so there were no swarms of tourists on the island, but it looked busy enough with the people she could see, probably, most of them locals. After all, it was the holiday season, and they had to do their shopping. Christmas was just a week away.

Sky-blue domes on big churches and private family chapels were dotted everywhere across the glimmering canvas of whitewashed buildings and lanes that spread out below.

As the plane left the capital behind, large expanses of cultivated fields with dark volcanic soil came into view. Small villages were strewn here and there, some built on level spaces inland, others on beaches of dark sand, and others holding on for dear life at the edge of a tall precipice or nestled against a rugged mountain.

Cathy was already dreaming of her first day off on this majestic island. It was naughty, she knew, since she was not visiting for pleasure, but for work. But this was Santorini. And she was so excited! She couldn't wait to admire the sea view from the precipitous cliffs of the Caldera in Fira, and why not? Perhaps, she could take a day off to explore further, maybe visit one of the island's many wineries and taste some of its fine, worldwide-famous wines.

“Mom! This is amazing!” Her son’s chirpy voice brought her with a start back to the present time.

Leo, who was sitting at the window, turned to look at her, his blue eyes huge with wonder. Whenever Cathy looked into them, it felt like she gazed into her very soul.

Has it been nine years already? They had been the best of her life with Leo in it.

She smiled at him, and, before she could speak, he beat her to it. “Thank you, Mom! For choosing this job! Christmas at a farm. Wow! I can’t wait. Will there be a lot of different animals, you think? Did the man say?”

Cathy giggled, then gave his cheek a little squeeze. Leo was adorable when he was excited, turning into a chatterbox. It didn’t happen often when they were in public. He was usually very timid with strangers and generally shy. It made sense to her, though, because of the way he had been raised – without a father, and in a tiny family circle. The two of them had never socialized much.

Cathy had to keep working hard as a single mom to make ends meet. That didn’t leave much time for fun and socializing for her and Leo. She hoped this job-slash-vacation in Santorini would help him get out of his shell, somewhat.

“Mom? Do you know?” he prompted, and she realized she had been gazing into his eyes, lost in her thoughts. She chased the reverie away by shaking her head. “Sorry, uh, darling. Yes! The nice man mentioned chickens and sheep. I don’t know about any other animals. He didn’t exactly give me a list, sorry. But we’ll soon find out, won’t we?”

Leo gave a toothy grin, then added, “Do you suppose he has any exotic animals at all?”

She goggled her eyes at him and snickered. Leo was good at making her feel like a child herself. “What? Like, elephants?”

“No, Mom! Not like elephants!” He giggled. “But, maybe, some parrots? You know, like those that talk?”

She screwed up her face. "Parrots? I don't think a Greek farm would have any talking parrots. Sorry, pal. But maybe, in my next job. If I'm hired... *on a pirate ship?*" She jabbed his ribs with her elbow and gave an amused smile.

He raised his chin and his brows, faking disdain. "Ha-ha. Well, we'll see. You never know."

She cocked her eye at him. "You'll be lucky if you see a canary. Just saying. But, yeah. We'll soon find out!"

They laughed, and he said a canary would do him just fine, just as the pilot announced they're getting ready for their descent into Santorini airport.

Chapter 2

"Come, Leo! This way!" Cathy urged, pointing to the conveyor belt at the far end of the arrivals hall. A voice on the speaker had just advised them their luggage was coming out over there.

Parting with her luggage always made Cathy nervous. She had lost it once, during a three-day break with her parents to Rome when she was a teen living in Athens.

When the airline informed her that her bag had been found in Baltimore she had found it entertaining that it had gone home to the US. But wearing the same clothes in Rome for three days before reuniting with her bag in Athens hadn't been so much fun.

Once again, she dreaded her luggage not turning up as she tried to find a spot before the conveyor belt amidst the crowd. They'd traveled on a full jet plane and everyone was clamoring to get a good spot.

A buzzer sounded and all kinds of luggage began to come out onto the conveyor belt. Cathy thanked herself for marking their suitcases with big red ribbons so she could identify them from afar.

"Here's mine!" shouted Leo, and she spotted it right away. The red ribbon on his green-camouflage-patterned suitcase confirmed it was his, and she stepped forward catching it with one swift move as it approached.

Both of them had packed light. They were only staying for about ten days, after all, having arranged to leave shortly after Christmas Day. They could have packed everything in one large suitcase, but Leo had insisted on carrying his own.

Her luggage hadn't come out yet. Passengers kept stepping in front of her to take their own from the belt, and as the crowd began to thin down she started fearing the worst.

"Don't worry, Mom! It'll come any moment now," Leo said, taking her hand. "See? There are other people around. They're still waiting for their luggage, too."

She looked at him and melted. That adorable face. That even more adorable caring heart of his. "Yes, darling. You are so right. Of course..."

"There, Mom! There it is!" he said, pointing, and sure enough, her blue luggage was finally approaching on the conveyor belt. She recognized the big logo emblazoned on one side, but there was something amiss.

