

## *Deus* Chapters 1-3

### Chapter One

#### *Road Map*

“Colin Hancock is a dick. I don’t know why you listen to him.”

Elli rolled her eyes, ducking past a family of four rushing to the luggage carousel.

“This isn’t about Colin,” Elli reminded her, letting exasperation leak into her tone. “He’s just a certified asshole with a PhD.”

“And a god complex to match,” Sana huffed, and the line crackled in response. “Don’t pretend like you couldn’t give a shit about what he thinks. I know you better than that.”

Sana was right, though Elli didn’t want to admit it to her. Colin had been her professor at York for nearly four years- as much as she hated it, his approval mattered.

The Santorini airport was much smaller than Pearson, though the same suffocating claustrophobia permeated the entire building. Elli maneuvered herself tightly to the wall, trying her best to stay out of the way.

For a relatively small island, Santorini was bursting at the seams with people. Elli spotted families, tourists, business travelers, all in her immediate vicinity. If she didn’t get out of here soon, she was liable to faint from the sheer magnitude of it all.

“I just don’t want you spending the whole trip moping,” Sana needled, sighing as dramatically as she could. It was impressive, even through the phone. “That would be just like you; move to Greece for a year and never leave your hotel room.”

“If you were here, you could make sure that doesn’t happen,” Elli taunted, her attention finally lighting on the exit. She made a beeline for it, skirting an elderly couple embracing their grandchildren. “Any luck getting your parents to change their minds?”

“Not yet,” Sana lamented. “They’re still pissed about my transcript. I’m working on it.”

“Did you hear back from the scholarship foundation?”

Outside was a lot clearer than the interior of the airport, with people gathering in small clusters near bus stops and taxi pickups. Elli took a deep breath, letting the humidity slam against her grimy skin.

Man, she needed a shower.

It had taken nearly three days of travel to get here from Toronto, and none of it was very glamorous. Elli had crammed herself into plastic airport chairs and stiff benches, sleeping on and off to avoid paying for a hotel. She had to relent in London, with a 16-hour layover threatening to send her to an asylum if she had to spend the entire thing imprisoned inside Heathrow.

“I haven’t lost it,” Sana told her happily, though Elli wasn’t surprised. Sana may be struggling to pick a major, but she was a smart woman. Her grades alone would be enough to keep her funding. “They said this is my last extension, but they’ve said that before.”

“Maybe you should listen to them this time?” Elli laughed, considering her options. The bus schedule was written in Greek, naturally, so that wasn’t going to help her much. She eyed the line of taxis out front.

“Now you sound like Ammā,” Sana snorted, and Elli could almost see the eyeroll. “Don’t worry your pretty little head, Elle. I’ll be dragging you to a Grecian beach by next week.”

“You’d better,” Elli threatened, waving down a cab. As much as Elli loved travelling alone, this was one trip that she wanted Sana at her side. A year in Greece by herself sounded just a bit too lonely for her tastes. “I’ve gotta go, I’m on my way to the hotel now.”

“Send me pictures when you get there,” Sana demanded, a horrible racket muffling her voice. Elli winced, imagining what kind of mess she’d managed to make in her disaster zone of an apartment. “I want to see all the luxury you’re living in.”

Elli swallowed a laugh.

The cab that stopped for her was silver, falling into line with all the other branded sedans. Some were black, but most looked like the one in front of her now. Elli shifted her phone to the other ear, balancing her backpack on top of her suitcase.

“I’ll check in later, I promise,” Elli told Sana, glancing up as the driver got out of the vehicle. “I really have to go. I love you! Chat later.”

“Love you too.” Sana blew kisses into the phone, which ended up sounding like static. “Be safe!”

“I will.”

Elli’s phone almost slipped from her grasp as she tried to wrangle it into her purse pocket. The driver was opening the trunk now, oblivious to her uncomfortable fumbling.

“Sorry about that,” she grinned sheepishly, pausing when he looked up at her in surprise. “Oh... do you speak English?”

He was a middle-aged man, probably in his late forties, so it was entirely possible that he didn’t. Elli frowned, frantically trying to remember some of the modern Greek she’d learned in her first semester. Before she could butcher his native language, the man smiled.

“A little,” he shrugged, his accent thick with uncertainty. “I am learning.”

