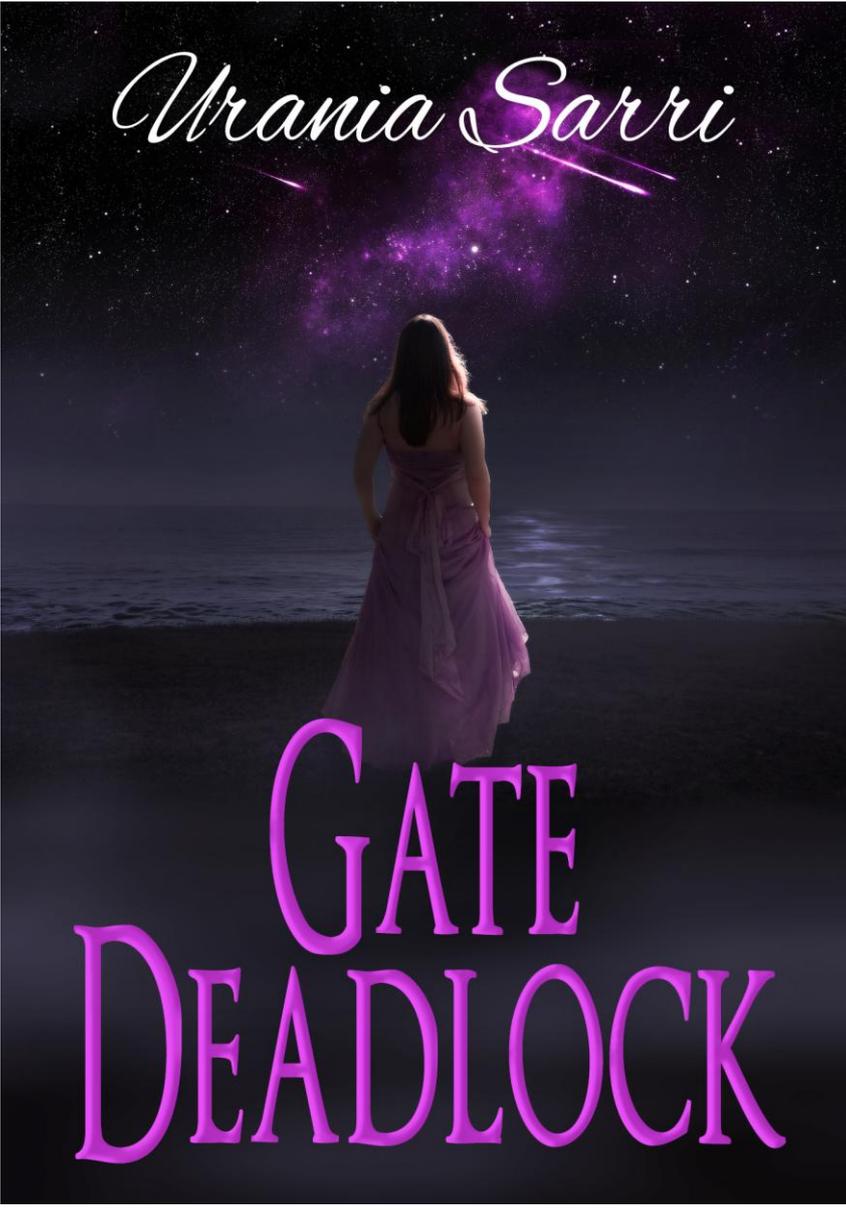


Urania Sarri

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a long, flowing purple dress, stands on a dark beach looking out at the ocean. The sky is a deep black, filled with stars and a prominent purple galaxy or nebula. Two purple streaks, resembling meteors or comets, are visible in the upper part of the sky. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

GATE
DEADLOCK

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‘Our heirs, whatever or whoever they maybe, will explore space and time to degrees we cannot currently fathom. They will create new melodies in the music of time. There are infinite harmonies to be explored.’

Clifford Pickover

Preface

The heat of the summer night did not get to me at all. I felt chills and I was trembling like a leaf, shattered by the news that had struck me like a bolt out of the blue.

Susan, the delirious female Crusader and emissary of the future world, was trying to rationalize Christopher’s decision, searching desperately for comforting words. But I was not listening to her anymore. I opened the drawer of the desk next to me and took my car keys with a fast move before Susan had time to react. It had to be one of the League’s tricks, I thought, although deep down I knew Susan would never lie to me.

I was frantic. I thought of his house. I had to go there, see with my own eyes, his clothes, his books, sense his smell... Maybe it was not too late. Maybe I could still make him change his mind.

I rushed outside and Susan followed me, shouting my name. But I was faster. Despair had been my motive power. I started the car, wasting no time to fasten my seatbelt.

‘It can’t be true... It can’t be happening! Please God, no! Don’t let it be too late. Oh, Christopher, what have you done?’ I repeated to myself, speeding off, my face soaked from the tears.

He could not have gone back, hundreds of years away from me, leaving me here. Even worse, he could not have returned to the life that had consumed all his humanity in the past, to the crimes he was desperately trying to redeem his soul from. It would sooner or later destroy him. I should not let him sacrifice himself to save me. I could not allow that. There had to be another way out of that deadlock.

I remembered the words he had whispered to me that night, when I had told him I was determined to fight for us.

‘When you get to a deadlock, will you please remember that I love you... That you are my life... My heart and my soul... belong to you... Wherever I am... Whatever I do... Promise me...you won’t hate me.’ he had pleaded. Their meaning was so clear to me now.

Tears were blocking my view as I clenched the wheel, but that did not keep me from stepping on the gas.

