

Excerpt – Chapter 2: Sons of Thunder

Sofia Frangos could save the world with her song. At least Markos's world, because that's what always seemed to occur whenever he happened upon her in time to catch the harmonies issuing from her as she worked.

More of a humming than a song, really, and he longed for the words, feeling they'd be plucked from some garden inside her. Someday, perhaps.

Yes, he felt a voyeur, but he couldn't stop the lure of her voice. Probably, she knew her power – felt his hypnotized presence, although her blue eyes never appeared to notice him.

Someday, he hoped, she would see the ruddy fisherman's son.

The sun spilled into the sea by the time Markos moored his boat and retrieved his catch. He nodded to the other fishermen repairing their nets along the wharf, others simply smoking away the twilight.

"What is your catch?" Alexio Mizrahi, the Jewish doctor, sat with his son-in-law as he worked his nets.

"Barbouni – for Theo's wedding!" Markos lifted the lid to the metal canister of fish, noticed the smiles of older, more accomplished fishermen.

Surely, he'd earned his father's toast at tomorrow's feast.

"Someday you will be a fisherman such as your father, Markos."

He let Alexio's words buoy his step, despite the late hour.

Sofia's song lured him as she stood, elbow deep in

flour, kneading the dough for tomorrow's wedding bread. Her dark hair whisked back into a lanyard, tiny unheeded curls dripped around her face.

For a moment, he imagined that he wasn't the son of a fisherman, wasn't marked with the scratches from squid barbs, his hands hooped from tying the nets, his face darkened with the fury of the sun. No, he fancied himself a merchant, a man of means, who might be worthy of such a girl as Sofia.

Not that his mother would agree. After all, Sofia was little more than an orphan, thanks to the Turks, who'd felled her father on the shores of Sangarios, and to illness, which took her mother during those dark years. No family, no dowry, no *koumbaro* to stand beside her groom as a witness. Only her aging grandfather – and not even a real relation at that, being that he'd taken in her father when he was a child – to claim her. The village of Zante had predestined Sofia, even at fourteen, as their next midwife, or perhaps a taverna keeper.

Sofia's graceful fingers began to roll the dough into a long strip, ready to braid, to form the decorative flowers and stars. She'd already worked the aniseed, coriander, and fennel into the speckled dough. The piquant smells of roasting lamb, fresh onions, tomatoes, and baked figs awakened an animal in Markos's stomach. He sucked in his breath, willing himself invisible as he stood in his mother's taverna, the metal canister of barbouni slung over his shoulder, dripping seawater onto the stone floor –

"Markos, where have you been?"

He jerked, stepped back from the doorway, rounding as his mother, her black skirt gathered, stepped up from the portico of the taverna. Behind her, the wooden tables were arrayed in a sort of semi-circle, appropriate for the dance floor. Today, this moment, Ava Stavros appeared every bit the mother of the groom, lines of tradition worked into her brow, her long dark hair caught back in a black scarf, an apron around her sturdy form. She knew the sea, her men, and how to build a home on the golden sands. "I expected you hours ago."

"We got caught in the doldrums, Mama. I'm sorry. But I caught your barbouni." He slung the keg off his shoulder and plunked it down at her feet. The water dribbled from the holes, seawater darkening the white stones.

"That's my Markos." She caught his face in her hands, pressed a kiss to each cheek. "Just like your father. You are destined to be the best fisherman in the family." She opened the lid. The red-hooded fishes lay, some still flopping, in a sleek pile. "Brava! Carry it to the kitchen—Sofia will scale them."

Sofia barely looked up as he carried in the catch. The heat of the wood-fired ovens ripened his sea-dog odor, and he tried not to get too close as he set the kettle down near the table, wincing at his own oafish presence.

She moved to open the lid, and he knocked her as he stood up.

"Oh!" She held her nose, turning away.

"Are you okay?"

He only made out her blue eyes watering as she nodded.

"I'm sorry!"

She turned, shaking her head. "No, it's my fault." She offered him the smile that could sweep thoughts from his head. Indeed, he stood there like a fool, drinking in her eyes, the way the sun had tinted her nose, the beautiful sweep of her lips. And, as if he might already be inside his wildest dreams, she moved forward.