"The red ribbon. Where is it?" said Leo before she could voice her concern.

Cathy picked up the luggage and turned it this way and that. "It looks exactly like mine," she mumbled as she inspected it. "The same brand and size, the exact same color shade... Maybe, the red ribbon went loose, or, perhaps, it was caught somewhere in the belts and got cut off."

"Mom! Look! There's your luggage! That man's got it! Hurry! He's going away!"

"*Whaaat?*" Cathy sprang up straight like a coiled spring. Indeed, a man about her age—late twenties or so—was leaving the arrivals hall rolling her luggage behind him. There was no mistaking it. The red ribbon was there, its edges dancing at the side of it as the man hurried along,

swerving through the retreating crowd, his phone against his ear.

“Hurry, Leo!” she said in a panicky screech she hadn’t meant to emit. “Hurry and tell him before he goes!” I am right behind you with your luggage and his!”

Leo went off like a bolt of lightning. Grabbing both handles, she began to hurry as best she could while rolling two suitcases behind her.

She watched as Leo caught up with the man to rush before him. He spoke to him and raised his hand, causing the man to stop, but the latter never lowered the phone from his ear. He seemed vexed, terribly so, and she couldn’t tell if it was the phone call or her boy that had caused him to start shouting.

Leo stepped away from him but continued to speak and point to their bag that the man had taken. The din of the crowd was loud, and Cathy couldn’t hear what the two were saying. She was hurrying along still, closing the distance between them fast with every passing second, but her breath caught in her throat when she saw the man suddenly resume walking, hurrying toward the exit.

Leo rushed forward and got hold of the luggage handle. The man turned then, his face like thunder, and he finally lowered the phone from his ear.

Leo let go of the handle and pointed at the luggage again, but before he could speak, the man raised his hand and Cathy panicked.

“Hey!” she shouted as she finally came within earshot.

She knew she had, because the man turned and looked at her, and so did many others, who were passing her by or leaving through the wide double doors.

And then, strangely enough, even though she felt anxious of losing her luggage forever, let alone about the possibility that this man had raised his hand to strike her child, she couldn’t help noticing that he was... well... the most handsome man she’d ever seen.

His dark eyes magnetized her to come closer, even though at the time they burned with his vexation like two live pieces of amber.

"What do you mean, 'Hey?'" he said, snapping at her when she stopped before him.

That caused her to lose all admiration of his charm in a hurry and to resume the role of mama bear full on.

She gave a huff and put a hand on her waist. Panting still, she took a moment to recover, then said, "Were you about to hit my child? What's wrong with you?"

He huffed and said, "What? No! Of course, I wasn't. But I was going to give him an earful, that's for sure!" He pointed to Leo with a sharp finger, his expression alight with disdain, and added, "So, this is your kid? Congratulations! Nice manners you've taught him! He's been harassing me. He even pulled at my luggage!"

"Of course he pulled it, you moron! This is not your luggage. It's *my* luggage!"

"Your luggage? No, no, no! You're wrong, lady! This is *my* luggage! You must be crazy!"

Leo stepped forward and took the handle of the man's luggage from Cathy. He rolled it to him to say, "No! Here is yours! Ours has a red ribbon on it, see?" He pointed to their luggage that the stranger had taken.

"Yeah! Didn't you see it?" added Cathy as the man looked down to inspect the suitcase in his hand properly, for the first time.

Finally, his demeanor changed. His eyes softened, and then, he let go of the handle abruptly, as if it had just scorched him.

"Uh... Sorry!" it sufficed him to say with a nervous chuckle, stepping away from it so Cathy could take it.

As she did that, he raised his phone to his ear anew. He mumbled a quick, "I'll call you back," and finally put it away in his coat pocket.

Cathy shook her head, incredulous, as the stranger gazed at her and Leo mutely for a few seconds.

"For goodness sakes!" she finally said, flailing out her arms. "You could have put away that phone sooner to listen to my son as he tried to explain."

"I'm sorry, okay? These things happen. Anyway, enjoy your vacation." With that, he grabbed his suitcase by the handle, turned about face, and hurried through the double doors, leaving mother and son to shake their heads at each other, lost for words.

"What an awful, awful man!" said Cathy to her boy as she beckoned to him to follow her to the exit.

Soon, they were outside, on a busy pavement. Cathy took an invigorating breath of the crisp winter air and said to her son, "Some men can be real a-holes, Leo... Don't you ever turn into one, you hear?"

Leo chuckled. "He did say sorry, Mom. Twice. Even though you called him a moron."

She rolled her eyes. "Look at you! Only nine and already rushing to the defense of other men!"

They laughed and looked around, and she spotted a taxi at the curb a little further down.

Cathy urged Leo to hurry to it, and as they did, they heard the driver's door close. When the engine fired up they dreaded the worst. The taxi was leaving, and there were no others. The crowd from the flight had disappeared. They'd probably taken them all while that despicable man wasted Cathy and Leo's time. The thought made her fume.

