

~ The End ~

(An Uber-Xena story)

by The Fallen

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AUTHOR'S NOTES: This story is a sequel to a previous story of mine, entitled [The Out](#). If you haven't read that story... well, stop now and go read it! :).

Oh, you're back. Wow, that was quick. Well, another quick warning: just like its predecessor, this story is a little complex, so if you wish to read further notes then please head over to my webpages at: http://thewomynsplace.com/fallen_theend_notes.html. If you have any comments or criticism, please send them to ukfallenangel2@yahoo.com. All feedback will be gratefully received.

Other than that, just read and enjoy. To paraphrase Willy Wonka, there might be little surprises around every corner, but nothing dangerous.

THANKS: Many thanks must go to Sam, who beta-read this story for me and kept me going with lots of positive encouragement. Without her help this probably never would have been finished.

1: I'll Sleep When I'm Dead

Thankfully, Cassie Wayward thought, the streets were empty at this early hour of the morning. She drove carefully, conscious of the slick roads, the poor light, the falling snow, and most of all her own exhaustion. She could hardly keep her eyes open. Despite the cold she had her window cracked, hoping the freezing air would keep her awake, and for the same reason the radio was blaring. She caught snatches of a wailing Britpop song, something about a winding road and blinding lights.

She pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building, switched off the ignition, and rested her head against the steering wheel. Her limbs felt like leaden weights. Had she ever been so tired?

"You okay?" Zoe asked.

Cassie smiled, although she didn't move. "Just tired. Really, really tired."

"You look it." It was said with a grin, to show no offence was meant.

Straightening, Cassie looked at her passenger. Even in the sickly jaundiced light of the streetlamps, Zoe Mercouri was beautiful. She was dirty and disheveled, her skin stained with patches of dried black ink and crusted with her own blood, but despite all that she looked so... alive, Cassie thought. Wide awake, if nothing else. It made her a little jealous.

"Why aren't you?"

A shrug. "Something to do with this, I guess," she said, patting a bulge in her jacket pocket.

The ambrosia, Cassie realized. She could still hardly believe it was real, that any of this was real, but how could she doubt the evidence of her own eyes? She yawned loudly, then looked up at the night sky through the windscreen. The stars seemed brighter tonight. The snowflakes were already coating the hood of the car with a thin wet sheen of white.

"Weatherman said it was going to be fine today."

"Well, not everyone's predictions can be on the money."

Cassie flashed Zoe a weak smile as she popped open the door.

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The elevator wasn't working again, Cassie saw with annoyance. She'd talk to the landlord tomorrow, if she remembered. But she already knew what Mr. McIntosh would say. He'd blame it on the cold weather, just like he always did.

She had to help Zoe up the final flight of stairs and it wasn't easy. Midway up, the taller woman fell heavily against Cassie, almost as if she was drunk, and complained of a bout of dizziness. She felt hot, her skin seemed to be burning, and there were small beads of sweat on her brow.

At the top of the stairs, Zoe pushed away from Cassie, insisting she could make it the rest of the way of her own, but she immediately sank against the nearest wall, resting her head against the grubby green tiles. She had her eyes closed and was rolling her forehead against the cool porcelain. She waved away Cassie's concerns. It was nothing, she said.

Cassie wasn't so sure. All the same, she risked leaving alone there while she padded down the corridor to her own apartment. Damn it, Danny had left the door open. He was always doing that. For a Sheriff, he had a lousy sense of security. She propped the door open, then went back for Zoe. Touching her gently on the arm to get her attention, Cassie saw that now she seemed to be sweating profusely and her skin seemed a little grey. But her eyes were alert and she reassured Cassie that all was well, shrugging off more efforts to assist her. Perhaps she was a little wobbly on her feet at first but by the time she reached the open doorway she seemed to be walking just fine.

Cassie threw Danny's car keys in to the bowl of fruit on the kitchen table, where they came to

rest between the two apples she'd bought last week and still hadn't touched. She hurriedly moved the three the empty beer bottles to hide them from Zoe's view, although it was probably too late, and then leaned over to shut and lock the apartment door.

She saw Zoe was looking around her, taking in the messy and disorganized kitchen. Not that there was much to see. A pile of unwashed dishes in the sink, the small table and two chairs, a clock on the wall that was no longer working, and a dying plant that hadn't been watered for several weeks. The fridge was covered with clutter, including a large poorly-printed photo of the Greek coastline held up with a rainbow magnet. Another magnet above the picture encouraged everyone to dream big.

"Nice place," Zoe said and if she was being sarcastic Cassie couldn't tell.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. It comes and goes. Seems to be passing right now. I could do with a drink of water though."

"Sure," Cassie said, hurriedly pouring her a glass of water. She had to shift some of the plates in the sink to get to the tap and was suddenly self-conscious, embarrassed by the mess. She was something of a slob, unfortunately, and while that usually didn't bother her, it was kind of humiliating when she had unexpected company. She took the pebble out of her pocket and placed it carefully in the fruit bowl beside the keys and apples. Zoe watched her.

"You could be dehydrated," she suggested. "That would explain the dizziness. Well, that and the... you know."

Zoe drank the water quickly and greedily, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Yeah, maybe. Or maybe the ambrosia was past its Best Before date." She grinned as she held the glass out and waggled it, asking for a refill.

Don't even say that, Cassie thought. "Maybe we should get you to..." She didn't finish the sentence. Take her to a hospital? How stupid was that? That would be some interesting medical history she'd have to explain, wouldn't it? 'Any symptoms, Ms. Wayward?' 'Well, she was dead for three hours and came back to life thanks to a mythical substance, doctor.' Hell, they'd have her on psych meds faster than she could blink. And besides, that wouldn't help Zoe any. The FBI would be on to her in a spot. Stupid of her for even thinking it.

Zoe waved away the concerns as she drained the second glass. "I'll be fine," she said. She clumsily put the glass on the edge of the table, and Cassie had to jump forward to catch it as it fell.

"Sure you are," she said wryly. "Well, how about a shower? No offence, but you're pretty filthy."

This was true. There was still blood and god alone knows what else caked on her skin and her clothes, and dark black stains where the tattoo ink had run.

Zoe looked down at herself, then back at Cassie. "A shower sounds great. Where is it?"

Cassie led her through the lounge, again trying to swallow the embarrassment she felt at the mess the room was in. Her tall bookcase drew Zoe's attention, stuffed with books as it was to the point of bursting apart. There were more books on the floor, arranged in neat piles, several books open on the coffee table, and even a few more on top of the television. Sliding glass doors led to the balcony outside, with thick blue curtains hung over them.

As she followed, Zoe slipped out of her leather jacket and dropped it on one end of the long couch. She looked amused at the disarray around her and Cassie could feel herself blushing. "You do read a lot." Then, nodding at a landscape on the wall, she added: "Nice painting."

It was anything but really. It was a dark, messy piece with a fiery centre that showed a storm collapsing huge mountains beneath a raging black storm. Cassie hated it. "It covers a hole in the wall," was all she could think of to say.

"A little somber for you, isn't it?"

"I have my dark side."

She heard Zoe chuckle behind her and did her best to ignore the shame she was feeling. Once through the lounge she led her guest to the small bathroom.

"There are towels in the closet there," she said, pointing. "You have to switch on the hot water first, otherwise you won't get any."

Zoe nodded and sat on the edge of the bathtub and began untying the laces of her boots. As she bent over, Cassie admired her muscle tone, the smooth, tanned skin buried beneath layers of sweat, dirt, dried blood and ink. Funny really, she thought, how something so perfect could be so flawed.

Looking up suddenly, Zoe caught her eye. She smiled. "You planning on staying?"

Cassie immediately blushed again and looked away hurriedly. She wasn't sure whether that was a jokey recommendation to get out or an earnest invitation to stay, and Zoe's roguish grin wasn't helping

"Well, I was thinking maybe I should..." she began, then faltered. "I mean, just in case. You get sick again, I mean, just in case of that. The hot water won't help your dizziness."

Zoe had finally managed to get both her boots off. She had a hole in one sock, Cassie noticed, as she wriggled her toes. The brunette stood, steadying herself against the wall, and then reached down to pull off her filthy wifebeater.

"I'll get you something to sleep in," Cassie said hastily and backed out of the bathroom without

looking at anything but the floor. As she shut the door behind her, she leaned against it, closed her eyes and shook her head. She heard the water begin to run. What the hell was she thinking?

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Zoe kicked her dirty clothes into a corner and stepped into the shower, pulling the plastic curtain across behind her. Despite following Cassandra's instructions, the hot water was a long time coming. She chose not to wait. The shock of the freezing cold water was almost enough to make her jump clear out of the bathtub. Instead, however, she gritted her teeth and ducked her head under the nozzle. She'd endured cold showers before. In prison, it was a rare day when the water would be even lukewarm.

She looked down at herself. Crap, she *was* filthy. She stunk too, she realized all of a sudden, sniffing with revulsion at the smell of dirt, the coppery stench of blood, a day or two accumulation of sweat, and the thickly sweet antiseptic odor of the morgue. There was a bottle of soap on the side of the bathtub. She didn't recognize the brand but it smelled good enough. Anything was better than how she reeked right now.

The ink ran off her under the pressure of the water and swirled around the drain. She looked at her shoulders and arms, brushing off the bubbles, and ran her hands over the smooth bare skin. It was odd to see the skin so unmarked and unblemished. She had had most of her tattoos for years and now, in a day, they were gone. It was going to take some getting used to.

The water was finally heating up and she closed her eyes, turning her face up to the showerhead.

She couldn't stay here. She knew that would most likely disappoint Cassandra but it couldn't be helped. She was a sweet girl, cute too, but if she really wanted to get involved with Zoe then she didn't know what she was letting herself in for. Perhaps in another life, things would have been different. She laughed out loud at that thought.

It didn't matter. Things might be getting a little out of control but right now she still had a plan. And plans were made to be stuck to. She needed to get to Fargo. If nothing else, the longer she stayed here the more danger she was in. Maybe she could just leave after her shower. Or sneak out later tonight. Cassandra was exhausted; she'd be asleep fast and sleep soundly, so chances were Zoe's leaving wouldn't wake her.

She felt a little jealous at the idea of a good night's sleep. Chance would be a fine thing, she thought. She wondered what Cassandra looked like when she slept. She smiled to herself, amused at how embarrassed Cassandra had seemed at the mess and the smallness of her apartment. It was adorable, really.

God, she was cute. Beautiful, witty, smart, all wrapped up in an unassuming package. Not that she was all that innocent, Zoe would bet everything on that. And that wasn't such a bad thing...

Damn it, she had to stop thinking of her like that. She needed out. She wasn't about to exchange one trap for another. Besides, Cassandra wouldn't want to be with her in the morning. Common sense always returned in the daylight.

So she should leave. Leave now. Finish washing, dry herself, get dressed and walk out. Don't even look at Cassandra. Just go.

And then what? What was she doing? She didn't even know what this had all been for. She thought of the pebble. She had worked so hard to steal it, only to have it snatched out of her grasp before she even knew it. Didn't that make everything worthless? She thought of that night in Nea Potidea when Michi had left her, had walked out after urging her not to pursue this. And then Sam had... Sam had...

The tears that came caught her by surprise. She thought at first that she might be crying for Michi, even if selfishly it was only for her loss, or perhaps even for Sam, or her parents, but none of this was true. She was crying for herself. The tears ran down her cheeks, and she felt so alone and desperate that they kept coming, and she hugged herself tight, trying to stop but could not.

She wept so hard she made herself retch. She crouched over to throw up, the shower water quickly washing away the thick, clear bile. There was hardly anything in her stomach even before she had vomited. She remembered that all she had eaten yesterday was a few pomegranate seeds, and she felt hungry all of a sudden.

The tears had stopped, without her even realizing it. She didn't want them to come again, so she clenched her fists and banged them against her legs. Keep going, she told herself, get yourself clean and then you can figure out what needs to be done.

At its simplest, she thought, life wasn't so different from prison. Make it through one day at a time, that's all you had to do. And if you were still alive and kicking the next day, so much the better.

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Cassie got her spare linen out of the closet and began readjusting the pillows on the couch. She tucked a cotton sheet over the couch and tucked the edges under the cushions, then threw out a thick woolen blanket. The pillows she placed at one end of the couch. Just in case, she got another thickly crocheted blanket from the cupboard and placed it the bottom of the couch. It was a cold night, after all, colder than anyone had expected.

Effy had given her that blanket as a Christmas present last year. If she was honest, it was pretty badly made, as it was the first thing Effy had actually created after learning how to crochet. But Cassie had never said as much, for it had meant the world to Effy that Cassie had liked the gift, and she had no desire to hurt Effy's feelings. Not that Cassie had ever thought much of Christmas; giving gifts and the excitement around the holidays were far more pleasing to her than the actual day itself.

Her head hurt. There was a lump high on her forehead where she had been kicked, the skin tearing open. There was an FBI agent with some nursing experience who had stitched up the wound during their time at the Sheriff's station. It wasn't serious enough to attend hospital, they had promised her. Just a few stitches, that's all. It would hardly leave a mark, they said. It sure

felt serious now. Maybe she should take some aspirin before bed.

She yawned, covering her mouth with a hand. She felt dead on her feet. That thought contorted the yawn into a smile. Didn't that describe Zoe more than herself?

She listened to the sound of running water. Perhaps it was just as well that she hadn't stayed in the bathroom with Zoe. She had wanted to ask Zoe about everything. About how she had known Hamilton was her father; about Sam, his death, and what he said about her parents; about Michi; and most of all, about Zoe herself. But she was very tired and knew she wasn't up to it. Maybe tomorrow, if she got a good night's sleep.

In all honesty, Cassie was feeling a little overawed that she had been talking to a dead woman. Why was she finding such an impossibility so easy to believe? She caught herself smiling, thinking of when she had first spied Zoe creeping out of the morgue. 'I can't really deny what's standing in front of me.' She couldn't believe she said that. How desperate did she sound?

But Zoe was dead. She *was* dead.

That was... well, she didn't know what it was. Her logical mind screamed impossible at her and even her imagination whispered incredible, amazing, astounding, but none of those words really did the feat of resurrection justice. A magic trick, Zoe had called it. Well, it was that alright. True magic. Like watching a conjuror pull rabbits from his hat only to realize you could see through the hat all the way to Albuquerque and that the trick wasn't a trick. It was real. And here she was treating it not only as real but mundane. Like coming back from the dead happened every day.

She scooped up Zoe's discarded jacket and pulled the velvet bag of ambrosia from the pocket. Somehow she couldn't resist looking at it again. She untied the drawstring and looked inside. The ambrosia was so strange, so alien, so unbelievable. She poked a lump. It wobbled just like jello but sparkled incandescently in ways her eyes couldn't quite focus on and her brain couldn't quite get a grip on. Her fingertip came away powdery and greasy, like touching a sugared jelly donut.

There were dark flecks in there too, she could see that now that she had more time to study it. What was that she wondered? Blood of the Gods, perhaps? Or was that her imagination running away with her again? She held the open bag up to her nose and sniffed. It smelt pleasant, but it was an odor she couldn't quite pin down. Wasn't ambrosia meant to be honey? She'd read that somewhere, she was sure of it. This didn't look like honey to her. Not even the set honeycomb kind and certainly not the runny pre-processed stuff you got in the grocery store.

And if all this wasn't weird enough (and right now for Cassie it certainly was, much more than she wanted thank you very much), the questions that the ambrosia's existence raised in her mind were beginning to terrify her. It wasn't as if this opened a can of worms. Oh no. This was the equivalent of opening a whole chain of fully-stocked bait shops. Because if the ambrosia was real, that meant...

She didn't want to think about it. She *couldn't* think about it. Maybe tomorrow, when she was less tired.

Cassie heard Zoe approaching, and so guiltily thrust the bag back into the jacket pocket. She looked at her fingers, seeing the sparkling powder on them, thought briefly about licking them, then rubbed her hands on her pants hastily.

At the sight of the made-up couch, Zoe looked directly at Cassie. A single perfectly groomed eyebrow, one that a few scant hours ago had a neat bullet hole above it, rose slightly. She said nothing but there might have been a smile playing around the edges of her lips, like a clumsy dancer at a prom. Cassie frowned. Was that an indication she was expecting to sleep somewhere else? Well, regardless of what Zoe might have thought, she was going to be shit out of luck tonight. Cassie was far too tired to even *think* about anything but sleep.

Another yawn came on. She did her best to stifle it as she looked Zoe up and down. The brunette's hair was still wet. She had on the shirt Cassie had left by the door but it looked like she was wearing nothing else until she moved, which gave Cassie a glimpse of dark boxer shorts. Cassie had a problem taking her eyes off those long legs and shapely thighs.

"Jesus, how old is this tee?" Zoe was holding the edges and looking down at it.

"What?" Cassie said, looking up suddenly.

"This shirt?" Zoe prompted, although there was definitely a teasing tone in her voice. "It's been a while since Frankie had anything to do but relax, hasn't it?"

As she walked past Cassie got a whiff of an incredible scent. Wow, she smelt good. Divinely sweet. What the hell had she used to wash her hair? It didn't smell like anything Cassie kept in her closet. "Did you use my shampoo?"

"Just your soap. Hope you don't mind," Zoe said as she perched on the far arm of the couch and began to comb her hair.

"Of course not," Cassie said hurriedly, still sniffing. It wasn't her soap's smell. So what the hell was it?

"Something wrong?"

A passage of verse came to Cassie and without thinking, she spoke it aloud. "And with ambrosia first her lovely skin she purified, with fragrant oil anointing, breathing forth such odors sweet."

"What was that?" Zoe had stopped combing mid-stroke.

"It's from *The Iliad*. Or *The Odyssey*. One of the two," she finished, embarrassed. She couldn't believe she said that. How cheesy did that sound?

Zoe looked honestly startled. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it, then opened it again. "Wow," was all she eventually said and she seemed surprised when that single word came out.

"Sorry," Cassie said quietly, looking away. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. "It just sprang to mind."

"Don't be sorry," Zoe told her with a smile. "It's sweet. I've never had someone quote Greek poetry for me before. Movies and TV plenty of times, and lines from books occasionally. And hell, I've had Biblical verse quoted *at* me often enough. But Greek poetry? That's something new."

Cassie stepped over to her and reached out to touch her forehead, intending to check her temperature. She half-expected Zoe to shy away but she didn't move. She looked up at Cassie, that infuriatingly attractive smile still firmly in place, as if she was daring Cassie to keep her hand in place. Or move it, so long as it moved in the right way.

"You're burning up," Cassie said, trying to fight the urge to run her fingers through those dark, silky tresses.

"Maybe the ambrosia only works on the mortal flesh. My soul could be in hell."

"I doubt it. They'd never let you in. You'd be running the place within a week."

Zoe laughed loudly. "You know how to compliment a girl, I'll give you that." She reached up to take Cassie's hand, twisting it over gently, so she could see the thin bruise that the handcuffs had left. She traced the line softly with her thumb.

Another yawn and Cassie pulled her hand free to cover her mouth. "I need to get some sleep. You should try to do the same."

"I don't think I can."

"Well, try." Cassie crossed to the doorway and paused with her hand on the light switch. "Are you sure there's nothing I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Well, goodnight then."

Zoe grinned at her. "It has been, hasn't it?"

2: Waking from a Troubled Dream

"One of these days, Sam," Zoe said as she leaned over the table to take another shot, "I'm going to have to kill you."

The cue ball bounced softly off a cushion and kissed the red-and-white ball she had just nominated, which in turn rolled slowly into a corner pocket. She rechalked her cue and studied the table for a moment or two.

The tall, muscular man grinned at her, his teeth starkly white against the blackness of his beard. God, sometimes she hated that grin. Actually, lately she was hating it most of the time. It bugged her. It was a self-assured smile and she knew what it meant. Oh yes, she knew exactly what Sam was thinking. It meant he thought he had the upper hand.

And she was letting herself be manipulated, that was the really infuriating thing. How in hell had she let Sam talk her into this? Was it just because she was unlikely to lose? But he knew that too, so why was he so damn happy?

"Yeah, yeah," the big man said, "sure you will. Long as it isn't today."

"Sam, what are we doing? I don't know how you talked me into this."

"Ah, quit your whining. You're already two balls up on me."

"You'll get no argument here."

He glowered at her suddenly. "Very funny."

He was right though, she shouldn't complain. After all, she was *very* good at pool. A natural, it had been said. Some people might even say it was a sign of a misspent youth, she supposed, although that couldn't be further from the truth. And Sam, try as he might, had never beaten her.

Which made it all the more strange as to why Sam had suggested they settle their differences over a game. He was bound to lose.

She wiped her forehead free of sweat. Fuck, the heat was unbearable. She had thought she would have no problem with it, but it had really caught her by surprise. Maybe it was the humidity. The gauge on the wall said it was only ninety-eight degrees. It felt a lot hotter. And it was raining outside, so hard that anytime the doors were opened you had to shout to make yourself heard, but

the downpour was doing nothing to cool the air.

The bar was crowded, packed to the rafters, and the tight press of bodies anytime you tried to get a drink was doing nothing to ease the heat. It was a popular haunt with the denizens of South Beach, but when the heavens opened a horde of people had rushed in, taking shelter. It was only around the pool tables that there was any space, and even so both she and Sam had been jostled or had hit people in the ribs with their cues while lining up shots.

One advantage of Sam's sheer bulk was that he was intimidating, even when he wasn't trying to be. Once they'd claimed a pool table as their own, they hadn't been bothered by anyone else wanting a game, even though there were obviously people waiting at the other tables.

Zoe finished her beer - some zesty, lime-flavored crap that would only sell down here in Florida, she thought - and then wiped her hands on her jeans, before gripping her cue again.

"Will you get a fucking move on and take your shot?"

She smiled. "In a hurry to lose, are we?"

"I just want to know what the future holds, that's all."

"I could have told you that without us having to waste time playing."

"Would you rather be out there in this weather?"

"I'd rather be on a flight back to California, if we're being honest."

He gave her a look of indifference. "When have you ever known me to be honest? Besides, a bet's a bet."

True. Even a damn stupid one. If she won, they go back to California and she gets a month off. She'd made sure to say a month because she knew it wouldn't last. There was no way Sam would let her sit idle for more than a fortnight. If she'd said less, she would be lucky to get just a long weekend.

If he won, which wasn't very likely, she'd stay and figure out some way to break into the Lowe Art Museum, steal an emerald necklace that was worth well over two million dollars, and then get away scott free. And it wouldn't be a stroll in the park either. The security at the museum was expensive, modern, and extremely difficult to get around. Hell, it wasn't even as if the stones would be easy to fence either, assuming that was what Sam intended. Not even he would be so foolish to try to sell the necklace whole. Or maybe he'd just approach the insurance company through a series of intermediaries and claim he'd recover it, and would return it to them for a small finders' fee. They'd done a few times before, usually successfully.

Damn, it was a stupid bet. Why in fuck had she agreed to it? It wasn't even as if she'd been drunk when he'd suggested it. That, she would have understood.

She knew why, really. Because she wanted a break. Sam was pissing her off lately and she needed some time away from him. Somewhere different, maybe. A change of scene would do her good. And if she won the bet, she could hold him to it. She would have a bargaining chip.

She potted another ball, a tricky shot that she made look a lot easier than it was. When she was a teenager, she'd hustled a little pool, until Sam had found out and beaten her bloody. It had been a lesson, he had told her, not to waste her time on small pickings. She'd learnt and quickly. One lesson was enough for her.

Zoe considered the table. "We're going to need ID cards. Good ones, too. Magnetic strips, real coding, the whole works."

She knew by discussing the robbery she looked weak, like she was going to change her mind and do the job anyway, regardless of the game's turnout. But thinking about the difficulties, even theoretically, kept her brain sharp. At least, that was the best excuse she could think of.

Sam nodded. "I know a good forger. She lives in the 'burbs. Bit of a drug problem, but she's reliable enough."

And that means she'll be cheap too, Zoe thought. Way to go, Sam. Keep using people. "You sure about that?"

Another annoying grin. "She does good work. You'll see."

Zoe wasn't sure she believed him. She'd have to meet this woman herself to be certain. One of the many differences between her and Sam, she thought, was that he only trusted people's skills. She trusted people's actions.

She nodded towards her empty bottle. "Go get us some more beers, Sam," she told him.

He didn't like being ordered around. Never had. But as always he let some things slide, if not to keep the peace than only to keep her happy. Not as happy as she'd like, but just happy enough to keep working. So he forced a smile, drained the last of his beer, and shouldered his way through the crowd to the bar.

Zoe considered the pool table again. She'd gotten a little out of position on that last shot. Without thinking, she reached up under her shirt sleeve to scratch her new tattoo. She managed to stop herself just in time and instead heavily patted the gauze pad. It didn't help. The bastard thing still itched like hell.

Swearing, she took a packet of cigarettes from her jeans pocket and lit one. It was a good tattoo she thought, well worth the money. She'd asked various tattooists in several cities across the country to copy her sketches but no one had quite captured the feeling she always experienced when thinking of the image. Hell, how hard was it to ink a damn double-headed axe? Kat Von D was the only one talented enough to even get close to what Zoe had pictured in her mind.

Thanks to that crappy new TV show, there had been a waiting list a year or more long at 305 Ink. Still, you paid enough, you could skip the line. That was true of most things. She patted the gauze again with her free hand, as the itching was now driving her crazy. Still, it was the last tattoo she'd get for a while. She had no more room on either shoulder, after all. She kinda liked the idea of getting a tramp stamp, but another part of her thought it was a little trashy, and she preferred to see it on other women rather than herself.

She smiled to herself, wondering what that said about her taste in women. Maybe she needed to find a nice girl in a small town and settle down. Yeah, right. Like that was going to happen.

"Who's winning?" A voice asked from behind her.

Zoe whirled around a little too fast. The thin, blonde FBI Agent standing behind her caught the cue stick before it could accidentally strike her across the face. "Careful," she said, "you'll have someone's eye out."

"Agent Hudson," Zoe said in a low tone.

Hannah was smiling. "Ms. Mercouri. Fancy meeting you here."

"Are you really going to pretend this is just a coincidence?" Before she could answer, Zoe continued. "And call me Zoe. You know me well enough by now, I'm sure."

Her smile grew wider and she took a drink from her own beer. "I know you both pretty well," she admitted, "although in different ways."

Zoe looked over to where Sam was being kept waiting at the bar. Usually his impatience would get the better of him but right now he was joking and laughing, trying to entertain and impress two scantily clad women next to him. They were both attractive enough, although only in that beachfront kind of way. Their tans were a little too heavy; their bodies a little too unnatural.

Sam didn't even glance back up at the pool tables once. If she didn't tell him Hudson had been here, he'd probably never know.

"I hear you got a promotion," she countered, hinting that she knew Hudson just as well. "Congratulations."

The blonde shrugged as if it were nothing. "Same job, different title. I hate the idea of the Bureau having a whole taskforce to bringing you down."

"Should I be flattered or insulted?"

