

*Intertwined
Souls*

NOR THE BATTLE TO THE STRONG



MARY D. BROOKS

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Nor The Battle To The Strong

Intertwined Souls Series Book 6

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Will Justice For One Have Life Threatening Repercussions For Many?

On the night of November 9, 1938 in Berlin, Germany a teenager's life was forever changed. Sent to Aiden at the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, body and mind were shattered in the brutal Aiden Research Facility. Eighteen years later, Eva Lambros is no longer a teenager but a wealthy heiress. She is poised and confident with the family she has always wanted but there is one last obstacle she must overcome. Together with her partner, the formidable Zoe Lambros, they travel to Aiden to open a memorial to the hundreds of souls that lost their lives. Aiden left Eva with debilitating mental constraints that have taken years to overcome but is she ready to confront and overcome her greatest fear?

Zoe not only has to contend with Eva's state of mind, but she is also pulled into a mystery that involves a woman's search for justice amidst shocking revelations that reaches into the upper echelons of Aiden society.

The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong...

CHAPTER 1 – SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

October 12, 1956

SYDNEY IN THE SPRING WAS GLORIOUS. It felt different--lighter and more carefree than the mild winters or the coming sweltering summer days. The sky was a powdery baby blue, and the jacaranda trees with their burst of purple flowers signaled the imminent arrival of summer with its dazzling sunshine-filled days and a humidity that frizzled Zoe's already curly red hair into an unmanageable mass. The grass almost looked like a carpet of purple had been arranged to honor the trees high above the ground. October was Zoe Lambros' favorite time of the year. Today was her twenty-eighth birthday and she was celebrating with her partner of twelve years, Eva, their children, and extended family.

Zoe laughed while watching Eva, who was down on one knee with a cricket bat in her hands that was far too small for her six-foot-plus height. Her sunglasses slid down her nose and she was looking down the length of the yard at the eager bowler. Her son was jumping on the spot just waiting for his turn. The children were all shouting encouragement to him.

"Come on, Nicky! The knees, Nicky, the knees!"

Their friend Henry said something from the back of the yard and Eva turned around, and although Zoe couldn't hear them, she saw Henry laughing and waving the tongs at Eva.

Backyard cricket was in full swing with Eva facing the less than menacing bowling of five-year-old Nicholas 'Nicky' Lambros. Surrounding Eva, ready get her out of the game, were their daughter Larissa and the other children that belonged to their circle of close friends. Nicky had reached the wraparound veranda and started his long run up to the wicket.

He released the ball, which bounced once and then rolled towards Eva and past her legs, and just missed the upturned garbage can which acted as the stumps. A collective groan greeted Eva, who shrugged and shouted encouragement to Nicky.

She lowered her glasses, glanced at Zoe, and winked. Nicky started his run up again and released the ball, which bounced on the grass. It was going flat until, for some inexplicable reason, it bounced again and struck Eva on the knee. The ball bounced off Eva's knee, hit the top of the bat handle and went into the waiting hands of Larissa. Yells of 'Howzat!' reverberated around the yard intermixed with Eva's exuberant arguing with the umpire, their friend Earl Wiggins. The dreaded umpire's finger went up to indicate the batter was out and Eva got up from the grass shaking her head. It was comical to see Larissa's attempt to mimic one of their cricketing heroes in celebration by racing around in circles, red pigtails flying, while Nicky jumped. They had finally got their mother out.

Zoe shook her head. She was well aware of what had happened to that ball. Eva was gifted with extraordinary mental abilities. Telekinesis, the gift that was used to move the ball, was used in play, but Zoe knew her power. Their children didn't know about it yet, but the time was fast approaching when they would have to tell them.

As Eva jogged past Zoe, Zoe touched her hand. Eva stopped and kissed Zoe's hand before she continued into the kitchen. Moments later, she came back out and made her way to the back of the yard to protect the ball from climbing high up in the air and down the cliff. She sat down on the sandstone fence which separated the yard from the sea below. She put on her sunglasses and a large floppy hat, and yelled encouragement to Larissa whilst she waited to bat.

This was their life; a home in Sydney with two adorable children and peace at last. This was a hard-fought peace, and their life was either simple or complex depending on whether someone knew the truth about the Lambros family. To the casual observer, Eva Lambros, the wealthy, extremely private heiress and owner of Lambros Steel, was living in a large estate with her sister-in-law Zoe Lambros, who was divorced from Eva's cousin, Dr. Thomas

Steigler Lambros, and their two children. Eva was also divorced from Zoe's brother, Theodore Lambros. To the casual observer, it was a case of the wealthy divorcee looking after her sister-in-law and her children. That was as simple as it needed to be.

To the select few who were privy to the real family dynamics, the perception of what society considered 'normal' was very different from the reality behind that ornate wrought iron gate--the truth was that Eva and Zoe were lovers in the most unconventionally conventional family arrangement that worked for all of them. Both women entered marriage with a man for different reasons, one of the chief ones being that they wanted to have children. They were married in a society that didn't accept their 'kind' - two women in any kind of loving relationship. It was abnormal and deviant. They hid their relationship to the outside world beyond their estate gate. Zoe's artistic, outgoing personality and exuberant nature contrasted with the intensely private and reserved woman whom she loved passionately.

Their home was their oasis, or as Eva liked to call it, their little Paradise Island. Zoe was certain that Eva had read far too many Wonder Woman comic books to their five-year-old daughter and had decided she liked the idea of Paradise Island.

Zoe loved the sound of her children's voices ringing out across the yard. The place was festooned with balloons and streamers that ran across the railing of the wraparound porch, and also hung on the trees. The yard came to a stop at a sandstone wall that overlooked the Pacific Ocean and a giant redwood that sat on the precipice of a cliff.

The multi-story house was situated on a vast inner city property, and it was one of three buildings on the estate that made up what was referred to as 'The Lambros Estate.' Outside the main grounds of the property were the offices of Lambros Steel, an Australian company that had its roots in Berlin, Germany. It was the Australian arm of AEMullerStahl, the German steel manufacturer that was one of the largest steel producers in Germany. Wilbur Muller and his niece Eva owned it. Behind the main building and surrounded by trees as a natural barrier, there was an ornate gate emblazoned with the Lambros Steel logo—a phoenix rising above the fire. It was the entrance to the main property. Two other smaller cottages were situated on the estate in addition to the main house. One was a guest cottage and the other was Zoe's art studio, known as "ZL Designs," which had an ornate Z emblazoned on the front door. It was more than the first letter of Zoe's first name, since it also incorporated Eva's initials. To the uninitiated, it was a just an odd- looking version Zoe's initials, but to Zoe, it was a blending of the two personalities which had made the studio possible. No one needed to or would be privy to the history behind the logo.

Without Eva working at a back breaking, mundane job to support her through Art College, Zoe would not have seen her dream become reality. It was because of Eva's desire to give Zoe her life's wish that she was the artist she was today.