Goodness knows how long they'd have to wait now for another taxi to turn up. It was the holiday season, surely, but not the height of summer. And, it was getting very cold out there now that the sun had begun to set.

"Hurry! Let's try and hail it as it approaches!" said Cathy. They stepped down from the curb as the taxi rolled closer. She put out a flailing arm, and the taxi slowed a little as it

approached, but then, she noticed a shadow at the passenger side lean towards the driver behind the windshield.

She couldn't see a face; the electric light streaming from overhead glared on the glass. With dread, she watched as the taxi began to accelerate.

Cathy realized the passenger had told the driver not to pick anyone else up. It was common practice in Greece for a taxi driver to pick up more customers on the way. Obviously, this courtesy would not be extended to them in this instance.

As the taxi passed them by, Cathy finally caught a glimpse of the passenger. His eyes were dancing in the yellow electric lights as he looked up ahead, his angelic face seemingly on fire. Had he chosen to leave them behind because he was in a hurry or was he just plain mean in general?

"What a moron..." said Cathy as she pointed to a bench so they would go sit. "At least, he's gone now. We won't have to stand here enjoying his fine company as we wait for a taxi."

"He's not just a moron. He's blind too. Fancy missing the big red ribbon!" said Leo as they took a seat on the bench.

It was chilly sitting there, so they zipped their jackets all the way up to their chins to shield themselves from the cold.

"Fancy being cold in Santorini!" said Leo, and they both giggled.

Cathy put an arm around her son and squeezed him against her, a wide smile on her face. It would take a lot more than a rude stranger and an empty taxi queue to ruin her good spirits.

Chapter 3

A taxi arrived about half an hour later, and soon, Cathy and Leo were leaving the airport behind.

Cathy rattled off the address to the driver, which was plain and simple. *Rallis Farm, Monolithos.*

The driver knew the farm and told them the village of Monolithos was where the airport actually was. He said the farm was a very short ride away. He was very talkative and went on to inform them that the farm was at the edge of the village, not too far from the beach, but in a very quiet area.

He knew Mr. Stavros, the old man who ran the farm, and was impressed to hear that Cathy—whom he'd initially taken for an American tourist, even though she had a perfect command of Greek—was going there for work.

Once the taxi driver found out that even though Cathy was an American by birth she'd been living in Athens since childhood, he warmed up to them even more.

Totally unprompted, and much to Leo's excitement, the man began to tell them all about the farm and Mr. Stavros who ran it. Like, how he used to be a seaman in his youth, and that now, being in his mid-seventies, he had an able Albanian worker, who helped at the farm, since the man's own son didn't care to do it. He said it was a pity, since the son was a vet, and his skills would be handy at the farm. But he lived far away in Athens and never visited the island.

Cathy shared a tight-lipped smile with Leo and gave a polite smile when the driver's eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror—for the hundredth time, it seemed.

The driver was a chatter box, that was for sure, and she was too tired to engage properly, plus, she never liked to gossip or judge other people. Especially strangers.

Still, Leo was beaming. He had clearly appreciated the information pertaining to the animals. No doubt, he couldn't wait to see the cow, the sheep, the goats and the chickens the driver said the old man kept on the farm.

They had just arrived at the village, just ten minutes later, through moderate traffic. The driver announced it while pointing to the road sign that read "Monolithos." Shortly

after, he turned off the main road and into a quiet country lane that was lined by fields on both sides.

As they drove in the darkness, under a cloudy night sky, with only the car lights shining the way ahead, Cathy could just make out branches of distant trees swaying in the mild wintry wind.

There had been no sign to direct them into this lane to the farm, which immediately told Cathy this wasn't one of those popular farms where tourists arrived in droves, like so many others all over the island, to sample Santorini's wines, pulses, sun-dried tomatoes, and other types of its world-famous local produce.

The very hope that the farm was not going to be swarming with tourists made her heart lift. She had worried this might be the case. The more peaceful the place the better. And the more genuine the Santorini experience, she imagined.

The taxi approached a large property fenced with railing and cemented pillars. The double gates were wide open, painted in a sky-blue hue that seemed quaint, even in the darkness, illuminated only by the car lights.

They rode through the gates and stopped at the end of a long driveway leading up to a whitewashed cottage with a charming tiled roof. Its door and windows had the same sky-blue shade that was typical of Santorini. Everything looked perfect, like a dream come true.

They exited into a large grassy space that was visible clearly, thanks to the small spotlights that were positioned here and there on the ground.

Yellow floodlights were mounted on tall pillars on either side of the cottage and over the roofs of the two big barns positioned near the front gates, side by side, against the fencing. They were made of planks of wood and had big windows and tiled roofs. On the left side of the property stood two small shacks, barely visible in the darkness. They seemed to have concrete walls and tinned roofs.

“Ooh! These must be where the animals are kept!” Leo uttered wide-eyed, pointing to the barns.

“I guess so, sweetie...” said Cathy, busy now getting her wallet out to pay the man for the fare. He had already removed their luggage from the trunk and placed them on the doorstep.