I only caught a glimpse of the car that appeared out of nowhere, ignoring the stop sign. My Beetle swerved dangerously in a last effort to avoid the collision and I found myself heading towards a cluster of trees, having lost control of the wheel.

The awful sound of the crash sounded as a blast to my ears. Then, the darkness of the night surrounded me, swallowing me into the blessed oblivion of nothingness.

Chapter 1 Darkness

I knew I had met him before.

He'd come to me from somewhere outside of this world, some other dimension, some other life, some other time. He was mine as much as I was his, at least in this life. He had told me that although the first time I'd met him he had come to kill me, now he was here to protect me. My life had been spared once but not without cost. Still, there were so many secrets that he wouldn't share with me which kept us apart and I knew we were racing against the odds, till they beat us down. Could a man have changed so much and yet remain the same? I wanted to believe him. I was desperately in love with him and although the voice inside me kept warning me to keep away, for the first time in my life I felt complete, as if all the pieces of the puzzle were now in place.

Until that dreadful night.

The first memories after the crash were like brief, incoherent snapshots of a wrongly preset camera. Tangled images, meaningless words and dazzling lights. I remember becoming aware of the fact that I was sinking into an enticing sense of relinquishment, tired of fighting, exhausted by the unequal encounter with time.

I couldn't know for how long I had remained in this state, bordering the bailiwick of death. Where I was, time did not matter anymore. For once in my life, time was completely meaningless to me. I was the one to mock its evil, ruthless face now.

Gradually, I began to make sense of what the people around me were saying, totally overriding their entreaties to open my eyes, to go back to them, to fight. Because I had nothing to fight for. My life had vanished that night when the last letter of his name had disappeared in the dark background of the computer screen, fluttered away, my heart and soul together, irretrievably lost.

In a vague way, my mind refused to recall the reason for my devastation; the deprivation of his voice, the feeling of his touch, of his kiss. All I could feel was an intolerable pain, the cause of which was buried deeply into my subconscious. It was probably a physical defense mechanism, as my mind was trying to protect what was left. I only saw the same dream, the nightmare I had that morning in Christopher's house that had made me wake up in the empty bed. I kept searching his house, shouting his name desperately, but he had vanished. The same torturing nightmare, over and over again.

I often reminisce those nightmares, especially one that had a different ending. I found myself in an empty street, a familiar neighbourhood around me. At the bus stop on my right, I saw my dad. I had not dreamt of him for many years after his death. He was smiling to me with his arms stretched in a wide embrace, waiting for me. I was ten years old again. He seemed so real; I could feel his warm body, I could smell him, the smell of my childhood. Next minute, I was holding him tight, crying.

'Where have you been dad? Why did you leave me?' I asked him.

He looked into my eyes, smiling. 'I never left you Emma. My beautiful Emma.'

'I've missed you so much. I need you, dad. Please take me with you.'

'Where I'm going, you can't come Emma. You must finish what you've started.' he said with the same sweet smile that used to brighten my childhood years.

'Don't go yet. Come home with me dad.'

I took his hand and walked him to our house. I opened the door shouting 'Mum, daddy is here, look!'

But when I turned to him, he had vanished. I was all alone again in front of the big house.

Kate's voice had been the hardest to ignore. And then of course, there was my mum. I was not sure if she had been there only once or if she had never left my side, but I kept hearing her voice saying,

'Wake up, Emma. Please, come back to us.'

I wanted to talk to her, comfort her that I was where I wanted, and all I needed her to do, was to let me move on. I needed her and Kate, my only friend, to release me, because I could feel their love holding me back. I was afraid that the slightest effort to respond to their plea would take me back to an empty world, back to the pain and the suffering.

To a world without Christopher.

I could not live in such a world. It was much worse than death.

Death. Eventually, it turned out to be the only way out of the deadlock.

I had made my choice. Every day, every moment was taking me closer to the end.

To forlornness.

To emptiness.

To nothingness.

To oblivion.

Chapter 2
Deep Blue
(Two months before)

I have always thought of the first time I met Christopher, as the first day of my real life. Nevertheless, I've never regretted letting him into my life, in full consciousness of the outcome and, were I given another chance, I would do exactly the same. Of course, I would have to change a few things. Because I have my share of blame in this story. This I cannot deny.

Every single detail of that evening will be forever engraved in my memory.

The first thing I vividly remember is the smothering heat and my total dependence upon the air-conditioner.

It must have been one of the hottest summers in Greece. My body had not become adjusted yet to the waves of heat coming from the south, making me spend my first two days in this vacation spot on the outskirts of the city of Corinth, going back and forth between the beach and the air-conditioned studio apartment I was sharing with Kate. Usually, it would take me a week to get used to the hot temperature, having spent the most of my life in the cool and gloomy suburbs of London. This summer I felt I would need even more time, as the overwhelming brightness and the blue of the sky did not match my mood at all. I had been masochist enough to be missing the cloudy, gloomy sky of London, even from the first day.

I was having summer holidays in Greece for the third year as a university student. Brantel University offered students the opportunity of spending eight weeks here every year, in cooperation with the University of Athens. It had been a long tradition for the schools of Archeology, History and Social Sciences ever since my dad had been working as a professor and researcher in Brantel. It goes without saying that for all of us, not only the students but also the tutors, summer school here was considered more as holiday time. But the school was not the only reason for my coming to Greece as other, personal reasons called for my presence here.

The second thing that comes to my mind about that first day of my new life is the awful headache I'd been suffering from, or should I say the hangover symptoms.

The previous night, Kate and Tony had persuaded me to follow them to the beach party that was traditionally organized by the Greek students to welcome us.

'No way I'm coming. You know I'm in no mood for parties.' I had stubbornly insisted.

'If you're not going, I'm not going either.' was Kate's, who was no less stubborn than me, last argument. She always knew how to have it her way.