"Actually, I need to talk to you. My grandfather is—"

"Out of my taverna, Markos." His mother lumbered into the kitchen.

Sofia cut off her words, turned away.

Mama shot her a dark look then turned to Markos. "This is not your place. Go—find your brothers. I'm sure Theo needs an airing out after last night's performance." She winked at him, grabbing up a towel and a knife.

But Markos's mind hung on Sofia's sentence—Her grandfather is...? Giving her hand away in marriage? Dying? Markos longed to scoop the words from her, hating how urgent they'd suddenly become.

But Sofia had already resumed her humming.

He chased his ego out, not looking back.

Sofia's song twined through his thoughts, through the wedding preparations, down the street the next day during the groom's procession. Indeed, it seemed the entire village had accepted Theo's invitation—propelled, most likely, by curiosity, since Kostas, Zoë's spurned suitor, joined the groom's march.

Lucien lurked somewhere behind in the crowd—Markos caught occasional glimpses of him even as they tramped through the cobbled streets, past the white-washed stone homes, scattering the wandering goats with their tinkling bells, through to the town square, with the fountain, the bird’s egg blue dome of the orthodox church, right to the front steps where Kostas stopped to await his bride. Clad in his only clean shirt, a pair of wool pants, and a multi-colored vest, Markos sweltered in the sun beside Dino, Kostas, and their father, Galen, broad-chested and resplendent in his threadbare—and only—suit. “Do you think father will allow me a glass of retsina?” Dino whispered, as the women appeared, beautiful Zoë flanked by her widower father in the bridal procession.

“Shh—no, of course not. It’s for the guests.”

“I’m a guest.”

“You’re annoying.”

Dino made to stomp him on the foot, but Markos sidestepped him.

There—on the edge of the procession—Sofia. Like the rest of the unmarried women in the village, she wore a twined headpiece of ivy, ornamented with orange blossoms, little white stars. For a moment, his breath slicked out, remembering her face yesterday twisted in pain at his clumsiness. But today she shone, her blue eyes matching her simple dress, gathered at the waist. Then again, she would be beautiful in a kitchen apron, smudged with flour—

“There’s Lucien!”

Dino’s voice yanked Markos’s attention from Sofia, to where Lucien sat astride the cart attired to pull the couple from the church to the family taverna for the wedding feast. He wore the cap of the driver low over his face, but Markos made out a scandalous smile.

Not today, Lucien. Still, his friend struck a comical pose, standing on the seat of the carriage and dancing a mock *tsamiko*. A few of the women began to giggle.

“Fool,” Galen muttered, his voice low. “Always playing the troublemaker.”

Theo only had eyes for Zoë. Radiant, with her waist-long hair down under a flowing red veil, a matching ornamented dress swishing along the cobblestone center square. Her father marched at her side, her hand tucked in the crook of his arm. A small man, with narrow shoulders and a tiny paunch, he might have looked younger had life not stolen his wife before she bore him more children. Thus, he guarded Zoë like a treasure, his surrender to Theo Stavros most likely won by Ava Stavros’s attention, delivering meals from the taverna over the years.

Markos—and the rest of Zante—wasn’t blind to the way Zoë’s father eyed Markos’s mother. Some even whispered that Ava Stavros, a foreigner from Athens and educated in literature at the university, might be more suited for a man of his station.

But Ava’s devotion belonged to Galen. Now, she smiled at him, dressed in her finest blue dress, a lacey white scarf bridling her dark hair. The Ionian blue topaz ring, the one she kept hidden behind her bed in a notch in the wall, sparkled in the sunlight.

Today, indeed, was a special event.

Theo clutched Zoë's flowers – a bouquet from Mama's rose bushes. His forehead wept.

Markos pinned his eyes on Sofia and imagined the day when he would stand in the sun, holding roses, sweating.

The Orthodox Church should have been cool, with its soaring, frescoed ceilings, but the smell of incense stifled the air, and the heat of too many witnesses hastened the priest's recitation of the prayers, the biblical tale of the wedding feast at Cana, the presentation of the Stefanos crowns with the circle round the altar...