As soon as the taxi was gone, Cathy turned to Leo. Taking a deep breath, she said, “Come on, let’s get inside. It’s freezing out here!”

“Fancy being cold in Santorini!” said Leo again, and they giggled as they walked up to the door together. She could already tell this was going to be their private joke throughout their stay. The few people they knew back in Athens had all been amused in the same manner.

Cathy smoothed the edges of the scarf around Leo’s neck, and fixed his bobble hat in place with a gentle tug, then a pat.

“Don’t worry, Mom. We both look fine. Let’s knock,” he said, smiling sweetly. He was the mirror of her soul, as always. It had been inevitable for them to be able to guess each other’s thoughts and insecurities throughout his few years. After all, it had been mostly just the two of them.

Cathy took a steadying breath, then knocked on the ornate wooden door. It had a thick glass window on the upper side, and through it, she could make out the faint glow of electric light. A large shadow appeared, then mushroomed behind the window as someone approached to open.

“Hello! You must be Cathy. And Leo!” said a rather heavy-set lady with an adorable face as she stood at the open door. She was in her late sixties, or perhaps in her early seventies. Her large eyes gleamed with kindness above her open smile. Strands of gray hair lightly peppered with brown fell in heavy locks over her brow and temples, the rest of it held in a loose bun atop her head.

She reached with chubby hands and got hold of Cathy’s luggage before the latter had the time to even answer.

“Thank you, yes! That’s us! Let me take the other one,” said Cathy taking the handle of Leo’s bag. The two fell in line behind the woman as she turned about face and beckoned them in.

“Welcome! Come in, come in! The fireplace is blazing in the dining room! I’ve made fish soup! Come and get warm!”

Cathy wondered what she had been hired for with such an awesome lady running the place. Or, maybe, she wasn’t? But, this question didn’t seem important at the time to dwell upon, nor did she care for it. The lady’s words had sounded like angelic music in her ears. Her bones still felt soaked from the humidity after their long wait at the airport taxi stand. A fireplace and a soup sounded like heaven to her.

Sharing just one excited look with Leo as they followed this cherubic woman inside told her he felt just the same.

A rustic dining room came into view as they reached the end of the tiny corridor, and it looked absolutely stunning, despite its simplicity. Oddly enough, right then, she spared again a thought for that rude man, who had cost them the wait in the cold. He hadn’t even bothered to check with them in case they were heading the same way he was.

He had looked so handsome, yet, his charm was marred by his abysmal character. Which served her as a gentle reminder not to trust any man, ever again. Especially the ones that looked beautiful like angels, the ones she could easily fall for. She had learned this the hard way.

The kindly lady stepped aside when they neared the fireplace and gestured toward the corner. “Meet Mr. Stavros.”

For the first time, Cathy noticed the old man, who was sitting in an armchair by the fire. In her defense, she had been dazzled by the roaring flames, her whole body singing with the warmth they emitted.

Mr. Stavros looked cozy, dressed warm in a thick cardigan, his pajamas and slippers.

He stood up with a benevolent smile, looking quite sprightly, and causing Cathy to look him up and down for a split second, without meaning to. As he offered his hand and a welcome, she noticed his left foot didn't have a sock on it and was bandaged up to the ankle.

"Hello, Mr. Stavros. So nice to meet you. I am Cathy," she said, shaking her curiosity away. He had stepped closer without any discomfort or a limp despite the bandaged foot. "And this is Leo," she added, turning towards her son, who stepped forward to shake hands with the old man and offer his brightest of smiles.

Mr. Stavros moved toward the dining table and beckoned them to sit. "Come, you must be hungry."

The three sat down, except for the old lady, who stood nearby, looking eager.

Mr. Stavros turned to her to say, "Marianna, I think we can serve the soup now. If Alex is ready, that is. He must have had his shower by now. Will you call him please?"

"Of course," she said with an eager smile and moved to the bottom of the internal staircase at the opposite corner of the room to shout, "Alex! We are ready to have dinner if you are?"

"I'll be right with you!" echoed the response from upstairs, and Cathy's brow knitted. *Who is this Alex? His son? The taxi driver said he never comes to the island.* She turned to Leo and he shrugged a shoulder, looking clearly as puzzled as she was.

Mrs. Marianna hurried off through a door to the left by the staircase, presumably to the kitchen, then Mr. Stavros turned to Cathy and Leo to say, "Alex is my son. He is spending the holidays with me here." He beamed as he said that. Even a blind man would have been able to tell from the sound of his voice.

"Oh, that's nice..." said Cathy, although she thought otherwise. Mr. Stavros had told her on the phone that he lived on his own. So far, two people she didn't expect were in

the house. Were there more? And was she going to have to wait on them all? The man had said he needed her to decorate the farm for the holiday season more than he needed a cook and a cleaner. Did the nice old lady do these jobs?