'Please Emma?' Tony had pleaded, making me give up, while at the same time Kate was smiling, enjoying her little triumph.

How excited I had been about this party the previous summer, when Colin and I were still together! This time, I felt like it was the wrong place to be. There were so many memories of Colin there and I had hated myself for not being able to stop thinking about him. He did not deserve it. Not since last spring, when I discovered that my suspicion that he was having another affair turned out to be utterly true.

The beach party was not over until the first light of day. Greeks were used to crazy nights but it had been too much for me. I had come home at the ungodly hour of 4.00 a.m. and, although I had spent most of the day in bed, I had not been able to make up for the lost hours of sleep. I had been suffering from serious hangover all day, which had made me take down a considerable dose of painkillers to be able to leave my bed

and help my friend with her cooking adventure. Which brings me to the third memory of that day: the dangerous blending of smells coming from the kitchen, as a very special dinner lay ahead for my friend Kate and her boyfriend.

Kate had been my best friend for the last three years. We were always on the same frequency she and I, and most of the time I did not even have to talk to her for she could always read my eyes as I could read hers. She had been a sweet comfort to me ever since I'd broken up with Colin.

Kate was really enjoying her achievement that night. I watched her slim, model-like figure move around the kitchen, wondering if she would really eat anything. Over the past few months she had lost some weight as she had decided to totally exclude carbohydrates from her diet.

My roommate had big plans for that evening, as she had decided to fascinate Tony with her cooking abilities. That was why she had bought a book with traditional, Greek recipes, and had chosen three of them for a romantic candlelit dinner in the little garden in front of our studio. We had spent the last three hours in the kitchen, which now looked as if a natural disaster, a hurricane or something as violent and fast, had just come this way, spreading debris everywhere.

Tony, a cute fellow student from Italy, was Kate's boyfriend. His apartment, which he shared with two other History students, was only a few blocks away. He and Kate had both been very excited about coming to Greece, looking forward to spending their holidays here together. It was no surprise that they had been the first to sign in for the University summer school. As for me, I was pretending to share their enthusiasm although I had known this summer would not be the same. I had been having second thoughts about this trip ever since Kate had literally dragged me to sign in. When she told me that Colin would not be here this year, however, I admit I felt much relieved. After all, he was the only reason for my inhibitions. Ever since I was a child, I had come to adore this country and its people, due to my Greek dad, and it pleased me to feel that summer holidays here had become part of my life again, the same way they used to be when my dad was alive.

I remember how Kate, overconfident about her choice of recipes, had refused to follow my advice about not blending the discrepant flavors that night.

'Seriously, Emma. Oysters are aphrodisiac. I may not be a chef but that much I know.' she had told me when I questioned her bizarre taste.

I had a natural aversion for seafood. It was the only part of the Greek cuisine I did not like. But from that day on, I was pretty sure that my aversion would turn to pure disgust, because the smell of seafood had blended dangerously with that of roast lamb, causing waves of nausea to my stomach.

'Do you think this shrimp sauce is thick enough?' Kate asked me anxiously, her face red from the hot steam coming from the pan in front of her.

It was the third time she was asking me that and she smiled apologetically when her eyes met my glowering look.

'Sorry, but you're the expert.' she smiled.

I was already on my way to check the sauce anyway, when I heard the doorbell ring.

'No! Don't tell me Tony's already here!' Kate panicked.

'Relax, if it's Tony, I'll send him to the store for beer.' I reassured her, wiping my hands quickly.

I walked to the door straightening my hair, wondering about traces of the flour war I had with her a few minutes ago.

When I opened the door, I came before a vaguely familiar face. It was not Tony, but a gorgeous stranger who did not seem less surprised than I was. He was standing on the threshold, looking at me with sparkling eyes.

‘Hi. Are you Kate?’ he asked, with a wonderful, distracting smile.

‘No. But I’ll get her for you.’ I said smiling back but realizing at the same moment that I was unable to move at all, as I just could not take my eyes off him.

He was tall and athletic, dressed in expensive loose, white linen pants and a light green, brand T-shirt. His hair, golden brown, entwined his wonderful face in a disheveled hair-do and his full lips were slightly curved downwards, in the shape of a heart.

But what was most striking on him, was the deep blue of his large, almond-shaped eyes, the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. They had captured mine, subliminally influencing my thoughts, making me struggle to recollect a long lost memory aroused by the angelic visage before me.

When I realized I had been staring at him, I felt my cheeks blush with embarrassment. I turned to get Kate, but she was already behind me. ‘Hi. I’m Kate. What can I do for you?’ She pushed me softly with her elbow, placing herself in front of me. I turned to hide into the kitchen, thinking what on earth was wrong with me. How could I have made such a fool of myself in front of that stranger?

I heard him talk to Kate without paying attention because something was trying for a second time to sneak into my mind, a past memory, an obscure image I was not able to recall, like a scene of a forgotten, nostalgic dream. It had to do with those sparkling, deep blue eyes of his. But how could it be possible? He was not the kind of man you would forget you have met. But still...

‘Emma, can you come here please?’ Kate was calling me from the living room. When I got back there, he was standing with his back to me.

‘Emma, this is Christopher, Harry’s roommate. Remember Harry telling us about the new tutor the other day?’ she winked at me. Harry was Kate’s brother and member of the summer school staff.

Christopher turned towards me with an innocent smile, but his eyes were now slotted, as if he was estimating my reaction.

‘Oh!’ I said, overtly surprised. His face had started to dazzle me again and I was at a loss for words. He certainly did not look like a tutor but rather like a model. His beautiful face, absolutely breathtaking, was blocking the function of my mind. They were both looking at me with obvious mystification now. This is really awkward, I thought. I should come up with something quickly. And I picked the wrong thing to say.