Elli exhaled in relief, smiling at him properly. He was tall and lanky, with a wiry frame that would buckle in a strong breeze. His thinning, sandy brown hair made him look older than he was, and his wide-set brown eyes gave him an air of seriousness that Elli hoped wasn’t as prominent as it looked.

“I’m going here.” Elli held out the printed copy of her hotel reservation for the man to read, not bothering to try and pronounce it herself. She planned to brush up on her Greek while she was here, much to her mamá’s dismay. Elli’s Spanish was suffering from disuse, as she often liked to point out.

The driver nodded, ushering her into the back of the cab and setting his meter.

Elli leaned back against the black leather seats as they began to move, sliding easily into line with the other cabs and rental cars. The car smelled like industrial cleaner and air freshener, which Elli found oddly nostalgic.

“You are American, yes?”

The driver’s voice startled her, interrupting her surveyance of the airport traffic.

“Canadian,” she corrected politely. “My parents live on the east coast.”

He nodded sagely, taking a wide turn onto more open road.

“They did not travel with you?”

“No,” Elli confirmed with an easy shrug. “They both have work. I plan to stay here for a while. Soul-searching, you know. Can’t exactly squeeze that into a long weekend.”

“I hope you enjoy it,” the driver told her, and Elli accepted the well wishes with a smile.

Back at the airport, it was easy to believe that Elli had arrived in another part of Canada that she hadn’t seen before. The busy to-and-fro of international travelers seemed to be universal, and nothing struck her as truly ‘new’ until the cab cleared the arrival traffic.

The Aegean Sea opened before her, colouring her window a luminous blue.

*Now* it felt like she was in Greece.

Elli pressed her face to the window as discreetly as she could, drinking in the magnificent sights. The rocky cliffs jutted in all directions, framing the ocean with a cream-coloured border. The buildings were made of brilliant stone, painted to a pristine white so they would stand out against the abundance of blue.

Her stomach did a little flip, lodging firmly in her throat.

She was here. She was really here.

Elli settled back against the seat again, trying to calm her racing heart. When she told her parents that she wanted to spend a year travelling abroad, they hadn't really believed she'd do it. Hell, Elli didn't believe it either until she bought the tickets. Then her parents worked themselves into a frenzy, doing everything they could think of to dissuade her. Elli held fast to her conviction, easing their worries as best as she could. Eventually, after some strategic guilt-tripping and meticulously laid out arguments, they had no choice but to accept her decision. She hadn't lived with her parents since she was 18 years old, and that was nearly ten years ago, but Elli would always seek their approval. This trip would've left a sour taste in her mouth if she'd had to go against their wishes.

"Have you visited Santorini before?" The driver asked her conversationally, ignoring the wild honking of a car that Elli was fairly certain they'd cut off. "It is a beautiful island."

"I haven't," Elli shook her head, leaning forward to speak to him better. "This is my first time in Greece."

"Europe?"

"I've been to Spain a couple of times," she told him, smiling fondly. "My abuela lives in Caliz with the rest of Mamá's family."

"Spain is a good country," the driver nodded in agreement. "Not as good as here."

"I'm excited to see for myself," Elli told him, her attention catching on the scenery again as they passed into a more urban part of the island. They should be getting to the hotel soon, if her snooping on Google Maps had been at all accurate.

Elli didn't have a lot of money to spare, but she'd splurged a little on her first home-away-from-home. The *Ducato Di Oia* was a beautiful hotel directly on the waterfront, and for one week it was to be hers. After that, Elli didn't know exactly where she was going to go, but she had some time to figure it out.

The one thing she knew for certain was that she didn't plan to waste any of her time here. More than that, she *definitely* wasn't going to waste any of it brooding over Colin and his temper.

Well, that's what she told herself, anyway.

Twenty-five minutes after leaving the airport, the buildings began to tier themselves around her. Elli scanned the road signs, looking for the markers she'd picked out online. Before she knew it, they arrived.

The cab pulled in front of the hotel, stopping just short of the main entrance. Elli fumbled with her wallet, rushing to get her local currency ready to pay her fare. After that, she nearly launched herself from the car.

Waves crashing noisily against the rocks below greeted her, as did the humid ocean air. Elli resisted the urge to openly gape, dragging her attention from one feature to the next, trying not to linger on one wonder for too long.