Zoe watched her dear friend Henry Franz, apron-clad with a bottle of beer in one hand and a pair of tongs in the other, in charge of the barbecue towards the back of the yard. The smoke drifted sideways with the direction of the gentle breeze as he added more sausages to the elaborate barbecue top.

Everyone, including Eva, jumped into the pool after the game ended. Earl, Eva and Zoe's dear friend and also Tommy's lover, waded towards Eva, who handed Nicky over to him. Zoe watched Eva leisurely swim the small distance from the middle of the pool to the edge. Zoe took a deep breath when Eva pulled herself up from the pool. Rivulets of water cascaded down her body, and droplets of water shimmered off her suntanned skin. Her long dark hair was tied up in a ponytail, a sight Zoe found especially endearing. She picked up a towel and wrapped it around her torso. As if sensing Zoe's eyes on her, Eva lazily turned her head and smiled broadly, her white teeth contrasting with her tanned face and electric blue eyes.

Seconds later, Zoe felt a soft kiss touch her lips and a feather-light caress of her cheek. She put her hand up to her lips and laughed. "I love it when she does that," she said. She watched Eva chuckle and walk off in the direction of Henry and the barbeque.

"Does what?"

Elena Jacobs turned to Zoe with a puzzled expression on her face. Eva was her lover, wife and best friend, but Elena was the closest thing to a sister without being born into the same family. They had met in 1946 on board the refugee ship heading to Australia and had been best friends ever since. Elena's husband was Friedrich Jacobs, a man Elena met under unusual circumstances that soon blossomed into love. The Jacobs were considered family to both Eva and Zoe; not of blood, but that didn't matter.

Zoe touched her lips again. "Evy just kissed me."

"That must come in handy." Elena laughed.

"Oh, it can, especially when we are with other people and she can't really kiss me," Zoe replied and then laughed when Elena poked her tongue out at her.

They looked at each other when Larissa and Nicky passed them, oblivious to their presence. The two were in a heated argument that seemed to escalate as soon as they entered the house.

"Oh, dear, I will have to go and break them up soon," Zoe quietly said as she shook her head.

Moments later silence descended and the raised voices hushed.

"I wonder..." Elena didn't have a chance to finish her thought when the door opened once again and Larissa came over to Zoe with an annoyed look on her face.

"Yes, Mama?"

Zoe took off her sunglasses and smiled at her daughter, who was giving her a very irate look. Larissa was a tall child for her age with fiery red hair, a smattering of freckles across her nose and striking green eyes. A distinctive dimpled chin was the only thing that differed from mother to daughter.

Zoe wanted to laugh at the glare she was getting. It reminded her of Eva when she was annoyed with herself, although Larissa had mimicked it to such a degree that it became an in-joke between Zoe and Eva. "Why are you annoying your brother?"

"I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No." Larissa shook her head vigorously.

"Lari, what have Mutti and I told you about not telling the truth?"

"I'm not annoying him. He is giving me the almighty irrits but I'm not annoying him. I'm *trying* to annoy him."

Zoe closed her eyes and tried as hard as she could not to laugh. "Why are you trying to annoy him?"

"He's being a nobby."

"Why?"

"He's pulling Blaire's hair and that's not nice!"

"No, it's not nice. Where is..." Zoe looked around to see where her son had disappeared to and found him. Eva was lying on one of their lounges with Nicky on her lap and was talking earnestly to him. From the look on her son's face, it looked like Eva's 'iron hand in a velvet glove' approach to discipline was in effect. Zoe knew she didn't have to hear what Eva was saying to know her voice was even and quiet. Zoe, on the contrary, would animatedly raise her voice and could be heard from one end of the house to the other.

"Mutti is talking to Nicky, so you don't have to worry trying to annoy him."

Larissa's scowl deepened as she scrutinized the interaction between her brother and mother. She turned back to Zoe, scowl still intact.

“What do you want me to do, darling? Mutti is telling him to behave.”

“Hm, alright, he better,” Larissa replied. She did an about turn and ran off back inside the house.

Zoe and Elena burst out laughing. “Oh, my goodness, Zoe, that child is adorable. Almighty irrits?”

“She is five but sometimes I think there is a very old soul in that body.”

“It is uncanny how she knows when you want her.”

Zoe sighed. It wasn't a mystery as to how Larissa knew that Zoe wanted to speak to her. Her daughter's mental abilities were starting to become more apparent the older she got. Over the course of the winter months, Zoe had been surprised a few times to find Larissa coming up to her before Zoe could call her. Larissa had a precognitive ability, a gift she shared with Eva and her grandmother Tessa Mitsos. Unlike Eva and Tessa, Larissa was not aware of it, but it was there.

“It's her gifts,” Zoe replied. “They're getting stronger.”

“Well, we knew they would.” Elena took Zoe's hand and held it in her own. “I know I keep saying that, but I'm still amazed by that whole PentaGifts thing that's happened.”

“We've had five years to get used to it, but some days it's just too strange. Last night I finished tracing Eva's family tree and she has Jewish blood throughout her family history. It's mainly through her German roots.”

“That makes her one of ours. Did you find out from what tribe?”

“Aunt Jana said that they belonged to the tribe of Naphtali and that's how they heard about Jesus because that's where he was spreading his message.”

“Interesting. I would love to know what my tribe is, but after 70 BCE no one really knows what tribe they are from unless, of course, they have a nearly two thousand-year-old relative! When the Messiah comes, we will find out,” Elena said and smiled when Zoe nodded.

“So, if her ancestors were Jewish, does that make her Jewish?”

“It does to me. Eva is of Jewish heritage, and for me that means she is a sister.”

“What does that make me?”

“That,” Elena pulled Zoe to her and kissed the top of her head, “that makes you my sister no matter if you were born in outer space.”

Zoe laughed and hugged her friend. “Please, don't tell the babies, because I'll have to watch that horrid movie again with that Klaatu character and I've seen it more than enough times.”

“They do love that film.”

“I'm not sure how much Eva paid for the film for the children to see at home but it's money well spent if I don't have to see it again.”

Zoe glanced back at Eva, who had her back turned to her and was picking up the beach towels the children had left on the grass. Seeing Eva's back was a testament to the horrors she had endured—a sadistic father who severely beat her when he found out she was a lesbian, and a French Resistance bomb blast that nearly killed her. For fifteen years, Eva suffered chronic back pain associated with those events in addition to her ongoing battle with horrendous electroshock aversion therapy and the mental and physical damage it caused.

Zoe marveled at the power that made it possible for Eva's pain and the injuries she sustained in a shocking paint bucket accident to be miraculously healed. *If only the mental scars were as easy to heal as the physical ones*, she thought.

“Eva is looking very healthy and strong. I'll be honest with you, Zoe, looking at those scars, I'm in awe that she was able to move when her back was hurting her so much.”

Zoe glanced at Elena before she turned her attention back to Eva. “I don't know how she did it either. Eva can withstand a lot of pain but there were days when moving was a problem

for her. Her back was getting worse the older she got, so what Mama Saint did was such a gift.”