"Does Mrs. Marianna live here with you?" She had blurted it out before she could stop herself. But then, she reasoned that since she was coming to work here it wasn't so rude. "I mean... er... You said you needed a housekeeper, and she seems to be more capable than I would ever be!" She chuckled, rather nervously, she knew, but if she had to be honest, she felt rather rattled. She'd never liked surprises.

The old man shook his hands before her face as if fanning a fire. "Oh, no! Marianna is just a friend. She doesn't work for me, and she doesn't live here. She keeps me company in the evenings, that's all. And, she cooks for me sometimes. But she has her own home and her business to run in the day. It's the bakery on the main road, just a minute's walk from here." He patted his tummy under his cardigan. It was a little too round for a man as skinny as him. "You can tell I love her desserts and her cheese pies, can't you? She keeps me well-stocked!"

He gave a wink and a chortle that caused both Cathy and Leo to laugh, the uneasiness she'd felt a while ago totally dissolved.

"You! What are you doing here?" she heard then, and whipped her head around to look toward the bottom of the stairs.

A man was standing there, his face ablaze with surprise. It took her just a split second to recognize him. From the airport.

"You?" she echoed, standing up, and he strode over to stand by his father, on the other side of him. The latter looked left and right to them in succession from his chair, then calmly said, "What? You two know each other?"

"Yes... unfortunately. Is this whom you hired to decorate?" He shook a sharp finger profusely in Cathy and Leo's direction, and it took all of Cathy's self-control to keep calm.

"Yes... but why? What happened?" The man's eyes sought understanding, but his son was too busy fuming, an urgent hand flying up to rake his hair as he puffed.

"What is it, Alex?" demanded the old man. "Cathy is going to be my decorator slash housekeeper for the next week or so. I told you I hired someone—"

"Yes. You told me. But you never mentioned she was coming with a child. They—"

"What about my child?" erupted Cathy with her hands on her waist. She'd had just about enough, but Mr. Stavros, somehow, seemed even more vexed now.

"You are being rude, Alex! This is not how I raised you. I think you should apologize to this kind lady and her boy!"

"You don't understand. Back at the airport, this little boy—"

Cathy was ready for whatever accusation he had to throw at them, but then, Alex stopped talking abruptly. He began to pace up and down, mumbling to himself. "'How you raised me,' you say! Huh! Don't even go there... Wow. Just wow! I don't believe it! Why did I say yes to this? I knew it! I knew it was going to be a disaster from day one!"

"Alex, enough!" said his father, causing his son to look at him with daggers. "You haven't been here in more than a decade, and this is how you choose to behave on your first night? Before my guests, no less?"

Alex turned and gazed into his father's eyes mutely for a few moments, his brown eyes burning like hot coal.

Cathy gulped and turned to look at Leo, only to see her own sense of angst mirrored in his eyes. It made her livid that her son should be subjected to this awkward scene. But she knew better than to get in the middle of a domestic between two strangers.

As she watched father and son, who were now looking away, both trying to compose themselves for a few quiet moments, she wondered what kind of a man Alex was.

Surely, they hadn't had an ideal first encounter back at the airport, but this burst of rage? That wasn't normal. She started to worry if it would be even safe to have Leo living under the same roof with this lunatic. *Shall we go? Surely, there must be a hotel not too far from here. This is Santorini, after all.*

"Alex, please sit. And calm down..." said Mr. Stavros, breaking the silence. "This is not necessary, son. You have practically just arrived..."

"Yes. And you can see what a great idea that was, can't you? I told you it was a bad idea for me to come here..." said Alex, calmly now, regret echoing heavy in his voice, as he took a seat on the empty chair beside his father.

Cathy continued to watch them, aghast. Alex hadn't addressed Mr. Stavros with "father" or "dad" even once. That was so weird. Just how estranged were these two?

The awkward silence continued for a little longer while Mr. Stavros looked clearly mortified and Alex shook his head ruefully.

Why had he flown off the handle like that when he saw her and Leo? If anything, she and Leo hadn't done anything wrong. He was the one who had taken their luggage by mistake, then acted like a total idiot.

But she was in someone else's home. She wasn't going to bring up this unfortunate incident, let alone be drawn into an argument, to misbehave and sink to his level. *What an awful, awful man! A little boy in the form of a man.*

He clearly had trouble managing his emotions. *What a torment that must be for him.* She wanted nothing of it. And, something told her his outbreak just now had more to do with his father than with her and her son.

She continued to look at him as he took a couple of deep breaths. Finally, giving one last deep exhalation he looked up

at her. He seemed spent. His eyes seemed wet, like two pristine brown hills misted by the rain. The thought was odd. This was not the time to admire his beautiful features.

She raised her chin and gazed back at him, trying to remind herself that he wasn't a man to ever trust, let alone ever dare warm up to.

He tightened his lips and raised a single shoulder. "I am sorry, okay? To all of you. I was out of line. I am tired, in more ways than one. If that's any excuse..."

"Thank you," she muttered back, somewhat satisfied. She sighed, then said, "Look... This is your house, and—"

"No, it's not," Alex said coldly, avoiding the glare his father sent his way.