Ignoring the jibe, Hannah motioned towards Sam with her beer bottle. "He uses you." She was scowling at the sight of him flirting with the two women.

"So tell me something I don't know." Zoe inhaled deeply on the cigarette. She really should give up smoking, she thought, but it was so low on her list of priorities. "Is that why you're stalking me, Agent Hudson? Just to tell me that Sam uses me?"

"Hannah, please. And pretty much, yes. Did you know I had a degree in psychology?"

Zoe shook her head.

"SUNY, class of '92. And I trained primarily as a hostage negotiator, until I transferred to Serious Crimes."

"Is all this leading somewhere?"

"Just background information. In case you were thinking I had no idea what I was talking about."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Huh. How much longer do you think Sam will tolerate you?"

"We've worked together for more than twenty years..."

"Together? Hardly."

Zoe ignored the interruption, although it did rile her. "You think he's going to try to be rid of me? I make too much money for him."

"He'd be rid of his own mother if she was no longer useful. Or if she was a threat."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Damn it, Zoe thought, she was losing her temper. She was going to have to watch herself, just to make sure she didn't give anything away. What the hell was wrong with her? Hudson or that partner of hers - what the hell was her name? - never used to get under her skin like this.

"You're getting sloppy." When Hudson saw the flare of anger appear on Zoe's face, she smiled and held up a hand. "Hear me out. By anyone else's standards you're still clean. Spotlessly so. We still can't pin a thing on you, not yet. But you *are* getting sloppy. You're partying too hard and running too many risks. You're talking too much to too many people. Maybe one day it will be the wrong people."

She sipped her beer again. "I don't know why. Maybe you're finally rebelling against him, maybe you have some deep desire to screw yourself up. Whatever the reason, Sam's not happy. Keep it up and you'll find out just how ruthless he can be."

Oh, she knew Sam could be ruthless. But would he ever cut her loose? She doubted it. He'd told her enough how she was the best he'd ever worked with. Of course, it didn't matter how good she was, if she kept pushing... And maybe she wanted him to ditch her. Maybe she didn't have the

nerve to leave him, so she was making herself intolerable, subconsciously urging him to grow weary of her. Fuck, talk about passive aggressive.

Zoe looked up and saw the FBI Agent was grinning. The bitch thought she'd scored a point or two. She was just trying to place a wedge between them. Divide and conquer.

"It depends on where you stand."

Hudson was momentarily non-plussed. "What?"

"You asked me who was winning."

She laughed at that, raised her beer in a salute and disappeared back into the crowd. Zoe glanced back over her shoulder to see Sam was heading back towards her. When she looked back, she had completely lost sight of Hudson.

Sam stepped up to her and handed her an ice-cold beer. When she took it, she noticed her hands were trembling in rage.

"We're going to have to cut this short, Zoe," he told her with a devilish grin.

"Do I dare ask which one succumbed to your charms? Or was it both?"

"Let's just say I have a busy night planned."

She shook her head wearily.

"Ah, you were going to win anyway," he told her.

She wasn't really listening. An idea struck her. She was going to play and she was going to lose on purpose, although she'd do it so well Sam wouldn't suspect a thing. Then she'd throw herself into planning the robbery and that alone would keep her focused. No more partying. She'd steal that damn necklace and it would go without a hitch, she'd make sure of it. Getting sloppy, was she? Well, she'd prove them all wrong.

It was foolish, really, considering Hudson had now revealed the FBI were in Florida and were keeping very close tabs on her and Sam. No doubt there was a surveillance team elsewhere in the bar. How long had they been watching them? And how close had they got?

"They'll have to wait, Sam," she said, suddenly full of certainty. "A bet's a bet, after all."

* * * * *

Cassie woke the next morning at her usual time, even though she had made sure to switch her alarm off. She almost turned over in the warm bed to continue sleeping but something drove at her to get up. She pulled back the thick sheets and braved the freezing air. She'd have to reset the thermostat if this cold spell kept up.

She hurried to the bathroom, not only because of the morning chill but also because she slept naked and fretted that she would be seen, and there washed her face and cleaned her teeth. She considered taking a shower, knowing that it would wake her up for sure, but there was no chance of hot water this early. There was something not quite right in the bathroom but it took her a while to realize what it was. The pile of Zoe's discarded clothes was missing, save for the bloody a-shirt that was crumpled on top of the hamper. She panicked, spitting out the last remnants of toothpaste and wiping her face clean quickly, then grabbing her robe from off the back of the door.

The lounge was empty, the couch undisturbed. Either Zoe had done a very good job of remaking the bedclothes or it hadn't been slept in. Cassie picked up the sheets and blankets, noting they were cold to the touch, and dumped them back into the closet. She moved through to the kitchen and saw immediately that the apartment door was closed but unlocked. She could feel the panic rising inside her. She checked the fruit bowl. Oddly, the pebble was still there. She picked it up and dropped it in a pocket of her robe.

Walking back to the lounge, she rubbed the back of her neck, thinking, conscious of the cold draft of air she felt. She looked up and saw the curtain was pulled back and the sliding glass doors were ajar an inch or two. She eased the door open and found Zoe, fully-dressed, seated in one of the two cheap plastic chairs out on the balcony. She was still wearing the loose-fitting Hammett tee Cassie had given her, although it was now tucked into her blood-stained jeans.

As much as she hated herself for it, Cassie felt an enormous sense of relief at finding Zoe was still here. The brunette looked as if she was lost deep in thought and didn't even glance up when she heard the door open behind her. Whatever memory she was thinking of wasn't making her happy.

"What time is it?" Cassie asked through a big yawn.

"A little past seven."

"Oh good. For a moment there, I thought I'd overslept."

That brought a small smile to Zoe's lips, and Cassie felt a flush of pride at making her, well, if not happy at least forget her troubles for a second or two.

Zoe looked up finally. "You okay? You look a little rough."

Yeah, Cassie thought, and I wasn't the one who'd come back from the dead. How was that fair? Out loud, she said, "Nothing a bucketload of aspirins and a cup of coffee won't cure. Did you sleep at all?"

"No. Too wired to sleep, I think. It's probably just as well. I would have kept you awake too." She paused, perhaps realizing what she had just said. "With my nightmares, I mean."

"How are you feeling?"

She looked askew at that question as if deciding how best to answer it. "Well enough. No more dizzy spells."

"No fever? Or whatever it was?"

"Nope. Why don't you go back to bed?"

"No, I'd rather spend the time with you." Cassie smiled weakly. "That sounded stupid, didn't it?"

Zoe grinned back at her. "Well, it's not as impressive as beautiful Greek verse, but it's sweet none the less."

"I have a lot of questions."

"I'll bet you do. I have a few of my own."

"You do?" She looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, about the pebble I suppose."

"No, not really. About you."

Flustered, Cassie retreated. "I'm going to make the coffee. You want some?"

"Sure. Black, no sugar."

Cassie almost ran to the kitchen, thankful to be on her own for a second. Damn it, why was it so hard to think when she was with Zoe? The woman was so confident, so self-assured, it was like she was making up for everyone else's doubts and insecurities. Nothing ever seemed to faze her. Well, Cassie thought, she would. Somehow, she'd think of a way to fluster Zoe.

And what the hell did she mean, she had questions about her? What was there that Zoe didn't already know? She was a boring, quiet, smalltown girl, who'd never done a single exciting thing in her life. She wanted to, sure, but never really had the chance or the time or... No, she thought, that wasn't true. She'd never had the nerve.

As she waited for the coffee to brew, she played with the pebble in her pocket. She knew the inscription by heart already. A good memory was something to be proud of, her mother had always told her, although Cassie had never found that to be true. Oh sure, she had a warehouse of trivia up there in her skull but what use was any of it?

"Where the star lies," she said to herself, quoting the first line of the verse scratched onto the pebble. Well, that was pretty straightforward, wasn't it? But what did the rest of it mean?

When the perculator finally clicked off, she found two clean mugs (well, her last clean cup, which she'd give to Zoe, and another she hurriedly washed out in the sink) and poured some

coffee out. She took both mugs back through to the balcony and placed them on the small table between the chairs.

"Here you go."

Zoe seemed to be concentrating on something down in the street below. "Thanks." She didn't touch the cup.

Cassie brushed the light dusting of snow off the free chair and sat down herself, tucking her robe around her to try to keep warm. Why the hell were they sitting out here, she wondered? But she wasn't about to argue. If Zoe wanted to be out here, she'd keep her company. "Aren't you cold?"

Zoe shook her head. She wasn't lying either, Cassie could see that. All the same she shook out a blanket from under the chair and wrapped it around the brunette's shoulders.

"I've been watching this guy walk up and down the street for the last half-hour," Zoe said, nodding down at the snow-covered sidewalk. "You'd think he'd be freezing."

Cassie looked down where Zoe was looking and saw a red-headed man hefting a sandwich board up and down the street. Both sides of the board read 'The End is Nice'.

"Oh, that's just Walter. He's harmless. Just thinks the end of the world is coming and it's a good thing."

"Not often you get an optimistic pessimist, I suppose," Zoe said with an amused grunt. She looked back at Cassie and studied her for a second. "So this is what you look like not dressed for work, eh?"

Cassie felt self-conscious and pulled her robe even tighter around her, trying to make sure nothing was showing. She tried to make a joke of it. "Well, be fair, I haven't showered or anything yet."

An eyebrow twitched. "Did you hear me complaining?"

Cassie blushed again. Damn it, when was she going to stop doing that?

"Why did they build a balcony on these places considering the weather?" Zoe asked, apparently having grown tired of teasing her.

"It's a fire escape too," she said, pointing to the collapsible ladder on one side of the railings. She sipped her coffee. "Besides, you should see it in the summer. You know, you probably shouldn't be out here."

"Why not?"

"You're supposed to be dead, remember?" She paused, thinking about whether or not to ask the

question that had surfaced in her mind. She blurted it out before she could stop herself. "Was it any better this time?"

"What?"

"Being dead."

The color drained from Zoe's face and she turned away, focusing on the marching Walter again.

"By my reckoning," Cassie continued, "you were dead for about three hours. That's a bit of a turnaround compared to last time."

"Let's not talk about that now." Zoe tried to smile. "I don't mind telling you, you freaked Ben out a little when you showed up."

"Who's Ben?"

"Ben Davis. The morgue attendant."

"Yeah? Not as much as you did, I'll bet."

Zoe chuckled. "I guess not."

A worrying thought suddenly struck Cassie. "How's he going to explain a missing corpse?"

"He's a smart enough kid. He'll figure something out." She looked at Cassie, her eyes flicking upwards, and her smile faded. "You're bleeding."

"What?" Confused, Cassie instinctively put a hand to the band-aid on her temple. Her fingertips came away red. "Damn it."

"Here, let me." Zoe removed the tape, slowly, carefully, so as not to hurt her or loosen the stitches, and then studied the wound, gently turning Cassie's head in her hands. "Doesn't look too bad. The stitches still look fine. You probably just opened the cut a little when you moved. Try frowning less."

"Easy for you to say," Cassie said with a smile.

There was no response. Cassie saw she was looking past her and so turned to follow her gaze. A black SUV was just turning the corner of the street, heading for the apartment building's parking lot.

Zoe touched Cassie's chin and tenderly turned her head back to face her. She smiled. "You're going to need another band-aid or something soon though."

There were some tissues in the pocket of Cassie's bathrobe and she used them to pad gently at

the blood seeping from the wound in her forehead. "Hmm. I noticed the door was unlocked this morning."

"I couldn't sleep so I went for a walk. I had a lot of thinking to do."

Cassie supposed there was little chance of someone seeing her. "About what?"

There was some hesitation before Zoe spoke. "I need to get to Fargo. To begin with."

"Not a problem. I'm sure we can borrow Danny's car again. He'll be busy all day anyway."

"You're misunderstanding me too fast. I said *I*, not *we*."

Startled by the rebuttal, Cassie said nothing for a moment. When she finally did speak, she could hear the tremor in her own voice. "So it's the brush-off, then?"

Zoe didn't answer.

"Well, at least you're not denying it."

"I told you, I..."

"You don't lie, I know. Although I'm beginning to wish you would, once in a while." She could feel her face getting hot again but this time she knew it wasn't from embarrassment but from anger. "You can't just leave."

She meant it to seem like it was an impossibility. Instead it sounded like she was pleading, and she hated herself for being so pathetic, and that only fueled her anger.

"You'd be surprised at what I can do. It used to surprise me."

"I really thought... well, I suppose it doesn't matter what I thought."

Zoe placed a hand on her shoulder. "You need to listen to me. I made a mistake once before. I don't want to make another."

Astonished, Cassie responded angrily, twisting out of the other woman's grip. "So I'm a mistake? Is that it? Damn right, you've made a mistake. And you won't get the chance to make a second."

"Calm down, that's not what I said..."

Heatedly, Cassie jumped to her feet. She fished the pebble out from her dressing gown pocket and places it on the glass table with a sharp click. "Well, you'll be needing this. You earned it, after all."

Zoe looked up at her and opened her mouth to speak. Whatever she was going to say was cut off

by the sound of the doorbell ringing.

"Who the hell can that be?" Cassie said.

"I'm guessing it will be your Sheriff, checking up on you. He seems the type to do that."

"Crap. What are we going to do?"

A sad smile appeared on Zoe's face. She stood, shaking off the blanket, and picked up her leather jacket from where it lay on the balcony floor. "Well," she said, shaking the snow off the jacket then slipping it on, "you probably need to answer the door."

"So will I ever see you again?"

"If you know where to look. And if we're unlucky enough."

What the hell was that supposed to mean, Cassie wondered? That they'd both be unlucky to spend some more time together? Was it some kind of weak insult? But if that was true why on earth would she say 'we' and not 'I'? It made no sense. But there was nothing she could think of to say as a retort, clever or otherwise, and so she bit her tongue. She half-outstretched a hand for Zoe to take, then thought better of it. Instead she stared angrily at Zoe for a moment more, then turned on her heel and stormed into the apartment.

* * * * *

Zoe had been proved right. It was Danny at the door. She was surprised, and more than a little grateful, that he rung the doorbell for once. Normally he just barged right in. She soon saw why he had been more circumspect this morning. Agent Hudson stood a little behind him. She was removing her sunglasses and placing them in her breast pocket, when she looked up and smiled at Cassie. It wasn't a particularly friendly smile, although Cassie got the impression that it was meant to look like one.

She let them both in, taking a few steps back to place herself in the doorway between the kitchen and the lounge. The move looked natural, she thought, and it bought Zoe some time.

"Hi Danny." She nodded brusquely at the FBI agent. "Hannah."

"Nice place," Hannah said, looking around judgmentally. "Lots of... space."

Danny looked concerned. "Did we wake you?"

She shook her head. "No, I've been up for a while. Didn't sleep well."

"I'll bet," Hannah said quietly.

Cassie did her best to ignore that comment, whatever it meant. "I would have thought you'd still be in bed, Danny."

He shrugged. "You know how it is. Things to do. Ike was covering the night shift and he needs to get home. I grabbed a couple of hours. I actually came for my car keys. Thought I might as well take the opportunity to check on you, make sure you're okay. Hannah was nice enough to give me a ride over here."

Cassie was only half-listening. She was busy watching Hannah playing idly with the drawstring of a small velvet bag on the table. She was really hoping that it wasn't the ambrosia. Why the hell would Zoe have left that here? Zoe wasn't careless, so she wouldn't have left it there by accident. But what else could it be? How many velvet bags did she have hidden around the place?

She tried to calm herself. Even if Hannah looked inside, she thought, how on earth could she guess what it was? All the same, she reached past Hannah, deliberately moving too close so the Agent was forced to step away, and retrieved Danny's car keys from the fruit bowl on the table. He took them gratefully.

Hannah looked at her and frowned. "You keep it cold in here."

"I was sitting on the balcony. Must have left the door open."

"Mind if I take a look?"

Damn it, Cassie thought, I gave her that opening, didn't I? "Would it matter if I did?" Danny shot her a warning look that Hannah couldn't have missed if she was blind. "Sorry, I don't do well on no sleep. I'm a little cranky."

"No problem," Hannah said, pushing past Cassie into the lounge. She cast a critical eye over the mess, then walked over to study the painting. "Interesting print. John Martin, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Wouldn't have taken you for a fan of Martin's work."

"It was my mother's."

Grunting acknowledgment, Hannah moved through to the balcony, sliding the glass door open. She looked down at the two coffee mugs, one still full, the other half-empty.

"Hmm."

"Something wrong?" Cassie said. She should have moved the mugs before answering the door. Too late now.

"Your fire escape ladder is down."

Cassie glanced over and saw that Hannah was right, the ladder was indeed extended down to the

sidewalk below. At least the Agent hadn't made a big thing about the mugs, she thought. Be thankful for small mercies. "It keeps getting loose," she lied, thinking fast. "I think there's something wrong with the catch."

Hannah peered over the edge of the balcony. "That's a problem. Should probably get someone to look into that. Not safe."

She shrugged. "It's an easy out."

"It's an easy in too. Could be tempting fate. This doesn't look like too safe of a neighborhood."

"I've always felt safe here."

"Until recently, right?"

"You said it."

"You're bleeding."

Cassie was momentarily startled by the sudden change of tack, then raised a hand to her head again. She hadn't put on a fresh bandage yet.

"Do you need to get that checked out, Cassie?" Danny asked, looking concerned.

"It's nothing." She waved his concerns away, more worried that Hannah was studying the coffee mugs again. She touched the woman on the arm to distract her. "Do you think you could tell me about her?"

"About who?"

She almost said Zoe but stopped herself in time. "Mercouri. I want to know more about her."

"Why?"

"I think it would help me if I understand why she did what she did," she said with a shrug of her shoulders. She half-turned away, playing the vulnerability card as much as she could. It usually worked and was worth a shot. "I guess I thought you might have some records or something you could show me."

Hannah looked as if she didn't believe a word of it. "I'll see what I can do," she said finally. She turned away, apparently no longer interested in being out in the cold, and moved back into the apartment. Danny followed and Cassie was sure to pull the glass door firmly shut behind her.

As the trio returned to the kitchen, Danny's over-the-shoulder radio crackled suddenly, almost making Cassie jump in surprise. She heard Ike's voice squawk from the handset, asking for the Sheriff. Turning away from the two women slightly, Danny pulled the handset down a little and

pressed the respond button. "Go ahead, Ike."

"Morning, Sheriff. I'm at the morgue. You might want to get down here."

At the mention of the morgue, Cassie's stomach flipped over. She looked up quickly at Danny, then saw Hannah watching her and so looked away, trying to look casually disinterested. She picked up a paperback book from the floor. A translation of *The Odyssey* by Robert Fagles. She ran her hand over the orange-and-blank cover. Dog-eared and battered, the spine firmly cracked, a phone number scribbled on the inside front cover; it was one of her favorite books.

Funny how these things could trigger memories, she thought. She had been on a lunch date from a temp job she taken in Bismarck, she remembered. It had been a cool day in early summer and she foregone her usual packed sandwich when Sonya had approached her at her cubicle and asked if she wanted to take a long lunch. She had hesitated before answering. Up until that point she'd avoided mixing too much with the other staff. That was often what happened between temps and permanent staff. It was just easier. No point learning names and stuff when you'd most likely be leaving in a month or more.

But that day she had said yes. They'd eaten at a little bistro that Cassie had never seen before. Good food she recalled, although she couldn't remember anything of what she'd eaten. Then, with plenty of time left in their lunch hour, they had wandered through a market place full of secondhand stores and antique dealers. She remembered being overjoyed when Sonya had found it amidst the horde of Tom Clancys, Anne Rices, and Stephen Kings on a table outside a secondhand bookstore and then had immediately bought it for her despite Cassie's protests. Not that she had protested too hard. She'd wanted the book, she just hadn't wanted to feel obligated.

The job hadn't worked out. Neither had the relationship. Both had lasted about the same length of time. Sonya was okay, Cassie supposed, lots of fun and full of energy. Easy on the eyes too, if you liked that whole rebellious-conservative style. The kind of look that said: 'I'm only dressing this way because I have to hold down a job so screw you and your hidebound conventions.' But over the course of a couple of weeks she had discovered that they had nothing in common and Sonya was perhaps a little too out there; Cassie never felt truly comfortable with her. Still, that was the most successful relationship she'd had in a *long* while.

The book hadn't been there the night before, had it? She normally left her books in neat piles but she was just too tired to remember. Had Zoe been reading it? What on earth for? One page had a corner turned over. That wasn't her, she knew that. She always just left the book open, upside-down, eventually breaking the spine. Laziness, she supposed. Her mother always tried to get her to use bookmarks.

She did her best to listen to Danny's exchange with Ike but kept her eyes focused on the pages, trying to remain calm. She tried to read the pages that had been marked but couldn't concentrate. Her heart was racing.

"The morgue?" Danny said. "What are you doing there?"

"Say again, Sheriff. You're breaking up. Damn this weather."

"What are you doing at the morgue?" Danny repeated a little more loudly.

"There was a break-in early this morning. One of the bodies was stolen."

Out of the corner of her eye, Cassie saw Hannah start at that. She looked up too. That was natural, she decided. She couldn't help but overhear the conversation, so she didn't have to feign disinterest totally. And who would when somebody reported a body being stolen from the town morgue? She closed the book and dropped it onto back onto the table.

Danny looked startled, as if someone had just slapped him. "Did you just say someone stole a body?"

"Yep. Mercuri's."

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Oh, that's just great," she said sourly.

"Okay, Ike, be there as soon as I can," Danny said after a thoughtful pause, returning the handset to his shoulder. He looked over at Hannah, then at Cassie, who said nothing but tried to look puzzled. "Why the hell would anyone want to steal a body?"

It sounded like a rhetorical question but Hannah looked up from her cellphone to answer it anyway. "Damned if I know. But it's not like she got up and walked away of her own accord, is it? You figure your Deputy has told anyone else yet?"

"I doubt it. We're short-staffed."

"Okay, I'm going to step outside and call Grace, keep her in the loop. I can't get a damn signal in here. It's a safe bet that she'll want to be in on this, so I'll drive back, pick her up, and meet you over there."

"Sounds good," Danny said with a nod. "You know how to get there?"

She didn't answer him. She might not have even heard him as she was already out of the door by the time he had started speaking. You could hear her muffled voice as she ran down the stairs, keeping up what seemed like a very one-sided conversation. Cassie waited until she was sure the woman was completely out of earshot, then waited a moment more, before looking accusingly at Danny.

"What did you bring her along for?"

He looked affronted. "I needed a ride."

"She creeps me out."

"Why? She's okay."

Cassie shook her head. "Something about her eyes. She's a little... obsessive."

"Comes with the job, I guess." Danny looked at her seriously. "Why did you want my car last night, Cassie?"

"Did you tell her I borrowed it?" Cassie said, evading the question.

"Yep. Several days ago."

Cassie let out a sigh of relief.

"Does that matter?" Danny said.

"No, of course not. I just get the impression she doesn't like me very much."

"Spend some time alone with her. Then you'll get the impression she doesn't like anyone very much. So where did you go?"

He wasn't letting this drop. That surprised her a little. Normally, he trusted the first thing that came out of her mouth. She hesitated, trying to think. She hated the idea of lying to Danny but telling him the truth would be opening a can of worms. What choice did she have? "Down to the bank. Or at least, I tried, but Main Street was still sealed off."

"The bank? What on earth for?"

"Not everything was confiscated by the FBI. They missed my book."

"Your book? You mean that myth thing? The Plato book?" He laughed. "You're telling me you went back to a crime scene just to get a damn book? Cassie, you are crazy. You could have got another one."

"Not last night I couldn't. You know I can't sleep without reading for a while first, Danny."

He shook his head in disbelief but it was a disbelief in her foolishness rather than doubting what she said. "You could have just asked."

She tried to give him a convincingly repentant smile. "Sorry, I didn't think. And I was tired and I knew you were too. I didn't want to ask you for help."

"You can always ask, Cassie. So what did you do instead?"

"Instead of what?"

"Reading Plato."

She turned the book around on the table so he could read the title. "I went back to an old favorite. *The Odyssey*."

"Yep, that would put me to sleep in a heartbeat. Nothing like a Greek tragedy, right?"

You don't know the half of it, Cassie thought.

* * * * *

Danny turned up his collar as he stepped out into the cold, then pulled his fur hat from his thick jacket pocket and stuffed it haphazardly on his head. His gloves fell out onto the snow and as he stooped to pick them up he saw Walter Haralson turn around on at the end of the sidewalk. That was Walter, Danny thought, always the same pattern, day after day, come rain or shine.

When things upset a routine, Danny thought, it threw everyone off-kilter. That explained why he couldn't shrug off this worried feeling he had over Cassie. She seemed a little on edge and he wasn't sure why. That in itself was unusual. He'd almost swear she was keeping something from him but that really wasn't like her. No, he thought, she couldn't be. She must just still be upset about what happened yesterday. Exhausted too, most likely. Lord knows, he was.

Walter must have heard Danny crunching through the snow or unlocking his car, because he paused beside the jeep. He looked in Danny's rough direction, his dark glasses shining one in the bright snow-reflected sunlight.

"That you, Sheriff?" The blind man asked.

After all these years, Danny was used to Walter knowing exactly who was who even when nothing had been said. It still amazed him though. "Yeah, it's me, Walter. How's the world faring?"

"Not ending, Sheriff. Not today."

"Well, that's good to hear," Danny said, trying to keep from chuckling. Walter was an elderly army veteran who, as the politest people in the town said, wasn't quite right in the head. He had an obsession with the demise of the world and told anyone who was willing to listen that he was able to guess when it would come, even if he would never know for sure. He seemed to look forward to the prospect. Some mornings Danny couldn't really blame him. "Any idea when?"

Walter shifted his placard from one shoulder to the other, then licked his finger and held it up in the air, as if testing the wind. "March, it feels like. Say the fifteenth."

"Well, you picked a good day for it."

"Oh it's not me, Sheriff. Only Mother Earth knows when the end will come for sure."

Danny paused, half-in the jeep. "Well, just remember, Walter, it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind."

* * * * *

Cassie carried both coffee mugs back into the kitchen. She set them both beside the sink, which was already full. You let it go one day, she thought, and before you know it it's a week later and you're up to your neck in dirty plates and silverware. She yawned loudly. She had considered going back to bed but knew she wouldn't sleep. If she was going to stay up, she really should make practical use of the time and wash the dishes.

Instead she opened the fridge and pulled out her last beer. Not much of a breakfast but at least it might do something to assuage her headache, which had gone from a mild drumming to a full-blown constant pounding. Popping the top on the table edge, she dropped down into a chair and took a long swig. Her eye caught the fruit bowl. Tucked between the two apples that had seen better (and riper) days, almost hidden from view, was the pouch of ambrosia.

Cassie stopped drinking. Slowly, she placed the beer bottle on the table, then wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her robe. Her hand reached out to touch the bag, her fingertips almost brushing the soft velvet, but she pulled back quickly, as if she had been burnt. She stared at the bag for a few minutes, thinking hard. Just why had Zoe left the ambrosia? It made no sense.