“A true blessing. She really isn’t limited by those scars anymore.”

“It took her a while to get used to doing things differently,” Zoe said as she watched Eva laugh with Tommy. “She wants us to run with her.”

“You mean the twins as well?”

“The twins, you, and me...”

“What did I do to deserve that torture?”

“You’re just lucky you’re my friend.” Zoe giggled and then sighed when Eva turned and picked up her white shirt. “Oh, no, don’t do that!”

“What is she doing?”

“Putting her shirt on,” Zoe muttered as Eva put on the shirt and covered her back from the sun’s rays.

“She is going to get sun burnt if she doesn’t put something on.”

“She’s just used to covering up, and when I want to ogle her...”

“You still ogle her? After being together for over ten years, you still do that?”

“I find her incredibly beautiful and I love watching her.” Zoe’s gaze followed Eva as she decided to join her aunt Tessa on the opposite side of the pool but was stopped by the children, who roped her into playing soccer. “Look at that.” Zoe turned to Elena. “Look at how she moves. Before she was healed, Eva wouldn’t be able to move like that. Sometimes I don’t think she believes she can move so freely.”

“The children are finding her long legs to be very easy to get through.” Elena chuckled. “That whole healing thing must be unbelievable for her. She’s all healed and—”

“Not completely healed. She still has her memories of that godforsaken hellhole, which I think are worse than her physical limitations,” Zoe said. “This time of the year is especially hard.”

Elena nodded. “Memories can be horrendous. This year we want to do something different.”

“Oh?”

“As you know, Friedrich’s birthday is on the tenth, and we thought if we move the party to the ninth, we can celebrate life instead of all the death and destruction brought upon us.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“We are going to plan this party to be the brightest thing...”

“We? *Friedrich* is going to plan a party?”

Elena shook her head. “No, silly. You and I. Friedrich doesn’t know the first thing about planning parties, but you and I are experts!”

“Aren’t we doing that already?”

“Yes, but this year we are going to have more fun. It’s a celebration of life. Everyone can dance and have a good time.”

“That, my friend, is an excellent idea. Who thought of that?”

“It was Dr. Hannah’s idea. She’s been such a godsend and has helped us deal with our memories. Just a lovely woman.”

“I knew you would love her. She’s helped us so much in learning how to deal with things. November is a difficult month for Eva, and the coming two weeks leading up to Kristallnacht are the worst. It’s still very raw and an open sore that won’t close.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Elena replied.

“We have all suffered a great deal, El. We have lost too much, but we are still here, so that must mean something, right?”

“By the grace of God, we are still here.”

“Exactly. I’m going to try and create new memories, happy memories, for her. I’m not sure how I’m going to do that, but I will think of something.”

“I’ve been reading about Aiden...”

Zoe turned to Elena. “Has it been in the newspaper here? Where? I haven’t seen it. I’ve been looking out for any mention of the investigation.”

“No, it’s not in the English paper. It’s in the news I get about the hunt for war criminals.”

“Where did you find that?”

“The German Community Club has a monthly newsletter. There’s a list of Nazi war criminals still at large and those that have been caught.”

Zoe sat back in her seat and watched Eva ‘accidentally’ falling over onto the purple flower covered grass with Larissa and Blaire tickling her. “They mention Aiden?”

“Yes. There were Jews that were sent there from Dachau.”

“They don’t mention the Catholics who were there?” Zoe tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “They don’t mention the homosexuals?”

Elena leaned across and put her hand on the crook of Zoe’s elbow. “They do mention the homosexuals. The crimes are against humanity, not just the Jews.”

“What did the newsletter say?”

“What they were doing in the facility and how many graves they found on the grounds.”

Zoe looked around her to make sure none of the children were within earshot of them. Elena’s eyebrows rose as Zoe uttered a string of Greek expletives.

“Sometimes I wish they would all shut up. Don’t they know what they are doing is causing raw wounds to remain open?” Zoe muttered darkly. “Investigate and prosecute, but don’t tell the public.”

“Is that what you really think?”

“You know what I really think, but this time I wish they would all shut up.” Zoe jutted her jaw and indicated with her head at Eva, who was playing tag with the children. “That’s the last thing I want her thinking about.”

“I think it hits the hardest when there is news about the Nazis being captured.”

“Or when they go on trial?” Zoe reached over and tapped her friend on the leg. “At least we have a confirmed date for Wolfgang’s trial...”

“I don’t believe it. They keep pushing the trial back, and every time we think we might get him convicted, something else happens to delay the court case. It’s quite maddening. We anticipate that justice will be done and this beast will finally pay for his crimes. My only wish is that I could be there to see Wolfgang pay for murdering my mother, and for the many others that lost their lives to this butcher. Ever since we found out they caught him, that’s what I’ve wanted to do.”

“He will pay for his crimes, El. He will.”

“I sometimes wonder if that’s why I lost my baby...because I was so upset over Wolfgang.”

Zoe gently pulled Elena up to a sitting position and faced her. “That precious baby didn’t die inside you because you were upset. She died because something just wasn’t right. You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“That’s what Dr. Hannah says as well.”

“You should listen to her. She knows what she’s talking about.”

“I know, but what if that was the reason?”

“What if that wasn’t the reason? Are you going to spend your life wondering if you did the wrong thing? What kind of life would that be?”

“I’m Jewish; sometimes that’s all we do,” Elena quipped making Zoe smile. “You and Dr. Hannah are right, but it’s going to take me some time to stop blaming myself.”

“No one is blaming you, so be gentle on yourself. I think the fact you’re not going to Berlin for the trial is also something that is weighing on your mind. Evy and I were talking about it last night. Do you know what a proxy is?”

“A proxy? You go to something instead of someone else? It’s what you are doing for the memorial; you are Eva’s proxy. What does that have to do with Wolfgang?”

“Evy and I are going to be in Berlin on March 9, and we won’t be leaving for Aiden immediately, so we will represent you at the trial.”

“Eva is not in the right frame of mind to attend a war criminal case...”

“She suggested it, and I thought it was a fantastic idea. We both want to do this for you.”

Elena stared open mouthed at Zoe. She shook her head. “You are going to a war criminal trial instead of trying to relax before you head for Aiden?” she said after finding her voice. “You’re going there for me?”

“Yes, of course. You can’t go to see justice done for your mama, but we can. We are going to be your proxy because you are family to us both.” Zoe cupped Elena’s face. “You are never getting rid of us!”

“You are a lunatic!”

“You can never have enough lunatics to look out for you.”

“I know, and it’s one of the things I love about you both. You are fiercely protective.”

“There’s something else we haven’t told you about.”

“You can’t shoot Wolfgang when you’re in court, Zoe.”

“I know, but don’t think I haven’t thought about doing just that. Do you remember Eva’s adopted sister, Leila? Her husband Gunther is a prosecuting attorney. We called him this morning, and although he’s not on this case, he’s going to try to get me to sit at the lawyer’s table so I can draw the proceedings for you.”