The hotel was much bigger than she thought it would be, with white stone walls that seemed to branch in every direction, leaving her struggling to determine what the actual shape of the building was. The roof was flat, blending in with the geometric design of the structure. Everything that she could see was made of stone, either an unnatural white or a deeply natural grey. The overall effect was luxury, if it sprouted directly from the cliffs.

"The front desk is that way," the driver told her, laying her suitcase gently beside her. She must've been staring a bit too blatantly, judging by his knowing smile. "I hope you enjoy your trip."

"Thank you," Elli grinned sheepishly, waving to him as he pulled the car out of the parking lot. She waited until he was on the road again before turning her full attention to the hotel and the city that would be her new temporary home.

## Chapter Two

### *Into the Fire*

Elli had barely started unpacking her things when she got a text from Sana. Her phone was sitting on the nightstand, buzzing intermittently as she caught up on all the notifications she'd missed while flying. Before leaving Canada, she thought about ditching the phone altogether, but Sana would've killed her if she even tried to bring it up.

This was both amusing and a relief to her; Elli and Sana had spent nearly every day together since they were children, so not speaking to her for long periods was unsettling. Besides, traveling alone without an immediate lifeline to her friends and family? That was a bit more than Elli was ready to take on.

Her hotel room looked much like the exterior of the building- all whites and rich blues. The doorways were arched and made of stone, leaving Elli feeling like she was walking into a castle. Dark wood furniture filled the moderately sized space, every available surface dotted with either colourful fruit bowls or equally colourful local art pieces.

Elli fell onto the double bed, ruffling the pristine white comforter as she opened Sana's message. It felt good to stretch out after so many hours folded into a plane seat that even a contortionist would have trouble finding comfort in.

*I forgot to tell you. Charlie has been insufferable lately.*

Immediately, Elli frowned.

*Oh God, he's asking about me?*

*Asking, pestering, worrying, every -ing you can think of.*

That left an uncomfortable feeling in Elli's throat. Charlie had no business bothering Sana about anything, let alone her.

*Did you tell him where he can shove it?*

*Yep. He just told me to watch Taken again.*

Elli sighed, deflating into the bed and letting her phone drop onto the pillow.

She supposed it was too much to hope for Charlie to forget about her when she left the country. Even on separate continents, he was still making her life more stressful than it needed to be.

*Ignore him, Sana texted, sensing the annoyance in Elli's silence. He'll take the hint eventually.*

*I don't think he'd take a hint if it punched him in the face.*

*I can try that.*

Elli laughed, shaking her head. If she gave the word, she had no doubt that Sana would jump at the chance to give her ex a solid left hook.

It wasn't *entirely* Charlie's fault, as much as she hated to admit it. He and Elli had been dating on and off for years, so it wasn't totally insane for him to think that their latest break up wasn't necessarily final. Still, she wasn't about to make excuses for him. Charlie was determined to insert himself into her life, whether she wanted him to or not. And Elli was firmly on the side of 'not'.

It had been eight months since their most recent break up, and Elli knew this one was final even if Charlie didn't. Theirs was a teenage romance that had long since fizzled out, and Elli couldn't afford to waste any more energy on protecting the feelings of someone who clearly didn't care about hers.

As a matter of fact, there were a number of things she couldn't afford to waste energy on anymore.

She told Sana she was going to take a nap, and then turned to her open suitcase. On top of a pile of neatly folded clothes, there was a small stack of paper. The paper was typed-on and stapled,

scribbled all over and wrinkled, but it was still legible. Sana would kill her if she knew Elli brought it with her.

Colin would probably be thrilled that he'd gotten under her skin so completely.

Maybe she was tired from the trip, or maybe she was feeling morbid after learning about Charlie's unwanted persistence, but suddenly Elli found herself reaching for the paper and flipping to the last page, where Colin had absolutely destroyed her hopes of a career.

*Uninspired. Contributes nothing to the topic discussed.*

The notes were written in angry, pointed script, with a fading red pen. Colin had underlined the most cutting words, as if to highlight her shame. Elli thought about covering the comments with a permanent marker, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Not after she received the letter that was tucked into the middle of her failed essay.

No matter how down she was, she wouldn't look at it. Not again.

The sounds of the ocean seeped in through her window, reminding her again of how far she was from home.

Enough moping, then. Elli didn't leave Toronto to spend the entire trip curled up in her hotel room, feeling sorry for herself. If she was going to do that, she would've saved a lot of money by just going to her parents' house in New Brunswick. With a determined huff, Elli threw her essay back onto her suitcase and marched for the door.