Thinking of Zoe brought her attention back to the book she had found on the floor earlier. She picked it up from the tabletop and quickly thumbed through it until she found the page with the turned-down corner.

She found the line almost immediately. In all honesty, Cassie knew any single line of the poem might have warranted Zoe's attention, and even on the two possible pages she had to choose from there were several wonderfully beautiful examples of writing. But it was easy to see. It stood out almost as if Zoe had underlined it.

For love deceives the best of womankind.

A smile played around the corners of Cassie's mouth. She closed the book and dropped it back onto the table. What was done was done, she told herself. Zoe had made good on her word and had disappeared, right under the noses of Cassie, Danny and a nosey FBI agent. It was a good trick, she had to admit. And there was nothing she could have done to prevent it. She felt stupid for not saying something. No, that wasn't right. She had said plenty. She felt stupid for not saying the right thing.

Looking over at the pyramid of dirty dishes again, Cassie sighed. Might as well do something useful, she thought, especially if it helped to put the dark-haired woman to the back of her mind. She stood, pushing the chair back so the rubber tips on the legs squeaked on the linoleum, and crossed to the sink. She picked up the coffee mugs and tipped them both up, pouring the cold coffee dregs down the drain. She froze. Something had fallen out of the full mug. Zoe's mug. The pebble hit a dirty plate and rolled down, coming to rest against a blue sponge.

The mugs slipped from her numb fingers. One landed with a clunk amongst the other dishes. The other hit the edge of the sink, then toppled over the edge of the counter and smashed into pieces against the floor. The crash was enough to break the spell.

Cassie swore and quickly stepped backwards to avoid flying shards of china. A small dark stain from the coffee residue was already spreading across the lino. She knelt and opened the cupboard beneath the sink, drawing out a dustpan and brush.

"Oh my dear, are you alright?" a gentle voice said.

Cassie looked up over her shoulder. It was Mrs. Smith from the apartment down the hall. Swearing under her breath, Cassie tried her best to smile politely. Danny must have left the door ajar again. Mrs. Smith was a well-meaning soul but always a little too eager to share tales of her grandchildren, usually for hours upon end. Even if she wanted to go back to sleep, Cassie thought, her chances were shot now.

"Let me help you with that," Mrs. Smith said, putting a foil-covered dish down on the table. The dulcet tones of Dean Martin singing *Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone* could be heard billowing out from behind her. She must have left her own apartment door open.

"No, it's okay," Cassie protested, "I've got it."

"I'm surprised to see you up so early. I was watching the news yesterday and I was so worried. Are you sure you alright, my dear?"

Cassie really didn't know how to answer that. The only thing she could think of saying was that it was like being back in the real world all of a sudden. As if all the excitement, fear, and realization of the previous day had been nothing more than a balloon, now burst, and she was left to pick up the pieces. Or perhaps yesterday had been the real world and now she was back in a walking dream - a staid, mind-numbing, dull dream. Now there was a gloomy thought. She smiled at that.

"That's the idea, keep smiling," the elderly woman told her, misinterpreting the response. "You must have been terrified."

"It wasn't so bad."

"You're so brave. Those robbers must have been mad to think they'd get away with it. Mind you, they looked mad. Especially the woman. They showed a mugshot of her on the news and she looked absolutely insane."

Cassie said nothing. She finished brushing the broken remains of the coffee cup into the dustpan, which she then tipped up and emptied into the trashcan, before returning it and the brush to their place under the sink. Dino had moved on to bemoaning *Someday*. Either Mrs. Smith or the long-dead Italian-American crooner had a sick sense of humor, Cassie thought.

"Anything might have happened to you. You could have been killed, you know."

"Not me, Mrs. Smith," Cassie said reassuredly. "After all, I'm going to live forever, or die trying."

Her neighbor wagged her finger at her. "Trust me, my dear, when you get to my age you'll realize death is everywhere." She then smiled and, perhaps realizing that this was not the nicest conversation to be having, made an effort to change the subject. "I brought you an apple pie. Baked fresh last night."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Oh, it was no trouble. I thought you might not be up to cooking."

"Truthfully, Mrs. Smith," Cassie said, as politely as she could, "I don't like apples that much. It was really kind of you though."

The old woman looked down at the bowl of fruit with the two browning apples sitting in it. "Then why do you keep buying them?"

Cassie thought about that for a moment. "I don't honestly know. Maybe I just like making the same mistake over and over again."

3: The Ruffian on the Stair

It was snowing again, only lightly, but it was cold enough for the flakes to settle. The roads on the way to the morgue had been salted earlier but were still icy and treacherous. Grace hated driving in the snow. Moreover, she hated driving with Hannah's always critical eye on her. Both together were a bad combination.

She felt ill at ease, as if the sudden worsening of the weather overnight presaged something. Quite what, she didn't know. She tried to shake the feeling off.

Maybe Hannah felt the same. She certainly seemed in an odd mood. Grace could no longer stand the long silence.

"You're quiet. Something bothering you?"

"Unlike you, Hannah, I concentrate on the road when I'm driving."

Grace tried to smile "Seriously, what's wrong? You've been..." She hesitated, wanting to choose her words carefully. "...moody, I guess... since last night."

"We should keep an eye on her."

"On who?" It took a little while to sink in where Hannah had been that morning. It didn't make sense though. "Cassie?"

"Uh-huh. Something's not right there."

"Well, she's just been through an ordeal and like the rest of us she probably didn't get much sleep. I'm sure nothing about that is right."

"She asked me a lot of questions about Mercouri. Wanted to know if there were any police records she could look at. Claimed it was so she could 'understand'."

The SUV seemed to slip too the left a little and Grace had to struggle to keep control. She risked a quick glance over at her passenger. "And what did you tell her? No?"

"Don't worry, I played nice. Told her I'd point her in the right direction, at least." Hannah scowled. "Wouldn't want to sour your tame Sheriff on you."

"I don't think you could," Grace said with a knowing smile. "So what's your point?"

"You don't think that's odd?"

"Not really. I mean, look at me."

Hannah laughed. "Be serious. I meant about Wayward wanting to know this stuff."

"She wants to know more about the person who held her hostage," Grace said, shaking her head. "It's not unknown, although uncommon as coping mechanisms go."

"There's more to it than that."

"Such as? Or is this just a hunch?"

"Two coffee cups."

"What?"

"She had two coffee cups out. One was full."

"So? She's a caffeine addict."

"Then why not reuse one cup?"

That was a good question, Grace thought, although she could think of several answers off the top of her head. She voiced the first one that came to mind. "Maybe she's lazy."

"But both cups were warm."

"Meaning what? You think someone else was there?"

There was a long pause. Hannah had turned away to look at the buildings rushing past. "Maybe," she said quietly.

"What else could it be?"

"The fire escape ladder was down. She gave me some bullshit about the lock being broken. No snow on some of the rungs. Someone had used it that morning."

"You don't know that. If the lock is broken and the ladder was up, there'd be hardly any snow. And if it fell, what little there was would be knocked loose."

Hannah gave her a disbelieving look.

"Were there any footprints?"

"Yeah," Hannah said wearily, "a frigging ton of them. Some doomsayer was marching up and down the sidewalk non-stop, proclaiming the end of the world was coming."

"There you are then. If something odd was going on, he would have seen it."

"Nope, he's blind. I'm telling you, though, there was someone else in that apartment."

"So, she has a secret lover," Grace said with a shrug. "She's gay, right?"

"Openly gay," Hannah pointed out.

Grace had the answer for that. It fit all the facts, after all. And as she'd always said, the simplest solution was most often the right one. "Yeah, but her lover might not be. Maybe whatever local hottie she's banging hasn't dared to come out yet. She stopped by last night to 'console' Cassie and skipped out when she heard you at the door. Doesn't want everyone knowing she's gay."

Hannah looked at her for a long time, frowning as she thought hard about her partner's conjecture. She seemed unwilling to accept it was plausible. "You're grasping at straws," she eventually said.

"And you aren't? Anyone ever tell you that you have a suspicious nature?"

"What makes me so good at what I do."

"You're just supposed to be the negotiator. I do all the heavy lifting."

She looked sideways at Grace. "You think I'm not a good detective?"

"I never said that. "

"She took a nasty kick to the head."

"Cassie? Yeah, so?"

"She and Mercouri believed similar things about reincarnation, she told us, remember?"

"Meaning what? You have to get whacked on the head to believe in anything spiritual?"

"Spiritual!" Hannah snorted. "That's a joke. These people wouldn't know the first thing about true spirituality."

Grace saw Hannah's hand clutch at her neck. She usually wore a tiny crucifix there. She wasn't wearing it this morning, which was odd. Had the chain broken, she wondered? That might explain Hannah's foul mood.

"These people?" Grace said pointedly.

"I meant criminals."

"Did you now?" Grace doubted it but moved on quickly. "And Cassie isn't a criminal, she's a victim."

"Says you. Someone had to take Mercouri's corpse. And we've still got no clue what the robbery was really about."

"Yes, we do."

"You're still not clinging to that stupid theory, are you?"

Grace sighed and reiterated what they had both agreed on the previous night, although even then Hannah had had her reservations. "Mercouri wanted to know what happened to Michi, that's why

she did this. She wanted some closure before she died."

Another snort of derision. "Closure. Bunch of bull. Sounds like the first bit of bullshit in a long line of bullshit."

"I think you're reading too much into all of this, Hannah. "

They had reached the morgue, and Grace carefully parked her SUV next to a battered white jeep. It had taken them longer than she had expected, thanks to the roads being so bad. But at least she hadn't got lost, which had been a concern.

"Whatever," Hannah said. "Let's just get this over with. And don't blame me if this all blows up in our faces."

Danny was waiting for them, having obviously arrived only a bare few minutes before they did. He beamed at Grace as she stepped out of the SUV, and she couldn't help but smile back. "If what blows up?" he asked, having caught the tail end of the two agents' conversation.

"Nothing, Sheriff," she told him. He might be cute but Hannah was her partner and you *always* covered your partner's rear. "Hannah's just concerned about this break-in."

"Who isn't?"

* * * * *

The three of them walked into the morgue. The large glass panel in the right-hand door was broken. Jagged shards stuck out at irregular spaces around the frame and the steps leading down were covered with a shining carpet of glass splinters. Past the doors was a tiny office area, which had been wrecked, with the chair overturned and all the drawers of the desk pulled out, their contents scattered over the cement floor. A bag of half-melted lemon drops had been kicked against the wall. Glass crunched underfoot as the trio through the insulated double-doors and stepped into the actual cold storage area. Thick rubber matting at the bottom of the doors scraped against the tiled floor. Surprisingly, it almost felt warmer in here than it did outside.

Danny was still puzzled at why anyone would break into the morgue. It could be a drug thing. A couple of addicts, desperate for easy cash in the early hours of the morning, or maybe even looking for prescription drugs. That was a possibility. Drug addicts were rare here in the wilds of North Dakota but were not unknown.

They'd had a meth lab once, hidden out on one of the foreclosed farms a few miles out of town. But that had been about five years ago and he and Ike had busted up the lab after a few months' hard work. He remembered how some of the local teenagers had got addicted, a couple even started holding people up at the ATMs. Cassie had been robbed, he recalled. That hadn't even unnerved her at the time.

He told both the agents not to touch anything, which was fairly stupid of him, but old habits die hard. He deserved the filthy looks they both gave him.

Hannah snarled. "Only a Yale lock? Jeez, they obviously had no trouble."

"Yeah, well, it's not like we were expecting someone to break into the morgue, was it?" Danny replied a little defensively.

The morgue attendant was leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He was a young man, a little overweight, with an unruly haircut that was supposed to look fashionable, and dark eyes that were a fraction too close together. He wore a look that was somewhere between boredom and fretting, although when he saw a huge Sheriff and two tough-looking women in business suits approaching, it shifted towards the latter.

Ike looked up from his notebook as he heard them come in, tucking his pen pack into his shirt pocket. "Finally! Now I can get out of here. This place gives me the creeps."

"Afraid of death, are you, Deputy?" Hannah said.

"Isn't everyone?"

"Mercouri wasn't."

Danny looked over at the long empty drawer that was the only one pulled out. The plastic sheeting was crumpled up in a ball on the floor. Body, clothes, personal belongings, all missing. God, what a freaking mess.

"This is going to cause us some problems," he heard Grace say from behind him.

"Saves the state the cost of burying her, I suppose."

Danny turned to Hannah. "Do we need to argue about who has jurisdiction over a missing corpse, do you think?" He saw Grace trying to hide a grin. "What I don't get is who would want to steal a dead body? What gives?"

"Well, it's happened before," Grace said.

"A body's gone missing before?" asked Danny, frowning.

"She means we've had evidence on Mercouri and Randall go missing before," Hannah said quietly.

"Shit."

"Yeah, that about sums it up," said Grace. "Why do you think we've had such a hard time pinning anything on them?"

Not for the first time, Danny felt a little out of his depth. He tried to focus on the problem at

hand. "You the attendant?" he said to the young man leaning against the wall. He only got a curt nod in reply.

Ike flipped back through his notebook. "His name's Benjamin Davis."

"Call me Ben, everyone does. I've told the Deputy everything already. Twice." He looked anxious to leave, even though he most likely had another hour or more to go on his shift.

"Well, sorry, Ben, but you're going to have to tell it all over again. Suppose you start at the beginning," Danny said with a reassuring smile. Something about the guy bugged him. Maybe it was just the fact that he was having to talk to the police. Most people didn't like to, even when they really had to.

Ben shrugged as if uncertain where the beginning was. "I guess it's my fault, really."

"You're confessing?" Grace asked. She seemed almost amused. Danny wished he had her composure. She always seemed to be having fun, even in the shittiest of times and places. He stared at her for a little too long and she caught his eye. Hell, she grinned and actually winked at him! Danny looked away sharply, hoping desperately that he wasn't blushing.

"No! No," Ben said in a panic, "I mean it's just my fault the morgue was broken into. I got careless."

"How so?"

Danny kept listening but looked around at the others. Ike was looking bored and tired, and kept sniffing. Maybe he was coming down with the flu that had plagued the department over the last week or so. Hannah's eyes kept flicking away from the morgue attendant towards the drawers that made up the left wall. She was shivering slightly.

Ben continued. "I heard about the bank robber on the news last night when I got up. Working nights, I tend to sleep in the afternoons until early evening. Well, by the time I was ready for work things were all over. I knew two of the robbers had been killed and so I knew they'd end up here. I was kinda excited about it." He looked a little shamefaced. "I suppose that's a bit ghoulish, isn't it?"

"A man in your profession is probably entitled to be a little ghoulish," Danny told him. "Go on."

"Well, in my excitement I forgot my iPod. I bring it every night as there's little to do most nights except study."

"You're a student?"

"Down at UND. Although I'm on break at the moment."

"What are you studying? Medicine?"

"Yeah. That's how I got this job. My professor recommended me."

"So back to last night..." Grace prompted.

"Oh, yeah, well, I realize I've left my iPod back at the house when I get here but it's so busy, what with you guys, and the bodies, and the media guys all over the place, I don't think about it again until much later."

"How much later?" Danny asked.

He shrugged again. "Dunno. I guess it was about three in the morning. So I decide to go home and get it." He saw their disapproving looks. "Yeah, I know. Like I said, it was stupid of me. But I figured I'd only be gone fifteen, twenty minutes, and no one ever comes in here at that time. Not once have they, I swear."

"Once."

He grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, okay. But I locked the place up good and tight. I know I did. I had the key in my coat pocket."

"I'm sure you did," Grace said. "They wouldn't have broken the glass otherwise."

"Anyone else have a key?" asked Danny.

Yeah, Jon. Jonathan Idared. He's the fulltime day attendant, works twelve hours every day.

"You're not fulltime?"

"Well, I work eight hours a night but only on nights when there's someone here. Other times I'm on call."

"Someone?"

"A body, I mean."

"Who else?"

"Doctor Galen and Doctor Wagener."

"He's the local ME," Ike butted in.

"Oh, and the Sheriff's Department have a copy too, of course. That's all I can think of. There might be more."

"So you went home to get your iPod?" Danny tried to steer the conversation back on track.

"Yeah."

"So how long were you gone? Twenty minutes?"

The young man hesitated. "No, not quite."

Ike rolled his eyes. "Not even close."

"Well, it wasn't charged, see?" Ben protested. "And my charger is right by my bed, so I thought I'd throw it on for a bit of juice just for five or ten minutes, so I could listen on the way back here, and so I lay down and..."

"He fell asleep," Ike finished the story for him.

No one said anything for a moment. Danny finally said what they were all thinking.

"You fell asleep?"

"Yeah." He was looking down at his shoes.

"Unbelievable," Grace said, shaking her head.

"For how long?"

"A couple of hours."

"Make it nearer three," Ike corrected, reading from his notes. "You said you checked the clock when you came in, saw it was six-fifteen."

Grace swore under her breath and then tried to smile. "Well, at least you got your iPod."

Walking over to the empty drawer, he asked the obvious question. "This is Mercouri's drawer?"

"Yes."

"Which one is Randall's?" Hannah asked.

"I already checked," Ike told her, "and Randall's body isn't missing."

"I didn't ask you!" she snapped. "Which one?"

The morgue attendant pointed at one further away. "5B. That bottom one over there."

Hannah turned her back on everyone and walked over to pulled the indicated drawer open a short way. She peeled back the plastic covering to stare at the corpse of Sam Randall. He was a big

man in life, Danny thought, every bit the match for him. Tall, muscular, heavy-set, with slicked back black hair and a thick goatee beard, even dead there was an aura of menace around him. There was a dark colored circle the size of a dime on his forehead, the tanned skin actually pale and purpling around the fatal wound.

"Hannah?" Grace said worriedly.

"I just want to check," she said, without turning round. She was kneeling by the drawer, and if Danny didn't know better he'd say it almost looked like she was praying over a grave. He watched as she touched the grouting between the floor tiles with two fingers. She peered at whatever was smeared over her fingertips, rubbing them against her thumb. It looked black, like tar or ink or something. "Go on, I'm listening."

Turning back to face the young medical student, Danny tried to ignore whatever Hannah was doing. She'd either tell them what she'd found or she wouldn't. And if she wouldn't, well, she'd be sure to tell Grace at least and he knew Grace would tell him. He trusted Grace, although he wasn't entirely sure why, but he sure as hell didn't trust Hannah. She had a hard, abrasive edge to her. Cassie had noticed it earlier, and he supposed he had too but he'd been reluctant to admit it. He disliked seeing bad things in people. Cassie had laughed when he had told her that once, telling him he was in the wrong business.

"Never mind her, let's stick with this for now," he said. "What's the point in robbery when nothing is worth taking?"

"Could be an inside job," the morgue attendant suggested.

Grace smiled tolerantly at him. "Are you confessing again?"

"No," he said sardonically. "I meant it literally. I saw it on CSI once where this guy with a terminal illness swallowed some diamonds. I don't remember the ending though."

"What the hell are you talking about?" said Ike.

"No, wait," Grace said thoughtfully. "That's a possibility. We don't know what was in those safety deposit boxes."

"We could ask the hostages," Danny suggested.

"No good. Only Cassie went anywhere near the vault during the time and only for a short while. If this is true, then Mercouri could have swallowed the stuff at any time."

"I don't like it. That safecracker..."

"Crocker," Grace told him.

"Yeah, him, he said he opened every box and Mercouri looked through each one, but didn't take

anything. And he locked the boxes up again after she was done."

"Except for the last few. I guess that's why he didn't know what she took."

"He could be lying."

"Why would he?"

Danny thought about that for a minute, before having to admit that he couldn't really argue with that.

"And Mercouri still isn't the type to commit suicide," Grace went on, "and certainly not to benefit someone else. It seems to me like that was a spur of the moment decision. Besides, she pretty much admitted what she was looking for. Okay, we don't know what it was but it was obviously something important to her. She wouldn't be doing that for someone else. She's too selfish."

"Bastard," Hannah whispered.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Hell, yes. She'd do something for Randall, probably because he terrorized her rather than out of any sense of loyalty. But no one else."

"What about the woman in Athens?" Ike asked.

Grace shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe her. Maybe we didn't know Mercouri as well as we thought we did. Like I said, I never thought she'd do what she did."

"Bastard," Hannah said. No one heard her.

"So did she swallow something or didn't she?"

"How do I know?" Grace answered Ike before Danny could. "I'm just trying to make some kind of sense of all this. I guess we'll know for sure when we get the autopsy report this afternoon. On Randall, I mean."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Danny said. "For this to hold any water, he'd have to have swallowed some stuff too. You know, before things got out of hand."

"Bastard!" Hannah was on her feet. "Bastard!" She was yelling by now. She kicked out at the corpse of Randall, kicking down hard, so hard you could hear bone crunch under her heel. The metal of the drawer scraped noisily against its rollers. She paused only in her string of cursing to hawk and spit a gob of phlegm down at the corpse. "Bastard!" she shouted once more. She kept repeating the word over and over again. In her anger she missed the corpse with at least one kick, her sole of her shoe slamming into the drawer so hard it shuddered and there was a sizeable dent

left in the metal. The drawer was only half open and so the corpse wasn't going anywhere but all the violent rocking caused one arm to roll free from the sheeting and flop onto the tiled floor.

"What the hell...?" Ike said, dumbstruck.

Danny and Grace did not hesitate. Maybe they were concerned for her, maybe they were more used to reacting quickly in odd situations, or maybe they didn't want the last piece of evidence they still had to be damaged. Whatever their reasons they both immediately stepped forward and grabbed hold of Hannah, pulling her back away from the corpse. She kept kicking out as they pulled her back, still screaming incoherently, spittle flying from her lips.

She struggled to break free but Danny had her in a firm grasp, hands tightly clutching each of her arms from behind. Her face a bright red, she swore loudly at him and then he felt the fight go out of her all of sudden.

"Hannah, what the hell is wrong with you?" Grace asked.

She wouldn't look at her. She was breathing hard. After a brief second, she wiped her mouth with a hand and then said to Danny, "Get the fuck off me."

He let her go instantly, his experience in separating combatants in countless barfights telling him that she wasn't about to start again. No one said anything for a moment, then Ike let out a deep breath and Grace took a single step forward.

Hannah ignored them all and headed straight for the exit, not running exactly, but not walking.

The morgue attendant brushed past them and knelt by the drawer and tried his best to tidy up the corpse. "Damn it, she broke one of the rollers."

Danny gave Grace a quick look. If she was half as worried as she looked, he thought, then this was bad, *very* bad. "You might want to go after her," he suggested.

She hesitated. "I suppose I should."

* * * * *

Grace stepped outside, pulling up the collar of her jacket against the cold. It was *freezing*. Who'd want to live in a place as cold as this? And for God's sake, why? For an instant, a very good reason crossed her mind and she smiled. Okay, she said to herself, maybe small towns like this did have some good points. Like the local constabulary. Flakes settled on her skin and melted. Not too many, though.

She saw Hannah was half-leaning, half-sitting on the hood of their shiny black SUV, clutching a half-smoked cigarette and looking down at the gravel surface of the parking lot. If she was feeling the cold, she wasn't showing it. She said nothing as Grace approached but half-raised her head and offered a sullen stare.

"I thought you'd given up."

"I'm a negotiator. I only tell people what they want to hear."

They said nothing for a second or two. Hannah took a long drag on the cigarette. A surprising amount of traffic flowed by, considering the bad weather.

Grace took a deep breath and broached the subject. "You want to explain what happened in there?"

Hannah shrugged and glanced away. Her hands were shaking, Grace noticed. "I just let my anger get the better of me. It won't happen again."

"Fine. Doesn't really answer my question though."

"We still haven't caught Mercouri, you know? It's frustrating. Even in death she cheats us."

"So you took that frustration out on Randall's corpse, is that it?"

"Partly. Not very professional, was it?" Hannah gave a weak smile.

"Not really, no."

"He hurt that girl in Athens, you know? I never thought he was capable of that."

Hurt? That was one hell of a euphemism for a brutal rape and murder. It was unlike Hannah to shy away from the straightforward facts.

"I'm not so sure. We've known him to be violent before."

"Not to that extreme," Hannah said firmly. "And why did he do it? Michi was already out of Mercouri's life, so he already got what he wanted."

"Beats me. Maybe it was revenge."

"No," Hannah shook her head. "It was a betrayal."

"Well, I doubt Mercouri cares now, wherever she is..."

"Are you talking spiritually or physically?" Hannah said with another weak smile.

"Either," Grace said, giving her a warm smile back. "I doubt we'll find a trace of either."

Hannah took one last draw on her cigarette, then flicked the butt away into the snow. "Yeah, you're probably right. They're not going to like this back in LA, I know that much."

"I'm pretty sure no one here likes it much."

"That doesn't help, you know," Hannah said angrily.

Grace turned back to look at her, puzzled. "What?"

"You flirting with Barney fucking Fife every chance you get."

"You mean Andy Taylor."

"What?"

"Barney was the Deputy, not the Sheriff."

"You know what I mean."

Grace sighed. "Look, why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"You're kidding right?"

"No. It's obvious you need it. Hell, we could both do with some time off. We've been working on this for a long, long time."

"We have too much to do," Hannah protested. "We're missing the corpse our main suspect, don't forget."

"I'll take care of it."

"And what the hell would I do around here?"

"Well, there's bound to be a bar if you wanted a quiet drink. But if you want to do something, how about arranging some motel rooms? Chances are we're going to have to be here for another day or so at least."

Hannah looked uncertain.

"Take the SUV. I'll get a ride back with the Sheriff. And don't worry, I'll talk to Baldwin."

"He's not going to like this."

"Then I'll take the heat for it, okay? You don't need any more stress."

"Thanks," Hannah said, reaching out and squeezing one of Grace's hands. She seemed genuinely grateful. She fished the keys out of her pocket and walked around to the driver's side door.

"You're sure about this?" She asked, but only after she had already unlocked the door.

"Absolutely. See how you feel tomorrow, okay?"

Hannah didn't reply, just climbed into the vehicle. Grace saw Danny, Ike and the young attendant were now leaving the morgue, ducking under the strands of bright yellow caution tape that criss-crossed the entrance doors. As the SUV's engine roared into life, she smiled at Hannah one final time, getting no response, then walked back to meet the trio of men. Danny caught her eye and smiled at her. She felt a warm flush suddenly hit her stomach. God, it was like being a schoolgirl again.

He had a cute smile. She thought about telling him to wipe it off, but she didn't really want him to, knowing as she did that she was the cause of it, and doubted that he could even if he tried.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Sure."

Ike looked as if he was about to say something but got a quick stern glance from Danny. Grace waved at Hannah when she drove past, kicking up a flurry of graying, sludgy snow, but the other woman either didn't notice or didn't care to respond.

The morgue attendant was itching to leave. "So can I go now?"

"I guess," Danny told him. "We may need to talk to you again though."

"Great," the young man said sarcastically. He headed off down the street, his head bowed and his hands in his pockets.