“You’re going to draw the entire thing?”

“Well, the first day we will be there, and then we hope to be back in Berlin for the verdict. It’s too bad I won’t be able to draw his execution.”

Elena stared open mouthed at Zoe. “I don’t have any words for what this means.” She put her arms around Zoe and squeezed her tightly. “You are incredible. I love you and Eva so much.” She pulled away and brushed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’ll be with you in spirit.”

CHAPTER 2

Eva rested her head against the pool chair and sighed contentedly as she felt the sun on her face. She was tired after playing in the pool and in the impromptu soccer game, and then counseling her son about his behavior towards Blaire, and trying to evade Zoe's aunt Stella, who was trying to give her a polio injection. The children were running around, their laughter intermixed with their dogs' barks. Seeing three fully grown German Shepherds being manhandled by children was quite a sight. Although not present in the back yard, the menagerie of other animals such as a couple of lizards, a guinea pig, a snake, several cats, and one rabbit made for a very interesting home life. Eva smiled. Just the way she liked it. The lizards belonged to Nicky, although more often than not, Eva was the one looking after the reptiles, in addition to the dogs, rabbit, and a python named Lucifer. Zoe was the cats' designated servant, and therefore all the animals were looked after. Eva didn't mind the arrangement at all; she never had any pets growing up, nor did she have any siblings, so a house full of pets and children was heaven.

She heard Zoe laugh. She lifted her head and watched Zoe and Elena. She blew her wife a kiss and smiled at Zoe's girlish giggle—how different Zoe was from the angry teenager that she had met so many years before.

Zoe had been a feisty fourteen-year-old when Eva first met her in war-torn Larissa. It was a slow, tortuous journey for Eva. Her life had spiraled out of control on November 9, 1938 and remained fragmented until the mercurial redheaded teen bravely stood up to her, stood with her, and then fought for her. Twelve years later they were still together and had two children.

Her thoughts turned from Zoe to her upcoming trip to Melbourne. It was going to be sooner than she had planned for. When a client suggested November 10 as a suitable date for a meeting, Eva did not hesitate. It would take her most of November 9 to travel to Melbourne and she would be alone, away from everyone, including Zoe and their children. They said that time would lessen the pain of her mother's death, that time would help paper over the guilty feelings she had on disobeying her mother. She wondered when that healing would begin. There were times when it felt her memories were less painful, but then it would be November 8 and those memories regurgitated around and around like a record on the record player.

The plan was to go away, and mourn the loss of her mother and her own freedom alone. That was the plan, but this year was going to be different. Zoe had made a convincing case for her to change the date of the meeting. Eva wanted to resist, but her intransigence was short-lived in the face of Zoe's earnest request. She knew that one day she would have to stop running from that date and the memories it brought to the surface.

Now that the meeting had been rescheduled, Eva just did not want to go, but she knew she had to. Melbourne was an overnight journey on a train, and she hated trains. She hated long distance travel of any kind. She disliked being away from Zoe and the children. Problems arose when clients requested that she be present and she had to venture out. Over the last two years or so, since Lambros Steel started to make an impression with the government and the general community, she found there were more social events she had to attend.

Eva was not a social animal. Her natural habitat was at home and that's how she liked it, but it wasn't simple. Lambros Steel was becoming a moderate to large employer, and that also generated scrutiny. The more scrutiny paid to the company and the owners, the more the press was also involved, although with Eva's low profile, they didn't bother her. Eva's foray into the social set of Sydney had added to her annoyance. She did not want to meet and greet, do small talk, or impress government or other self-titled 'important' people, but she had to. She had to engage and be engaging.

At first, her husband Theodore was always by her side. When news of his infidelity became public and they divorced, she made the social pages of the newspaper and was the talk of the town for a brief time before another scandal diverted attention away from her.

Eva's escort to social events was then introduced as her assistant, Zoe Lambros, her sister-in-law. Zoe was there to take the pressure off Eva, and it worked. She was entertaining, exuberant, and could talk her way through any situation. People were not intimidated by her height—Zoe was barely five feet four inches. What those people didn't know was that it didn't matter how short Zoe was. She was formidable. When people first met Eva, they were intimidated by her height and dark looks. She wasn't sure why a six-foot woman was such a novelty. In any event, Zoe usually ended up charming them and they relaxed. Her profile as an artist was also a welcome distraction. Eva found herself fading into the background and waiting for a reasonable time to leave.

She could hear the sound of the pencil against the paper, and smiled. That unmistakable noise was her aunt Tessa and her favorite drawing pencil. "You're not drawing another artwork of your grandbabies, are you?"

Eva lazily turned her head to look at Tessa. Theresa Mitsos was a woman that exuded serenity, and her presence was enough to relax Eva. Tessa's dark hair was streaked with silver and she had an elegant and regal way about her. Zoe loved Tessa's eyes; they were light gray with a darker gray on the edges. 'Eyes that could see into one's soul' were the words Zoe had used to describe them when they first met Tessa. She was right. There was more to Tessa Mitsos that hid behind those gray eyes, but everyone who met her was disarmed by her serene nature.

Eva noted there was a lot more silver in the dark straight hair than there used to be, but her aunt still looked younger than her fifty-six years.

Tessa was lying back on the deck chair, and her long legs were brought up and used as a brace for her sketchbook. Her sunglasses were perched on her head to allow her to draw and watch her model in action. "No, not the grandbabies this time."

Eva leaned over and glanced at the sketchpad. Staring back at her was a portrait of a younger Stella Lambros, Tessa's partner. "You are such a talented artist."

"Thank you, darling. My papa was a very gifted artist, and I inherited that from him."

"Not your mama?"

"Oh, no, Mama couldn't draw at all, although she tried." Tessa laughed. "She could cook, and she embroidered, but she couldn't draw. Neither could your mother."

"I wish sometimes I could draw, because I would love to draw Zoe."

"Is that because you want to pay her back for all the times she's drawn you?" Tessa asked as her face creased into a beaming smile.

"Yes, just once I want to draw her."

"We all have our talents."

"Oh, I know I don't have any talent in that area. Both of our babies have inherited Zoe's gift. They are so good for their age, and they also have her incredible memory. I'm not sure the memory thing is all that good, but we have two incredibly talented children," Eva said proudly. She stared at the artwork of Stella for a long moment. "When was that?"

"The first time I saw her. It's actually tomorrow. We've been together for thirty-eight years."

"Congratulations! I didn't know the date."

"Thank you, darling. I met this amazing woman just after I had a treatment, and I was coming around when I opened my eyes and saw her."

"Didn't you want to close your eyes again?"

Tessa seemed to be a little confused before she apparently got the joke and laughed. "It was a little bright, yes. There was this gorgeous woman sitting next to my bed and writing in

my chart. She was wearing this silly little bright pink hat, if I remember correctly, and it was sitting ever so jauntily on her white hair.”

“She had white hair at that age?”