‘I just thought you would be, you know, ...older.’ Oops! I regretted saying that immediately. How could I have said that? What was I thinking?

‘Well, maybe I am older than you think. Let me introduce myself properly. Christopher Auburn.’ He seemed amused by my bewildered attitude.

But ...again... His voice; how could it be so familiar? And his smile. Once again, the same dream-like memory was creeping into my mind. Kate was giggling now and I realized he had his arm outstretched towards me, still waiting for a handshake.

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ Foolish! A mocking voice shouted in my head.

‘Nice to meet you, Emma.’ He looked obviously amused by my childish reaction as he was still grinning broadly when I touched his hand. It was warm and his grasp felt firm and familiarly inviting to me.

‘Have we... met before?’ I asked sheepishly.

His expression changed instantly. He looked straight into my eyes, meditatively and with some concern for a long moment. Then he went on, smiling knowingly.

‘I doubt it. I’m sure I would have remembered that.’

He held my hand a little longer than he should in a normal handshake. Or was I holding his? Kate was giggling again. He turned to her releasing my hand as his face became more serious.

‘Thank you for the keys, Kate. I should be going. I don’t want you to destroy your dinner over me.’

‘Oh, no!’ she shouted running to the kitchen, alarmed by the smell of burnt food coming from it.

‘I’ll see you two tomorrow then.’ he said, going for the door.

‘Just let us know if you need anything else!’ Kate shouted from the kitchen.

The door closed behind him and I was left in a daze, staring into vacancy.

When I got back to the kitchen, I found Kate pouring some water in the pan with roast lamb, which now looked a little darker than the one in the picture of the cookery book.

‘I KNOW!’ she shouted. ‘He looks like a Greek god, doesn’t he? You had me worried for a minute, you know. What’s wrong with you?’ she asked, rolling over the meat before putting it back into the oven.

‘I’m not sure. I felt like...like I’ve seen him before. Something about him is very familiar to me.’ She took off her cooking gloves and looked at me musingly, leaning against the kitchen table.

‘That’s impossible. He comes from a university in Canada, Harry told me. It’s his first time in Greece and he’s never been to Brantel either.’

‘What did he come here for?’ I asked.

‘He needed the keys to the apartment. Harry’s not back from Athens yet.’ She paused for a moment. ‘He asked about you, you know.’ she grinned. ‘That’s why I called you. He wanted to know your name.’ she said, checking me with the corner of her eyes.

‘Really?’ I was mystified.

‘Extremely handsome though, don’t you think? And he was so flirting you!’ she added teasingly, scrutinizing my expression.

I did not say anything because I knew where she meant to lead this conversation. I decided to ignore her last comment and started cleaning up the mess, but not before throwing a wet towel at her. She chuckled as she got it.

‘Tony will be here in less than half an hour. You’d better be fast.’ I reminded her. I knew Kate had been so preoccupied with her cooking that I could easily forecast her last minute frustration when she would realize that the kitchen was not in a condition to receive guests, let alone Tony who would always tease her for being the “messiest girl he’d ever met”. So, I started cleaning up the mess to avoid this last minute crisis.

When Tony came, I withdrew in my bedroom with a full dish and a glass of wine, although he and Kate had both insisted that I should stay with them.

I knew it was their night and Kate had been looking forward to it for so long, so I had decided to stay in my room and watch one of my favorite thrillers. Besides, I needed a good sleep.

I took a bite of the surprisingly delicious roast lamb. I have always considered myself as quite experienced when it comes to Greek cuisine. My dad used to insist that we should stick to the Mediterranean diet even for the months we stayed in London, and my mother did her best to please him. She never gave up on those cooking habits even after she got married to her second husband, another extinguished

member of Brantel alumni, Daugh. By the way, when I mention my dad I do not mean my stepfather but my real father, Dr Dimitris Ioannou. And this is the next strange thing I vividly remember about that evening; somehow I had become overwhelmed with the memory of my father, provoked by something I was not able to identify exactly, although deep inside it felt like I knew the reason for the sudden recollection of my father's memory.

My late father was the only child of a Greek rural family from southern Peloponnese, who made their living on farming. His father had spent his whole fortune so that his son, Dimitris, would get proper education, enough to put him in a position to lead a better life than his.

Dimitris got his BA in History with excellent marks and won a scholarship to continue his studies abroad. It was then that he met Virginia, my mother, a wealthy young woman born with a silver spoon in her mouth. He was a postgraduate student in Brantel University where she was also studying History. They became inseparable since then, but they did not get married until my mother was pregnant.

My dad was a committed researcher in the field of history. The most vivid memories I have from him come from the moments he used to spend with me in his large study room. At nights, shortly after dinner, I would always find him hidden behind piles of books, often having lost track of time as he would spend hours in there. Short before his death, he had become obsessed with Project-Em", which was something I have always been proud of, as he had named it after me. This was his last project and I'd always thought it was related to his previous research on Sanctuaries of Ancient Greece.

Trying to spend as much time with him as possible, I would intrude the privacy of his office expressing genuine interest in what he was doing. He was amused by my naive questions but he would always answer them as explicitly as possible. Despite my age, I had realized that whatever he was working on had been worrying him a lot and that his friends were trying to persuade him to drop it. And so did my mum.

One night, after an awful argument between them, to which I had been a silent witness, my mother had accused him of being a dreamer who wasted his time and talent on chimeras and witch-hunt. She had left his office without noticing me hiding next to the door, but I could see the tears flowing from her eyes. My dad was sitting behind his huge oak desk with his head hidden behind his hands. I ran to him and sat on his lap to comfort him. My heart aches to the present day when I recall the bitter expression on his face, revealing pure disillusionment and despair.