Cathy cleared her throat. "Erm, you know what I mean... Christmas day is just one week away. I can do the decorating in the next couple of days, and then Leo and I can leave. We don't have to spend Christmas here as initially arranged. It's no problem. We can change our flights." She pointed to Mr. Stavros, then said, "Unless you'd like us to go now, Mr. Stavros?"

"No! This is nonsense. No one is leaving! And you and your son are spending Christmas Day here, as agreed." Mr. Stavros stressed the last two words and tapped his hand firmly on the table as he stood. This time, he did it slowly, teetering a little on his feet and flinching as if his bandaged foot had hurt him, and Cathy thought it was a little strange.

He turned to look at all three in succession and said, "You've all come from far away and you must be tired. So, this is what we're going to do... We are going to have some nice soup, then we're all going to bed, and tomorrow is a new day, okay?"

He gave an audible sigh. "Christmas is coming, and we all have obligations to fulfill." He turned to his son and added a rather strict, "Isn't that right, Alex?"

Alex gave a soft grunt, then a sigh, before answering, "Yes."

“Good.” He limped for a couple of steps toward the kitchen, probably about to call Mrs. Marianna, but right then, she appeared through the door and hurried over, a large soup-serving bowl in her hands.

The earlier gaiety had drained from her face. Gone were her rosy cheeks. She looked like a pale ghost now, eager to flee and mix with the shadows. She had obviously heard them shouting earlier and chosen to stay out of it.

Cathy felt her heart squeeze with sympathy for her. She liked Mrs. Marianna already. Mr. Stavros too. As for Alex, right then, she had no idea what she thought of him. Not really. Sure, he was quick to apologize, but his mouth was quick to scold, and rage seemed to keep bursting out of him with intensity. She could tell already this was going to be a rather tough cohabitation...

Chapter 4

Mrs. Marianna opened the bedroom door and Leo gave a gasp. Cathy was just as taken aback. This room was every little boy’s dream.

Big shelves brimming over with board-game boxes, toy cars and superhero figures hung on the wall opposite, by the window.

On the right side of the room, a large plastic tub stood in the corner full of stuffed toys and even more cars. Beside it, an old bookcase seemed ready to collapse under its full load of colorful books.

On the left, two single beds were snuggled closely together, on either side of a bedside cabinet. A mobile with little airplanes and rainbows hung from the light fixture on the ceiling, and the delicate silk curtain on the window had little toy cars stitched on the rim.

This clearly was no typical guest room.

"This used to be Alex's room," said Mrs. Marianna then, as if on cue. "After he left the island to move to Athens, many years ago, Mr. Stavros bought these matching single beds and put them here. His sister visits with her family from Athens sometimes, so this room comes in handy."

Leo strode into the room, rolling his luggage behind him. Wide-eyed, he began to marvel at everything. It was obvious he approved of the sleeping arrangements.

Cathy tried to hide a snicker and failed miserably. She turned to Mrs. Marianna and offered a smile. "This is wonderful, thank you. But, are you sure it's okay to deprive Alex of his room?"

Mrs. Marianna flicked her wrist and twisted her lips. "Don't worry, Cathy. Alex is in the guest room, on this floor, and this was what he wanted. He didn't wish to stay in this room, for some reason." She shook her head, then added, "But, anyway... Enjoy your stay."

She was about to turn and leave, but Cathy raised a hand. "Wait! Mrs. Marianna! We haven't discussed tomorrow morning. Where do I start with the work? And will you be here to give me directions? Mr. Stavros didn't mention anything before retiring for the night. I didn't want to stop him and ask. He seemed very tired."

Mrs. Marianna shook her head. "No, I won't be here in the morning, darling. I work at my bakery every morning till the early afternoon. But I'll see you in the evenings. As for where to start, take it easy. When you see Mr. Stavros in the morning you can ask him."

"Okay. I'll set my alarm early, to make sure I get up before he does, at least."

Mrs. Marianna giggled and said, "Oh, don't worry about setting an alarm here. Trust me. You *will* wake up early!"

Cathy exchanged a mute glance with Leo, both failing to understand.

Before Cathy could ask what she'd meant, Mrs. Marianna pointed to the closed window and added, "When the

roosters begin to crow out there around six a.m. in the morning, you will have no choice but to wake up, believe me!”

Leo approached her, his eyes big like wagon wheels.

“Roosters? Really? How many?”

“Ooh! I’d say about five or six, at least! Stavros only owns one, mind you, so there are no fights in the coop, but many of the neighboring farms and houses have roosters. They all roam the fields all day freely around here with the chickens. It’s a right concert when they all start cowing and clucking! They wake up everyone in the neighborhood. I should know; I live just down the road.”

“Do the sheep make noises too? Will I hear them in the morning?” asked Leo, wide-eyed.

“You bet! The sheep, the goats, and the cow, too! You’ll hear all the bleating and the mooing. And the bells around their necks, of course. It’ll be a right concert, trust me!”