“Yes,” Tessa replied. “Stella’s hair changed color due to losing Timothy. She loved that man so much. Her hair was pure white, like it is now. She was twenty-five years old and an intern. When I saw her for the first time, she had colored her bangs a bright pink and she wore yellow and purple framed glasses. I don’t know where she got them from, but they stood out.”

“Did you say it was a little bright?” Eva giggled.

“My eyesight wasn’t all that well, but when I did focus on her, she made me smile. She used to put little yellow ribbons in her hair, and sometimes, if her registrar turned a blind eye, she would dye a pink strip on the back of her head as well, and sometimes her bangs were yellow or pink or red. She did it just to see if anyone noticed. She was so unconventional. She wasn’t like anyone I had met before. The patients loved her. I remember a friend of mine, Leonidas, would go up to her and touch her hair ever so gently just to make sure it was real. Stella would stand very still, in case she startled Leonidas, and allow him to stroke her hair. She was a breath of fresh air in a very sad place...” Tessa turned to Eva, who was gazing down at the artwork and had grimaced at the term ‘patients’ for the asylum inmates. “They were patients, Evy.”

“It’s hard to think of people in a lunatic asylum as patients rather than inmates.”

“Yes, that’s true for you, but some people were truly helped, and it wasn’t really a lunatic asylum. It was a hospital, although some aspects of it were like an asylum. It was an unusual place.”

“Like you?” Eva smiled, knowing full well her aunt had not been mentally ill when she was sent to the lunatic asylum in Athens.

“I thought at the time that I was being helped. Stella Nikas-Lambros was the best thing to ever happen to me. She was my cure.” Tessa gazed at the portrait. “I met the love of my life and it changed everything.”

Eva chuckled and nodded. “If I had met the love of my life in Aiden, I think I would have thought of it differently.”

“You did meet her a few years after Aiden.”

“Hm, and the best thing to ever happen to me as well.” Eva turned her gaze to Zoe, who was now just outside the veranda sucking on a lollipop. “We both got very lucky, Aunt Tessa. Those Lambros girls are very special.”

“Yes, they are. Speaking of Lambros girls.” Tessa put her sketchbook down and turned to Eva. “What do you sense when you are around Lari?”

Eva’s gaze fell on her precocious daughter and nodded. “I sense a color just like you said I would. Green mostly. Is that it?”

“Yes, each gifted one is different, like a signature. I sense a dark forest green. It fluctuates a little in the spectrum because her gifts are just starting to emerge, but that’s her signature. With you I sense the same shade of blue as your eyes.”

“Is that normal? The eye color to match the signature? Yours is light gray like your eyes.”

“I’m not sure what normal is. Aunt Irene was lavender.”

“You couldn’t sense my mother, could you?”

“No. I had no control of my gifts then and I couldn’t feel Daphne’s gifts. We can both see and feel Lari’s gifts emerge. Does she know what is going on?”

“Not really, but then she doesn’t know she isn’t normal at her age. However, she will start wondering soon enough. I think it’s time for you to have that chat with the two of them.”

“Nicky isn’t affected by it.”

“He is affected, Evy. You know how they share everything. What Larissa is and what she will become will affect Nicky.”

Eva sighed deeply. “Yes, I have been preparing for this.”

“It’s imperative you do it soon,” Tessa replied and tapped Eva on the knee with the edge of the sketchpad. “Some of the gifts are quite active.”

“Her telekinesis.”

“Yes, that appears first, along with understanding languages. I don’t know why.”

“What’s next?”

“I’m not quite sure. My experiences and yours are very different. Larissa will be the first one to truly have someone watch her gifts mature, to know what they are, and to be able to help her control the power.” Tessa put her arm around her niece. “Everything will be revealed when it needs to be revealed. Now, to more pressing matters. Do you want Grandma to take the grandbabies to Luna Park later?”

Eva was puzzled. “Are you reading my mind?”

“No, darling, I wouldn’t do that to you without your permission. I was asking because I want to have some time with them and get Stella to relax a little. She’s been working far too much and she will want to spend time with the children.”

“Are you up to going on all those rides?”

“Oh, indeed! Stella loves the rides, and I love watching Stella have as much fun as the babies.” Tessa chuckled. “I don’t know where my angel finds the energy.”

Eva smiled. “Well, Nana, you will have two very hyperactive children to contend with. I suspect Elena will go along to look after Rebbie and Danny. The boys are going to a football game later.”

“You are going to be giving your Lambros girl her birthday gift?”

Eva looked away and felt a warmth spread across her face which had nothing to do with the sun. Tessa’s gentle laugh made her feel a little shy.

“Oh, come now, that wasn’t that hard to guess. I’m sure Zoe will enjoy what you have planned.”

“Ah, there is Mrs. Eva Lambros. Now it’s your turn!”

Eva groaned and turned to see Stella coming her way. Stella was an older woman, barely five feet, four inches in height, in her mid-sixties, with white hair and almost black eyes. It was difficult to describe her without mentioning her colorful dress sense and even more exuberant personality. Eva initially found her to be intrusive, but it was with Stella’s help that she found a way to heal from her memories of the war in Larissa. Eva loved Stella even though at that very moment she was about to give her a polio vaccination in the middle of a family barbeque. Eva made a play of shielding her eyes against the bright pink dress that had yellow stripes across the chest and at the bottom.

“Oh, yes, you are too funny, Eva Lambros,” Stella said with a laugh as she kissed Tessa lightly on the lips.

Eva smiled. “I assume you have finished with everyone and now it’s my turn?”

“Yes.” Stella nodded. She turned to Tessa. “How is my girl?”

“We’re going to get our grandbabies for a few hours because Evy wants to give Zoe her birthday present.”

They chortled. Tessa put her arm around Eva and kissed her on the cheek. “We’re always here to look after our grandbabies.”

“Wonderful, but first I have to give their stubborn mama an injection.” Stella turned to Eva with a smile. Eva wasn’t going to argue and offered her arm. She stared at the needle that was visible in Stella’s bag.

“I’m also here to vaccinate Henry, who does a remarkable job of disappearing when I’m around.”

“He knows when there’s an injection intended for him,” Eva mumbled. She closed her eyes and winced when she felt the needle pierce her skin. A tiny hand touched her knee and Eva opened her eyes to see Nicky scrunching his face to mirror her own. She laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

“Mutti, you want a lollipop?”

“Did you get a little jab from Nana Stella?”

“Yes, and I didn’t cry.”

“Unlike their mutti,” Stella quipped, making Eva laugh.

“Do you want me to hold your hand while Nana Stella gives you the medicine?” Nicky looked up at his mother. Eva wanted to grab hold of him and hug him fiercely. “Nana Stella gave me a lollipop. Here.”

“No, I’m going to be fine. Thank you for the lollipop,” Eva took it and popped it into her mouth.

“No, Mutti, you suck on it after you get the jab!”

Eva laughed and took out the lollipop and held it. “Alright, I’ll have it after.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek before he ran off to play with Elena’s son, Danny.