There was a clumsy, awkward silence for a moment. Ike looked up first at Danny, then at Grace. He grinned. "Can you believe this weather? Fucking TV said it was going to be mild today."

"What do they know?" Danny said. "This is the third bad winter we've had."

"So I'm going to head back to the station and write up my notes," suggested Ike, seeming to want to make himself scarce. "If I hurry I can get home in time to get into a warm bed and an even warmer Effy."

"Ike!" Danny looked shocked but the Deputy merely grinned wickedly and headed off towards his patrol car.

"Effy?" Grace asked. "Your switchboard operator?"

He nodded. "They're engaged. Well, not really. I guess the older folks around here would say they have an understanding. So this complicates matters, I suppose?"

She looked at him for a second, not understanding. "Oh, you mean the break-in. Yeah, I guess it does a little. Still, the end result is the same. I'm sure to catch some flak from the higher-ups but

it won't be so bad. Be over before you know it."

"That's a shame."

"Why?" Was he turning red? Or was it her imagination?

"Well, I was thinking..."

"Yes?" She knew what was coming. Damn, they were always at their cutest when asking, especially when they got nervous. That probably explained why she'd been dumb enough to tie the knot so many times.

"I know you're leaving soon, but I'd regret not asking."

"Asking what?"

"Do you want... I mean, would you like to... well, that is, if..."

Well, this was going to take forever, it seemed. If it was going to happen, it had to while she was still young. She was going to have to let him off the hook. "You're asking me on a date in the middle of a crime scene?" she said.

He motioned over his shoulder. "Well, technically, the crime scene is back there."

"In a morgue, no less."

"Again..."

She laughed. "Near a morgue then. Don't deny it, I kind of like this morbid streak you have going on. Okay, you can buy me dinner tonight, how about that? I might as well make the most of my time here, right?"

4: What We Do for Others

The house was larger than Zoe remembered, larger than most of the others on this street. It was painted in a bright and cheerful yellow, with a crisp white trim; a well-tended lawn and several tall palm trees offered a decent amount shade. Despite all that, somehow it still managed to look cheaper and less cared-for than every other home in the vicinity.

Maybe it was the strong bars on the windows, she thought, as she rang the doorbell for the second time. This was an up-and-coming neighborhood in Aventura, with new houses replacing old, and even some of the older homes were selling for vastly inflated prices. No one wanted to think about burglary. Most people just assumed the bars were a deterrent. Zoe knew differently. She'd installed them.

She undid the second-from-top button on her shirt and shook the sweat-sodden fabric in an effort to cool herself. She'd had no trouble remembering the humidity, although it was nowhere near as bad as the last few times she'd visited. It must have been around eighty or more degrees out in the sun, an unusual high for this time of the year. Still, it was better than the cold of Wilusa. Something to be said for Florida, then, at least during winter.

All the same, she was thankful to be in the shade of the porch. She heard someone shouting from inside but couldn't make out the words. She pressed the doorbell once more, just to be sure, then looked around again. The sky was crystal clear, with a single aircraft vapor trail the only break in the blue.

The door finally opened a crack and an elderly woman peered out. Her grey hair was cut very short and large gold hoops hung from her ears. She seemed angry, annoyed perhaps at the bothersome guy who kept ringing the bells, but her eyes lit up when she saw who it was. The door was flung open immediately and Zoe found herself pulled down into a tight hug before she could protest. The breath was knocked from her as she was squeezed tightly in two plump but strong arms.

They separated although the old woman kept a firm hold on her for a second. She was much shorter than Zoe but what she lacked in height she made up for in girth. She was beaming a huge smile and there might have been tears in her eyes.

"My dear Hope, as I live and breathe. Let me take a look at you, child!"

"Hello, Mrs. Bramley," Zoe said, wheezing slightly due to the bearhug.

The old woman frowned in mock displeasure. "Child, how many times do I have to tell you? You call me mother, just like you should."

Zoe smiled but shook her head. "You know I can't do that."

"You will, sweetness, one day, Lord willing. I suppose you've come to see my no-good daughter?"

"Well, that and in hope of free meal."

She laughed. "You're welcome to everything we have. And you need it too. Look at you. All skin and bones. When was the last time you ate?"

"It's been a while," Zoe admitted. She'd grabbed a coffee and sandwich at the airport in Chicago this morning, if that counted.

"Lord, I can see that. No wonder you can't get a man. No man likes a scarecrow. My beloved Stanley always said the more stuffing there was, the tastier the bird!" She laughed uproariously at her own joke. Zoe smiled politely. "Well, come in, come in. Don't let all the cool air out."

Zoe stepped in and shut the door behind her. The air conditioning was a blessed relief after the oppressive heat of the Florida afternoon. She pushed her sunglasses up to the top of her head and dropped her heavy bag off her shoulder and onto a nearby coffee table.

Mrs. Bramley waddled past a garishly colored couch. She shouted loudly down a corridor. "Robyn! Get your idle butt out here!"

The reply was shouted just in turn. "I'm coming, Ma! Give me a second!"

"Don't you backtalk me, child! And don't keep Hope waiting."

Immediately, there was the sound of a door being jerked open. Robyn Bramley came hurrying into the lounge. She was already smiling but she knocked it up a notch as soon as she laid eyes on Zoe. "Hey, Hope!" she said, "I like your hair!"

Zoe self-consciously ran a hand through her dark blonde hair. She'd dyed it a few days ago, when she spent the night in Chicago after flying out of Hector. She wasn't sure how she felt about it just yet. It was going to take some getting used to.

"Your hair!" Mrs. Bramley exclaimed. "I thought there was something different about you. I just couldn't quite tell what it was."

"A lot's changed, Mrs. Bramley."

She sucked in air through her teeth in a sign of disapproval at the name but said nothing.

Robyn was grinning. "You look well too. Life's been treating you good, I take it?"

"Well, I wouldn't say life exactly."

"Oh!" Mrs. Bramley exclaimed suddenly, startling Zoe. "We have great news!"

"What?"

"Show her!"

Her daughter rolled her eyes and sighed. "Oh, ma, she's not interested."

"Show her!"

"What?"

Reluctantly giving in to her mother's insistence, Robyn held out her hand, palm down. Zoe saw the sparkle of a diamond engagement ring. She looked up at Robyn and smiled.

"Bailey?" she asked.

Robyn nodded shyly.

"Good. It's about time he asked you."

"That's what I said," Mrs. Bramley said, pleased at the support. "See, you should listen to you mother."

"He's a good man," Zoe said and she meant it. She'd met Bailey Rubens only once but she'd called in a few favors and had him thoroughly checked out. Credit, background, police files, even school and college records, the works. There was no way she was going to let Robyn get serious about someone who wasn't good for her. "And a lucky one. I'm really pleased for you."

"You mean it?" Robyn asked, then immediately held up a hand. "I know, I know, you don't lie."

"That's right."

"Kinda makes having a conversation with you hard sometimes."

"Weren't you the one who said all men were bastards?" Zoe joked.

"Hope!" Mrs. Bramley snapped. "You'll mind your language in my house."

Zoe sighed, then did her best to look appropriately shamefaced.

Robyn was giggling but tried her best to defuse things. "Leave her be, Ma. You know what she means. But any fool can fall in love."

"So I've heard," Zoe said, a little sadly. She caught Robyn looking at her quizzically and tried to smile. "Don't ask."

"Oh, now I'm going to have to."

Mrs. Bramley tutted loudly. "You'll do no such thing. If Hope wants to keep something to herself, you won't pry."

"Yes, mother."

"And don't 'yes, mother' me." She wagged a finger. "Now, I'm going to make you some beef stew while you girls talk."

Zoe tried to protest. Just like always, she needn't have bothered. "You really don't have to..."

"Oh hush. You need fattening up." She bustled away to the kitchen and soon was banging through cupboards, searching for pans and ingredients.

Robyn looked apologetic. "Sorry about her."

"No problem. She's sweet and she cares about you. Not everyone has such a good mother."

"You're right, you're right. You usually are. Come on though."

Zoe picked up her hefty bag and then followed Robyn to a room in the back. She knew the way, although she noticed a few differences in the décor since she'd been here last. The room was familiar to her too. The huge poster of local actress Lark Morgan on the wall, next to another of Lloyd Banks' second album cover, the chipped white paint on the iron bars on the window, the bed with its plain wooden headboard, the built-in closet, one door of which still had the sizeable dent in it from when Robyn had tried to break free that one time. She wondered why they had never replaced the door. A constant reminder, maybe? They'd repainted the room since she was last here, so maybe not.

One corner of the room was occupied by a desk and a shitload of electronic equipment. It looked like someone had taken a forklift into a NASA control centre at Cape Canaveral and just lifted a whole section out, eventually dumping it here. Three monitors, two keyboards, several sizeable server towers. A Mac laptop. Half-built circuit boards littered the desk's surface. A soldering iron was resting on one precarious looking pile.

There was an electric humming in the air that took a few moments to get used to and block out.

Robyn took the swivel chair at the desk, so Zoe was forced to sit on the edge of the bed. She placed her bag by her feet.

"You've painted," she said.

"Last summer. You like it?"

"Sure," she said non-committedly. "Very pretty."

"You get laser treatment, Hope?"

Zoe was confused. "What?"

"The tattoos." Robyn gestured at her own neck to show what she meant.

"Oh. Yeah, something like that."

"I heard that left scars."

"Well, this was something new. Experimental, really."

"Makes a big difference. That and the hair."

Zoe nodded. That was part of the reason why she had dyed it, after all.

"You know, Ma wants me to invite you to the wedding. Yeah, I know, stupid. Where would I send the invitation? Besides I don't even know your real name."

This was true. Zoe had refused to give her a name. Telling her would have been foolish for them both. Early on, Robyn had told her just to make one up but Zoe had refused to lie. So Robyn had started calling her Hope, only because at one time she had been the only hope the family had had. A few years ago, Zoe remembered, Sam had tricked her into doing a job in Miami. The security had been tougher than she expected and they'd needed fake ID cards. Real good ones too, complete with magnetic strip and the appropriate coding. Those kind of forgeries were hard to come by, if only because there were very, very few people who could do that kind of quality work. Robyn was one of those few.

She had studied art in college and had gotten her start in minor crime by forging ID cards for high school students. From that point on, she had never looked back. She wasn't only highly skilled at art, graphic design, and calligraphy, but had also studied computers extensively, if only because she had soon realized that to be an effective forger she needed to know the ins and outs of security software and hardware. She built her own systems and, given a little time and effort, could hack into most secure networks.

At the time, the IDs Robyn had made for Zoe and Sam were good enough to let her get the job done but they could have been so much better. It was the drug problem Robyn had that prevented her work from being the best. After the job was done, they were supposed to skip town. In the end, only Sam left, heading back to New York to fence the stolen necklace. Zoe had chosen to stay. She had seen something in Robyn that perhaps no one ever had, not even her mother. Sam hadn't been happy at her staying; a big waste of time, he had said. She had ignored him. Was that the first time she'd openly defied him? She couldn't honestly remember.

Zoe had forced her way into the house, pushing past Mrs. Bramley. The old woman's protests had died away when Zoe had dragged the kicking and screaming Robyn out into the living room,

throwing her bodily onto the couch, ignoring the scratching and biting and screaming. Mrs. Bramley was suddenly confronted with what she had been trying to avoid, what she had been pretending she didn't know. From that point on, Zoe took control.

That night Zoe had stayed in the bedroom with Robyn, refusing to let her out no matter how much she fought, threatened, and eventually pleaded. She had stayed with her the next day too, while Mrs. Bramley had shopped for strong locks, which Zoe had then fitted to the bedroom door and window. She'd installed the bars on all the windows too, when they were delivered that same afternoon. All that at least allowed her to get a few hours sleep on the couch, although it wasn't a wholly peaceful night.

The second day was always the worst. Zoe had always wisely shied away from drugs, especially the harder stuff, but she knew what to expect. She'd lived on the street for a few years and had mixed in criminal circles for a long time. She had witnessed the degradation and suffering drugs caused, even though she had been fortunate enough never to experience it herself.

It would have been a lot easier with methadone but that meant going public. Zoe couldn't do that, Robyn wouldn't do that, and her mother didn't want that. The Bramley's medicine cabinet did have some valium, and at one particularly desperate hour she had considered giving Robyn that, but she eventually decided against it. The poor young woman would just have to sweat it out.

And she did. And Zoe had stayed with her, doing everything her mother was just unable to do: holding her when she couldn't stop shaking; cooling her with damp rags when she sweated; calming her when she screamed or cried; and cleaning her when she vomited or crapped.

Zoe had stayed in Florida for the better part of a month, cooped up in that house, the walls closing in on her, until she almost went stir-crazy. She'd refused to answer Sam's phone calls at first, knowing he'd just be wheedling at her, trying to get her to leave. When she had answered, she'd been surprised at how angry he was. Despite his fury, however, she'd not given in. She wasn't leaving.

Ma Bramley had asked her one night, when Robyn was thankfully sleeping somewhat peacefully, why she was doing this. Zoe hadn't known what to say to that. She didn't honestly know why. So instead she had evaded the question, just as she had evaded so many over the years, by asking one of her own. Why hadn't Ma Bramley done something? The old woman had looked mortified. Back in Speightstown, she said, on the island (that was how she always referred to Barbados) she had seen people turn to drugs as an escape from poverty. She had looked down on them all. She never thought it would happen here, in her adopted country. But it had and she had found herself unable to cope, not knowing what to do or who to turn to, so she had pretended it wasn't happening. It took someone as strong willed as this stranger to make both mother and daughter face up to the problem. Ma Bramley had broken down into tears there and then, begging Zoe for forgiveness. Zoe had given it, although she was not sure why she was being asked, and the old woman had wrapped both her gnarled hands around one of Zoe's, kissed it over and over again, and called her her 'Hope'. The name had stuck, for want of a better alternative.

"Hell," Robyn said, dragging Zoe's attention back to the present, "I wouldn't even know where to send the invitation." She smiled as she spoke but Zoe could tell she was only half-joking. She was obviously curious about Zoe, always had been. She'd always been pushing a little, prying open each little bit of info that Zoe gave her. Not that there were many, Zoe made sure of that. Keep your mouth shut except to smile, that was one of her mother's favorite pieces of advice. Understandable, really, considering her career choice.

Zoe shot down the questioning immediately. "So, everything in place?"

Robyn swiveled in her chair and reached for a package on the table. It was a small padded envelope, unsealed. Zoe tipped out the contents on the bed beside her. She picked up the dark blue passport first. It was a forgery, of course, that was what Robyn did, but there was no way of telling that at first glance. She doubted she'd ever be able to tell. She flicked through the pages, noticing the various stamps of different colors, all indicating the many places she was supposed to have travelled. The thicker, card at the back was perfect. It had a photo of her along with all her personal information. Well, it wasn't her information, of course, but it would be for a few days or so. She'd have to adopt this persona.

"Sorry about the name," Robyn said.

Zoe looked over the info. Melissa Braeburn. Well, that wasn't so bad. Maybe she'd shorten it. Besides, it wasn't for long. Ms. Braeburn was from Chicago apparently, and she was two years younger than Zoe really was, which made her smile. The photo was a few years old, which had been Robyn's recommendation. It made things more authentic, she had said. She closed the passport, amazed at the quality. You'd never know it wasn't real.

"You do good work."

Robyn smiled. "Yes, I do." It was just stated simply, matter-of-factly, not as something egotistical. "Even so, I wouldn't recommend using it too often. It's good enough to scrape by once or twice, even if someone's diligent enough to check the records," she tapped the computer monitor, "but if they dig deep enough or long enough..."

Zoe nodded and then looked through the reminder of the envelope's contents. An American Airlines return ticket from Miami International to Heathrow. Coach, she noticed. Hmm. That was going to be a new experience. The rest of the journey Robyn didn't need to know about. A driver's license, again from Chicago and again perfect in every detail. Same name, with full address on it this time. Slightly different photo. That was clever.

There was a cheap-looking wallet in the pile of debris too. She flicked through it. A fake Social Security card, some insurance cards, and several credit cards, all under Braeburn's name. She took one out and turned it over. If it wasn't real, it was impossibly good.

"I used some of the money you gave me to set the limits on those. Pretty low. But then you're a dental hygienist, so you probably wouldn't have a lot of savings."

"A dental hygienist?"

"Are you getting picky?" She sounded defensive.

"Not at all." Zoe noticed there were several business cards in the wallet, all from the same dental clinic with her name on it, along with several dentists' names. Under the wallet was a roughly opened letter. She looked inside it, seeing several pages of handwritten text, but didn't bother to read it. Instead, she looked quizzically at Robyn.

"A letter from your mother, who lives here in Miami. You've been visiting her before going on vacation to England. That explains your lack of tan."

She really had thought of everything. God, she was good. Zoe packed all the debris back into the padded envelope, then picked up her own bag and hefted it across to Robyn, who sat it on her lap and unzipped it. She looked inside for a second, then up at Zoe, frowning.

"Anything wrong?" Zoe asked.

"Yeah. There's too much here, Hope." She opened the bag wider, showing Zoe how packed it was with neatly bundled stacks of cash, as if she didn't already know.

"Not there isn't. You deserve it."

"You don't have to give me this, Hope, you know that. I owe you... well, everything."

"You don't owe me, Robyn."

She looked close to tears. "Of course I do. Why do you think my Ma loves you so much?"

"Well, take it anyway and consider us even." Zoe paused, a little uncertain of how what she was going to say would be taken. "I'm retiring, Robyn."

"Really?" She looked surprised but recovered well, then smiled again as she stood up. Zoe followed suit. "Well, good for you. I wouldn't think you were the type to retire though. You've always struck me as the type who gets bored quickly."

"That's true enough. But I need to try to stay out of trouble, for a while at least."

"Good luck!" Robyn said passionately. "I know how hard that is to do." She grabbed Zoe in a sudden hug. Caught off-guard, Zoe didn't really know how to respond, so she just stood there, uncomfortable.

Robyn broke the hug and laughed. "You don't hug people very often, do you?"

"There's not much call for it, I've found."

"Well, maybe that will change when you've got more time on your hands." Robyn glanced at the clock on her bedside table. "Come on, let's go. You do realize you're not going to get out of here without emptying at least two plates, right?"

* * * * *

Cassie wound her way through the crowded bar, wincing at all the noise. The sound system was pumping out a loud dance version of *Criminal* by Fiona Apple, which was competing with the college game on the large screen TV mounted high on the back bar.

The volume of the television set was turned way up and the majority of the patrons seemed to be clustered around that end of the bar were yelling and arguing. It looked like the State University team was fighting hard in a home game at the Fargodome. That explained why she could barely hear herself think. Personally, she believed that people around here took football far too seriously.

Still, she thought, go Bisons. She glanced at the score as she pushed towards the booths at the back. They were losing, of course. It hadn't been a good season so far.

"Cassie! Over here!"

She looked around until she saw the large form of Grace seated at a booth, waving energetically at her. She made her way over there, skipping past a stumbling drunk.

"Hey, Grace."

Cassie unwound her scarf and then unbuttoned her thick woolen overcoat before sitting down. It may have been freezing outside but they kept it warm in the Calypso. A little too warm for her. Trying to match the temperature to the name and theme, she thought, frowning at the gaudy plastic palm trees and the large wall mural depicting a beach at sunset. She'd never really liked this bar but it was one of Danny's favorites.

"You want something to eat?"

Grace and Danny must have already eaten, Cassie saw. There were two plastic trays on the table, empty save for greasy paper and a few crumbs. She shook her head. "Just a drink."

"Danny's already getting some. I tell you, he knew exactly how late you'd be."

Cassie smiled back at her. "Comes from knowing each other so long, I suppose."

"Sorry to hear about the bank closing," Grace said sympathetically. "That was a bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"I guess." It had been slightly more than a week since the robbery but the head office of the Bank of Arcadia hadn't wasted any time in announcing the bank would be closed. It had nothing to do with the robbery, they had said, but instead was a simple case of economics. It wasn't financially

expedient to keep such a small branch open in such a lowly populated town or so they claimed. It wasn't a popular decision with anyone in the town.

The first Cassie had heard of it was when a letter from head office arrived in the mail. There were no meetings, no discussions, no passing on the decision through management, just a formulaic letter. She and the other staff had been laid off, effective immediately, except Mr. Wechsler, the manager, who had accepted a new position in Bismarck. All in all, they had all been treated shabbily, but Cassie had expected little else. She was trying to look on the bright side. She'd never really liked the job anyway.

"How are you doing?" Grace asked her, looking concerned.

"Not too bad," Cassie lied. "I'm keeping busy."

This was true. In addition to her job search, which wasn't going too well, she had that slimy bastard Williams phoning her constantly, begging to represent her in the contesting of Professor Hamilton's will. She'd told him to get lost a hundred times or more but he took no notice and just kept calling. And whatever free time Cassie had was taken up with studying the documents Grace had given her, documents that went into great detail on nearly every aspect of Zoe's life.

As if she was reading her mind, Grace asked, "Those files helping at all?"

"A little, thanks."

"No problem. Sorry I couldn't get you more but you know how it is."

"Sure," Cassie said, looking around a little nervously, and she asked the question that had been on her mind all night. "No Hannah?"

Grace shook her head. "She's working late. That's what she said, anyway, although I can't imagine what she's working on. We're all finished up here. Probably her Norwegian blood. Makes her a workaholic."

"Probably just an excuse," Danny said from over Cassie's shoulder. He placed three bottles of beer on the table, all already open, and then slid into the booth to sit beside Grace. "I don't think she approves of me and Grace."

"Hmm..."

"Something bothering you?"

"It's nothing," Cassie told Danny. "I'll tell you later... can we talk about something else?"

"Of course," Grace said but she looked worried.

Smiling, Cassie tried to change the subject as best she could. "So what is this, three dates in as

many days?"

"Four."

Danny frowned. "Four?"

She nudged him, none-too-subtly. "If we count the coffee-break this morning. Aah, ain't he cute when he blushes?"

Cassie took a swig of beer. "That's fast work."

"Not for me," Grace said, then she turned to Danny. "Actually, I have something to ask you."

"It's not a marriage proposal, is it?" he said with a nervous laugh. Then he caught sight of her slightly affronted expression and backpedalled as fast as he could. "Well, you said you worked fast..."

Grace said nothing for a while. Eventually Danny had to prompt her. "Well?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"No, go on, ask."

Cassie was feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "Should I make myself scarce?"

"No, it's okay, Cassie. This kinda involves you too, I guess."

Cassie looked surprised at that but said nothing, just exchanged a glance with Danny, who looked as confused as she felt.

"This is stupid. I shouldn't have said anything."

Danny took Grace's hand and squeezed it. "Your choice," he said quietly.

She looked sideways up at him and smiled. A deep breath, then some beer to give her courage.

"Listen, both Hannah and I have worked our butts off on the taskforce over the last year or so." The words came out in a torrent, as if she was scared that if she didn't say them now she never would. "Well, that and a few other things. Neither of us have taken any vacation time for more than a year. I mean, we're overdue some serious PTO. I've been talking to my boss back in LA and..."

"And?"

"I was thinking I could take a fair bit of time off right now. Things are pretty much wrapped up here. Even if Hannah doesn't seem to think so. My boss isn't exactly happy about it, though."

There's some kind of internal thing going on that he'd like me to get involved in, but I really need some time off. And he's willing to put things on hold for a while, until I get back. I think he liked to keep me happy right now."

Cassie frowned. "What kind of internal thing?"

"Damned if I know," Grace said with a shrug. "I didn't ask for the details and he wasn't volunteering any. Whatever it is, it can keep."

"Well, good for you," said Danny genially. "I'm sure you could do with the break. But what's that got to do with me?"

She looked at him warily, as if judging if he was just playing dumb or really was.

Cassie grinned. She'd figured out pretty quickly where Grace was going with this. And sadly, Grace hadn't yet known Danny long enough to know he could be really obtuse sometimes. "You're going to have to spell it out to him, Grace."

"Spell what out?" Danny said, looking between them. "Why do I feel slow all of a sudden?"

Grace flashed Cassie a grateful smile then turned to the Sheriff. "How would you feel if I spent some time here?"

"Why would you want... oh."

"Is it too soon?"

"No, no."

"So it's okay?"

"Hell, yeah, it's okay. You could stay with me, if you wanted."

"Now who's moving fast?"

Danny blushed again. "I just mean... the motel can't be that nice..." He cleared his throat. "How long are we talking about?"

"I was thinking a couple of weeks, maybe. Longer if you like. I could probably take a whole month off. I was thinking about heading back to my folks in Washington for a few days though."

"Is that where you're from?" Cassie asked. "D.C. or the state?"

"The state. Angel's Roost. Smaller town than this. Really small. Nothing exciting ever happens in Angel's Roost." She turned back to Danny. "So is it okay?"

"Sounds great."

"You sure?"

"Of course."

Grace smiled, sigh in relief, took a long drink, and then looked at Cassie. "I want to make sure it's okay with you too."

"Me?" Cassie was startled. "Why?"

"Well, you and Danny are friends and, I don't know, I kinda get the impression you don't like me." She looked uncomfortable. "Or you don't like me and Danny being together."

"Hell, no. I mean, yes. I mean, I don't mind. Not that it's got anything to do with me. Danny's life is his own. And for what's it worth, I like you." It was the truth, even if right now was the first time Cassie could admit it. "And you seem to make Danny happy. Hurt him though..." She left the threat hanging, only half-joking.

"Yeah, I've heard you can throw people about with ease. Wouldn't dream of it."

They both smiled, understanding each other perfectly and happy with their newfound understanding.

Danny grunted in annoyance. "Are you ladies done talking about me as if I wasn't here?"

"Are we?" Grace asked Cassie.

"Not yet. Did he tell you about the time he was in the school play and his pants fell down?"

"Okay, that's enough, Cassie," Danny said warningly, although the irate look on his face made it hard for her to keep from laughing. "Just for that you can get the next round in."

"Not for me, actually," Grace said. "I had better run."

"You're not staying?" Danny asked.

She shook her head as she drained her bottle. "I've got to check on Hannah. You kids behave and don't talk about me when I'm gone."

Cassie held a hand over her heart in a mock expression of hurt. "As if we would."

* * * * *

Much later that night, Danny walked Cassie home through the snow. She tried to protest but feebly, partly because she knew he wouldn't take no for an answer but mostly because she secretly welcomed his company. She felt the need for a little protection.

Hannah was outside waiting for her. Danny didn't see her, of course, but he wasn't meant to. She skulked in the shadowed doorway of the grocery store opposite the Calypso, almost hidden from sight, but somehow she deliberately made her presence known to Cassie. That was the second night she'd followed Cassie home. Yesterday, she had been waiting on the library steps at dusk.

Cassie shivered. It was unnerving, like she was being hunted. Why was the damn woman following her?

"Cold?" Danny asked, misunderstanding.

She shook her head and wrapped her scarf around her face.