Screw Colin, and screw Charlie. They were a million miles away from her.

The front desk had given her a short list of nearby sights and points of interest when Elli checked in, and that seemed like the perfect distraction. It felt strange arriving in a foreign country with no plan and barely enough money to live, but if her mother could do it, then so could Elli.

It was almost comical, really, that Emilia Verónica Porter née Pérez was so adamantly against her daughter traveling abroad when she herself had immigrated to Canada from Cádiz in the 80s, alone, with barely a penny to her name. Elli took great joy in reminding Emilia of this fact whenever she was especially adamant that Elli should just stay home. Unsurprisingly, her mamá began to regret telling Elli that story in recent months.

The hotel's list was helpfully divided into a handful of categories ranging from shopping to food to sightseeing. Elli flipped the stiff paper in her hands, noting the addition of a map in the last section. She was hungry, but after so many hours of traveling and so little sleep, Elli wasn't sure she'd be able to stomach anything. Shopping was a bit more appealing, but she didn't want to risk blowing her meager budget on her first day, so that left the only category that wouldn't cost her anything.

The hotel was no less confusing on the inside, and after a quick change of shoes, Elli wandered uncertainly into the hall. It took her longer than she was willing to admit to find her way back to the lobby, but the temporary panic faded quickly at the glowing sunlight filtering in through the front windows. The receptionist waved cheerfully as she passed, and Elli made a mental note to thank her for her hospitality.

Outside, Elli found exactly the distraction she was looking for.

Humidity aside, the weather was warm and welcoming as she tentatively meandered away from the hotel property. It was early evening now; the hustle and bustle of mid-afternoon traffic having since slowed to a trickle. Elli took a deep breath of unfamiliar sea air, listening to the sounds of waves and gulls in the distance.

There was a beach on the list, wasn't there?

Well, perhaps 'beach' was a bit generous for the stretch of shore that she quickly found herself on. The hotel looked out over the water, hugging the edges of the rocky shore so closely that Elli almost worried a strong wind would blow the building directly into the water. A damp wooden sign poked innocuously from behind the safety fence skirting the lawn, depicting a simple drawing of waves and an arrow. Elli followed the barebones directions, finding herself on a winding gravel path downward.

She'd seen pictures of incredible beaches in Santorini, but they were located on other parts of the island. This was a rock beach, barely any room for walking between the jagged cliffs and bulging boulders. From the roadside above, the crystalline blue bay was shaped almost like a crescent moon, as if some unfathomable monster had taken a huge bite out of the island. Elli scanned the area, but not another soul was around. The hotel had beautiful individual pool balconies in most rooms, so she wasn't surprised that the thin, rugged shore was left abandoned.

Sliding down the rocky slope wasn't easy, even with the indicated path. Elli knew almost immediately that this couldn't be a popular tourist beach, if the ease of access was any indication. The hotel listed it as a 'quiet, secluded photo opportunity', and even that was a bit of an embellishment. Sure, the view was incredible, but whether it was worth the trek remained to be seen.

After some graceless maneuvering, and more than a few scratches on the backs of her legs, she managed to end up at the water's edge with only minor injuries to show for it.

It was chillier down here, with the breeze coming directly off the water. Elli had thought about changing from her travelling hoodie and leggings into something more seasonally appropriate, but now she was glad she hadn't. Her ankle boots weren't much protection from the sharp rocks beneath her feet, but they were better than the pair of thin flip flops she'd been wearing on the plane.

Even the ocean was different here. Elli once thought that the ocean was the same everywhere, that no matter where she went there was an air of familiarity about the open water that would be nostalgic and comforting. Here though, everything was different. The waves moved in gentle ripples, reflecting the bright, happy blue of the unobstructed sky. Back at her parents' home, the sea was angry and fearsome, more grey than blue, and foreboding even on the calmest days. There was nothing of her home here, nothing to remind her that she wasn't a world away from everything she's ever known and loved.

It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

Carefully, Elli picked her way along the shore, walking parallel to the softly pulsing waves. She was in no rush- that was the benefit of traveling without a plan; she could let her whims guide her more than she ever could back in Toronto.