'Don't worry daddy. I believe you.' I told him. He did not say anything, just stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. He smiled to me and carried me back to my room to tuck me into bed.

Two days after this, my dad was murdered. I was only ten by then. The police never caught his killer and no one could find a possible motive for killing a respectable university professor. There had been a lot of rumors, of course, but the police finally decided to close his file as one of the numerous unsolved homicides.

I have always considered myself as lucky because I had been the last person who had seen him alive. He was supposed to be taking care of me as I had come down with a cold at the last minute, changing my mother's plans.

That night we had been invited to my godfather's for a birthday dinner. My dad had decided not to go, as he and Don, my godfather, did not get on well for the past few weeks.

My mother had finally decided to go by herself, as my dad reassured her that he would take care of me.

When my mother came home, she found me alone in my bed, but there was no sign of my dad. She had waited up for him all night but he did not show up.

The next morning, little after nine, the doorbell rang. Feeling better, I had just joined my mother for breakfast in the kitchen and I knew she had been crying while she was making my milk. Listening to the doorbell, she turned so fast that she dropped the glass of milk on the floor. I remember running behind her and watching the policeman on the doorstep who nodded to her. He did not need to say anything. My mother just mumbled. 'He's dead, isn't he?'

She married Daugh seven years later. He was reasonable enough not to pretend to be a father to me. Looking back, I never really liked him. I just put up with him for my mum's sake, as it was obvious that he was a comfort to her. Since my dad's death, I felt like I had lost my mum too, for she was always depressed, silent and constantly abstracted, decided for years to lead a sequestered life. She would refuse to leave the house and she stayed away from her friends and relatives. Thankfully, we never faced any financial problems, so she had hired a governess, Alice, who took care of me.

After my father's death, we never thought of coming back to Greece. But this changed after my eighteenth birthday, when I received a letter from my father's lawyer, Mr. Jackson, who requested that I paid him a visit as soon as possible for a very important matter. We met on the following morning to present me with a sealed envelope that my father had entrusted him with. My father's instructions to Mr. Jackson had been to hand over the envelope to me when I would be at the right age. I remember opening the red wax seal my father had so often used, with trembling hands. In it there was a brief note:

Use it wisely.

There was something more in the envelope: a key to a safe deposit lock of the National Bank of Greece.

I was so curious about what my father had in store for me that I left for Greece on the next day.

'I wish you didn't have to go there, Emma. It's probably about some family heirloom.' my mother had told me, but I could see how worried she was.

'You know I can't let go just like that, mum. It's something I just have to do.' I had insisted. She knew me well enough to understand that any effort to talk me out of this would be vain.

In the bank lock I had found the most unexpected things: files, which I recognized to belong to my dad's archives, as I had seen them on his desk years ago. They had been labeled with strange names that made me instantly recall the circumstances under which my father had named them. Actually, my dad and I used to play the "baptism" game, where I got to decide the title for each of the files he was working on.

I was instantly deluged by an overflow of the sweet memories of my childhood, of the happy years when my dad's smile would seal every day as he held me safely in his wide embrace, when he explained to me the ancient Greek myths, when he tucked me into bed kissing my forehead. Inside the cold walls of the bank, I could almost feel him; I sensed his presence more intensely than ever. I cried myself out until my eyes became swollen and my head felt awfully heavy. Eventually, I picked up the thickest file, the one he had named after me.

I had spent endless, tearful nights studying 'Project-Em' before I decided to fulfil my dad's dream. He had planned an excavation in a specific area in Greece that belonged to him, aiming to bring out another ancient sanctuary, at least that was what I thought at that time. This one seemed to be really important to him, like some kind

of an obsession, as I saw numerous notes and maps where he had tried to locate the exact point where the sanctuary probably lay, covered by layers of history throughout the ages. He had labeled this spot as Point-X, the landmark of his Project. The excavation was scheduled for a week after his death. I found that he had recently bought this piece of land in the district of Mesinia, of which my mum was ignorant, and had made all the necessary arrangements with the Greek authorities.

Mr. Jackson helped me with the legal details, as I became the only legal heiress of my dad's archives. With my stepfather's help, the university "adopted" Project-Em in terms of funding, as a tribute to my dad's memory.

Unfortunately, I had not yet achieved to resuscitate the project due to unanticipated exigencies of Greek bureaucracy for the last three years. This summer, however, I was pretty optimistic about it, as I had received a letter from Demetra, the supervising archeologist, informing me about the latest developments.

'Good news Ms Ioannou. I have worked out the problems with the Archeological Service. I'm pretty sure that the excavation will be starting within a month. I need you to be here as soon as possible.' she had said over the phone.

I was so much looking forward to it! My initial inhibitions about returning to Greece were erased, as a lot more than summer school were lying ahead for me.

I left the empty tray on my desk, reminding myself to congratulate Kate on her cooking progress, although I had only tried the roast lamb.

I turned off the Dvd player because it was impossible to concentrate on the film, as my mind was still on the gorgeous tutor. That strange feeling still had not gone off and my intuition was warning me that I would soon get to know him better.

I thought of the summer school group meeting that would be taking place the following morning, feeling strangely exhilarated. For the first time ever since I had broken up with Colin I felt my heart beat fast and it surprised me to admit how much I had missed that feeling.

The next morning I woke up really early. I turned my head drowsily towards my bedside table to look at the small alarm clock our prudential landlady had left for us. I saw it was only 6.30. The summer school meeting was not until 10.00, so I tried to go back to sleep discovering soon that it was useless.