"Don't worry, things will get back to normal tomorrow," he said, referring to the imminent departure of the federal agents. There were only a few FBI staff left in Wilusa now, mostly low level workers, ensuring all the paperwork was being completed, and a few members of the forensic team, who were still going over bits of evidence from both the bank and the morgue. The bank would probably never open again; at least not as a bank. She supposed it might be sold, maybe become a small store or something, but then who would purchase a tiny location on the main street of a dying town? And where would they get the money? A bank loan was out of the question.

Grace and Hannah stayed only to oversee the work, and even they were supposed to leave with the rest tomorrow. Of course, Grace had decided to stay on, which had pleased Danny. And, Cassie was surprised to realize, it pleased her too.

Cassie sighed, her breath misting on the chill night air. "Oh, Danny, I don't think things will ever be normal again."

He grunted at that, not sure whether she meant it as a bad or good thing. They walked along the icy sidewalks for a while in silence, then he laughed suddenly, a deep, booming laugh that made her jump in surprise.

"She's scared of you, you know," he said quietly. The idea amused him obviously.

"Who is?" Did he mean Hannah? She wasn't scared of anyone or anything, it seemed. She glanced over her shoulder quickly, worried that Hannah might still be following her. Why would she though? She knew well enough where Cassie lived. She thought she saw something moving along the other side of the street but it was too dark to be sure. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

"Grace."

She looked up at him. "You're kidding! She could twist me into a pretzel without breaking a sweat."

"Yeah, ain't that great?" he said, with a huge goofy smile on his face.

"Thanks, Danny. Why would she be scared of me?"

"Because she wants you to like her. Why do you think she's been giving you all this paperwork you wanted, like the copy of the prison psych report she got you yesterday? You know, that's not supposed to be public knowledge. If it gets out she gave it to you..."

"I know, Danny, I know. And I appreciate it."

"You know how it is, Cassie. She's trying to suck up to the best friend."

"Yeah. Well, she doesn't have to. I like her. Really I do. Not that it matters."

He glanced at her, frowning. "It matters to me."

"You know what I mean. As long as she makes you happy."

"She does."

Cassie smiled at him. "You don't have to tell me, Danny. I can see that. I haven't seen you this crazy over someone since... well, probably not since Jenny Pinova back in high school."

"Jenny Pinova..." he said thoughtfully. "I had forgotten about her. I had the biggest damn crush on her. I wonder whatever happened to her?"

"Married, two kids, lives in Akra."

"Really? Shame."

"Yeah, I'll tell Grace you said that."

He laughed and pushed her playfully. When she almost slipped over in the snow, he grabbed her and held her upright until she had regained her balance. Sometimes he didn't know his own strength.

"So, anything juicy in it?" he asked.

"In what?"

"Mercouri's psych file. Was she really crazy?"

"We're all a little crazy, Danny," she said.

"Not me. I am certifiably sane, thank you very much." He paused, thinking about whether or not he should continue. Obviously he chose curiosity over caution. "Did she really believe she was

reincarnated?"

She studied him for a moment. He wasn't making fun of her, she could tell. Anyone else and she wouldn't have been so sure but Danny didn't have a mean bone in his body. She nodded, realized he wasn't looking, and so told him that he was right.

"Well, that makes two of you," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe there's something to it."

"I'll make an unbeliever of you yet, Danny," she said with a grin.

"Who knows? Maybe I'm the reincarnation of Kull the Conqueror."

"He's fictional, Danny."

"Oh." He looked crestfallen. "Well, Conan then."

She looked at him, slowly realized he was joking, and then laughed with him.

"You want to know something funny?" he said.

"What's that?"

"We talked about reincarnation on the morning of the bank robbery, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"That's one hell of a coincidence."

Cassie looked over her shoulder once again, just in case. "No such thing as coincidences, Danny, you know that."

5: Not Screaming and Terrified, Like His Passengers

Cassie could hear Danny thumping around the kitchen. For such a large man, he could move quietly enough when he needed to. Sadly, most of the time he felt it wasn't needed. He was making coffee, although sounded much more like a tornado ripping through a Kansas farmstead.

She tugged at the curtain again, scared her nervous spying would be seen, and peered down at the street below. It was difficult to make anything out, as the thickly falling snow obscured most of the jaundiced light from the streetlamps, and the bright bulb behind her meant she was likely to be more visible than anything outside.

But she saw her. Hannah was standing in an alley across from the apartment building, almost hidden in the pitch-black shadows. If it wasn't for the stark blonde hair, Cassie would never have spotted her. She must have been freezing, standing out there for most of the night. How long had it been? Cassie glanced back at the clock on her DVD player. The television set had been muted but the movie was still playing. On the screen, a hot air balloon was slipping away from a gaudy green city. It was eight-thirty, she noted. That meant Hannah had been there for more than an hour, since Cassie had got home.

She was being stalked. It was so damn stupid. She felt silly even thinking about it. But it was true. Hannah wouldn't leave her alone. There was no confrontation, no questioning, nothing. But every time she turned around or looked over her shoulder or glanced up from a book, Hannah was there. It was beginning to scare the shit out of her, if she was honest.

The rest of the FBI team had packed up and left more than three weeks ago, leaving only Grace and Hannah here. But Grace and Danny weren't even aware that Hannah was still in Wilusa, at least as far as Cassie knew. And she wasn't about to tell them. That was partly because she didn't want to put a dampener on their burgeoning relationship, even if they were just screwing around. She wasn't about to spoil Danny's fun. Mostly though, it was because she doubted they would believe her. The first thing they'd ask is why on earth Hannah would be here?

Cassie couldn't tell them. She really didn't know and that was bugging her. She'd done a little investigating of her own but had got nowhere. She'd checked every local motel and come up empty. She couldn't even find out where Hannah was staying, for God's sake. Maybe Danny would have more luck. But then if she told him, she might as well tell Grace, and not telling either of them was kind of the point, wasn't it?

She watched Hannah shuffle in place, then a flash of pale white as she looked up, staring directly at the glass door. It felt as if she was looking directly at her, and Cassie mechanically yanked the curtain tighter around her. Was Hannah smiling? Maybe she was just imagining it.

She felt a nudge at her elbow and looked around. Danny was offering her a steaming mug of coffee.

"Here you go," he said with a huge smile. He was up to something, she could tell, although she had no idea what. "Watching the snow?"

"Yeah," she lied.

He took a sip of his own coffee, swore as he burnt his lip, then placed the mug on table and sank into the sofa. "Last month was the worst February on record, or so the Channel 11 News said."

"So what was it you wanted to tell me?" Cassie asked him.

"It's going to have to wait until Grace gets here, do you mind?"

She did. "No. How are things going between you two?"

"Good." He looked down, a little embarrassed. If his grin got any bigger, his face would fall apart. But his joy made her happy. "Really good."

"You're not going to tell me you're getting married, are you?" she teased.

"I hope not. I wouldn't put it past Grace to already have a license though."

"Hey Danny..." She glanced back at the balcony and fell silent again. It was better to keep quiet about her stalker, she thought.

He looked concerned. "Something bothering you?"

For some unfathomable reason, Cassie was unexpectedly reminded of what Danny had once told her, one drunken night. If God's so great, how come he doesn't have a girlfriend?

"You're a religious man, aren't you, Danny?"

He looked surprised at the question. "As much as a man in my line of work can be, I suppose."

Danny was a Lutheran, although not a particularly devout one. Church every other Sunday morning was the best he would manage. Personally, Cassie had never had much time for religion. Something that she inherited from her mother, the original wild child.

"Why do you ask?"

She glanced over at the velvet bag that was on top of the TV set and the pebble set next to it. Another question popped into her mind and she blurted it out. Perhaps she was just hoping that by keeping a conversation going, she wouldn't be able to think about Hannah.

"If you had proof that God exists, would you share it?"

He laughed. "That's an unusual question to ask, Cassie."

"It was just a thought."

He seemed to think about it for a moment. Cassie didn't like the silence stretching on for too long.

"Well?"

"Don't hurry me," he said. "It's not the kind of question you can answer right away. What kind of proof?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. An angel's skeleton or a burning bush that talks or... I don't know. Does it matter?"

"No, I suppose not." He thought some more. "You know, I don't think I would."

"You wouldn't?"

"Well, don't sound so shocked."

"It's just, well, I thought everyone would."

"Not me."

"Why not?"

He smiled at her and picked up his mug again. Satisfied that it wasn't scalding any longer, he took a sip. "What would be the point? Those who didn't want to believe still wouldn't. The shoe would be on the other foot, that's all. You atheists would be the ones relying on faith now." He chuckled. "Now that would be a funny turnaround. And then think of the upset. If I could prove that my God existed, think of how pissed the Catholics would be. Not to mention all the other religions."

"Okay, that's a good point."

"Most of all, I have to go back to faith."

"Faith?"

"Think about it for a minute. If we all know God exists, then there's no need for faith anymore. And if belief in something important is taken away, well, I don't know what that would do to someone."

"Yeah," Cassie said quietly, "it could really screw you up."

"Don't worry about it, Cassie. Faith is simple."

"Oh really?" she said sarcastically. "You've read the Bible, right?"

"I didn't say religion, I said faith. And it's true. We all believe in God, even atheists like you. The only difference is, you don't trust him."

The doorbell rang.

"There's Grace," Danny said, jumping to his feet. As he walked into the kitchen, Cassie once again looked at the bag and pebble. Trust. Was that what it all came down to? Did she still have both the ambrosia and the map because of a woman's trust in her?

Grace was all smiles when she came in. She was dressed a lot more casual than usual, in tight-fitting jeans and a thick sweater. Cassie didn't think she'd ever seen her in anything else but a business suit before. The big woman took off her coat and scarf, with Danny's help, although his blundering meant it probably took longer than it should.

"Hey Grace."

"Hi, Cas," Grace said, grinning like a loon. Oh yeah, Cassie thought, the pair of them were up to something alright. She'd taken to calling her 'Cas'. Cassie didn't really like it but she put up with it. "Any luck finding a job?"

"Not yet."

"Well, don't worry something will turn up."

"Speaking of which..." Danny said, terribly unsubtly.

"Well, wait a minute, why don't you?"

"Oh, like you want to wait."

Cassie sighed. This could go on all night. "Someone mind telling me what's going on?"

Grace and Danny exchanged knowing smiles. "We got you something," Danny said.

"A present? Why?"

Grace dug through her coat pockets. "Just because." She handed an envelope to Cassie, who opened it to find an airline ticket. Several airline tickets, actually. One from Hector to O'Hare in Chicago, then a flight to London, connecting through JFK in New York, then a flight from Heathrow to Athens. It was a trip to Greece. There were hotel reservations too, she noted. The pair of them had paid for an entire trip to Greece, just for her. She felt tears in her eyes and did her best to blink them away.

"You can't afford this, Danny," was all she could think of to say.

He waved away her concerns. "Well, when you come into Old Man Hamilton's money, you can buy me a yacht in return." She looked at him sharply and he quickly apologized. "Sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Forget it."

"Anyway, it's not just me. Grace and I wanted to do this for you."

"Both of you?" Cassie had to ask. "Why?"

Danny looked at Grace to see if she was going to answer but she merely gestured that he had the floor. He took a deep breath and scratched his chin. "You're not happy, Cassie. I don't know what to do to make you happy any more."

"Don't blame yourself, Danny," Cassie said truthfully. "I haven't been happy in a long time."

"But you used to smile. I could make you smile at least." When she did so, even though she knew it looked forced, he shook his head. "Nice try, Cassie, but you're not fooling anyone."

Grace was now wisely staying silent. Cassie could tell she wanted to say something but she respected their friendship too much to intervene.

"I'm okay, Danny, honestly."

"No, you're not." When Cassie opened her mouth to speak, he held up a hand to stop her. "It's okay, you don't have to explain anything."

"I can't, Danny."

"I know. And I hope you know you don't have to. I'll do whatever I can to help though. And whatever it is, it's okay with us..." He glanced quickly at Grace, embarrassed either for speaking for her. He mouthed an apology to Grace, who just grinned at him and then shoved him playfully with her shoulder.

Cassie smiled at that. At least something came out of the bank robbery. She had hoped that a couple would forge out of that disaster, but she hadn't expected it to be them.

"So, we wanted to give you a chance," Danny went on.

"A chance?"

"To chase your dreams." Grace said.

"You always said you wanted to visit Greece. We thought this would, well, if not make you happy, at least help you forget your troubles for a while."

Cassie tucked the tickets back into the envelope. "Do you believe in fate, Danny?"

"It's the night for odd questions, isn't it? Maybe."

"What about you, Grace?"

"I try to have a respectful belief in everything," the muscular woman said, "even if two things are contradictory."

Cassie looked down at the envelope in her hand. Without knowing it, the pair of them had done everything they could to set her on a path. The records and files Grace had been supplying with had shown her how unlucky Zoe really was. If Cassie wanted, she could be unlucky too. She just had to take that first step. And Grace and Danny had given her ability to take that first step. There was no way she could have paid for a trip to Greece herself, especially now as she was eating into her savings just to pay the rent.

But was it the right path? And where would it lead? She couldn't risk it. She just couldn't.

"I can't take this," she said, offering the envelope back to Grace.

They both looked startled and Grace even looked a little hurt. "Of course you can," she said, trying to smile.

"No, I really can't."

Grace shook her head and refused to take the envelope. Cassie thrust it at her again. Eventually, Danny reluctantly took it.

"I have to make my own way in this world, you know that. And that includes making my own mistakes."

Danny frowned. "Just be sure not to make too many, Cassie."

* * * * *

Zoe awoke to find herself being shaken by one of the flight attendants, who was having to lean over the man in the seat to her left in order to reach her. The lights were all turned low in the plane, save for a few overheads. It seemed a few people were still awake, reading or watching the in-flight movie.

"Miss?"

Blearily, she looked up at him, then down at the hand he still had on her shoulder. He looked too and quickly snatched his hand away.

"What?"

"You were screaming, miss, in your sleep."

"I was?" Zoe ran a hand through her tousled hair.

"Yes, Miss. It was disturbing the other passengers."

"Woke up my kids," the English woman to her right complained bitterly. "Some people." She had a whole brood occupying the seats around her. Zoe thought about telling her it had been hard to get to sleep with all the damn brats yelling and kicking the back of her seat, but thought it was better to attract no more attention than she already had.

"Sorry," Zoe said quietly. "Bad dreams," she said as way of explanation.

The flight attendant nodded curtly, then headed back down the aisle.

The screen at the front of the cabin indicated the plane was two-thirds through its flight. They'd be in London in an hour or two. Zoe gathered up the blanket that she had obviously restlessly kicked down to the floor in her sleep. Her book was there too, so she picked that up. She found her page again and caught the English woman glancing none too surreptitiously at the title and tutting loudly. *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* by Sinclair Beckstein. She probably thought it was based on the movie, Zoe thought with a superior smile.

She couldn't remember what the last thing was she had read. She must have fallen asleep mid-sentence. Wow, how tired was she?

"Scared of flying, are you?" the man to her left said kindly.

Sighing, hopefully obviously enough to discourage further conversation, Zoe shook her head. "Not really. Not of flying."

The man ignored her, which she'd half-expected. "You know what I've found helps?"

"Let me guess. Taking off your shoes and walking barefoot on thick carpet as soon as we land?"

He looked bewildered. Pop culture clearly wasn't his strong suit. "No. What makes you say that?"

"Never mind." Zoe said with another sigh.

The man touched a hand to the crucifix that hung from a chain around his neck. "No, what helps is having faith. If you are true in the eyes of our Lord, you have nothing to fear."

Oh for fuck's sake, Zoe thought. This is why she never flew coach.

"So tell me," he said in a confidential tone, "have you ever considered being born again?"

"Buddy," she told him in all honesty, "you have no idea."

* * * * *

"I heard Danny's quite upset."

Cassie sighed and rolled her eyes behind Effy's back. She pushed the shopping cart around the corner, into the produce section. She didn't really like shopping at Hugo's but since the other grocery store in town had closed late last year, she really had no choice. Effy didn't seem to mind, but then she'd shopped here on a regular basis.

Since the bank had closed, this weekly grocery shopping trip had become a routine. That wasn't Cassie's choice but rather Effy's. Cassie suspected Effy had been forced into it herself by Ike, but she wasn't sure. Maybe the young woman was merely reaching out in an effort to be more sociable, perhaps concerned the Cassie was becoming more reclusive, and was only using the shopping as an excuse. They'd never been close, even in high school, although they'd always been friends of a sort.

Whatever her reasons, Effy had insisted. Cassie had given in gracefully, accepting the inevitable. That didn't make shopping together any less of a chore though.

She liked Effy, always had. She was pleasant enough, she was very good for Ike (who wouldn't be half the man he was without her guidance, or nagging as he would have said), and unlike her parents she had always been very accepting of Cassie and her choices in life. She didn't approve really, but instead just tried to ignore the things about Cassie that bothered her.

No, it wasn't the company. It was the duration. Effy took so damn long to shop. She had to weigh up every single item she even considered purchasing. If alone, Cassie would fly through the store in less than half-an-hour. Now the routine meant she had to devote a good two or three hours to grocery shopping.

"Yeah?" Cassie asked, feigning ignorance. "Over what?"

"The trip to Greece he got for you."

Cassie said nothing.

"The tickets are non-refundable, you know. Although Danny told Ike that he could reshuffle the dates if..."

"Effy..." Cassie's tone was warning enough.

"Alright, alright," Effy said smiling.

"I mean, if you're trying to make me feel bad..."

"No, not at all. A trip probably would have done you some good, is all. And you haven't had much fun lately, have you? I mean, when was the last time you went on a date?"

Oh great, Cassie thought, this again. "You know what they say, Effy. All the good ones..."

"Are married or gay, I know. Although I suppose I should say married or straight, right?" She smiled at Cassie.

"I suppose. But actually I was going to say all the good ones are battered and tortured."

"If you say so. Do you want some apples?"

Cassie didn't answer. She was staring across the aisle towards a pyramid of cans. An all-too familiar figure was standing by the cans, paying no attention to anything else around her save Cassie. That damn bitch had followed her here, Cassie thought angrily, just like she'd followed her every-damn-where, every damn day. Maybe she should go to church with Danny this Sunday. Could she claim sanctuary or was nothing sacred?

She felt Effy touch her on the arm and the contact jerked her out of her reverie.

"What?"

"Did you want some apples?"

"I guess."

Enough was enough, Cassie thought, her temper flaring. This couldn't go on. She might not be able to tell Danny or Grace but she would be damned before she would let this continue. "Effy, do me a favor."

"Sure. Anything."

"Stay with me."

"What?"

"Come on," Cassie said to her and she strode down the aisle. She was pleased, and somewhat comforted, by the fact that Effy did indeed stay right behind her. She was sure Effy didn't understand what was happening but she was loyal enough.

Hannah was pretending to study the deli now but she turned as the two women approached.

"Are you going to stop following me?" Cassie heard Effy gasp, either at the sudden outburst or the accusation, she wasn't sure. It didn't matter, she was focused solely on the problem at hand.

Hannah had the nerve to look innocent. "Are you talking to me?"

"You know damn well I am!" Cassie was almost yelling, attracting the attention of nearby customers. She was expecting Hannah to retreat. Maybe not turn and run but at least to back up a little. She didn't move, not even an inch. She was much taller than Cassie and just stared down at her, one eyebrow raised in amusement. She wasn't grinning so much as smirking.

"Who says I'm following anyone? I'm on vacation, taking in the sights."

"And what do you expect to see in a grocery store?"

"You never know. Besides, I have to eat."

"What is it you want from me?"

Hannah didn't say anything for a moment, then bent forward so her lips were inches from Cassie's ear. Cassie shrank back a little. "I want to know what you and Mercouri were up to," she whispered, the words so quiet Cassie knew Effy wouldn't hear them. "I want to know what she stole. Most of all, I want to know what *really* happened in that bank."

"You know what happened!"

"I know what you told us."

"You think I'm lying?"

"I *know* you are."

"I haven't lied about one thing that happened in that bank!" Cassie snapped.

"Really?" Hannah was still smirking. "Then what have you lied about?"

"Look, you were the one who told Zoe about what happened to Michi, weren't you?" said Cassie angrily. She felt Effy's hand on her shoulder and shook it off angrily. "She confronted Sam about it, he lost his temper and attacked her. She shot him in self-defense. I told you this a dozen times."

Hannah shook her head. "I don't buy it. Oh, I can see that crazy bitch killing him, that's for sure. There's no limits to which she wouldn't have gone, I'm sure. But I don't believe Randall would try to kill her. He valued her too much."

"Why would I lie?"

"Good question. Here's another. If I'm such a bother, why haven't you told your friendly neighborhood sheriff?"

Cassie stepped back. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the store manager approaching.

A crowd was gathering. She raised a pointed finger at Hannah.

"Stay away from me."

"Or what?" Hannah grinned, turned and almost bowed to the manager by way of an apology for the scene Cassie had caused. She made a circle out her thumb and forefinger, like an 'okay' symbol, and held it up to her eye. "Be seeing you."

They just let her walk away, Cassie thought furiously. Everyone just moved away from her, the crowd parting as she moved through, and no one even tried to stop her. They were all staring at her, as if she was the problem. They all wanted to know what *her* problem was. Sometimes she really hated this town.

"What was all that about?" Effy finally said.

"It doesn't matter."

"Let me guess. Psycho ex-girlfriend?"

"No," Cassie said, wishing she'd shut up.

"Does Danny know about her?"

"No, and you're not going to tell him. And don't tell Ike either."

She looked doubtful. "I really should."

"Effy..."

"Okay, okay, I won't tell him."

Cassie let out a deep breath and held a hand to her head. She didn't know what she was going to do. This was getting beyond a joke. She was beginning to feel like the whole damn town was turning against her. Something Effy had said earlier came back to her.

"Can I borrow your cellphone?" she asked Effy. She'd lost hers to the FBI's evidence locker and couldn't afford a new one.

"Sure."

Cassie dialed Danny's number. It rang a few times, then he answered.

"Danny? Yes, I know you're at work," she said. "Yes, I know. Listen, Danny, do you still have those airline tickets? Yes. Yes. Yeah, I'm pleased too. As Effy says, a trip will probably do me some good."

* * * * *

There is a nightclub in Exarheia, deep in the heart of downtown Athens, where the young, the beautiful, and most importantly, the anyone with enough disposable cash, can dance the night away. Or drink the night away. Or even, if their tastes stretch that far and they know the right people, blur the night away with the right choice of illegal drugs.

Memory, as the nightclub is called, has been raided by the local police more times than anyone in the neighborhood can remember, but more often than not the only arrests that are made are a few under-age drinkers and the occasional possession charge. Some people say the police have given up trying; some say they're in the pay of the owners; a few even dare to say the owners are clever enough to avoid both being caught and bribing the authorities. Nobody says there isn't more going on.

The music pounded out from countless unseen speakers, so loud Zoe could barely hear herself think. Later, the club would have a live DJ but before midnight it was only set playlists. Right now, Sakis Rouvas was singing something about forgetting both the past and present but the volume was set so high it was hard to make out the words. After hearing just one of his songs, Zoe couldn't help but wish he was back on his yacht.

She'd been waiting here at the bar for over three quarters of an hour, taking up space and nursing her single drink, despite the glares from the bar staff. She was being kept waiting, she knew that. She wouldn't have minded so much but it was just the constant noise. Crap, she thought, she must be getting old. She was certainly a good fifteen years older than most of the dancers. Well, maybe not too old, she thought. After all, she'd already been hit on half-a-dozen times; her rejections to begin with had been polite but after the fourth or fifth time she just started telling the young men to get lost. She was better off in Gazi than here.

She was shifting position to try to reduce some of the weight of her heavy shoulder bag, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned away from the bar, wincing as the music seemed to increase in volume. A young woman stood behind her with a disapproving look on her face and one hand on a hip. Unlike most of the dancers, she was dressed very casually, in jeans and a simple tee, although she wore heels to try to disguise her short stature. She had jet-black hair cropped in a neat princess cut and a face that could only be described as witch-like. Something about her reminded Zoe of Margaret Hamilton. Her lips were thin and pursed in an almost childish pout. She looked Zoe up and down and her gaze grew even more disapproving.

There was space all around her, as if everyone knew who she was. Maybe they did, or maybe they were just picking up on the respectful vibes the staff were giving off. She deserved the respect. Eris Zabat was the Cannibal's daughter and everyone said she was even more crazy than he was.

"You're Idunn?" she said.

"That's the name your father gave me," Zoe said cautiously.

"Come with me," Eris said, turning on her heel and walking away, not even bothering to look to

see if Zoe was following her. The crowd of dancers might have parted for her but they showed Zoe no such respect. As she and Eris edged around the dance floor, Zoe was bumped hard from behind and stumbled forward, falling into the younger woman's arms.

"Sorry," she said with a sheepish grin on her face. She was a little surprised Eris had deigned to catch her. "It's pretty crowded in here."

"Get your hands off me, malakismeni!"

Zoe stepped back immediately. She wasn't about to get on this woman's wrong side if she could help it. Eris scowled at her but said nothing more, instead leading Zoe through a door marked 'employees only'. In the corridor beyond, she told Zoe to turn and face the wall. Zoe had been expecting this and so did as she was told, dropping her bag on to the floor and then placing both hands, palms flat, on the dingy grey wall. The plaster felt surprisingly cold. She felt the woman's hands on her body, pawing at her sides, rummaging through the pockets of her jackets, patting at her arms, even frisking briefly through her hair.

When the hands reached her crotch she tensed but managed to keep her mouth shut. They weren't taking any chances, that was for sure. But that was okay, neither was she.

Eris was evidently satisfied with the results of the patdown, although you'd never know it to look at her. She took Zoe's bag and then led her up a spiral staircase and through a beaded curtain. Which was where Zoe found herself face-to-face with 'the Cannibal' for the second time in her life and which would hopefully be the last.

Antiphates Zabat was a huge man, with at least three chins and thick jowls. His hair was graying and thinning, although he tried to disguise it by combing his hair over, and his beady eyes were as dark as coals. He was dressed in an expensive looking and perfectly tailored suit, although he wore his collar loose and no tie.

His hand was straying to and from a bowl of powdered candy. Zoe had never seen him not eating. He was a renowned glutton and fancied himself as something of a gourmet. That was part of the reason why everyone called him 'the Cannibal'. The other part was because it was said that he made a habit of eating parts of the business rivals he killed, although most people doubted the rumors were true. Still, the nickname had stuck and she was sure he did little to discourage them. Those kind of rumors were good for business, kept people in line.

A Sicilian by birth, Antiphates had lived in Greece for most of his fifty-six years. Rumors linked him to the most of the organized crime families in Greece, Italy, Turkey, some even further afield, including possibly even the Velentzas back in the States. No one really knew for sure. He'd held the crime concession in this small part of Athens for almost as long, or so it seemed. And he had ruled for so long simply because he was three things: intelligent; dangerous; and content with his lot. He controlled a large part of the downtown Athens underworld but knew its boundaries and his own limits. He didn't stray outside those and so was tolerated by the bigger fish in the criminal ocean. And if anyone tried to step inside his territory, he was smart enough to stop them quickly and efficiently. And Zoe tried not to think about how he stopped them.