“All done. See? That wasn’t so bad, and now you can have your lollipop. Now to find Henry.” Stella looked around and smiled.

Eva followed her gaze and spotted Henry. She laughed. “Go get him,” she said. Moments later, Kava, their Golden Retriever, raced out of the house. The poor dog had toilet paper wrapped around her head, and it dangled down the side. She stopped for a moment, heard her pursuers coming after her, and raced around Eva and under the house.

Chasing after Kava were Larissa, Rebbie, Blaire, Jimmy, Danny and Nicky, yelling at the top of their voices. They all came to a stop when Eva crooked her finger at her children. The others stopped as well. That’s all she had to do to get any of them to stop. She never raised her voice; she just gestured to get them to come to her.

Eva went down on one knee and opened her arms. She was nearly bowled over when the twins engulfed her in hugs. “Now, why are you chasing poor Kava? What happened to her?”

“We were going to make her into a mummy.”

Eva wasn’t sure she had heard that correctly. “You want to turn her into a mummy?”

Nicholas giggled. “We were going to wrap her up with toilet paper and then put her in the dog kennel.”

Eva chuckled. “Why?”

“So she can live a long time,” Larissa piped up.

Eva nearly fell over as she laughed. She remembered Larissa being intrigued by a book on archaeology. She couldn’t read, of course, but liked the pictures of the gold sarcophagus and asked what it was. The food and wine around the burial site made Larissa think it was some sort of party. Eva explained it was what the Egyptians used to do when their Pharaoh and other high officials died. Somehow that explanation got lost.

“No, honey, you have to be dead to be a mummy.” Eva hugged Larissa.

“You mean we have to kill Kava?” Nicky said, clearly outraged. He turned to Larissa. “I’m not killing Kava so she can be a dead mummy!”

“You can’t kill Kava.” Eva tried to keep a straight face, but broke out in a huge smile.

“Can you two go and get the poor dog before she decides to stay under the house forever? Take off all the toilet paper and put it in the bin.”

“Okay.” Nicky kissed Eva on the cheek and dragged Larissa towards the hapless dog.

Eva shook her head and watched as they continued to argue. She laughed when Kava decided she’d had enough of the twins and raced past her and into the house. Tessa sat back in her chair and laughed.

“Poor Kava. I think that dog puts up with so much. I saw Delilah the other day having infinite patience with Lari, who was trying to ride her,” Eva recalled.

Tessa laughed. “You have your hands full.”

Eva lay back and smiled broadly. “I sure do and I love it!”

CHAPTER 3

Despite wanting to take a whole day off for Zoe's birthday, Eva didn't have the luxury of completely escaping work. Instead of spending time with her family, she was in her office at home. The room was situated on the ground floor of the multistory house next to the main door. It was the first room anyone ever saw as they entered the house; that was by design. Eva did not want anyone passing through into their home unnecessarily. She knew she had taken the privacy issue a little too far, but she was happy this way and Zoe didn't object. Zoe entertained clients in her studio, which was situated in a cottage away from the main house.

The office was of medium size with a large English oak desk in the center. A ceiling-to-floor window overlooked the garden outside, and the walls were covered with photographs taken by Eva. Artwork by her children was interspersed with the photographs. A portrait of the family, painted by Zoe, hung on the wall behind her. It was very different from her office at the main Lambros Steel office, which didn't reflect Eva's personality and was quite Spartan in comparison.

Oliver Lemann, her marketing and sales director, had joined her in the office after leaving the party. In contrast to Eva's casual dress, Oliver's concession to the casual nature of the party was to dress in a suit without his customary bow tie.

Oliver had worked for AEMullerStahl, the Muller family Steel business, before the war, and was one of Wilbur Muller's closest friends. Wilbur, Eva's uncle, who was cognizant of the terror Hitler would bring to the Jews, sent Oliver to England for his protection. With the war over, Oliver returned to Germany and worked once again for his friend. When the opportunity arose to travel to Australia to start a new life and a new business opportunity, Oliver chose to help his best friend's niece with the business. That's what Eva needed—trusted people to guide her. Wilbur trusted Oliver and that was good enough for Eva.

Eva liked the man a great deal for his steady hand and business sense. She was greatly amused on seeing Oliver being flustered whenever Zoe was around; she suspected her marketing director had a tiny little crush on her wife. Not that she could blame him.

Sitting on the other side of Oliver was Debbie, also in a casual dress, taking notes.

"I got a phone call from Mr. Peabody yesterday to arrange another meeting."

"Yes, I thought you would," Eva said as she brought her cigarette to her mouth.

"I thought--"

"You thought I shouldn't go to the factory," Eva finished Oliver's sentence and smiled. "I know."

"Eva..."

"You told me that I should leave this up to you, and if it was viable, we would go ahead."

"Apparently, you *were* listening," Oliver muttered making Eva chuckle.

Eva took a drag of her cigarette and exhaled. She sat back in her seat and smiled. "I was," she said and stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. "Oliver, there is a history here between myself and Mr. Peabody."

"Oh?"

"In 1947, when Zoe and I arrived in Australia, we had nothing. I mean absolutely nothing. There were times when we literally had to scrounge around for shillings to see us through the week. I couldn't get a job and Zoe was working long hours at a restaurant kitchen earning just enough to get us through. Only one man gave me a chance."

"Mr. Peabody?"

"Mr. Peabody. I went for a secretary position."

"You can't type; I've seen you peck at the keyboard," Debbie spoke for the first time and smiled when Eva rolled her eyes. "Well, you can't."

“I was willing to do almost anything to get a job. Unfortunately, the secretary position was gone, but Mr. Peabody took a chance on me.”

“Is this where in the film, the violins start?”

Eva shook her head and picked up a small ball of blue plasticine that had been left on her desk. She playfully threw it at Oliver and hit him on his bald head.

“Ow.” Oliver chuckled as he retrieved the plasticine missile.

“No, the violins don’t start yet. Mr. Peabody gave me a job as a factory worker. Trust me, that job was the hardest, the most backbreaking job I have ever done. I was grateful even if it meant working in 100-degree heat and smelling of flossy flutes.”

“I don’t see why--”

“That was the place I met Earl, who became my first friend in Australia, and it’s how I got Zoe into art school. It means a lot to me.”

“I understand that. Mr. Peabody speaks very highly of you.”

“Well, I think he is a decent man and he deserves to have the factory saved.”

“It’s not that. It’s just not our--”

“We will make it our business. There are a lot of migrants who work there. Migrants with little, if any, English skills, but who work hard. That’s what we need in our business—people who are not afraid to work hard. Some of these people have skills we can use and they are wasted on the factory floor.”

“Like your skills were wasted?”

“I had no skills other than my language skills. I’m talking about people with teaching degrees, like Earl. There were women who were doctors and physics professors but worked those menial jobs because they didn’t have English skills.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“We can teach them English and then they can use their skills.”

“But if we teach them English, they will go elsewhere,” Oliver reasoned and looked at Eva over the top of his glasses.