I had been tossing and turning, my pillow over my head, for almost half an hour when I finally decided to get up. I went straight to the kitchen to make coffee, since only after an adequate dose of caffeine would I be able to function properly. Strong coffee has been my one and only addiction, a delight I would always permit myself to indulge to.

The hot, bitter liquid worked instantly as a miracle. I reached for my laptop and I sat on my bed cross-legged putting it in front of me to check my e-mails. But I knew my mind was elsewhere.

Why should I be so anxious for this meeting? I asked myself as I waited for my computer to load. It would be a Monday morning meeting as always, where Rose, the summer school supervisor, would announce the classes for this week and a discussion with our tutors would follow. Of course, Dr Auburn would be joining the school staff today.

I promised myself to do my best so as not to behave foolishly in front of him again. Generally, I have always been a person with great control over my emotions and my reactions. I have consciously been very careful so as not to let others see through me. This is what I have been doing ever since my father's death. I have been well practiced. It is an impulsive strategy of defense that's helped me confront my problems in my own way, shutting out anybody who attempts to sneak into my

thoughts and my feelings. But above all, it made my mother feel better, as she had fooled herself with the comforting thought that I had overcome my father's loss so much easier than anyone had expected and without any irreversible consequences. Only I knew the truth. When she got married to Daugh, everyone thought I had accepted it quite easily, again without consequences. But I knew better than that.

An e-mail from my mother appeared on the screen, but at that moment I was not in a mood for more advice on how to behave in a foreign country. I had known for a long time that whenever I went away, her deepest fears were triggered off. She would never express them directly, of course, but she would bombard me with tips, as if she had copied pages of a travel guide.

I found this totally unnecessary, for I had never come up against any problems with the locals here. Everyone was minding their own business, which was what I wished for.

I eventually decided to take a look at my mother's e-mail and found it was what I had expected. The only unexpected thing about it was a surprisingly useful attachment by Daugh, with links relevant to the presentation I was to make for the Greek university conference in about two weeks. He had persuaded me to sign in, so that I would enrich my résumé, as he and my mother wished I would follow in my dad's steps towards an academic career.

I turned off the computer and took a second cup of coffee. I decided to have it in the garden, where it was still pretty cool and quiet, trying to concentrate on the next chapter of the detective story I had started reading a couple of days ago. But I was about to discover that the book held no interest for me anymore, as I kept checking the time every ten minutes.

It was 9.00 now and I decided it was time to get dressed. I had a quick shower, put on my stretch light blue jeans, my red sneakers and a loose, floral patterned red and white blouse. I looked at my image in the mirror and gave myself a smile of approbation. I never had any problems with my looks, although I've always considered myself as common, in fact I have been grateful for being like that. My strong point, I guess, is my figure, one of the few things life has been generous to me, because I have a slim figure but curvy at the same time, making others think I spend my time at the gym, which is far from being true of course. Kate always says that she envies my "sexy figure to which I should be giving more credit". My hair is long and light brown and I have my mother's gray eyes, although the almond shape and the long black lashes come from my dad. So does my complexion, which is not the typical British pale colour. Colin used to say I was the most beautiful girl in uni but I was sure his judgment was far from being unbiased. Besides, he was used to lying to me, anyway.

I took my sunglasses, cap, and backpack and went to get Kate. Her door was open and I saw she was still in bed. Tony was not with her.

'Isn't it a little too early?' she asked stretching her arms lazily.

'Well, I have to run some errands before the meeting, so I guess I'll see you there.' I set off before she started getting suspicious of the reasons for my anxiety.

I found my car, a white Beetle, a gift from my mother on my last birthday, under the shadow of an olive tree in the backyard. Daugh had hired a driver to drive it to Greece a week before my departure. Inside it still felt cool. That was good, considering it was 30° C already outside. I wondered whether my stretch jeans had been the right choice in this temperature, as I felt them stick on my already sweaty legs. I turned on the stereo and music from my favorite band, singing about chasing starlight, flooded the cabin. 'That's definitely a good way to start your day!' I said to myself.

The meeting did not last longer than an hour.

Rose started with the introduction of Dr Auburn.

Christopher came to shake each student's hand with a polite smile on his face.

When it was my turn, he said 'Nice to see you again Emma. How are you today?'

'Fine.' I replied laconically, smiling but keeping my hands under the desk. Not having to touch him was a good idea, as I would not like to freeze again in front of everyone in the room. Kate followed my example too, so nobody noticed my awkwardness.

I was determined to preserve my self-dignity this time, so I would choose every word carefully. After all, I had had enough time to prepare myself for meeting him this morning. Never again would he catch me unprepared.

'Emma, you should know that Christopher is also here to supervise the developments in Project-Em.' Rose announced in an anxious manner.

I flinched, alarmed by what she had just said. I had not been prepared for this. He could have told me last night, if of course I had not behaved like a fool.

'I see.' That was all I managed to say.

'Then, can I see you in my office after the meeting?' Christopher asked me.

'Sure.' I said, this time in a fake-casual manner, although I was certain my eyes revealed how alarmed I still was.

During the rest of the meeting, I tried hard not to look at him, although he was sitting just a few meters across. I had noticed he too was wearing light blue jeans and an off-white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The first three buttons of his shirt were undone revealing the upper muscles of his chest. It was impossible to concentrate on what the tutors were saying.

Kate was doodling absentmindedly; she was probably recalling last night's date with Tony. I noticed that Beth and Sue at the front desk were staring at Christopher. I had heard them talk about him excitedly before the meeting started, trying not to laugh at their childish remarks. When he was shaking their hand, they looked as if he had mesmerized them. There you are, I thought, satisfied with my discovery. I'm not the only one who behaves like a schoolgirl in front of him.