More than once, Elli wondered if she'd made a mistake in coming here. For the weeks leading up to the trip, Sana had to regularly assure her that her decision was the right one, that taking some time to reflect and relax was the best thing she could do. Elli knew she was right, but she didn't really believe it until she got here. Now, she couldn't imagine ever second-guessing herself.

She still didn't know what she was going to do, but her problems felt much smaller here. And wasn't that the whole point?

A rock tumbled out from beneath her foot, making her stumble. Elli caught herself before she plummeted into the surf, brushing her wild hair away from her face. It was already starting to frizz, as her mother promised it would. She had the same thick waves as Elli and had grown up near the sea. At her insistence, Elli brought lots of hair ties.

This feeling of freedom was foreign to her. All her life, Elli had known exactly who she wanted to be and what she wanted to do. She'd been on the same track for as long as she could remember- nothing in question, nothing doubted. In one semester, Colin Hancock had managed to throw her entire life plan into disarray. It wasn't fair, but Elli also couldn't ignore it. He was the head of the Classics department at York, and his opinion mattered. She really hated that.

"Maybe I should've been a dancer like Mamá," Elli sighed aloud, knowing that would've been impossible. She'd unwillingly inherited her father's lack of rhythm.

The surf was rising with the setting sun, the starkly coloured water growing mildly agitated the longer Elli walked. She didn't know how far she'd strayed from the hotel, but the ground was slowly evening out the further she went. There were traces of other people, too- empty fire pits, forgotten towels, even a sand pail- so she must be entering a more populated part of the beach.

Elli wandered closer to the abandoned beach wares, glancing about to see if their owners were nearby. Her thoughts were turning sour, so some socialization might be exactly what she needed to lift her spirits.

The pail was the first thing she reached, driven down into the rocks and cracked along the rim. Elli was about to skim past it when some movement caught her eye.

The pail wasn't empty after all.

Inside, swimming in lazy, broken circles, was a sickly-looking pufferfish.

"Shit," Elli cursed, immediately lifting the bucket out of the rocks. The plastic was scalding to the touch having been left out in the sun for so long- the poor fish must be boiling alive.

She rushed to the shore, carefully positioning herself on a flat, mostly dry rock. The fish seemed to come to life a little as she jostled it, but Elli worried she was too late. The little bucket was barely big enough for the similarly little fish, and Elli had no idea how long it'd been out here. Gently, Elli lowered the pail into the water.

The pufferfish continued to swim in circles, not realizing freedom was at hand. Elli tipped the bucket a little more, until the fish could see that it was home. In a burst of energy, it shot into the open surf.

It swam in erratic patterns for too long. Elli held her breath, praying that the little guy would snap out of it. Could the sudden change in temperature have shocked him? Maybe she should've held the bucket in the water longer. She was about to reach in with the pail again, hoping that something would come to her if she watched him for long enough, when the little fish suddenly sprang to life, darting into the deep blue.

Elli sighed in relief, smiling at the spot where the fish vanished. She wasn't sure if it would live, but it had a much better chance now than it did before she arrived.

"That's it," she rolled her eyes, her voice monotone. "Forget dancer, I should rescue fish for a living."

It sounded like something she would've said at 5 years old, whenever someone asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. Who could've guessed that at 28, she still wouldn't have a solid answer?

With that bitterly amusing thought in mind, Elli turned to make her way back to the safety of the beach.

*"Kalispera, Canadian girl! We meet again!"*

Elli yelped, pitching forward on the uneven terrain. She caught herself at the last second, teetering on a loose stone.

"Sorry, sorry!" The voice laughed, and Elli looked up in time to see a man lightly jogging across the beach to help her. She moved to more solid ground before he reached her, brushing her hair out of her face to look at him properly.

"That was my fault," she dismissed, smiling politely. The man looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place his lanky frame and thinning hair. "I didn't know anyone else was here."

"Exploring a foreign country alone? Brave girl!" The man laughed, shaking his head at her. The curt movement finally sparked recognition in Elli's mind.

This was the cab driver from the airport.

"I guess that depends on your definition of 'brave'." Elli fidgeted. Her relief at placing the man quickly gave way to wariness. This was strange, wasn't it? Running into the same man again, scant hours later, on a deserted beach? Maybe it was the fright she'd gotten, but something in Elli's gut twisted in warning.

"I guess that depends on the person," he countered, smiling openly. "I would say that traveling alone is brave. I've never done it myself, and I don't think I ever would."