“Maybe, but it’s worth it.”

“We’re not in the business...”

“We’re not, but we will make it our business. The government has made it a priority to accept migrants from Europe. As I said, some of these people are skilled.”

“Alright then, that’s what we will do. Do you want the factory turned--”

“No. The factory remains. There will be changes. There are areas I want to be refurbished, and I want the large fans replaced. It’s unbearably hot in there, even in winter. Larger fans and larger windows.”

“You’ve thought about this.”

“I thought about this when the sweat was dripping down my back and my legs felt like lead. I wanted to punch a hole in the wall to let some air into that place.”

“Alright, but this will cost us money.”

“It’s going to cost money, but I believe it’s going to make us money too.”

“Uh huh.”

“I want you to go down there and speak to...”

“Mr...” Oliver shuffled his notes and picked up the paper with the name he was after. “Jack Stalk?”

“Bean,” Eva said. She smiled even though she didn’t have good memories of the man; his nickname always made her smile.

“No, his name is Jack...”

“Bean is his nickname...as in bean stalk. He is very tall.”

“Australians and their nicknames for everything.”

“Well, Bean will give you what you need.”

“You are right he is very tall. I met Mr. Stalk when I spoke to Mr. Peabody. Stalk is a disagreeable fellow.”

“You would be disagreeable if you got your arm chopped off by the Japanese.”

“He kept calling me comrade and then switched to Kraut.”

Eva sat back in her chair and smiled. “I spent months being yelled at and called Kraut Muzza.”

“Muzza?”

“Nickname for Muller.”

“I will never understand, but alright. I will meet with them to start the negotiations.”

“Give them everything they want.”

Oliver stopped writing in his notepad. “That is not how you negotiate.”

“I know. I told you, I owe this man a great deal.”

“Do you want to be present when we sign the contract?”

“Yes. I care about this factory and what happens to it. Even though I detested every minute I spent there, the people were good.”

“Lambros Steel acquires—”

“No, not Lambros Steel.”

“No? Who will acquire this factory?”

“Lambros Foods, Oliver. Lambros Steel is not in the business of acquiring food companies.”

Oliver sighed so deeply that it almost sounded like a low growl, making Eva and Debbie exchange amused glances. “Lambros Foods. That means a new board.”

“Yes, lots more work, but it will pay off.”

“Lambros Foods acquires Johnson’s Cookie Factory.”

“Biscuit Factory.”

“Indeed.”

Eva smiled, picked up another piece of plasticine, and threw it at Oliver, who caught it, looked at it for a moment and then put it in his pocket, much to Eva’s amusement.

“Did the contract for the Foundation building come through?”

“Yes,” Oliver replied and smiled.

“Good. Now all that’s left is for me to go to Melbourne and see our new client, who can’t be bothered to come here.”

“I know, I’m sorry but...”

“But they want to see me. I think we should fly them over here.”

“Please, don’t say we are going to buy an airline company.”

Eva chuckled as she lit another cigarette. “Lambros Air...what do you think?”

“Are you thinking about that?”

“No, I’m teasing you, but this is the last trip I’m taking to Melbourne. I hate these long-distance trips, so in the future we’ll get the clients to come here and put them up at a hotel. It will be cheaper than me travelling to them.”

“Alright. I’ll take these documents for the factory over to the office and start working on them.”

“Aren’t you staying for the rest of the party? It is your day off.”

“You did say this was important, is it not?”

Eva nodded. “Alright.”

Their impromptu meeting ended soon after Oliver outlined Eva’s travel arrangements for her trip to Melbourne. He left to attend the factory buyout.

“I bet he puts on his bow tie as soon as he leaves the house,” Eva quipped to Debbie.

Henry entered the office after a slight knock. “Has Oliver left?”

Eva looked up from reading the notes Debbie had given her. “Yes, a few minutes ago. Did you want him?”

“I’ll have to catch up with him then. The trip to Melbourne is off.”

“It is??” Debbie swiveled around in her chair and gazed up at Henry. “When did this change?”

“Who cancelled the trip? Did the client change the data again?”

“No, the client didn’t, but the trip is cancelled *because* of the client.”

“Oh great, now you’re talking in riddles. Debbie, catch Oliver and tell him about the cancellation.”

Debbie laughed and stood up. She patted Henry on the shoulder before she left the room.

Eva turned to Henry. “What happened?”

“I went to hear the football score and turned on the wireless, and it seems there has been an arrest in Melbourne of suspected war criminals.”

“That’s good. Is that why I’m not going to Melbourne?”

“One of those mentioned was our prospective client.”

“Well, that would stop our meeting.” Eva offered a cigarette to Henry, who lit Eva’s as well as his own. He took a drag as he stared at Eva.

“As Earl is fond of saying...is the other shoe about to drop?”

“Forget the other shoe, this time it’s a grand piano. One of the other men mentioned was Andreas Lange.”

Eva let out an explosive breath. “The head of my security in Melbourne is a war criminal?”

“Suspected war criminal,” Henry added wistfully. “We don’t know for certain...”

“Henry! The head of my security team in Melbourne is a war criminal!”

“We didn’t know...”

“Which is exactly what our fellow Germans said about the concentration camps! We didn’t know we hired a war criminal as the head of our Melbourne security team.”

“This is going to draw too much attention to us.”

“I would say this would draw unnecessary attention. Alright, we just have to contain the damage somehow. David doesn’t know because he would have said something to me.”

“No, David didn’t know. The Melbourne office coordinated the raids.”

“Does Zoe know?”

Henry grimaced and nodded. “She found out when I did. She was restrained in her opinion.”

Despite the serious nature of their discussion, Eva smiled. She knew ‘restraint’ and Zoe in the same sentence meant the children were around and she couldn’t express her outrage in her usual exuberant way.

“Oh, this is bad.” Eva sighed. “First thing we have to do is find out if this is accurate. Friedrich is perfect for this job.”

“He wasn’t going to start until next month.”

“I’m bringing him now. You can go to Melbourne and sort out the mess down there. I want Friedrich investigating Lange. We can’t do anything else until we are certain about him. I don’t care about the other fellow; he’s not our concern.”

“Alright. Can we talk to David about this?”

“Not privately. David is the head of the Sydney office and can’t be seen to be giving me any special consideration. I’ll go into the War Crimes office and discuss this with him as the head of the unit.”

“Can I come with you and then go to Melbourne?”

“No. You go to Melbourne first, and then when you get back, you, Friedrich and I will go to the War Crimes Unit office.”

Eva sat back in her chair and gazed out into the garden for a long moment. “This arrangement is also good for Friedrich. By making him assistant security chief, we may be able to accomplish something even more important than finding out the truth about Lange. Friedrich is feeling useless and unable to function as he wants, but this way he can use his skills. We both know he is an excellent field officer.”

“You want to help his self-esteem?”

“I want to get him back to his best. He is a very good investigator with an excellent intuition. Let’s find out if Lange is really a war criminal.”