The grand pronouncement of Theo and Zoë's future.

They exited the church with a collective exhale. Thankfully, Lucien had abdicated his position to the hired driver. Markos searched for him, but he had vanished.

For their eldest son, the Stavroses laid out tables of *moussaka* – baked eggplant, stuffed zucchini, and roasted potatoes. Giant red lobsters and grilled barbouni, fried *kalamarakia* -- squid, and sardines baked in tomato sauce and oregano, boiled green beans *-hortas* -- with lemon, and green beans steamed from their plates, amidst fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, onions. Another table served honeydew melons, honey-soaked baklava, almond cookies, figs, and of course, sugared walnuts. Barrels of wines, unearthed, perhaps, from the cellars of the Ramone family – for the Stavros supply of retsina had gone to buy the favor of the village the night before – lay stacked on their sides, ready to be tapped.

A hired musician played the *bouzouki*, the strings of the small guitar sounding tinny against the stone floor, as Zoë and Theo stomped out their first dance. A *floyera* player stood up, his shepherd's whistle bobbing to time.

Still, no Lucien.

Kostas, however, sulked on the perimeter of the dance floor, his dark eyes fixed upon the couple, his hand clutched around a glass of wine, nursing his second, perhaps more – Markos didn't want to count. He wore a granite expression, although occasionally he raised his glass, shouted with the crowd.

Next to Markos, Dino had filled his plate with enough to feed an entire pack of wild jackals. "You know you will be sick."

Dino picked up a shrimp, dangled it towards Markos. Markos looked away and found Sofia, sitting with a knot of girls. She glanced over at him, gave him a whisper of a smile –

"Time to dance the *Kaslamantiano*." Papa appeared at the table, whisking a hand across Markos's back. Whoops and clapping drove the musicians' beat, the tempo increasing. His father moved to the next table, urging his guests to the dance floor, to join in the hand-to-hand circle.

Markos timed his movements and caught his hand into Sofia's soft, yet strong hands. She tightened her hold on his, and for a blinding second, he again wished for merchant's hands instead of his – rough-cut, callused, and reeking of the sea. But she looked up at him, her smile in her eyes. Then the music started, and he fell into the dance.

Round and round, faster and faster. Slow step to the right, quick step right with the left foot, quickstep right with the right foot, repeat. Markos counted out the steps in his head, watching Theo lead them around the portico. Slow step backwards with the right foot, quickstep backwards with the left, quick weight shift –

Kostas broke into the crowd, grabbing a hand, the other clutched around his glass. Something about his exuberance sent a ripple into the circle, the embarrassment of watching a man suffer.

Markos could even smell Sofia, something floral, the orange blossoms and the hot Ionian sun baked into her skin. Maybe he would ask her to take a walk with him across the moon dappled sand to his boat. Maybe he would tell her that someday they would have their own Kaslamantiano dance, and he would hold her bouquet of Mama's roses –

With a shout, Kostas dove into the center of the floor, twisting and turning in an erratic solo as he danced – no, leered, Markos decided – at Zoë, then grinned like a shark at Theo.

Drunk. Of course. Like father, like son.

Zoë blanched. Some of the dancers stopped, although the music twined on, tinny and quick.

"Kostas, go home," Theo said, still trying to reclaim the night, moving to shield Zoë. Despite his smile, a sharpness edged his tone, his eyes stony.

Kostas danced over to a table. "We're still celebrating." He picked up a plate, and with a flick, threw it to the floor. It smashed, a thousand white shards

spraying the stones. Sofia jerked back, her hand over her face. The music stopped.

"Go home," Theo said again, advancing on the man, his hand around Kostas's wrist before Kostas could pick up another plate.

Kostas jerked his wrist from Theo's grasp, his face hard.

Go home, Kostas. Markos drew Sofia close.

For a moment, everyone stilled, as if drawing a breath. Beyond the taverna, the sea clawed at the shore, a storm in the wind, the chilly breath snaking into the party.

Kostas threw down his glass. It exploded against the stone floor. "You're a thief, Theo Stavros!" Kostas glared at Zoë. "And you're a harlot."