Truly, he was the most beautiful man in the room, in the building, in the city, in the whole world for all I cared. He does not belong in this context, I thought. Men like him you expect to find in magazine photos of celebrity parties and VIP resorts, not in a summer school meeting of the faculty. No, he did not belong there. He was the only dissonance in that room. I could not resist staring at him anymore, and the same wistful feeling started to overwhelm me once again. Thankfully, the meeting was over before anyone noticed my dazzled expression.

I stood up and walked to the door, battling with my desire to run away. Kate had caught up with me, asking me something I could not hear. I turned around and saw that two of the female students were going straight to him to welcome him again.

He talked to them politely for a few moments, noticing I was waiting for him by the door. He asked if he could be excused with the most irresistible smile of his.

'Hey, have you heard anything I just said?' Kate was complaining next to me.

'Sorry, what?'

'I just said we're going swimming with Tony and Mick at four. Make sure you'll be there and don't stand us up again. We have to get you out of the house, girl. It looks like you still need a push.' she said, as she put her arms under the straps of her backpack.

'I'll see you there.' I said quickly and she left me to join the others.

He came to me.

‘Shall we?’ he asked. I just nodded and let him lead. I already knew he was sharing his office with Harry. He opened the door and waited for me to go in first.

First thing he did was to turn on the air conditioner. He had probably thought the heat had caused the red on my cheeks.

‘Much better now.’ he said. ‘Please, Emma, make yourself comfortable.’ he pointed to the black, leather sofa. He sat right next to me. And it happened again. I was instantly numb, helplessly overwhelmed by his presence. Chemistry. I thought. That must be it. For the first time I had come to realize the meaning of the word. It felt as if his whole body was attracting mine in a weird, primitive way, while, at the same time, the feeling of familiarity struck me again. For a brief moment I saw myself touching him, his silk hair, his beautiful angel-like face... Pull yourself together Emma, a warning voice was shouting in my head.

He looked convincingly comfortable next to me, which is something I could not say for myself. Could he not have sensed the intensity of the atmosphere between us? His deep blue, penetrating eyes were fixed on me, making me even more uncomfortable.

I pretended to be looking around as if it was the first time I had been in Harry’s office. That didn’t help at all. When I started to think it could not get any worse, he broke the ice first.

‘I hope you’re not angry at me.’ he said.

Angry? Why should I be angry at him? He went on, as if he had read my mind.

‘For not telling you last night the reason for my presence here, I mean. I thought the timing was ...bad.’ Right now it did not help to be reminded of last night.

‘You know, there isn’t much to supervise. I’m afraid it’s all been stuck up to bureaucracy. The file has remained closed up to now.’ I tried to keep my voice calm.

He did not say anything. His eyes were still fixed on my face as if he was trying to find out my true intentions for what I had just said. I decided to be more honest as sooner or later he would discover the truth. So I went on, in a more confiding tone.

‘Still, we’re planning to start the excavation next month, if things go well. Demetra, the supervising archeologist, has been able to work out some of the problems. But you know, we’re still keeping our fingers crossed.’

‘I see.’ he said finally, looking down. His heavy black lashes were hiding the blue of his eyes.

‘Well, if this is the case, I want a copy of the file on my desk first thing in the morning.’ he said, in a slightly authoritative manner. Then his voice softened again.

‘If you don’t have a problem with this of course.’ he added.

‘Of course not.’ I said, but my unwillingness was apparent in my voice. The idea of having a stranger into my dad’s notes for once more was not welcome. But he was not really a stranger, was he? Somehow I felt I could trust him although I could not explain why.

‘May I ask where you are planning to start digging?’ he asked.

‘Point-X.’ I replied. ‘I’ll show you on the map.’ I turned to get my backpack.

‘Emma, I know exactly where Point-X is.’ His voice was suddenly cold. I was startled by his serious tone. Besides, I would never have guessed he had spent time memorizing the plans for the excavation.

He looked at me as if he was expecting me to ask something. But I was already helpless. His face was so close to mine that I could not stop myself from getting lost into his eyes once more. Those so familiar eyes! I realized I was breathing heavily.

He stood up and went to look outside the window. As soon as the distance between us increased, I felt released. I sensed there was something bothering him about what I had said. He’d better not try to change my plans, I thought. Disagreeing with him was

the last thing I needed. I was sure I would not be able to handle it, considering the effect he had over me.

He turned suddenly and I noticed his beautiful, inexplicably familiar smile was back too.

‘Now, can you show me around? Harry’s not coming until tomorrow and I haven’t had breakfast yet. So, unless you condemn me to spend my morning with Rose and Dr De Marco, will you please join me?’

I was desperate for an excuse to run out of the room, but, instead, I heard my voice as if it was someone else’s.

‘Of course.’ Second thoughts came up instantly.

‘You mean right now?’ I must be mental, I thought.

‘Yes, shall we take my car?’ I hesitated for a moment.

‘It’s settled then.’ he said, deciding for me. ‘Let’s go.’

He must have sensed I was about to be mesmerized by his eyes again.

He was walking next to me whistling a familiar tune, while I was careful to keep a safe distance from him. He certainly doesn’t belong here, I thought again. He held the passenger door of an astounding silver Audi Q7 open for me, which was something I had not been used to. He sat on the driver seat and started the car.

I tried to focus on the marvelous screen of the car but, inevitably, I could smell his perfume, reminding me of deep forest scents.

His stereo started playing, the same song I had listened in my car a couple of hours ago. I was startled by his taste in music. He put on his sunglasses, smiling. ‘Now you lead the way, Emma.’ he said.