Mrs. Marianna gave a guffaw to see Leo’s ecstatic expression, and then, sobering a little, said to Cathy, “Stavros should be up by seven. He can make his own breakfast, so don’t worry. He only expects lunch and dinner served by you. As for Alex, he can make his own breakfast too. You don’t have to wait on him. Just make sure Stavros has all he needs, when he needs it.”

The mention of Mr. Stavros’s needs prompted Cathy to ask, albeit with hesitation, “Forgive me, but I noticed Mr. Stavros’s foot is bandaged. Is he okay?”

“Ah! It’s nothing. He just sprained his ankle the other day. It’ll slow him down a bit for a while, as he loves to be out and about in the farm, but that’s all.”

Cathy nodded, “So, it’s just Mr. Stavros and Alex staying here?”

“That’s right. But I visit in the evenings, as I said before, and there is also Stavros’s friend, Nikos, who comes to play backgammon with him in the early afternoons. Keep an eye

on these two in my absence, by the way! The old goats are heavy-handed with the ouzo, if you know what I mean.”

She gave a giggle, then said. “Oh! And there’s Anton, of course, our Albanian farmhand. Go look for him tomorrow morning, and he will give you a tour of the farm.” She bended over and pinched Leo’s cheek. “He will show you all the animals. Just don’t feed them any chocolate.”

“I won’t. Promise,” said Leo, giggling.

“Good boy!”

“Chocolate?” asked Cathy, surprised.

“Our neighbors had some kids visiting last summer. They used to come every day behind the fence with candy and... Oh! They caused such a mess for poor Stavros!” She flicked her wrist and added, “Ugh! Forget it! Glad your boy has some good sense. They’re not all that way, believe me.”

Her eyes lit up, then she added, “Oh! I almost forgot! All the Christmas decorations are stored in one of the shacks on the side of the property. Ask Anton to show you where they are, but take it easy with the string lights. I don’t think Stavros expects you to hang all of them. In years past, he used to light up the property outside like the streets of Las Vegas!” She gave a chortle, then sobered to add, “Ask Anton for help to hang the decorations. Just a few will do. And I left you my number on the fridge in case you need to call me.”

Cathy smiled with gratitude. “Oh, thank you, Mrs. Marianna. This is very thoughtful of you.”

“Sure thing. Call me anytime if you have any questions.” She winked and added with a lopsided smile, “Come with Leo soon to find me at the bakery. I’ll treat you to a pie.”

Cathy and Leo promised to do that at first chance, and she raised a hand to wish them goodnight.

Cathy lingered on the landing for a few moments, watching the kindly woman disappear down the steps, her heavy footsteps on the wood resonating with an eerie heaviness in the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t identify the cause of it, but it was unsettling. Something was going to

happen here this Christmas. Something that, she feared, she wasn't ready for. She knew it. She just didn't know what it was.

Trying to shake the dread away, she gave a huge sigh, then dragged her suitcase inside and stopped by the bed. Her reflection in the large mirror on the dresser opposite confirmed she looked just as tired as she felt. She turned and looked at Leo to find him yawning, then checked her watch. It was almost ten p.m.

"Showers?" she asked.

He shook his head and yawned again.

"Pajamas?" she asked again.

He nodded fervently and they tittered.

Putting their suitcases flat on the thick carpet in sync, as if they were contesting in some reality game and someone had just given the signal to start a race, they knelt, unzipped their bags and began to giggle as they rummaged inside them.

For now, Cathy's apprehension had evaporated. Getting into bed and surrendering to a peaceful sleep felt like the only thing that mattered at the time. She didn't want to think about anything else. Hopefully, tomorrow, would take care of itself.

Chapter 5

Mrs. Marianna was right. The roosters had done the trick at ten minutes past six, according to Cathy's watch. It was impossible to get back to sleep once she was awake, even after burying her head under the pillow to shield her ears from the high-pitched noises.

Plus, with Leo giggling every time a new animal sound echoed in the distance, she felt now more awake than she'd ever expected to be at this early hour.

She slipped out of bed, gathered a change of clothes in her hands and announced to Leo she was going to have a

shower. The previous evening, Mrs. Marianna had shown her where the master bathroom was on their floor, and where their towels hung.

She said Mr. Stavros would stay downstairs because of his bad foot, sleeping in a small sofa bed in the kitchen, and would use the guest bathroom down there. So, unless Alex was an early riser, she could have a long shower now without worrying she would put anybody out.

To avoid fishing for her slippers at the bottom of her luggage she hurried down the landing on her tiptoes along a runner mat. As she slowly opened the door to the bathroom, she felt a tug from the inside.

Taken aback, she let go of the handle, and immediately heard an exclamation of pain from the inside.

Biting her lip, she stared aghast as Alex appeared from behind the door.

“Argh! Careful!” he said, throwing her a thundering look. He was rubbing his brow with one urgent hand.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to—”

He put up both hands, then gave an exasperated sigh. For a few moments, he just looked at her mutely, and she braced herself for another fit of rage, like the one he had exploded into the previous evening.