"That's enough, Kostas." Galen stepped across the floor, two giant steps, voice solemn, but enough to thunder. "You are not welcome here."

Hours later, Markos still fought to sort it out. He wanted to will it all into stone, something he could snatch and fling away into the night.

Perhaps if he'd been faster, slipped up beside his father, taken Kostas's blow on his own chest....

Heeded the impulse inside.

Because, in the sliver of time between Galen's words and Kostas's attack, Markos knew. He heard it – a warning, or more of a moan, emitting behind him. Saw it, too, an omen written on the face of Lucien, who appeared at the edge of the portico, his mouth bloodied, his eyes wide with a warning that bespoke his mysterious absence from the party.

Markos even sensed it in a tremor through him, like the storm edging in on the shore. A cold, slick turning of the tide – “No!”

But he hesitated, afraid of the thunder inside.

Kostas outgirded Galen, and wine made him bold. He slammed his fist into the center of the older man’s chest, the full weight of his sodden fury behind his blow.

Galen stumbled back, his mouth open, without a breath.

He fell with a deadened thud.

Mama screamed as Theo erupted.

He tackled Kostas, knocked over tables, drawing blood, brawling at the feet of the musicians. In the chaos, a man roared and charged into the brawl – Yannis Pappos, bully drunk, dangerous. He pushed aside Kostas to beat Theo.

Sofia had let go of Markos’s hand. Which was better anyway, because Markos may have hurt her as he threw himself at Yannis.

Kostas turned to the first man who tried to intervene, threw him down, and broke his jaw with a kick. He then caught Markos off the top of Yannis’s back and threw him with the force of a mule across the room.

Markos landed, stunned, the breath whisked out of him. He gulped like a fish to live.

At once, Lucien appeared. His hands closed around Markos’s wrists, pulling him up. “Run!”

But Markos had no sight to recognize his friend’s warning. He shoved Lucien away and turned back to the fight.

Dino had his skinny legs clamped around Yannis’s beefy back, a crab even as Kostas closed his hands around Dino’s scrawny neck.

Theo, on the floor, had gone limp, his face white, his eyes unseeing.

“Dino!” Markos lost himself to his rage, unable even to sort through his movements as he snapped.

Kostas unhanded Dino, whirled around, yet not fast enough to catch Markos. He tackled Kostas with the speed of a wild boar, slamming him with a bone-jarring crash into the wall.

Kostas screamed, writhing on the floor, hands to his neck.

The ugly shard of a broken plate protruded from his neck. Blood poured onto the stones.

“Markos!”

His mother bent over Galen, her hands on his chest, her twined hair undone. “Help me!”

His father’s eyes had swiveled back into his head, leaving only the eerie white of a fish’s underbelly. Markos skidded to his knees, put his ear to his father’s mouth. No breath. He grabbed his shoulders, shook. “Papa!”

Everything stopped moving then, a silence broken only by his mother’s quiet pleading. “Galen, Galen...”

Markos looked up. Dino, white-faced, crawled to his father’s feet. He bled from the mouth.

Theo lay in a widening pool of blood, his mouth slack, his skull crushed.

And Kostas’s blood spilled freely, as he slumped against the wall, his eyes glossy.

No one moved to rescue him, even as Yannis pressed his hands against the wound. "Kostas!"

Markos looked away, a fist in his chest, crushing him, squeezing his breath.

"Kostas!"

Markos winced. Tightened his jaw. Because he'd seen the whites of Kostas's eyes too.

And then – "You – Stavros!"

Markos glanced up to see Yannis, blood dripping from his hands. He found his feet.

"Leave him be!" Mama threw herself at Yannis, intercepting his rage. "Leave him be!"

She held on, even as Yannis slapped her, held on as she screamed to her sons, "Run!"

Run.

Markos grabbed Dino's arm, yanked him to his feet, and, bile in his throat, fled from the wedding of his oldest brother.

In the distance, thunder shook the heavens, and it began to pour.

Hope you enjoyed the beginning of Sofia, Dino and Markos' adventure....preorder the book at Christianbook.com, or your favorite retailer!

And look for it on shelves at Wal-mart in January!

Thank you for reading!
Susan May Warren