Not that it had always been easy; he'd had to face down many young thugs and punks who were stupid enough to challenge him. Right now he was busy fighting the in-roads the Albanian drug lords were making into the Athens underclasses. All the same, he was not a man to be treated lightly.

He waved a hand idly, motioning for her to sit down. He was smoking a huge cigar and thick, stinking clouds of dark smoke hung over the desk, making it difficult for Zoe to see. The rich tobacco smelt good though, she thought as she pulled out the only free chair. Funny, she hadn't craved a cigarette since... well, not since she'd died.

He looked up at Eris as she dropped the heavy bag onto the desk, right next to the ashtray where he was stubbing out the cigar. "Was she wired?"

"No. No weapons either."

Chuckling, Antiphates brushed his fingers on his lapels absent-mindedly, leaving streaks of white powder from the Turkish Delight he was eating. He unzipped the bag and began pulling out the neat stacks of purple Euro notes.

"Don't be so disappointed, daughter. From what I've heard she could probably still give a good account of herself."

Eris sneered in disbelief. "She's not as tough as she looks."

"Nobody is, sweetheart," Zoe said sadly.

"How true," Antiphates said without looking up from his counting. "A blonde now, hmm, Idunn?"

Zoe shrugged. "You know how it is."

"I can guess." He had emptied the bag by this point and handed it back to his daughter, who turned it upside down and shook it, then looked carefully inside before discarding it.

Antiphates looked over the stacks of money, his greedy eyes flicking back and forth as he calculated the total. There were beads of sweat on his brow. Zoe was sweating a little herself.

"Well, everything seems in order."

Zoe said nothing. She had a good idea the less she said the better off she'd be. She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable more from the unmoving gaze of Eris than the hard wooden chair.

Grinning now, Antiphates pulled open a drawer and retrieved a manila folder which he handed over to Zoe. There were greasy fingerprints all over it, she noticed. She placed it flat on the desk and flipped it open. There were several sheets of printed paper, medical reports (mostly

doctored), an EU passport, and most importantly a Greek ID card. The name she saw everywhere was Helene Anastasia Stavros. She smiled at that touch of fate. It meant one less lie.

She picked up the ID card and ran her finger over the photo. It was an older snapshot, taken when she had been *much* younger. Antiphates had asked for that. It was meant to look like the card had been issued many years ago and was battered and weathered. It even had the older typeset, with the words 'Ministry of Public Order' at the top. It really was an excellent forgery, worth every cent. Without it, she'd have no hope.

"Shall I save you the bother of reading it all?"

"If you would," she said, more to keep him happy than anything else. She really wanted to get out of here as soon as she could, especially with his psychotic daughter pacing up and down behind her, but knew she needed at least to check the basic details to make sure she wasn't getting the shaft. She'd read everything thoroughly later, when she was alone and safe. And she'd memorize it all, every last word. This was her new life now. She needed to know every aspect of it.

"I must say, my associates have done me proud. So much so, I was tempted to charge you more, I must admit." She looked up at that, fixing him with a stern stare. His smile grew wider, dimpling his fat cheeks. "Don't worry, I may have many failings but I am a man of my word."

"That *is* one of your failings, father," Eris said bitterly.

"Perhaps so." He grinned up at his daughter, then took a piece of candy from the bowl and popped it into his mouth. After chewing for a second or two, he swallowed and looked at Zoe.

"Her name," he began, "was Helene Stavros. She committed suicide a little over a month ago."

"Why?"

"Interesting choice of question. Because her husband beat her. Repeatedly. You'll see from her medical records that she had to undergo treatment for lacerations and severe bruising quite often, even the occasional broken bone or two. Never life-threatening, although she obviously thought so. And that's why. She finally decided enough was enough, I suppose, and took the only escape she could." He shrugged. "Sad, isn't it? But life is so sad for all of us. And there is only so much sympathy to share."

"Didn't the police do anything?"

"She never pressed charges. It's common enough. We all know the story. That's not to say the police weren't aware of what was going on. When you live in a small apartment in a crowded tenement block, secrets are hard things to keep. They picked up her husband, Spiro, several times, usually on minor unrelated charges, but none of them ever stuck. No death certificate was filed, of course."

Zoe nodded. She knew Antiphates had many people in his payroll, that's why she had approached him about this last year. It didn't surprise her that number included a few doctors, nurses and medical staff.

"As far as the world is concerned, Helene Stavros is still alive. And she is, now. She's sitting right in front of me!" He found that amusing and gave a great roll of laughter.

"Any family? Friends?"

"No. She kept herself to herself as you would expect. It's hard to make friends when your life is so controlled."

Tell me about it, Zoe thought bitterly, her mind instinctively conjuring up an image of Sam.

"Most days she never left her home. And no family. She was an only child, her mother died in childbirth, her father died in a car wreck in the early nineties. You can see she was roughly the same age as you, although we had to guess there."

Actually, she was two years younger, but Zoe didn't volunteer the information.

"So I think you will agree, she was a perfect choice."

"Not quite perfect," Zoe said. "You haven't told me about the husband."

"He is no longer a problem."

There was something in the way he said that. It sent a chill down Zoe's spine. Still, she had to ask. "You care to elaborate on that?"

"Pantheras Stavros was the one who found her body and rushed her to hospital. The doctors there told him that she had been saved and they were keeping her overnight for observation. When he came back the next day, she wasn't there. All the doctors could tell him was that she had been there the night before. Naturally, he thought she had gone home, but he didn't find her there either."

"He must have reported her missing to the police."

"Of course. But they had the suicide attempt, and her recovery, reported by the hospital authorities. And as I told you, the police knew what was going on behind the Stavros' closed doors. As I expected them to, they came to the obvious conclusion."

"Which is?"

"That poor Helene had been too frightened to go back to Pantheras after what she had done and so she fled. Either that or she was too tired of his treatment of her to stay with him any longer. They understood that. If you're going to lie to the police, always give them a story they can

understand, even if they don't believe it."

"I'll remember that."

"So they weren't going to try too hard to locate her, you see? They think they're doing her a favor. And I suppose they're doing you one too."

Zoe was still not convinced. "But the husband..."

"Was arrested on drug charges a little over a week ago," Antiphates interrupted her. "After a tip-off, the police found a large quantity of heroin in his apartment. He claims to be innocent of course. Who knows, maybe he is." He grinned evilly at that. "Although something tells me that he won't find prison to his liking."

Zoe wasn't exactly pleased at the implied threat but guessed she had no room to argue. She tried telling herself that one less wifebeater in the world wasn't exactly going to break anyone's heart. Somehow it still pricked at her conscience.

"What about her body?"

"Smuggled out of the hospital and disposed of. Don't ask me how."

"I won't. Well, thank you." She got to her feet, holding out her hand. She expected him to shake it. Instead he grasped her hand in both his greasy paws and bent to slobbily kiss it. She shuddered a little but tried to keep smiling. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I trust we'll never see each other again."

"Please, we are not quite finished." He looked up at her and grinned. His daughter had a similar wicked smile.

Zoe sighed. She knew this was going to happen but all the same had been hoping that it would not. "Really? You've given me what I want and I've paid you. What else is there?"

"You have not paid me enough."

"I came to you because I'd heard you were the man who could get this done. You would know the right people, I was told, no questions asked. You consented to get me what I needed, I agreed to pay your fee. We had an agreement."

"And I am changing the terms of that agreement."

Zoe nodded wearily. "I thought you would."

"Ah, you delight me. Not like most Americans. Even the clever ones are so blunt," he told her, jabbing at the air with a pointed finger. Then he began twirling the finger. "You, you think in circles. I like that. All the same, you will pay me double what is here. Within twenty-four hours."

Zoe's face hardened. "No, you'll take what's there and be happy."

His smile did not fade.

"I have no idea who you are, Idunn, and I really have no interest in finding out. It would be far too difficult and time-consuming. But I know who you will be pretending to be and I know that if you so desperately desire another identity, there must be other people who do know who you are. People who are a lot less friendly than I. Finding them will be easier."

"Maybe," Zoe conceded, "but not easier than giving a recording of this conversation to the police."

His eyes flicked upwards to his daughter, who frowned and shook her head. "You were searched. You have no recording devices."

"No, I don't," said Zoe. She inclined her head towards Eris. "But she does."

Both the Zabats looked puzzled for a moment. Then the father scowled, his smile disappearing for the first time Zoe had ever seen.

"She's lying, papa," Eris said quietly. She looked terrified of her father's wrath.

Antiphates looked at Zoe, who gave him a hard look in return. "No, she isn't. Look in your pockets."

Obediently, Eris turned out her pockets, starting with her jeans. She dropped what she had found on the desk. Some crumpled Euro banknotes, a few coins that clattered on the wooden surface, a cellphone, a pack of stick gum... and a small silver rectangular shape with a red LED brightly lit at one corner. Antiphates picked it up and held it between finger and thumb, turning it over.

"It wasn't there," the daughter protested, "I swear! She fell against me on the dance floor. She must have planted it on me then."

Zoe shrugged. "It's a kind of magic. So, are we done?"

"Hell no, we're not done! We can smash it!" the daughter yelled.

"It won't do any good, will it?" Antiphates asked Zoe.

"No," she told him honestly. "It's a transmitter, not a recording device. And before your daughter even thinks of asking, killing me right now won't do you any good either. Although it might make the recording more entertaining."

"You have the receiver in safe hands?"

"Several receivers, just in case. And yes, the recordings they're making will be kept safe, so long as our agreement stands."

"Like I said," Antiphates said, shaking his head and smiling once more, although there was a hardness behind the smile, thinking in circles. "You'll have to be careful, Idunn. Someone cleverer than you will be sure to catch you one day."

"One day," Zoe said with an equally hard smile. "Though it might as well be someday."

6: The Same Line

The door jamb to her apartment was busted, Cassie saw in alarm, the metal buckled and wood splintered.

Cassie knew she should have gone back to get Danny. He was sitting in his jeep down in the parking lot, waiting for her to get her luggage and the tickets. They had to be the airport within the hour. Grace had insisted on coming with them. The pair of them were probably making out in the car like horny teenagers, Cassie thought. Two armed officers of the law were so near. Just two flights of stairs away.

She should have backed away slowly. Hell, she should have turned and ran. She should have started yelling and screaming and pounding on all her neighbors' doors.

She *should* have done any one of those things. Naturally, she didn't do a single one.

She reached out and pushed the door open softly. It creaked a little. Not loud enough for anyone to hear it, unless they were listening for it. For some reason her mind immediately told her she was smudging any fingerprints there might have been on the door handle. Corrupting the evidence, crime scene, isn't that what the police called it.

There were no lights on inside but the stark corridor light was more than enough to see by. The kitchen was in disarray, the table was turned over, the cabinets open, their contents scattered over

the counters and the floor. Her fruit bowl was smashed in pieces on the floor, she noted, and she stooped to pick up a rolling apple that the opening door had bumped into.

Even the refrigerator was open. That struck Cassie as absurd. Did burglars always search the fridge? More to the point, did people often keep valuables in their fridges? Grace would know. She'd ask her later.

The broken fruit bowl made her briefly panic, and she stuck a hand in her pocket, checking to see if the pebble was there. It was.

Cassie carefully picked her way through the kitchen debris. As she approached the living room, she walked slower, not only to create as little sound as possible, but to let her eyes adjust to the dimmer light. Her shoes splashed softly in a puddle of water when she passed the fridge.

She moved into the living room. The sheet that served as a curtain was drawn across the sliding glass doors. She hadn't left it that way. All the same, very faint light from the street lamps outside crept in through the thin fabric.

"Do you mind if I turn on the light?" she said quietly.

The voice, soft, low and threatening, came from behind her, which caught her unawares. "Don't scream." From anyone else it might have been a plea, from her it was a demand.

"I wasn't planning on it." Cassie flicked the light switch and turned around, very slowly and cautiously so as not to make the intruder jumpy.

She had known from the moment she had seen the splintered door jamb that Hannah would be lying in wait for her. What were the chances of some complete stranger robbing her? And Hannah may not have been expecting her to just walk in but must have suspected it as a possibility, and she certainly heard the front door creak open. She had made no effort to hide her break-in.

Hannah was wearing gloves and had a hefty looking flashlight, which she dropped onto the sofa as Cassie turned. The flashlight bounced a couple of times and then rolled off to hit the floor with a thud. It kept rolling until it hit the trio of empty beer bottles by the corner of the couch.

In the stark light of the overhead bulb, Cassie could see that, just like the kitchen, the living room had been thoroughly ransacked. There wasn't much that hadn't been emptied, turned out, or upturned. Her books, once lovingly stacked against the far wall, had been thrown into a huge pile behind the couch. That was probably a fire hazard, she thought. She was surprised to see her desk was still standing, although the drawers had been pulled out and tossed to one side. She saw why the desk had been relatively unscathed - the notes, files and papers she'd collected on Zoe had been there. They still were there, just not how she left them.

"Find what you were looking for?" she asked.

"No. Not yet."

"Hmm. There's a surprise."

"Although I did discover you were taking a vacation. Greece, huh? Expensive."

It was odd, Cassie thought, to be having such a normal conversation. You could almost say crazy. She should be running. Instead, here she was talking calmly with someone who had violated the sanctity of her home. She found herself wondering which of them was the more crazy, her or Hannah.

"It was a gift from Danny and Grace."

She snorted. "Really?"

That was interesting. Obviously Hannah didn't know everything.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking. About what happened. I've looked at this every which way, and no matter how I try only one make sense."

"Yeah? Do tell." Cassie began edging towards the phone.

"I wouldn't bother. I've unhooked it. You see, there are only three possible answers: one," Hannah held up a gloved hand and began counting, "the official story, Mercouri was working with Sam until they fought over the death of Michi. Sam ended up dead."

"So did Zoe."

"Yes. Which doesn't make sense. She wasn't the type to kill herself."

"Maybe she couldn't live with the loss of Michi."

Hannah laughed at that. "Hardly. She had no problem getting women. The loss of one slut wouldn't faze her."

Cassie was determined not to let what this woman said get to her, but it wasn't easy. "She didn't seem to think so," she said. "The loss was enough to make her kill Randall, after all."

Something in what she had just said seemed to rile Hannah. Cassie saw a glint of barely restrained anger appear in her eyes and it looked like Hannah had to struggle to control it. Her jaw was clenched tight. When she spoke, her voice was flat. "If you say so. Unless she killed him for another reason."

"Such as?"

Hannah ignored her. "Two, Mercouri was working alone. She was planning on selling out Sam

like she did the others, right from the start. Maybe she wasn't planning on killing him, maybe she was. Maybe she already knew about Michi and had this all in mind from the get-go, I don't know. But let's assume she was planning on getting him a hefty prison sentence. That makes a certain amount of sense. After all, he did the same to her and that resulted in some serious hurt, both physically and psychologically. Hell, even emotionally. She felt betrayed. I can understand that."

She had begun pacing, stepping carelessly on the wreckage spread across the floor, not even looking where she was treading. Cassie tried moving towards the kitchen but Hannah blocked her route. The only other way out was over the balcony and she'd never make it.

"Unfortunately," Hannah went on, "we still have the problem that Mercouri was unlikely to commit suicide. And that's even truer in this scenario. After all, if she was trying to punish Sam by making him serve some time, then wouldn't she want to be around to gloat?"

"If you think she's the gloating type."

"Do you?"

"Why ask me?"

Hannah ran a hand loosely over the papers on Cassie's desk. "You've been reading up on her. Looking for some insight, isn't that what you told me?"

"Yes."

"Mercouri would want an escape route. She was always looking for one, which is why her suicide bothers me. Besides, it would hardly be a punishment if she was serving the same sentence Sam was, would it?"

Cassie opened her mouth to answer but Hannah cut her off.

"Rhetorical question, don't worry. Likewise, if she was dead then Sam's punishment would kind of be irrelevant. So no, her actions make no sense if she was working alone."

"Let me guess," Cassie said tiredly. "That leaves us with..."

"Three. Mercouri was working with someone else."

Cassie sighed. "Not this again. You've been following me around for weeks, stalking me, never giving me a moment's peace. I don't know why. You seem to think there's something I'm hiding from you, but there really isn't. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Until I believe you. Seems to me you've still a ways to go."

"This has to stop. Up 'til now I haven't said a word to anyone, if only to be fair to Grace. But I

will, if you don't leave right now." She pointed at the kitchen door.

Hannah snorted. "You don't get it, do you? You are going to tell me what's going on."

"Or what?" Cassie said sarcastically. "You're going to beat it out of me?"

"Yes, something like that."

That surprised her. Cassie may well have believed Hannah was more than capable of going through with such a threat but the simple, unemotional admission made it suddenly seem much more real. She took a step back into the center of the lounge. When she spoke, she tried to keep her voice calm and steady. "And you think you'll get away with it? You think you can just break in here and do what you want?"

Hannah just smiled a wolfish smile. "Suspicion of a crime. I was coming to pay you a visit and saw that your apartment has been broken into. I had a duty to investigate."

"And you think anyone will believe that?"

"I'll take my chances. After all, they'll only have my story to go by, won't they?"

Cassie was puzzled for a second, then the enormity of what was implied sunk in. "Oh. You were too late, I suppose. Rather simple, don't you think?"

"The best stories generally are."

"Isn't this a little extreme? Even for you, I mean?" Keep her talking, Cassie told herself, buy some time. Danny won't wait forever. "You're an FBI agent, for God's sake."

"I'm on vacation." She stepped forward, menacingly. Her fingers were flexing, as if she was itching to get her hands around Cassie's throat. Cassie could hear the soft leather of her gloves creaking and the sound terrified her.

Oh well, Cassie thought, so much for stalling. She took a single step back, trying to make it look casual at first, but as her foot touched the floor she sprang forward, launching a kick towards the blonde psycho's head. It was quick but Hannah was quicker. She had her arm raised to parry the blow, although it made her stagger somewhat, knocking over a standing lamp. Cassie followed up with a quick jab towards the woman's chest, hoping to knock her completely off-balance, but Hannah caught her hand before it connected.

Their eyes met for a moment, steely grey staring into soft green, then Hannah scowled and twisted Cassie's hand at the wrist sharply. Cassie gasped in pain and instinctively moved with the twist, hoping to lessen the sudden agony. Even as she did so, she knew it was foolish. She felt the other woman's foot connect painfully with the back of her left knee and her legs went out from under her. She fell forward, but at least managed to spin around as she fell, falling hard on to her back. The air was knocked from her lungs.

Hannah was on top of her in an instant, her thin frame weighing heavily on her chest. Cassie could hardly breathe. She felt the woman's hands encircle her throat and suddenly hard became impossible.

She saw the heavy flashlight out of the corner of her eye. She reached out for it but her fingers were just a hair's breadth away. She struggled to stretch far enough. Hannah saw what she was doing, despite her rage, and lifted her by her throat only to slam her head hard onto the floor. Everything went white for a moment.

But that had been a mistake. The lift had meant Cassie had been shifted in place. Only slightly, but it was enough so that her fingertips touched the flashlight. Unfortunately, in her desperation she clumsily swatted at it and the flashlight skittered away, knocking over the beer bottles. One bottle rolled towards her in a lazy circle. Cassie saw it coming and clutched at it in panic. Her fingers encircled the body of the bottle and without thinking she slammed it up into the side of her attacker's face.

The bottle exploded. She felt pain in her right hand suddenly as sharp edges cut into the flesh of her palm. She ignored the pain and pushed, grinding the bottle upwards. Her face was covered with falling shards of brown glass and she closed her eyes instinctively, just kept pushing, anything to make the grip on her throat lessen. And then it did. She opened her eyes, shaking her head to dislodge the splinters, and saw Hannah rearing up, her hands clutching at her face. Several nasty-looking jagged spurs of glass were sticking out the left side of her face and her cheek was cut and bleeding and... and... oh God... her eye...

"My eye!" Hannah was screaming. "You dumb bitch, I think you've blinded me!"

It was true; there was blood seeping out from between her fingers of the hand that she held over one side of her face. Blood and a little ooze. Her one visible eye glared at Cassie malevolently. "You know, despite all I said," she growled between gritted teeth, "I was only planning on beating you until you told me what I wanted to hear. Now I'm really going to kill you!"

She lurched forward at Cassie but suddenly stopped short. She didn't expect it, she almost struggled, as if she had suddenly hit a wall of solid molasses and was fighting to get through it. Her hand fell from her eye and Cassie reeled in shock at the bloody mess of the left side of her face. One moment Hannah wasn't understanding why she couldn't move, the next she almost disappeared, hurled bodily into the couch, and that flipped over backwards, sending her sprawling onto the floor.

Danny followed where he had thrown the woman. He was saying something, his face contorted into an angry snarl, but Cassie couldn't make out the words. She was busy gasping for air, clutching at her throat. She was beginning to panic. It was so hard to catch a breath. But she was breathing, wasn't she? Air was coming, she had to be calm and let it come.

She could see Danny pounding on the fallen woman. He may not have had skill at martial arts but with his size, strength and a downed opponent, he didn't need them. Then, just as he had

pulled her off Cassie, he was pulled off Hannah.

It was amazing that Grace could move him. She was at good foot and a half shorter than him, although nearly as muscular, and she had to really strain to try to get him away from the fallen woman. But somehow she did it, and as soon as Danny was heaved back to his feet he was slammed back hard against the wall, so hard Cassie could see the fittings shake.

Grace was the epitome of unruffled professionalism. "Calm down, Danny. Check on Cassie, make sure she's okay."

Cassie could see the rage suddenly flood from him, like someone had unscrewed a tap and it all just drained out. His eyes focused on Grace and he nodded. She let him go and he slumped a little, which was a weird thing to see, considering just how tall he was. He moved past Grace, straightening his rumpled shirt as he did so, and came over to where Cassie was now struggling to sit up.

"You okay, Cassie?"

She nodded. It hurt too much to speak right now. God, her throat ached. She was having trouble swallowing.

"You sure?" He lifted her head with one hand under her chin, looking at the red skin on her neck. "Can you breathe?"

She could only nod again. It wasn't easy but yes, she could breathe. Each and every breath hurt like hell though. She watched Grace step behind the sofa and kneel beside the fallen Hannah. Nothing was said and the room was quiet for a moment. She was conscious only of her own labored breathing, the rustling of fabric as Grace moved, and Danny's hand reaching for hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. God, he looked panicked. She tried to smile to support him in turn but it still hurt so much.

Grace looked over the top of the upturned couch. She looked at both of them but it was easy to tell she was only speaking to Danny. She was slipping into bureau-mode, taking charge, not acknowledging civilians like Cassie.

"Hannah's face is messed up pretty bad. I'm going to get her to the hospital. You should take her too."

"I'll be fine," Cassie croaked.

Grace didn't reply to that, just exchanged a worried glance with Danny, then hauled the beaten and bloody Hannah to her feet. She put one of the woman's arms around her shoulders and held on to the wrist with her left hand, then gripped the thin woman's belt loops with her right. Half-walking, half-carrying, the pair stumbled out of the room.

Danny scrambled over to sit beside Cassie, his back against the wall. He put his arm around her

and she leaned into him, taking comfort from the simple fact that, as always, he'd been there for her when she had needed him. Maybe a little later than usual this time, she thought, but still... She chuckled at that, despite the pain in her neck, then the sudden giggle turned into a sob, then the sob turned into tears.

Danny said nothing, just held her tight. When her shoulders had stopped heaving and she straightened up, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hands, he looked at her.

"Grace was right, you know. We should go to the hospital."

"There's no need."

"Well, at least let Doctor Galen take a look at you." His hand gingerly touched the back of her skull where a tender lump was already swelling. "I think we need to get your head looked at."

"You've been saying that for years." He smiled at that but she knew there was little humor behind the smile. "I'm fine, Danny, honest."

"You want to tell me what that was all about?"

"She's crazy."

"Well, I guessed that much. A few weeks ago she was as stable as me or you though..." She caught his eye. "Okay, as just me. Why the sudden change?"

"I don't know, Danny, honest I don't. Ever since the robbery she's been keeping tabs on me."

"What?" He was astonished.

"She's been standing outside my apartment for hours on end. Every time I looked she was there. And then she's followed me wherever I go. I had enough a few days ago when I saw her following me and Effy in Hugo's. I confronted her but she just stood there and laughed at me." Cassie rubbed her throat. It hurt to talk so much.

Danny frowned. "Effy didn't say anything to me."

"I made her promise not to."

"That doesn't normally stop her."

Cassie began to laugh but had to stop. "Oh Jesus, that hurts."

"You should have told me, Cassie." He sounded angry.

"Would you have believed me?"

He looked aghast at that. "Of course I would. How can you think I wouldn't?"

"I don't know, Danny. I'm not sure of much these days."

She could see her words had upset him but he made an effort to get past that. "It actually makes sense, anyway."

"Yeah? Not to me."

"Well, I didn't tell you this at the time but she kinda freaked out when we visited the morgue the day after the robbery. Started attacking Randall's corpse. That's not exactly the actions of a rational person."

"I think she has anger issues."

He smiled again. "So what now?"

"What do you mean, what now?"

"You still want to go?"

"Hell, yeah. I just want to get on that plane and forget about all of this."

He nodded, then looked around at the chaos that had been wrought in her apartment. "Well, let's just hope we can find your passport."

"Never mind the passport," Cassie said. "The mess this place is in, I'll be lucky to find my luggage."

* * * * *

Grace shifted gears and slammed her foot down on the accelerator. With only a quick glance to her left, she pulled the SUV out and sped past the slow-moving pick-up truck. She hadn't used her directional before changing lanes. That usually prompted a ribald remark from Hannah. Not tonight. The only thing she had said since Grace had bundled her into the passenger seat was the occasional muttered curse at the pain she was in and a few other mumblings that Grace hadn't been able to make out.

Snowflakes were appearing from out of the blackness and smearing the windscreen. The wipers were going full out and the heater was straining to keep out the cold. It was getting hard to see. Luckily the traffic on Interstate 29 seemed light.

She was driving way over the speed limit but she had her blue lightbar on, just in case some over-eager State Trooper tried pulling her over. She wouldn't stop. Screw that. They could chase her all the way to Aurora and she'd do her explaining there, once her partner was being looked at by a doctor.

There were plenty of other medical facilities she could have gone too but none of them would have been able to cope with the injury Hannah had sustained. Aurora Hospital was brand new and had some state of the art facilities; the downside was that it was all the way down in Grand Forks. She would have preferred heading to a larger hospital in Fargo or Bismarck, but that would take far too long. Grace was taking a risk travelling so far as it was. She didn't know the way; she was blindly trusting her GPS. She just hoped there were no roadworks.

Hannah hadn't said a word when Grace had told her of the decision. She held a thick towel to her face, the terrycloth already thickly soaked in blood. Considering the injury, the amount of blood wasn't surprising. Grace considered she'd be lucky to keep the eye. Angrily, she put her foot down again and the SUV responded, its powerful engine growling.