Elli shrugged and maintained her polite smile. She was being silly, she told herself firmly. This man was being nothing but nice to her, and yet suspicion was raging through her veins. Her mamá's lectures must've affected her more than she thought. Still, the cab driver's overly friendly demeanor was putting her on edge. He hadn't been this talkative in the car.

They stared at each other for a moment, awkwardly shifting focus from the lack of conversation to the scenery and back again. Elli discreetly scanned the rocky cliff face, looking for possible escape routes. Just in case.

"I see you've found my son's sand pail," the driver said suddenly, pointing at the bucket swinging in Elli's grasp. She'd almost forgotten it was there at all.

"Oh!" She held it up, sending a spray of sand and water everywhere in the process. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to take it—"

"Nonsense," the driver snorted, giving her a toothy grin. There was something off-putting about his general disposition, and it was driving Elli nuts. Not to mention, setting off alarm bells in her mind.

She shouldn't be so distrusting, but her gut had been right too many times to ignore it now.

"He's always leaving things wherever we go," the driver continued, taking another step towards her. His attention shifted over her shoulder, to something she couldn't see. "Javan! Come get your toy!"

Elli began to turn, holding the sand pail out for the driver's son to take, when she realized three things simultaneously.

First, the driver was still wearing his clothes from earlier. Jeans and a white button-down t-shirt, not exactly beach attire.

Second, his thick accent had dropped. He was speaking perfect English.

And third, it was not a child standing behind her.

Elli threw the pail in alarm, opening her mouth to scream, but she wasn't quick enough. A thick, meaty hand clamped a dingy cloth over half of her face, and the last thing Elli remembered was trying to catch herself before she smashed her head on the rocks below.



## Chapter Three

### *Cornered and Caged*

Jetlag really was a bitch.

Elli scrunched her nose, fighting back a cry at the explosion of pain that erupted behind her eyes. She'd always been prone to stress headaches, but this was on a whole new level. Her neck hurt, her head hurt, her throat hurt- just about everything hurt if she focused on it long enough. Thank God her dad had reminded her to bring ibuprofen.

Elli groaned, rolling onto her side. Or at least, that's what she tried to do. Her body wouldn't respond properly, like something was keeping her in place. Her wrists felt chafed and sore, her knees aching from being bent for who knows how long. Had she accidentally fallen asleep in the wicker armchair in her room? She fought to open her eyes, preparing for the light to aggravate her pounding head.

All she could see at first was a splash of blue, spread out before her like a vast ocean. Her vision swam, making her dizzy. Was the hotel ceiling blue? She couldn't remember.

A biting breeze whipped across her cheek, and Elli knew with one hundred percent certainty that she wasn't in her hotel.

The vast sea of blue actually *was* the sea, stretching out in every direction. The wind shocked her into awareness, the events at the beach coming into clear focus in her mind.

The cab driver. The sand pail. The cloth.

Panic stirred in Elli's chest, tempered by disbelief. She lifted her head slowly, trying not to draw too much attention to herself as she assessed her surroundings.

She was on a boat, that much was obvious. The floor tipped and rolled beneath her, making her vaguely nauseated. She was sitting on rusted steel, spattered with all manner of gunk from both the land and the water, creating a smell that clawed at her nostrils relentlessly. The sides of the boat had clearly been white in the past, but now were a mixture of copper rust and yellow age. Elli couldn't see behind her, but the rough press of cold metal told her she'd find more of the same.

Her wrists were bound with zip ties, fastened with just enough care to be effective.

Elli took a deep, steady breath. The panic was fighting its way to the forefront now, and she knew she had to do something before it took hold. Zip ties... she'd learned how to break out of zip ties from a video once, hadn't she? Something about tightening them and...

Fear gripped Elli's heart as she struggled to remember, the reality of the danger she was in settling like a rock in her stomach. She didn't know what was going on, but she knew she needed to get out of here.

Voices carried along the breeze, and Elli froze.

"...énas..."

Fluid Greek met her ears, her heart sinking. Elli could pick her way through the language once upon a time, but her memory had diminished since she turned her attention to Latin and ancient Greek in her studies. She strained to hear, praying for anything familiar.

"We'll meet you... yes. Canadian. Big... pay."