Henry tapped the desk with his hand. “I agree. Now, enough about this disaster. How are you today?”

Eva took off her glasses. “Today has been a good day and I’m trying not to think about ‘it.’ Zo’s birthday is one of my favorite days.”

“How’s the back?”

“I’m expecting this year to be different, but then I expect every year to be different. It’s achy at the moment. Stella tells me there’s nothing physically wrong, but it’s all up here.” Eva tapped her temple. “I’m just crazy, Henry.”

“You’re not crazy. My friend Ruben’s leg was amputated and he can still feel it even though it’s no longer there.”

“How does that happen?”

“I don’t know, but the mind is very powerful. One day it will be different. This year Friedrich is holding his birthday party a day earlier.”

“I know. I’m not going and Friedrich understands.”

“It’s his first birthday after being shot. It’s a celebration of life. I know this is a horrible day for you but...”

“I want to be alone. You know how I am on that day...I don’t want to be around anyone, and even Zoe leaves me be.”

“You do this every year and every year it’s the same. You suffer in silence and it takes you a long time to get back up.”

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

“No, not this time. I’m ignoring your protests. I hoped Zoe would try and get you to change your mind.”

“Can we not discuss this? Please?”

Henry held up his hands in surrender and sat back in his chair. “I’m giving up because I know when to retreat.”

“That was an early surrender.”

Henry smiled. “I’ve got my orders from my general not to engage the boss today.”

“Your general has given you orders that you actually listen to?”

“She has. I’ve always listened to her ever since Larissa. I’m not going to argue with dynamite.”

“She is being over protective.”

“Yes, she may be that, but she loves you and it’s killing her that she can’t do anything about this.”

“Henry, please...”

“Alright, alright. I’ll talk about something else. I fixed the problem of Earl and Tommy being seen at that party together.”

Eva played with her glasses for a moment before she laid them on the desk. “What were they thinking? They were stupid to let that happen.”

“I know, and it was a close call, especially for Earl. I know you are still angry with Tommy for being so reckless, but it happened.”

"I'm not angry," Eva replied softly. "I'm annoyed that they could be so silly. If those photographs had been published, Earl's headmaster tenure would be over and quite possibly his teaching career too. What was the reporter doing there?"

"Trying to uncover the seedy underbelly of homosexuals in Sydney. I would love to know how he found the location of the gathering."

"Do I want to know how you managed to salvage this? How much did it cost?"

"It wasn't cheap. You donated money for a new wing at Dunkirk Hill Memorial Hospital."

"Do you remember how well it worked out the last time I donated money for a hospital wing?"

Henry smiled. "Don't worry; you won't be testing this one out. It's for the children's wing. The owner of the Daily Chronicle is Sir Reginald Matthews."

"I think I met him at a function."

"Mr. Matthews' son is Clyde Matthews, who is the editor of the newspaper. Clyde and Earl were in the army together. He recognized Earl when he saw the pictures and intervened. I don't know the full story, but the article has been killed."

Eva smiled. "Was Clyde Matthews one of Earl's former lovers?"

"Earl tells me they were more like brothers than lovers. In 1942, Matthews and Earl ended up in Formosa and were forced to work in a copper mine for the Japanese."

Eva sighed. "Earl told me, when we both worked at the biscuit factory, that he was a POW, but he didn't want to talk about it and I didn't push."

"Formosa was a hellhole; so many died from working in the copper mines with little food. It was horrendous. That's where Matthews lost an arm, and it was Earl who saved his life."

"Did Earl tell you about that?"

Henry shook his head. "No. Tommy told me. Earl doesn't want to talk about Formosa with me either."

"Hm. Alright." Eva nodded. Suddenly, the door burst open and the twins ran in, forgetting to knock as they had been told to do. "Mutti! Mutti! Mutti! Mutti!" they cried out in unison.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" Eva exclaimed. She came around her desk and went down on her knees in front of the children. "What are you two up to?"

"We're going to Luna Park with Nana Stella and Nana Tessa, and with Auntie Debbie and Auntie Elena, and Rebecca, Blaire, Jimmy, and Daniel, and then we'll have some ice cream with Uncle Theo, Uncle Henry, and Uncle Friedrich!" Larissa exclaimed excitedly.

"And we're going on a ferry across the water!" Nicky added, followed by a chorus of cheers as the other four children entered the office as well.

"Can we eat some chocolate ice cream?" Larissa asked.

Eva laughed at how her daughter had become the leader of the pack. She suspected that this was the natural order of things. She nodded and smiled. Some days she was certain that, if given the opportunity, her children would live on ice cream and nothing else.

"You can have chocolate ice cream." She looked at Tessa, who had just entered the room, with a knowing grin.

"I like chocolate," Nicky said solemnly.

"We know." Eva touched his nose with the tip of her finger.

"Right, we're off for some vanilla and chocolate ice cream," Theo announced from the door, making the children squeal in delight. They all hugged Eva and then stopped when they saw Zoe out of the office. They hugged her too and raced off yelling.

Isabella, their housekeeper, stood outside the office and laughed.

"You're going to Luna Park too?"

"Oh, yes, I like Luna Park as much as the children," Isabella said, making Eva and Zoe laugh as she waved them goodbye.

Eva had sat back down and beckoned her to come over Zoe leaned against the doorjamb.

“Do we have the house to ourselves?”

“Oh, yes.” Zoe went over to Eva, who pushed away from the desk and patted her lap. She didn’t need to invite Zoe, who had apparently decided that’s where she wanted to sit. “We have the house all to ourselves.” She gazed lovingly at Eva and smiled, and then she picked up Eva’s glasses and put them on her. “I love those glasses on you. They make you look...”

“Smart?”

“Nah. You’re already smart. I was going to say very sexy. A very smart, sexy teacher...I have a thing for teachers...” Zoe punctuated every word with a kiss. She put her arms around Eva’s neck and their eyes met. “Hmm,” she said before capturing Eva’s lips for a long sensual kiss. A moan escaped Zoe’s throat. “I want my present,” she purred. Eva watched the desire fill her eyes.

“Oh...um...yes,” Eva said a little breathlessly. “I’ve been having this fantasy all day...”

“You and me naked on this desk?”

Eva laughed and shook her head. “Nah, I don’t think my back is going to like the desk today. Let’s go upstairs, where it’s much more comfortable.”

“Comfortable? I like comfortable.”

“There’s no one in the house, and I’ve been fantasizing about this, so...”

Zoe gently pushed Eva back and got up from her lap. “Evy?”

“Yes, love?”

“You talk too much.” Zoe laughed and took Eva’s hand. She led the way as they stripped off their clothes whilst going up the ornate staircase.

“We have a war criminal working for us, Zo.”

“Don’t care at the moment, I want my birthday present!”

Eva chuckled and followed Zoe up the stairs.

Thank you for reading the sample chapters of *Nor The Battle To The Strong*.

If you would like to review the book please contact Mary on marydbrooks@outlook.com

NOR THE BATTLE TO THE STRONG

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