"I'm going to kill that bitch," Grace heard Hannah say quietly.

"Cassie? For God's sake, Hannah, get a grip! What is wrong with you? What are you even doing here? I thought you were back in LA."

"Someone had to keep an eye on her," Hannah said, and then began laughing hysterically at her own words.

"Why? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You still don't get it. She's in this with Mercouri."

Grace sighed. "Not this again. We settled this. Besides, Mercouri's dead, remember?"

"I tell you, Wayward is involved somehow. I don't know how. Maybe she paid Mercouri to rob the bank."

"Even if that was true, you think that's enough of a reason to try to murder her?"

"It is for me."

"That's insane. Do you have any proof? You don't, do you?"

"I know it's the truth."

"You don't know any such thing."

"Why are you protecting her?"

"I'm not protecting anyone. Why would I?"

"Because you're my damn partner. We've worked together for almost a decade. Just whose side are you on, Grace?"

"This isn't a matter of sides..."

"Everything is a matter of sides! You either support me in this or we're done, you hear me?"

Grace said nothing for a second, biting her lip. She concentrated on the road ahead instead. "Hannah," she said finally, "you have to stop this. You'll be lucky if Cassie doesn't press charges."

"Fuck her," said Hannah angrily. "Fuck you too."

* * * * *

Hector International Airport was packed full of people. The snowstorms had meant several flights were either delayed or cancelled and that meant a lot of confused or angry travelers were milling around aimlessly. A few were more serene about everything, sitting and waiting, some even sleeping. The Barnstormer restaurant was packed. A couple of Happy Hooligans must have been shipping out for active duty, as they were bidding tearful goodbyes to loved ones.

Fortunately for Cassie, the departures board had indicated that the flight to O'Hare was still on schedule. The staff at the United Express had politely confirmed that, although it was obvious their patience was being stretched thin. She wondered how often they'd answered that question tonight.

She and Danny had reached the security gate in record time, but she had stopped before going through. Danny couldn't go any further, even with his badge and uniform. She felt a little scared. This would be the first time she'd been out of the country, she supposed that was it. Although it wouldn't be until tomorrow night that she actually flew out of New York. No, that wasn't it. She was scared of leaving Danny, she realized. She was a little scared that she'd never come back.

They didn't have much time but neither of them moved.

"I wish we had taken you to the doctor's," Danny said.

"Stop worrying, Danny." Her voice still sounded a little raspy. She rubbed her neck self-consciously. It hurt like hell but she wasn't going to admit that. It would only make him feel worse. Besides, she really wanted to go. Just to go, get away, run back to... well, she thought, smiling inwardly, to somewhere she'd never even seen outside of a postcard or a television documentary.

"Maybe you could get your throat looked when you're in England. They have free universal health care over there, you know."

"Danny, I'm going on vacation. I'm not going to spend an entire day sitting in an emergency room."

"Okay, okay!" He held up both hands as a sign of surrender. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"Always am, Danny. Maybe that's why I don't have much fun."

She was smiling when she said it but he seemed suddenly crestfallen.

"I meant what I said, you know."

"About being careful?"

"No, when we gave you the tickets. About you not being happy."

She squeezed his arm. "I know, Danny. And I can't thank you enough."

"Well, you seem happier now. And that's all the thanks I need."

Cassie looked at the security gate and noticed the line was thinning. She should really go. Instead she looked up at Danny and frowned. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

"Hannah?" When she nodded, he thought for a moment. "I don't know. You hurt her pretty bad."

"You sound angry." Or disappointed, she thought, and she didn't want that.

"I don't like violence," he said. "But you were just defending yourself."

"And not doing a very good job of it."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. She's a trained FBI agent, don't forget."

"She's a psycho, that's what she is."

"You'll get no argument from me. If you're worried about her pressing charges..."

"Pressing charges?!" Cassie exclaimed incredulously. She had raised her voice but only realized it when a few people around her started staring. "She broke into my apartment and attacked me!"

"I know, I know. But it's never quite that clear-cut, you know that."

"You mean it's my word against hers."

"Pretty much. And, sadly, her word counts for a lot more. But don't worry, I'm sure Grace can talk some sense into her."

"I doubt it," said Cassie sourly. She glanced back at the line. "I suppose I should be going."

"I suppose. So do I get a hug?"

He looked so forlorn that she couldn't possibly refuse. Not that she would have done anyway.

She buried her head against his massive barrel-chest and hugged him tight. It felt good to have his arms around her. Her best friend. She felt like crying all of a sudden.

"I'll miss you most of all, Danny." Her voice was muffled.

He smiled as he held onto her. "Is that a dig?"

"Well, duh."

The separated but he held onto her arms a moment longer.

"Don't look so sad, Danny."

His cellphone began to ring. He sighed.

"It's okay, Danny. Duty calls, right?"

"I guess." He plucked the phone from his belt and looked at the caller ID. "It's Grace."

"Answer it," Cassie said, picking up her carry-on bag. "I have to get going anyway."

Danny flipped the phone open and held it up to his ear. "Grace? Everything okay?"

As he listened to what she was saying, Cassie motioned that she was leaving. He nodded and smiled at her as she stood on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. She headed towards the security gate, not looking back.

"Whoa, slow down," she could hear Danny saying as she got her bag back from the airport staff. She waved at him but he didn't notice. No doubt Grace was filling him in on Hannah's condition. Well, that was no concern of hers anymore. She was on her way to Greece, to warm weather, sunny beaches, beautiful ruins, and a riddle that been waiting two millennia or more for a solution. And there might even be someone waiting for her, if she had guessed right.

She was free.

* * * * *

Grace paced up and down the narrow corridor. She still hated hospitals. Funny how some things stuck with you for so long, she thought. She could remember saying goodbye to her sister as if it were yesterday. She'd been lucky to make it back to Washington in time, not that her sister had even registered her presence.

Spokane or Aurora or anywhere, it made no difference. The stark white walls, the stink of antiseptic, the constant beeping of electronics. Every hospital was generally the same. And they all freaked her out a little.

She held her cellphone to her ear. "Come on, come on, pick up," she urged.

She wished he would. Talking to someone would take her mind off being here. She was worried that she was beginning to hyperventilate. A panic attack was the last thing she needed right now. This was the third time she'd dialed. Every time the connection had broken before the phone had stopped ringing. Reception here was sure damn lousy. And she needed this call to go through.

It got to the third ring and she held her breath, hoping that she wouldn't get cut off this time. Fourth ring. Still good. Come on, Come on...

It was answered on the fifth ring and she was so relieved she couldn't speak for a moment. Not that it mattered as the gruff male voice on the other end of the line barked out a welcome.

"This better be good, Cory. I'm in the middle of eating."

"I'm sorry, sir." Assistant Director Baldwin was Grace and Hannah's immediate supervisor and ran one of the ten regional resident agencies in Los Angeles. He was a mean-spirited dour man, who liked the sound of his own voice and was often more concerned with making his agency look good than actually fighting serious crime. But he was also a good executive who looked out for and cared about his agents, even if he would never admit it, and that's why she was calling. He'd want to know how badly Hannah was hurt.

"Don't be. It's one of my wife's tedious dinner parties."

"Then why..."

"I'm just hoping you'll relieve my boredom. Now was there a point to this call?"

"Yes, sir. Well, it's..."

He interrupted her. "Aren't you supposed to be on vacation?"

"Yes, sir. But..."

"Up in the wild beyond somewhere, isn't that right?"

"North Dakota, sir. If..."

"Well, I can imagine better places to holiday."

"It's a quiet state."

"They don't come much quieter. Now are you going to keep rambling or do I get to go back to my entrée, which is now no doubt as cold as it is tasteless?"

"Sir, it's about Agent Hudson."

There was silence from the phone, which caught Grace off-guard. It went on so long that she began to worry the connection had been lost again. "Sir?"

"What about her?" His tone was guarded.

"She's here in North Dakota with me, Grace began before being interrupted again.

"She's on vacation with you?"

"No, sir. Until today I didn't even know she was using PTO. I thought she was back working in LA."

"We haven't seen her since the Mercuri debacle. So what *is* she doing there?"

"I don't know, sir. But there's bad news. She got involved in a barfight tonight and was injured. I'm at the hospital with her now." The lie had been rehearsed over and over again during the frantic car journey, so it came easily. Like all the best lies, it was simple, fit the facts, and had a kernel of truth at its core.

"How badly is she hurt?"

"Hard to say. She got a beer bottle smashed into her face. She's in a room now but the nurses only gave her a brief exam."

"Sounds like it can't be that serious."

It was more that this place was understaffed and overworked, but she didn't say as much. Better to keep him focused. "It looked bad to me, sir. She might have lost the sight in one eye."

She could hear him tutting to himself as he thought, his tongue clicking against his upper teeth. It was one of his more annoying habits. "A barfight, you say?"

"That's right, sir." She panicked briefly that he had seen through her lie.

"Hmm. Listen to me very carefully, Agent Cory. I want you both back here as soon as possible, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, but..."

"No buts, Cory. Get Hudson treated and then get her back here. I don't care what you tell her, but you don't let her out of your sight until you're both standing in my office first thing tomorrow morning."

"Sir?" Grace was perplexed.

There was a pause and more tutting. "You don't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you, is that

clear, Agent Cory?"

"Absolutely, sir." Grace had gone from being puzzled to being anxious. She had a sickening feeling she knew what was coming.

"The ongoing investigation that I wanted you to be involved in..."

She sighed. Baldwin had called her into his office right before the taskforce had moved to Fargo in pursuit of Mercouri and spoken to her about the upcoming investigation. A team of accountants from Sacramento were coming in to go through the agency's records with a fine-toothed comb, he had told her, and he'd wanted her to be involved, which had struck as odd as she had no background in financial investigations. She'd always been involved in serious crimes, ever since leaving Quantico. It was where her talents lay; Baldwin had even once told her that. Now though, his request was beginning to make perfect sense.

"It's Internal Affairs, isn't it, sir?"

"That's right. We were under strict instructions from on high to make it look like they were studying bookkeeping discrepancies. But that's not what they're really after."

Grace held a hand to her head, gripping a fistful of her hair. "Hannah?"

"Agent Hudson, yes. She's been under suspicion for several years now."

"That's why you wanted me involved. IA think I might be corrupt too, don't they?" Always look at the partner, Grace thought. Just like in homicides, as her cop father had told her, whenever a wife dies the first place to look is at the husband. Nine times out of ten you'll be right.

"Yes. Don't misunderstand me, Cory, I don't believe for an instant that you are mixed up in any of this, but Internal Affairs aren't so trusting. It's in their nature to be suspicious of everyone. And they have serious doubts about your partner."

Grace didn't say anything.

"And I can tell from your silence that you have too."

"Maybe." Grace felt terrible at admitting it. Even saying the words aloud hurt her. "I never really..."

"No, well, they say the closest are often the blindest."

"No chance of finishing my vacation then?" she said bitterly. Her thoughts had briefly turned to Danny. What was he going to say about all this? And thank God Cassie was safe now. What the hell had that all been about tonight?

Baldwin's laughter got her attention. "About the same chance of me finishing my dinner."

"Not a hope then?"

"No." His voice became serious again. "I'll do my best to defend you, Agent Cory. But I want you both back here tomorrow."

"We'll be there, sir."

He hung up abruptly, just as he always did. She pocketed the cellphone and then walked to the nearest restroom. She splashed cold water on her face and then stared at her reflection above the sink. She couldn't believe it. Hannah was corrupt. She felt dirty even thinking it. Was it really possible? She thought back, trying to think of any instances when Hannah might have said something or done something, but nothing came to mind.

Damn it, she thought, banging her fist hard against the porcelain. She was getting angry, thinking about how Hannah's corruption might tarnish her, might drag her down too; then even more so at herself for selfishly thinking of such things.

She had to pull herself together. There was no point acting this way in front of Hannah, it would only alert her. Although Hannah had always been bad at reading people, especially those she knew. She'd already decided not to inform Hannah of the investigation. A partnership only went so far, after all. Just how she was going to get her back to Los Angeles without telling her she didn't know, but she'd think of something.

She made her way back to the room the nurses had placed Hannah in and called out as she pushed open the door. There was no reply. As far as she could tell the doctors still hadn't been in to see Hannah but she supposed Hannah was lucky to get through the crowded emergency room so quickly. Or maybe lucky was the wrong word. Maybe they were rushed through to this room because the injury was so serious. There was a sobering thought.

The room was empty. With a sinking feeling, Grace found the hospital gown discarded by the head of the bed. There was no sign of Hannah. She had to call the Assistant Director again, but first she knew she had to call Danny.

7: Life Sometimes Must Get Lonely

Michi turned over restlessly, dragging the mess of sheets with her. She couldn't get comfortable, no matter how she tried. The bright green digits on the clock beside the bed told her it was three in the morning.

She sighed, perhaps a little more theatrically than she had intended. She might as well face it, she wasn't about to get back to sleep. Still, maybe she should try. Lie back, close her eyes, and drift off to the land of nod. But she knew it wouldn't happen. This was sadly beginning to become a habit.

Lord knows, she needed the sleep. She was bone weary from working so hard on the dig. She'd never known that supervising a site was so much hard work; she had always considered her bosses in the past to be underworked at best and idle at worst. A month they'd been digging at the site and she was worn out. And she hadn't got a good night's sleep in all that time.

She really wished Zoe would help her more but for the last two weeks she'd been working on her own little dig. That was a waste of time. Why bother digging up in the hills? There was nothing there. The boundaries of the village didn't stretch that far. It was possible there might have been one of the more expensive houses there at one time but she'd done a cursory survey of the area, at Zoe's behest, and found nothing. The woman was wasting her time on that hill. No, not just her time. Everyone's time. Well, that would have to stop, Michi decided as she stared at the circling hotel ceiling fan. She'd trek up there and talk to her tomorrow about it.

She sighed again, then sat up.

"I thought you were asleep," Zoe said quietly from the darkness.

There was warm air breezing in through the open balcony doors and Michi could smell the cigarette smoke being carried on it. She rose, pulling on the shirt she wore yesterday. It stank. She'd have to do laundry again soon. No chance anyone else would do it, she supposed.

She walked out on to the balcony. The streets below were relatively quiet. Some of the bars and nightclubs in Nea Potidea were still open, even at this early hour, although even they seemed to be subdued. A few competing dance tunes could be heard if she strained her ears.

Zoe was leaning against the stone balcony, with her back to the town and the sea. She wore only a sleeveless white tee and a pair of shorts. Her upper arms, shoulders, and neck seemed to merge into the night, her tattoos and thick black hair almost swallowed up by the blackness, and it was only when she moved to lift the cigarette to her mouth that Michi could see where the skin ended and the night began.

"It's kind of hard to sleep with you kicking out all night," Michi said. Her voice was husky, her throat sore from sleeping with her mouth open. She hoped she hadn't been snoring. She'd been

told before that she did, although she still had her doubts.

Zoe gave her an apologetic look but said nothing. She inhaled deeply, the tip of her cigarette glowing bright orange in the darkness.

Michi waved a hand through the air in front of her, trying to brush away the smoke as best she could. "I wish you wouldn't smoke."

"Do you want me to give up?" Zoe looked at her, considering the request as if it was the first time Michi had ever made it. "Then maybe I will. Maybe I'll get Sam to quit too."

Michi doubted that. She doubted anyone, even Zoe, could persuade that bastard to do anything he didn't want to do. "He doesn't like me."

Zoe gave her a small shrug. "Well, he has two good reasons. Firstly, you don't make him any money. And secondly, you distract someone who does."

"I'm not sure I like being considered a distraction," Michi said sourly.

"His words, not mine," Zoe said hastily, obviously trying to avoid an argument like the one they had yesterday before bed. She touched the side of her head gingerly, feeling the scalp beneath her black hair with her fingertips.

"Is your head bothering you?"

"A little."

"I'll get you some aspirin," Michi told her. She was a little worried. Zoe had been complaining of headaches more often lately. Maybe it was the heat or the exertion.

She got some pills from the medicine cabinet above the sink in the bathroom and ran a glass under the tap. When she returned, Zoe took them gratefully after flicking her cigarette stub over the balcony. The dull red tip could be seen spiraling uncontrollably down to the pavement below.

"Do you really think you and Sam are so different?"

"Fuck, I hope so!" Zoe said in alarm. "He doesn't trust anyone, even me."

"And you do?"

"Yes!" She looked quite insulted at the suggestion. "I trust you."

"No, you don't," Michi said with a rueful smile, shaking her head. "You think you do but you don't. I think one day you'll find someone you can trust, but it won't be me."

"How can you say that?"

Michi didn't answer. This was leading nowhere good, she had decided, and it was probably best just to leave well enough alone. If they started arguing again now, whatever slim chance of sleep she had would really be shot. "I'm going back to bed," she said, finally. "Try not to stay up too late."

Zoe was fishing a fresh cigarette out of her pack. She placed one between her lips and then her face, tilting downwards, was briefly illuminated by the flame from disposable lighter. "I do trust you, Michi-chan, really I do," she mumbled past the cigarette.

"Your problem, Zoe," Michi told her as she climbed back into the bed, "is that you'd rather believe in magic than in people."

* * * * *

Zoe had only been back in Amfipoli for three days and already she was bored. It was no use denying it anymore.

She sat on an uncomfortable metal chair before a similarly ornate metal table, out on the stonework patio that overlooked the acres of rolling grassland. Here she was, tucked away in the shade provided by one corner of the house, secluded in her own safe little world, and she was bored.

It was a large house, sparsely furnished (although due to lack of opportunity more than by choice), and just as she was hidden within it, so it was secreted amidst the hills that rose up from the river. She liked that. She liked the seclusion, the distance the house put between her and the world, the safety the house provided for her.

When Zoe had bought the house through a third party, the grounds had been really what sold her. She'd always dreamed of having acres and acres of land, although now that she did, she really didn't have a clue what to do with it. There had been an olive grove here once, the realtor had told her, although it had been destroyed in the Bulgarisation efforts many years ago. Nothing but grass and scrubs grew here now. There were lingering rumors that the earth had been salted by the retreating Communist soldiers and nothing decent would ever grow there again. She hoped that wasn't true.

She would have bought the house anyway. It had belonged to her grandparents. It was her family home. And she got it for a song. No one wanted to live here. Not only was it in such bad repair, having been abandoned for nearly half a century, but it was well away from the town. As a result, it would cost such a huge amount of money to renovate, most of the other buyers who had originally expressed an interest backed off after seeing the potential money pit it could become. It was a lonely place. The excavations further up the plateau were nearer than the town itself. And none of the locals liked it up here. The words 'haunted' or 'cursed' had yet to be said within Zoe's earshot but she got the distinct impression it was only a matter of time.

There was a bright blue tarp covering the roof of the garage, which was still undergoing repairs. Not that any work had been done on it recently. She'd enquired about it at the construction

company in town but had been fobbed off with excuses. She'd take care of it later in the month, she promised herself, even if meant throwing more good money after bad.

The rest of the house was complete, or at least as complete as the construction company could make it. Parts of it still needed cleaning and then decorating, but that too would get done in time. There was no hurry. That was the great thing about retirement, Zoe thought. There was no hurry to do anything.

She sighed. It was a pleasant enough night. There was a cool breeze wafting in over the Strymónas and she knew if she got up and walked over to the low wall to her right she'd be able to see the twinkling lights of the town in the distance. But she didn't move.

The housekeeper shuffled past her, collecting the discarded plate and silverware as she moved. She looked at the remaining food and frowned disapprovingly. She muttered something that Zoe didn't catch. She was either swearing at having to wait upon this strange woman from Athens or worrying like a mother that her charge wasn't eating properly.

She belonged here. She knew she did. It was a tie to the past, something she had embraced willingly. So why did she feel so uncomfortable?

Perhaps she was just getting a little stir crazy. Sitting around this huge, empty house with nothing to do and no company. Three days of that would drive most people a little whacko, she thought. But why her? She'd done worse. She'd spent time in an overcrowded prison, locked-up for twenty-three hours of every twenty-four, and she'd never felt this bad. She was supposed to be leaving early tomorrow morning and yet still the feeling wouldn't stop bugging her.

It felt like... like she was missing something.

Well, there was an easy answer to that, wasn't there? She smiled to herself. Then she saw the frowning housekeeper was staring at her and so she turned away. She just had to wait until tomorrow, she told herself.

But even one more night in this empty house was probably enough to send her over the edge. She pushed back her chair, ignoring the disapproving clicks of her housekeeper's tongue as the metal scraped noisily on the stone slabs, and stood up. She had decided, finally, to go out. She wasn't sure where yet but believed heading for the town was a good start. Chances are she wouldn't achieve any peace of mind but doing anything was better than sitting here until she was tired enough for sleep.

She announced her decision to the housekeeper, who waved a hand in dismissal more than acknowledgement and went right back to her knitting. In the spacious kitchen, she passed the old woman's granddaughter, who was busy cleaning the last of the dishes from dinner.

"Going somewhere, Miss Stavros?"

"Somewhere." When the teenager looked up at her with a confused look on her face, Zoe felt the

need to elaborate. "I just need to get out of the house. I think I'm getting cabin fever."

More confusion. "Cabin...?"

"It doesn't matter," Zoe said hastily. Apparently that lost something in the translation.

"Ah. Aren't you leaving tomorrow anyway?"

Zoe nodded. "Just a short trip. Maybe a day, although I hope longer. I just can't keep pacing the floor anymore." She thought about what she was going to do for a second, then said the only thing that came to mind. "I feel like getting drunk."

Young Louiza placed the last plate in the rack on the counter to dry, then turned around, wiping her wet hands on the apron she wore. Tucking a few loose strands of badly dyed blonde hair behind her ear, she gave Zoe a crooked smile.

She was supposed to be in college but had apparently refused to go, wanting to work instead. Save a single aunt, the family had disapproved and her mother had had a meltdown. Zoe had only met her mother once but she wouldn't argue with her, that's for damn sure. Louiza, however, had got her own way somehow. When Zoe had moved in, the grandmother had asked if more help was needed, and Zoe felt she couldn't say no. Especially once she had found out that Louiza was a few months pregnant. Apparently there was another reason the young girl wanted to stay in Amfipoli, although she refused to say who he was.

So now Zoe had a cook as well as the housekeeper the realtor had arranged. It was probably a good idea she was leaving tomorrow; if she stayed a few more days she'd probably have the whole extended clan as employees.

"My aunt owns a bar in town. Good bar but no mischief. She won't stand for it." She wagged a finger at Zoe in a mocking warning gesture.

"That's your aunt who's in the army, right?" Zoe asked.

"She *was* in the army. She runs the bar now."

Well, Zoe thought, a bar was as good a destination as any. She got directions from Louiza. It would take her half-an-hour or more to walk that distance as she didn't have a car, or a moped which seemed to be the vehicle of choice in these parts, but she figured the walk would do her good. Burn off a little energy. Maybe she would even find the walk would do the trick, that by the time she reached the bar she'd be ready to come home again. Either way, it would be fine with her as long as it meant she could think of something other than that damn pebble and that damn woman.

* * * * *

The bar was a typical modern Greek tavern. Parts of it would have not been out of place fifty years ago; the stark white-washed walls, the plants on the outside veranda, or even the cracked

and slightly grubby tiles that made up the floor. And then there were all the modernizations that seemed to find their way into any bar, anywhere in the western world. Hell, for all she knew, anywhere in the entire world. A large plasma television was mounted high up in one corner, tuned to a loud music channel, where nattering VJs talked mostly in Greek, occasionally slipping into English. The bar's interior was a half-and-half mix of blue tiles and white paint, with the walls being covered with posters of celebrities. Some she recognized, some she didn't. A large sign reminded patrons that they offered Wi-Fi internet access, free of charge. Neon signs behind the bar were a mixture of unknown European and recognizable American brands. She hadn't expected anything different, really.

Louiza's aunt, however, was not at all what she was expecting. She had darkly tanned skin, black hair pulled back in a ponytail, a hooked nose, and an eyepatch, no less. When Zoe looked closely, there was some small scarring visible under the low edge of the patch, so it was obvious that the loss hadn't been from natural causes. There was a Greek army tattoo on one shoulder ('freedom comes from valor', it read), which went some way to explaining the eyepatch, and a tattoo of an ouroboros on the other. She wasn't a looker by any means but she seemed as hard as nails. No mischief, Louiza had told her. Zoe doubted this particular bar ever had too much trouble.

Not that that seemed likely tonight, she thought. The place was almost empty. Only one table was occupied, by three women who, judging by the amount of empty glasses on their table, had been here for some time.

She approached the bar. There were jars of home-made honey for sale, arranged in a pyramid with a neat handwritten label on each. That stuck her as a little out of place.

"What can I get you?" the aunt asked without looking up.

She spoke in English, which surprised Zoe for a moment. Did she look like a tourist, she wondered? She didn't think so. Maybe she did. It wasn't the tourist season, after all. And even if it was, Amfipoli could only be described as a minor tourist attraction, and that was being generous. But when she heard the loud voices of the trio of women at the only occupied table, she knew why. They were British, judging by the heavy accents. So, she reasoned, there were some tourists around after all. Maybe they were taking advantage of lower travel rates or something.

"I'll have a Jack Daniels, thanks," she said in Greek.

The aunt reached for a glass and then searched for a bottle behind her. Zoe sighed and looked out of the open doorway at the street bathed in the soft glow of the setting Mediterranean sun. This wasn't helping, she thought. She felt empty inside. That was the only way she could describe it. For the first time in a very, very long time, she was living without a purpose. No goal set, by her or more usually, by Sam. Even the small plans she had made for after the robbery were over, some completed, some never to be completed. She had nothing mapped out. That scared her a little. Actually, that scared her a lot.

Maybe she wasn't cut out for retirement, not quite yet. But what else was there to do? Her thoughts immediately jumped to Cassie, making her feel incredibly sad all of a sudden.

"Cheer up, beautiful!" a loud voice boomed in her ear. She looked up and saw it was one of the tourists. The woman had dark hair, cut a little too short for her rounded face, and soft green eyes. At a guess, Zoe would say she was in her early twenties. A little tubby, perhaps, but she carried the weight well and she certainly didn't lack in confidence. "Dumped you, did he?"

Zoe had trouble trying to place the accent. British, definitely, but not a London accent, that was for sure. "No, I dumped..." She thought twice about saying 'him', just in case, and then decided not to be so cautious. "...her."

The girl blinked twice, slowly, as if she had been slapped in the face. "Oh," she said slowly. Maybe all the drinking she'd done had fogged her thinking processes a little because she let the word hang in the air for a moment. Then she grinned again and wrapped a friendly arm around Zoe's shoulders. "Oh, well, never mind, luv. Why not come and drown your sorrows with us?"

In truth, Zoe wasn't sure whether she shouldn't mind being alone or being gay, but she let that one pass. She looked over to where the remaining two tourists were drinking and laughing. "I shouldn't. You look like you're having too much fun and I'm not in the best of moods. I'd only spoil things."