Most of the conversation was a jumbled mess, but Elli picked out enough to turn her blood to ice in her veins. Two words surfaced at the back of her mind, struggling to make their way to the forefront. She wouldn't let them, because if she did, Elli thought she might pass out.

Human trafficking.

She'd heard stories, of course. Young women getting kidnapped in the dead of night, snatched in an abandoned parking lot or lured in by a man with a fake injury. All her life, Elli had been told that it could happen to anyone, at any time, and to always be vigilant, especially when she was alone. Like any woman her age, Elli was always cautious, but there was a small part of her that believed she was safe. Safe in the daylight, in a place where parents took their children to play. In a country that welcomed tourists with open arms.

She knew now- much too late- that she'd made a mistake.

The urge to thrash and tug viciously at her bonds was overwhelming, but Elli fought it down with brittle determination. She had to be smart about this.

They were on a boat, in the middle of the ocean. Elli didn't know how far they were from shore, but she'd risk swimming for it. At least in the water she had a chance- maybe she'd come across a surfer, or a pleasure boat, someone who could help- but here, she knew her fate was sealed.

First though, she needed to get out of these ties.

Using her teeth, Elli tightened the zip ties as much as she could, until the plastic was biting painfully into her skin. That much she knew was right.

Carefully, she lined her arms up on either side of her knee. Elli wasn't positive on the motion, but she had to try. The voices had disappeared, but that didn't mean her kidnappers weren't close by. If she wanted to escape, it had to be now.

With a deep breath, Elli slammed her joint wrists down onto her knee.

The zip tie pulled but didn't break, cutting into her skin and drawing blood. Elli bit back a yelp, chewing her lip to keep quiet. She took a staggered breath, lining it up again. This time, she jolted her knee up in time with her wrists, and the zip tie snapped with a frightfully loud thwack.

The breath caught in Elli's throat.

She hesitated for just a moment, long enough to process that she'd managed to free herself, before her flight instinct took a stranglehold on her chest. Her whole body tensed, ready to launch into a sprint for the side of the boat, when the voices returned.

This time, accompanied by her kidnappers.

Elli fell back against the wall with a barely contained cry, tucking her wrists between her knees to hide her freedom. The two men appeared not a second later, and Elli recognised one of them as the cab driver.

"You're awake!" He greeted in a perfect English accent, grinning at her. "I was hoping you'd get to see the sunset. It's beautiful on this side of the island."

"Calix," the other man rumbled, furrowing his brows in disapproval. "You shouldn't taunt her."

It was such an absurd reprimand that Elli almost laughed.

The two men fell back into Greek, so Elli took the opportunity to assess her second kidnapper. He was shorter than Calix but not by much, wiry and almost skeletal in his appearance. His hands were the only large thing about him, hanging at his sides like prepped weapons.

Javan, that was his name.

Thin black hair hung to his chin, almost melding into the thick stubble around his neck and jaw. Elli tried to memorize as much as she could, taking a mental picture of the duo that she could give to police if she ever escaped them.

"Where is your passport?"

"Excuse me?"

Elli lifted her head defiantly, expression guarded. The question had come so abruptly that she almost missed it amidst the foreign words.

"Your passport," Calix repeated in annoyance, turning to face her. "You didn't have any ID on you at the beach."

“Who brings their passport to the beach?” Elli shot back, regretting the words the moment they left her lips. Calix smirked, sinking into a crouch before her.

“This isn’t a tit for tat,” he drawled, digging a cigarette out of his pants pocket. It was crinkled and damp. Elli wondered if it would even light. “I asked you a question, so you should answer it.”

“It’s in my suitcase,” Elli lied. The first thing she’d done when she got to the room was lock all her important belongings in the hotel safe. Calix didn’t seem to pick up on her lie thankfully, and leaned back on his heels, assessing her.

“Who knows you’re here?” He asked, twirling the cigarette without reaching for a lighter. Elli kept her mouth shut, refusing to answer.

If she was going to die, she wasn’t about to rope any of her family or friends into it. Not a chance.

Calix sensed her stubbornness, gently placing the unlit cigarette between his chapped lips. He considered her for a moment and then, faster than she could react, he slapped her.

Elli reeled back in shock, her cheek stinging from the impact.

“This will go a lot smoother for you if you cooperate,” Calix said conversationally, sneering. “The people we’re bringing you to won’t be nearly as patient as we are.”