He followed my instructions unquestioningly. I had decided to take him to one of the beach cafés where it would be most unlikely to meet any of my friends at this time of day. The girls would probably have hated me for this and I didn’t even want to think what Mick and Tony would say. However, I could think of someone I would like to see me now, next to this man who looked more like a model than a university tutor. I’d really like to see the expression on Colin’s face right now! I smiled. It surprised me to find Colin’s memory pleasurable distracting for the first time.

We were already walking on the fresh lawn of the garden of “Quasar” café.’ Soft jazz music was coming from inside.

‘Where do you want to sit?’ I asked him.

‘You choose.’ he answered, taking off his sunglasses to take a better look of the place.

I picked a table in the back garden where I knew it would not be so hot, as the shadow of the building protected it from the hot rays of the sun. It would also keep us away from the curious glances I had noticed the few customers cast on us as we were coming in. I could imagine every woman in this café was fancying him.

I realized I was quite flattered that he had invited me. Tutors, even Harry, usually went out with their colleagues, not with students. Not to mention that men like him would hang around in beach bars with models, not with university students.

He came to sit next to me, our elbows almost touching. This is too much, I thought. Colin, a thought about Colin please! But my mind suddenly became blank.

As the teenage waitress approached, I could not help smiling with the expression on her face as, naturally, she too was captured by his looks.

She had to repeat our order three times to make sure she had got it right. And it was not that much difficult to comprehend.

‘French coffee and breakfast for two. Right.’ she said finally, as she turned for the bar. It was comforting to find out again that I was not the only one who could not concentrate when being next to him.

He noticed I was smiling. ‘You look in a much better mood than before. I hope you’ll be more talkative too.’ he remarked.

‘I’m sorry Dr Auburn if I gave you the wrong impression.’ I apologized with a sheepish smile.

‘Christopher.’ He cut me. ‘After all, you have already noticed I’m not old enough to be a tutor, haven’t you?’

‘Again, I’m awfully sorry’ I hesitated. ‘...Christopher.’ I said eventually. ‘I don’t know why I said that.’

‘You were right, you know. I am too young. You weren’t of course the only one to be surprised. Most people at the School were surprised too. And they’d be more surprised if they knew I refused their invitation to be here with you.’

His tone was suddenly serious. I realized there was more to this meeting than I had originally thought.

‘Why? I mean, why did you choose to be with me?’ I asked looking at the waitress’s unsteady hands as she was emptying the tray on our table.

‘Well, I wanted to talk to you.’ He was helping himself to the toasted bread as he said that.

‘About what?’ I pretended this was the most natural conversation ever, trying to ignore the fast beating of my heart as I brought the cup of hot filter coffee to my lips. It was burning hot. I’d started to act foolishly again. I put the cup back, pretending nothing had happened, trying to ignore the pain from the burn on my tongue.

He was looking at me, with his lips tight, as if trying to hide a smile.

‘You see, I have a vested interest in you ... and this project of yours, Emma.’ he said, examining my reaction, not missing the frustration on my face.

‘Think of it as returning your father a favor.’ he added.

He probably meant Daugh. There was no way he could have meant my dad.

‘You know Daugh?’ That was a surprise! How could Daugh be one of his acquaintances? The generation gap among them must be huge, I thought.

‘I’ve met your father. But let’s not talk about that now.’

‘He’s never mentioned you.’ I said, mystified. But he changed the subject.

‘There’s plenty to talk about, Emma. For example, your presentation for the Athens conference. Are you ready for it?’

My presentation? How did he know about it? He had guessed my question, for he went on.

‘You see, I know a lot about you, believe me. But for the time being, let’s leave it here. Let’s go back to your paper. I’d like to help you with it. So, how about a meeting, tomorrow at 11.00 sharp?’

He had made it sound as the most natural thing to say. I hesitated for a moment. I liked the idea of meeting him again the next day.

‘We can do it, I guess.’ I said. ‘But what makes you think I need your help?’

‘Well, don’t you?’ he asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

I hesitated for a moment, before I said, ‘I do. It’s true. I need to turn it into a presentation format and copy-paste some photos and videos. I’m not even sure which of the videos to include.’

‘Say no more. It’s settled.’ He took another, long sip. ‘So now tell me, what should I know about the rest of the staff?’ he asked in a conspiratorial manner. I saw his face full of anticipation, the face of a child when planning to cheat in a game.

‘That will be entirely confidential information, of course.’ he added in the same manner, making me laugh. I had already started to feel more comfortable. Chatting kept me distracted, so I started talking about the tutors and saw he was extremely interested in every word I said, asking me questions which, as I realized later, made me say more than I intended to.

‘I’m sorry. I got too carried away. You’re really bad, you know. You should have stopped me.’

‘Well, I couldn’t. You were so enlightening. By the way, you’re right. I am bad.’ He was looking in his empty cup. His face had become suddenly serious.

‘But I won’t give you away. This, I can promise.’ he added and I saw he was smiling again as he looked at me, causing waves of a strange agitation in my chest.

He looked at his watch and I instantly knew our meeting was about to end.

‘I have to get you back now.’ he said. ‘I’ve a very important meeting in Athens in two hours from now and I really should be going.’

He left me next to my car, outside the university central building. Before reversing the car, he rolled down his window. ‘I’ll pick you up tomorrow at 11.00.’ I heard him say. I thought that this sounded more like a date rather than a tutorial, but it suited me fine.

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Urania Sarri lives in Korinthia, Greece with her husband and sons. She holds a BA in English Language and Literature and an Msc in Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). She is now finishing her studies for a PhD in Linguistics. She specializes in teaching English to children and young adults and she totally adores her job. While doing so, she takes any opportunity to convey to her students the passion of reading. She is fascinated by paranormal stories and appreciates good romance whenever she gets her hands on it!

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