He was wearing jeans and a turtleneck top, the latter a dark blue that accentuated his honey-brown eyes. He was up bright and early, all dressed. *Well, he is a vet. Surely, he’s used to going to work early. That’s commendable. Hey! What the heck am I doing, admiring him? His eyes, his dress sense, his starting the day early? Get a grip, girl! The man is a Neanderthal!*

To her surprise, his expression melted somewhat as he tilted his head to the side and half-smiled. “I don’t know why we keep meeting in these awkward ways... but it sucks.”

She blinked hard, then said, “Um... I agree.”

"I am sorry about yesterday. I acted like an ass. In my defense, I didn't want to come here. For my own reasons. But that's my own problem, and nothing to do with you."

"Right..."

He smirked and leaned a little forward to say, "But, in my defense, you *did* call me a moron!"

She met his gaze and saw the humor lingering in his expression. Relieved, she said, "And you left us stranded at the airport. We could have all come here together in your taxi." She gave a lopsided smile and added, "We froze our butts on that bench at the roadside."

"Ouch. I am sorry. I did say I acted like an ass. Forgive me?"

She gave a firm nod. "Sure. We all have our bad days."

He offered his hand. "Let's start anew. Pretend we just met. I am Alex."

She shook his hand gently and beamed at him. "Pleased to meet you, Alex." She pointed a finger over her shoulder. "I have a son back there. His name is Leo. He is nine."

He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner, clearly in jest. "Oh, I think I remember him. He has a mean tug." He gave a titter, and she echoed the happy sound with her own. It felt good to be in his presence and not cringe, for a change.

There was a large glass pane on the wall a little further away behind her. Feeble natural daylight was streaming in, making his brown eyes glow, like steaming mocha.

It made her realize she was thirsty, funnily enough, and it was hard to focus on the moment, because of the way his eyes were gazing into hers. And then, it dawned on her she actually preferred for her mind to roam in those moments. She didn't want to dwell on how attractive he was. *I didn't have this problem with Angry Alex...*

He flashed her an easy smile, and it served to return her to the present without delay. He tilted his head again, his smile forming a cute dimple on one side of his mouth. It was clearly visible through his thin well-trimmed beard.

She melted, but then froze, when he took a step forward and said, "Let's bury the hatchet, Cathy. Let's have a nice Christmas, yes?"

She giggled, despite herself. "Yes, let's."

"Good. I'll see you around." He raised a hand and turned to go, but then faced her anew to add, "Oh. Just to say. You don't have to wait on me, just, well... the old man."

A shadow crossed his face momentarily as he said the last two words. Again, she noticed he'd avoided to refer to Mr. Stavros as "dad" or "father."

He chirped anew and added, "I'll make my own breakfast, Cathy. Though, I do look forward to your cooking. I am useless at cooking. Back in Athens, I practically live on take out dinners." He gave an impish grin.

Smiling sweetly at him, she said, "Sure thing! What do you like to eat?"

"All typical Greek food, I guess. But Mrs. Marianna told me you're American, so I am not sure what you have in mind?" He wasn't being offensive in the least, just humorous, the playful glint in his eyes unmistakable.

She raised her chin and played along, to say deadpan, "Hamburgers, corn dogs, macaroni and cheese, and apple pie sound okay?"

He bit the bait. Flinching, he said, "Seriously? Oh... I don't think the old man would like any of that. He loves his Greek stews and roasts. And his baklava."

She chortled and flicked her wrist. "Relax, I'm only kidding. I am actually half-American. My Greek father and my grandmother taught me how to cook."

"Phew! That's a relief! So, you were raised here in Greece?"

"Yes. I've lived here most of my life. We left the States when I was only six."

"That explains your impeccable Greek, too. I did wonder about that."

"Yup. Thanks," she said, looking down at her socked feet, feeling all timid and vulnerable all of a sudden, realizing she was still in her pajamas in the few awkward moments of silence that ensued. His loafers looked pristine.

His chuckle caused her to look up again. "Though, I would love to know what a corn dog is..."

She cocked her eye at him, about to enlighten him, but then he winked, smiled, and walked away.

She liked this different Alex. The one that was polite, charming and even cracked jokes. And now, she felt really sorry she had called him a moron at the airport. In her defense, he had acted like one, but this Alex... he was being a pleasure to be around. Too much for her liking, actually, and she reminded herself to be careful.

She stood for a few more moments on the landing, watching Alex until he disappeared through a door at the very end, presumably, the guest room.

Scolding herself, she entered the bathroom and closed the door behind her, locking it.

Locking him out of her thoughts, though, proved harder as the warm water began to soothe her senses. *Be careful, Cathy. You don't want to be in that kind of nightmare again. And now, having Leo, you're not the only one at risk of getting hurt. Just be civil, be formal with him... It's just a job, and once it's over, you won't ever see him again...*

END OF SAMPLE

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