When Elli again refused to speak, Calix drew his hand back threateningly.

Elli flinched away, resisting the urge to bring her hands up protectively over her face. Calix and Javan hadn’t yet realized that she’d freed herself, and she couldn’t risk the only advantage she had left.

“Leave her alone, Cal.” Javan crossed his arms over his bony chest, rolling his eyes to the clouds. “She hasn’t started screaming yet and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I do hate it when they scream,” Calix agreed, pushing himself up into a standing position once again. The bones in his legs creaked and popped, making Elli wince.

They were speaking Greek again, and Elli wondered how much of their decision to speak English was based in comfort for her and how much was an attempt to make her feel isolated. On a boat in the middle of the ocean, they didn’t have to work too hard to make that happen.

The sun was almost touching the water on the horizon. If Elli didn’t make at least an attempt at escape before dark, she worried she’d never get the chance at all. During the day, she could see her surroundings. At night, she was at the mercy of the elements.

But Calix and Javan didn’t seem keen on leaving her alone again.

Elli’s throat tightened. She had to move soon; her window was closing quickly, and the diminishing light made her panic swell. Could she cause a distraction? Not without them seeing her. What about her things? Calix said she didn’t have any ID on her, so he must’ve searched her. Had they taken her room key and her phone? She couldn’t check now, not with them lingering so close. Why were they still on the deck anyway? Didn’t one of them have to navigate? They couldn’t possibly stay out here all day-

A shrill ringing cut through the dull roar of the ocean.

Calix reached into his baggy pants, pulling out what looked like an ancient cell phone. Elli stared, realizing with a jolt that it was a satellite phone. She’d never seen one in real life before, but she couldn’t think of anything else it could be.

Calix grunted into the phone, listening for only a beat. He glanced at Elli, then at Javan, and jerked his chin to the back of the vessel. Wordlessly, they both moved toward the cabin door.

Whoever was on the other end of that line must be the person they were going to meet. Elli wasn’t sure how she knew, but the feeling pierced her to her bones. She needed to run, and she needed to run now.

As soon as Calix and Javan were out of sight, Elli bolted to wobbly legs. She tipped forward on her first step, her entire lower body alive with pins and needles. After a few unsteady test shakes, she lunged for the side of the boat.

The sea was pure blue, not murky and grey like the Atlantic. Elli scanned the surface for anything useful- an island, a boat, even a buoy- but there was nothing. Nothing as far as the eye could see.

Her next scan was of the boat itself, looking desperately for a lifeboat or jacket, anything at all she could use. Again, she came up empty.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes, but she couldn't cry. Not yet.

With time and options in short supply, Elli knew she'd have to jump.

Throwing herself from the deck of a boat was easy in theory, but when she peered down into the bottomless sea below, her stomach lurched, and she froze. This went against every self-preservation instinct she had, and the payoff wasn't guaranteed. What if she drowned? What if a shark attacked her? What if she swam in the wrong direction and ended up even further out than before? This was stupid. Completely and utterly stupid. She couldn't jump, she just couldn't-

"Hey!"

The shout startled her into a scream and Elli whirled in time to see Calix and Javan rushing towards her.

Her options had just run out.

With a deep breath, Elli vaulted herself over the side of the boat.

She was airborne for only a moment when a sweaty hand clamped around her leg, jerking her backwards. Elli screamed, kicking viciously as she hit the railing at hip height and felt her stomach lurch in protest. Calix wrestled with her, yanking her back into the boat, as Javan ran up with something else to secure her.

It was a net. A fishing net.

Elli could break a zip tie, but she didn't know how to cut through a rope without some sort of tool. If Javan managed to tie her down with that, even temporarily, all hope was lost. Elli thrashed, striking out like a wild animal, hitting and biting and struggling to get free. Calix held fast, though he took several wallops to the face and chest.

She was hauled to her feet, the net going around her arms, and Elli found her opening.

Calix loosened his grip just long enough to let Javan wrap the net around her, and Elli threw everything she had into jerking herself free. Calix fell backward, cursing in Greek, and Javan lost his grip on the rope. Neither of them had a hold of her anymore.

Elli didn't think- she sprang for the side of the boat, barely pausing to take a breath before she jumped. The water stretched beneath her, cold and inviting.

The last thing she heard was furious shouts from the deck of the boat before she hit the water, the ocean swallowing her in one defiant gulp.