The VJs had grinned their way into a song by REM, which made quite a contrast. Michael Stipe started warbling a string of nonsense, about Lenny Bruce or something.⁵⁰ At least the lower volume of the song made it easier for Zoe to hear what was said.

"Don't be stupid. Plenty of fun to go around." She leant forward to whisper conspiratorially and Zoe could smell the alcohol on her breath. "Mind you, be careful. We're all on the pull tonight and there aren't many fit blokes round here it seems. A few more of these and you might have to beat us off with a stick." She laughed boisterously.

Zoe studied her for a moment. Should she? She'd have to stay relatively sober, which she wasn't planning on doing before now, but that was what came of drinking in company. And it would be a distraction, if nothing else. Ah, what the hell. Her thoughts were broken up by the bartender placing her drink in front of her.

"Are you sure?"

"Shit, yeah. There's no excitement around here at all and something tells me you're exciting enough to keep us entertained." She winked unsubtly. "For a while, at least."

Zoe smiled.

"Only rule is," she said as she led Zoe back to the table by the arm, "you have to buy your own."

Her two friends looked up as she approached, and they both stopped talking immediately,

although they still had smiles on their faces. The one nearest Zoe was a blonde girl with freckles and a gap-toothed smile. The other was a striking Indian or Pakistani girl. She was definitely the best-looking of the trio, Zoe thought, although it was easy to see she had an aggressive, feisty attitude about her.

Her companion sat down and offered Zoe the chair next to her. "This is... sorry, luv, didn't catch the name."

"Helene."

"This is Helene. She's depressed because she just had to dump her girlfriend."

A chorus of ahs and sympathetic clucks ran around the table.

"I'm sure she deserved it," the blonde said.

"No, not really. I'm just a jackass."

Her companion laughed. "Oh, don't you just love the American accent? Jackass." She pronounced the word very slowly. "So much better than arse."

"Depends whose arse it is," the blonde said, eliciting laughter. Zoe smiled politely.

"Helene, this is Sharon and Meena. I'm Kelly, by the way."

"You're on vacation?" Zoe asked, sipping her whiskey. She grimaced. Whatever it might have said on the bottle's label, there was no way this was Jack Daniels.

"That's right."

"Odd time of year."

"Cheaper. Still, joke's on us. There's nothing to do here."

Sharon grinned lustily. "She means no one to do."

More laughter. Zoe tried to keep the conversation going. "So where are you girls from?"

"Bradford, innit?" Sharon spoke first.

"Bradford, that's what, the north of England?"

"Midlands," Meena said, "but close enough. What about you? You are American, right?"

Zoe thought about lying but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She wouldn't have had to consider it if she hadn't been sloppy with her choice of words. Speaking Greek made everything easier,

especially in the natural accent she had acquired from her parents, which was a mixture of the Athenian, Thessalonikian, and Greco-American dialects. The locals knew she wasn't from here but assumed her story that she came from Athens to be true. But reverting to English for the first time in three days had made her careless.

"Originally," she finally said. "I live in Greece now."

"That's so cool."

"It's not so bad," Zoe admitted.

"What do you do for a living?" Kelly asked.

She hesitated again. "I'm a thief."

They all exchanged glances. "Yeah?" Kelly asked cautiously. "Should we all be watching our handbags?"

"No, nothing like that. I rob places not people. Museums, galleries, auction houses, the occasional bank."

"Come on, stop messing around." Sharon had started laughing and soon Meena joined her.

"She's not," Kelly said. She alone seemed unfazed by the honest response. She studied Zoe seriously. "Are you?"

"No."

Meena frowned. "So, what, are you like Ronnie Biggs or something?"

"Who's that?" Zoe asked, confused.

"Never mind her. She's just asking if you're in hiding."

"No, not exactly."

"Alright," Kelly said, "then what do you do when you're not robbing banks?"

"I'm retired, actually, although that hasn't been going to well."

"Why not?"

Zoe shrugged. "I'm bored. And it's only been a few days, can you believe that? And I can't stop thinking..."

"About your girlfriend?" Meena asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Hell yeah!" They all laughed again and even Zoe had to join in this time. She felt foolish but knew they weren't laughing at her, just with her.

Kelly motioned with one hand for attention. "Alright, full throttle to an empty bottle, girls!" All three immediately attempted to drain their bottles as quickly as possible. Meena finished first, slamming her bottle back down on the table with a sudden jolt that made Zoe jump a little.

Kelly laughed when she finished her beer, and pointed at the blonde sitting opposite her, who was still chugging at her bottle. "Okay, Shaz, your round."

"No fair!" Sharon protested. "What about her?"

"She wasn't playing."

A little reluctantly, Sharon got up and walked over to the bar to get another round of drinks. Louiza's aunt didn't exactly seem happy at having the boisterous tourists occupying a corner of her tavern, and she made such displeasure clear, although it went completely above Sharon's head. But she still served them. Their money was as good as anyone else's, after all, especially seeing as how there wasn't anyone else.

"So," Meena asked Zoe, "much money in robbing, is there?"

"Let's just say I'm independently wealthy," Zoe said as Sharon returned with a tray full of drinks. There was a glass of whiskey for her too, which was kind of them. It seemed like she was falling behind; her first glass was still half-full. She made sure to say thank you, although no one seemed to notice.

"Oh, well the next round's on you then, eh, Kell?" said Meena, grabbing one of the fresh bottles.

Sharon took a new seat, one nearer Zoe, and she scooted up even closer. "So, rich, fit, and dangerous. Wish I was gay."

"You are shameless, Shazza!" Meena said with a grin.

"What? I'm just saying what you're all thinking."

"I wasn't thinking that! Dirty slut."

Zoe interrupted the joking. "Well, thanks for the offer, Sharon, but you're not my type."

"No chance of a rebound fuck, then?"

Zoe had forgotten how crude some English women could be. They always seemed so blunt, to

the point, and were never afraid of saying what they thought or asking for what they wanted, although a few drinks usually made absolutely sure of that. It took her a moment to recover and she saw that made Sharon even happier than her own jokes.

She chuckled along with them to show she was a good sport.

Kelly wasn't smiling. "Leave her alone, Shaz."

"What? I was only having a bit of fun."

"Too much fun, girl."

Sharon considered this for a moment. She seemed about to argue but then caught Kelly's stern eye and backed down. "Okay, okay. You're going to owe me a drink for that though."

"I have to keep these two in line," Kelly stage-whispered to Zoe. "Or else we'd all be in a Greek police cell before the night's out."

"You wish," Meena said. "A big copper taking down your particulars..."

"With nice eyes..." said Sharon, dreamily.

As the two other girls continued running down the list of what their ideal holiday romance partner would include, be he an officer of the law or not, Kelly touched Zoe's knee gently to get her attention.

"So this girl..." she began.

"Cassandra."

"Cassandra, right. So this Cassandra, were you two together long?"

Zoe shook her head. "Less than a day, really."

Kelly looked a little startled by that. "You're not kidding, are you?" When Zoe shook her head and looked somewhat awkward by the admission, she laughed. "Well, that means you're either crazy or..."

"Or what?"

The Englishwoman left the question unanswered. It didn't matter; Zoe knew what she implied. She found herself smiling at the thought and tried to be serious.

"So why did you break up with her?"

"I had too."

"Yeah? How come?"

"It's a long story."

"Well, give me the short version."

Zoe pursed her lips, thinking about how much she should tell. Or if she should tell at all. This new found confidant was already quite drunk; would she remember a word of this come the morning? And it might do her some good to unburden herself.

"I left her a cryptic invitation," she eventually said, having decided to keep things simple but not to stray too far from the truth, "to meet me somewhere." She noticed Sharon and Meena had stopped arguing about which Hollywood actor had the best butt and had started listening to her.

"I see," Kelly said thoughtfully. She swigged her beer and glanced to her right. She too had obviously noticed the other two women listening. Looking up, she raised an eyebrow questioningly, as if to ask Zoe if she wanted to continue. When Zoe smiled and inclined her head in the smallest of nods, she went on. "And you're hoping she's smart enough to figure it out. You only like smart women, is that it?"

"Damn," Sharon said, "looks like I'm shit out of luck after all."

Zoe laughed loudly at that, which made Sharon smile, but shook her head. "No, that's not it. But she's smart, alright." Zoe believed Cassandra probably had the rest of the map figured out already. In that regard, she was several steps ahead of Zoe, who had only memorized the first part and that had taken her more than a week to decipher.

"Oh, I get it," Kelly exclaimed. "You're testing her, aren't you?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it exactly like that," Zoe said hesitantly.

"I'm right, though, aren't I? You want to be absolutely sure she's in love with you, so you set this up."

"Sounds a little mean," Sharon said.

"I don't know," Meena said with a sweet faraway look in her eyes. "I think it's romantic, asking someone to travel halfway around the world to prove their love."

"No one said anything about love," Zoe protested hastily.

"Actually, I did," Kelly reminded her. She gave Zoe a concerned look. "You know, I'm beginning to think someone must have hurt you real bad."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Well, screw them, whoever they were."

"I'll drink to that," Sharon said.

"You'll drink to anything," said Meena acidly.

"True that."

Meena held up her bottle. "If you want an excuse to drink, here's to true love."

Shaking her head, Sharon clinked her bottle against her friends. "Nah, here's to good sex."

Kelly smiled. "Here's to happy endings."

They all looked towards Zoe expectantly. "To endings," she said, raising her own glass. "Just endings."

* * * * *

They drank for most of the night. Zoe had always considered herself something of a hard drinker but these girls made her look like a lightweight. She kept nursing each drink, making it last, wanting to remain at least semi-sober. The trio of holidayers however just kept knocking them back.

Towards midnight, Zoe excused herself and made a few calls on her cellphone. By the time she got back to the table, Shazza had passed out and Meena was throwing up in the restroom. They weren't exactly classy but they were decent girls, she thought. They deserved better than to be stuck here off-season. She told Kelly as much, hoping she was sober enough to understand. She also told her how she had paid for a taxi to take them to Athens whenever they were ready to go. And then she told them there were three luxury suites at four-star hotel waiting for them, for as long as the rest of their stay. Her gift for them being so kind to her, she had explained when Kelly had tried to refuse the offer.

It wasn't much, but it made her feel a little better. A small act of kindness that reassured her, made her feel sure that because she had been so unselfish, the universe would reward her by ensuring Cassandra would be waiting for her on Crete tomorrow.

8: The Undertaker Will Be Sorry

Zoe leant against an ornately painted column, her chest heaving, as she tried to get her breath back. The climb hadn't been easy, although she was faring better than most of the others in the tour group. The elderly Italian couple looked like they were both about to keel over, although as far as Zoe was concerned that was only a good thing. It was the first time they had stopped talking since the tour had begun. And the British widower with the wandering eyes (and who had already once showed Zoe how his hands could also wander, but she'd made sure it had been *only* once) was either about to pass out or throw up. She felt a little guilty wishing for the former. Or if it was the latter, maybe he'd ruin the camera slung round his neck.

She looked past the others, back down the trail. The parking lot far below looked incredibly small. Wow, was it really that steep? And they'd made it up here in less than twenty minutes. No wonder she felt worn out. Considering the sheer climb, she really didn't feel so bad now.

She straightened, putting her hands on her hips and tried to stretch out. The energetic tour guide was bouncing around from one of his charges to another, checking on them all. He hardly seemed fazed by the climb and was encouraging them to carry on as soon as possible. Quite why he'd seen the need to rush them all up the trail, she didn't know. Did the palace close at odd hours or something? She supposed he was probably angling for tips. She couldn't blame him; Cretan Adventures was probably considering itself very lucky to have this many people on the tour. It was the off-season and probably too chilly for even the few tourists there were on the island to trek this high up. Half-a-dozen people were a positive bonanza for this time of year.

The tour guide had now launched into his spiel, explaining the history of the palace in the very briefest of terms. He took great delight in telling the lewd tale of how the Minotaur was created, how Queen Pasiphaë had lusted after a white bull and got a little too carried away, and was pleased with the laughter his telling received.

Zoe had to give him his due. He may have done this a million times before but he was so enthusiastic and energetic that it seemed like it was all brand new. He had the other tourists spellbound as he explained the path they'd take through the palace, going through the Corridor of Procession, to the South Propylaeum, into the Central Court, and then culminating in the Throne Room. The husband of the Italian duo asked, in impressively bad Greek, about the allegedly impressive wall friezes. The tour guide kept smiling but was apologetic. Most of the friezes had been removed, he explained, taken to the museum in Iraklion for restoration. But there were still plenty of beautiful sights to see, he assured them all.

Zoe had been trying to keep her distance from the others, tagging along at the back, although that hadn't been easy, given the small size of the tour group. And the tour guide had kept falling back to harry her, urging her to keep up with the others. Now though, he was paying more attention to the others, and so she used the opportunity to slip away.

She picked her way through the low hanging trees that surrounded the western entrance to the palace, walking at a brisk pace, keeping within the roped-off paths, not wanting to draw any more attention than a lost tourist normally would should she be caught. She kept climbing upwards, trying to remember her route so she wouldn't really get lost. That was easier said than done. Even in ruins, this place was confusing. No wonder the myth of the maze had endured for so long.

After a few minutes, she was on the 'floor of the noble', one of the highest points of the palace, where she could see for miles around. This was the best vantage point by far. Parts of the stonework had been covered or replaced with sturdy wooden planking; it hardly bowed as she walked across it and dropped down to sit on the edge, her legs dangling.

There was no one else around. She couldn't help feeling a little disappointed.

She still had a little bit of a hangover. She'd drunk way too much last night, got very little sleep, and then had to catch an early flight to Iraklion. All that had taken its toll. The sunlight seemed just a little too bright, every tiny noise just a little too loud.

She had left her luggage in a locker at the small airport. There was no way of knowing for sure where Cassie would be, or if she would be here at all, but Zoe had a good idea. It was a gamble, that was all. Everything recently had been a gamble. The toss of a coin, nothing more. Her hand went to a pocket in her shorts and she touched the coin there, hoping for good luck. A silly superstition, really.

It was chilly, especially this high up in the hills. She was glad she had worn a thick long-sleeved shirt, although her legs were feeling the cold now the exertion of the climb was over. She shrugged off her backpack and fished inside for a bottle of water, which she cracked open and took a long drink. She could have just gone on the tour, and then waited in more comfort on the benches at the museum-run café, even if it was closed at this time of the year. But where was the fun in that?

She screwed the cap back on the bottle and sat it down beside her. She felt a little sad. She reminded herself that it was still early. She'd only been here for a short while, after all. There was no need to give up hope just yet. She shouldn't be so...

"Don't look so disappointed," a soft voice said as a shadow fell over her, interrupting her thoughts. "I'm told there are many more beautiful things to see in Crete."

Zoe looked up, squinting into the bright midday sunlight. Cassandra stood on the nearby wall, a few feet higher than the wooden platform. She was wearing thick hiking boots, tan shorts and a light tee, and if she was feeling the cold she wasn't showing it. She jumped down, sending reverberations through the wooden slats as she landed with a thump, and half-lifted a hand as if she was about to wave a greeting. As she was only a bare yard away it was rather a foolish gesture, and she must have known it, as she dropped her hand quickly and her broad grin softened into a self-conscious look.

"I had hoped there would be," Zoe said. She could feel herself smiling too, and something was telling her that she couldn't have stopped smiling even if she had wanted to.

Cassandra dropped down beside her, sitting so close Zoe could feel the warmth of her skin.

"How long have you been there?"

"Long enough. I saw you join the tour group."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I wasn't sure it was you at first." Her eyes flicked up to Zoe's hair. "That's a pretty drastic change."

Zoe pushed her sunglasses upon top of her head, pushing back loose strands of her hair that was caught by the gentle breeze. "You don't like it?"

"It's going to take some getting used to," Cassandra said, "that's all."

Zoe smiled at the idea of the permanence this suggested.

"Besides, I wanted to be sure."

"That it was me?" Zoe said, confused.

Cassandra shook her head. "What you were looking for."

"Ah," said Zoe understanding suddenly.

"You didn't seem all that interested in the palace."

"No. You know, maybe I should call you Penny." When she got a puzzled look from Cassandra looked at her, puzzled, she explained. "Because you keep turning up, even when I'm not expecting you to."

"But I'm not bad."

"No?"

"Don't worry, I'm not that good either." Cassandra gave her a soft nudge and another cheeky grin. "So what now?"

"Well, that depends."

"On what?"

"On what you want to do."

Cassandra frowned a little. She deliberated about her answer for a second, her eyes growing distant. Damn, Zoe thought, she looked adorable when she was distracted. She had small ears, each pierced three times, and an absolutely gorgeous neck... were those bruises? Where the hell had they come from? Zoe had to restrain herself from reaching out and just running her fingers tenderly over those bruises, to show Cassandra how she would never hurt her.

Seeing Zoe staring at her neck, Cassandra tilted her head away, obviously embarrassed.

"I thought I'd made that obvious just by being here," Cassandra said. When no reply came, she prompted one. "Well, we could sit here and enjoy the scenery for a while."

"We could." Zoe took another long drink of water, draining the bottle.

"But I guess we need to talk about..."

Zoe interrupted her, not ready to talk about the pebble just yet. "Where are you staying?"

"The Kastro." The younger woman threw her a sideways glance. "Are you going to ask me what room?"

"Would you tell me?"

"Room 412," she said flatly. "So where do we go from here?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"What?"

Zoe sighed. "Never mind. We can talk about it later. Maybe over dinner."

"Why, Miss Mercouri," Cassandra said, holding one hand to her chest in a mock-shocked expression, "are you asking me out on a date?"

"Uh..." Zoe was caught wrongfooted and didn't know what to say. Her thoughts had been erratic, jumping from one thing to another, but a date was the last thing on her mind. Well, maybe not the last thing, maybe not even close, but she supposed that depended on your definition of a 'date'.

She had been thinking about calling the Kastro and getting a room, then about where exactly the centre of the labyrinth was supposed to be, if a labyrinth had ever really existed here, how Cassandra tasted, where the Minotaur was supposed to be buried, if the Minotaur had ever been real, wondering if Cassandra would know, and finally about eating something as she felt a little hungry. That had prompted the dinner suggestion. After all, they both had to eat, right?

"Uh..." Zoe repeated weakly, knowing she sounded really eloquent, "...something like that."

Cassandra seemed to be enjoying seeing Zoe squirm on the spot. The smile on her face was wicked. "Uh-uh," she said, wagging her finger playfully. "You don't get away with that. Not any more. Are you asking me on a date or not?"

Zoe smiled uncertainly. "I guess I am."

"You guess?"

"Okay, okay!" Zoe shook her head wearily, although she couldn't help smiling. She held up both hands in a gesture of surrender, and then, after earning a laugh from Cassandra, she took a deep breath and said what had to be said. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight, Cassandra?"

It surprised Zoe how tough it was for her to say that. She was so used to the more blunt approach, to have women approach her or for her to take what she wanted, to not have to ask. It was a little scary having to wait for an answer too.

The younger woman shrugged with an assumed air of nonchalance. "I guess."

That made Zoe chuckle. "I know a place near the Kastro," she said. "Well, kinda near. But it's a nice restaurant."

"Sounds good," Cassandra said, grabbing hold of the guide-rope to pull herself up. She frowned again. "Have you been here before?"

"No."

"Ah," she said, understanding. "But you always do your research."

"That's right. And there's no hurry, is there?"

Cassandra looked surprised. "You really do want to enjoy the view?"

"Some views," Zoe said, looking slowly up the length of Cassandra's body, "are worth enjoying."

* * * * *

Cassie still wasn't completely dressed when she heard the knock on her hotel door. She hurriedly grabbed a white shirt off the back of a chair and called out that she'd be just a minute. As she buttoned up the shirt, she cursed that she hadn't had time to iron it. Hopefully it didn't look too creased, she worried as she tucked it in her tan-colored slacks. She stood in front of the mirror and checked herself over. She didn't look too bad, all things considered, she thought, not for a first date. She grinned at the thought. If this *was* a date. Her clothes were casual but smart, her make-up light and natural-looking. She ran her hands through her blonde hair a couple of times, trying to get it to behave. It resisted and she eventually gave up. It would just about pass muster.

Another knock. Well, she was impatient, wasn't she? That was a good sign, Cassie thought, giving herself a slight smile in the mirror. Her eyes fell to her neck and she instinctively touched the shirt collar self-consciously. Her smile faded a little.

Sighing, she shook herself, and crossed to open the door. Zoe stood a little to one side with her arms folded. She may have been mad at the wait but the smile on her face seemed to imply otherwise. She was wearing the classic little black dress and while simple and plain it looked *phenomenally* good on her. It seemed tight enough to cling in all the right places and short enough to show a good amount of those beautifully long legs that tapered down to a spotless pair of black heels. A tiny long-strapped purse hung from one bare shoulder. Her hair was perfect, of course. It would be, Cassie thought, with a tinge of envy.

Suddenly Cassie felt short of breath.

"Something wrong?" Zoe said, giving her a concerned look.

Oh yeah, Cassie thought, something was definitely wrong. Let's start with the fact that she could feel her mouth moving, her lips forming words, but no sound was coming out. How about that? Or what about the fact that her heart was packing its bags and leaving, fed up with conditions it was being forced to work under? And how about the laws of physics being broken all of sudden? No one had legs that long. It was impossible.

"Cassandra?"

"What?" Cassie said, unable to tear herself away from those smoothly tanned legs. She realized she was staring suddenly and looked up, well aware her cheeks had colored a little. Zoe was smiling at her.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing's wrong. Wow, you look..." Well, that was a sentence she started without knowing how she was going to finish it.

"Different?"

"Yeah, different. If I was wearing socks..."

Zoe glanced down at the flats Cassie had on. "Aren't you?"

"Yes. That's not what I meant. Never mind." Wow, this was going well. Could she be any more stupid?

"You ready to go?"

"I think so." Cassie instinctively checked her pockets for the room key, her wallet, and the other

few items she had wanted to bring. Everything was there so she stepped forward, pulling the door shut behind her.

The two women walked down the hotel corridor in what to Cassie seemed like an uncomfortable silence. Cassie wanted to say something but didn't dare. She was only willing to make a fool of herself so much, after all. Why did she suddenly feel so nervous? She'd been perfectly calm up until she had opened that damn door. And of course the elevator seemed to take forever to arrive. When it did finally reach their floor, the two women entered and stood side by side, both staring straight ahead. When she pressed the ground floor button, Cassie noticed her hands were shaking, so she stuck them in her pockets. Hopefully Zoe hadn't noticed. She opened her mouth once to say something, anything, then shut it quickly before she could embarrass herself further.

As the elevator started moving, Zoe broke the silence. "Those bruises look fresh."

Cassie reached up and tugged at her collar. "Long story."

"Aren't they all?"

Cassie tried to smile but she could see from her fuzzy reflection in the elevator's metal walls that it came out more as a nervous grimace. She let her hand drop to her side. This was going to be a disaster, she knew it. What was she thinking? She should have expected this to all go wrong.

What she wasn't expecting was for Zoe to reach out and take hold of her hand, gently squeezing her fingers just once, but then not letting go.

It wasn't so bad, Cassie thought. Things might work out. You never know.

* * * * *

They took a taxi to the restaurant, which was just as well. This early in the year the night air was decidedly cool and the soft breeze had made Cassie shiver as they had waited outside the hotel foyer. If she was chilly, Zoe must have been freezing, but she gave no sign of discomfort.

"I feel kinda underdressed," Cassie whispered. They looked to be the only guests but then it was still early. She knew from the few days she'd spent on the island that Cretans liked to eat late at night.

The restaurant was called Loukoulos and it was exquisitely decorated, with beautiful paintings hung around the beige and burgundy walls, surrounded by ornate golden masks and lovely flowers. Zoe had suggested they would eat outside. Cassie had been reluctant to argue, despite the cold, and when the waiter showed them to a table she was glad she hadn't.

If anything, the courtyard was even more stunning than the interior of the restaurant. There was a trellis to their right, which was covered in beautiful green foliage, and a high wall to their left, which protected any diners from the chill night air. Zoe's heels clicked on the red and white tiles as they walked across to a circular wooden table. There were a few beautiful yellow verbascums in a square glass vase serving as the centerpiece amidst the perfect white table settings. The

waiter kindly pulled a black leather chair out for each of them, so they could sit opposite each other, and then made sure they were fully settled with menus in their hands before scuttling off to give them time.

Cassie imagined that even if all the seven tables had been full, the place would have been cozy and intimate. It had that kind of feel about it. Right now, however, the place was deserted and Cassie was amused briefly by the thought Zoe might have called ahead and reserved the entire restaurant for just the two of them. She supposed it was possible, although she doubted Zoe had that much pull or money... right?

Now that there were some actual paying customers, the staff switched on the dim overhead lamps. There were strands of tiny, beautiful lights wrapped around the overhead beams, running down each support, and they sparkled incandescently against the twilight sky. Despite this, when Cassie looked straight up she could still see the stars in the unclouded darkening sky.

"Don't worry, you look great," Zoe told her, getting her attention. "Besides, it's the off-season."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They're glad of the custom."

Cassie frowned playfully. "You were doing okay until then."

"What?" Zoe said, looking confused for a second. "Oh. Well, I meant it, you look great."

"Yeah, well you look unbelievable." Wow, Cassie thought. She'd managed to say that without stuttering, stammering, or putting both feet in her mouth. Things were looking up. She caught Zoe looking at her and tried to change the subject, even if it was with an obvious understatement. "Nice place."

"Isn't it?" Zoe smiled, evidently pleased that Cassie liked her choice. "The food is supposed to be really good too."

Cassie took that as a hint she should be looking at the menu, so she opened up hers and looked over the entrees. She was surprised at how expensive everything was. She had a brief flash of panic wondering whether she had enough cash to pay, then another when she thought that Zoe might expect her to pay for her dinner too, then a third when she realized she might not need cash as Zoe might be paying for everything. Crap, she thought, wiping the sweat from her forehead with her napkin, it really had been a long time since she'd been on a date. When she realized what she was doing, she stuffed the napkin onto her lap, embarrassed.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just a little warm."

"Well, we could walk back to the hotel after dinner if you like. It's a lovely cool night."

"Maybe. Won't you have to get a taxi anyway?"

"Why?"

Cassie was confused. "To get to your hotel...?"

"Ah." Zoe looked a little sheepish. "Didn't I mention that? I'm staying at the Kastro too."

"Really?" Cassie said with a hint of sarcasm, although she couldn't help smiling. "That's convenient."

"Very. I'm in Room 413."

Cassie laughed out loud at that. She was going to say something but right then the waiter returned to take their orders. As Cassie wasn't really ready, Zoe went first. Cassie was hesitant in using her clumsy Greek in front of the perfectly fluent Zoe, but she stumbled through the conversation as best she could and the waiter seemed to beam in joy at the rare occurrence of two tourists who had taken the time to learn his language. In the end, they both ordered the same thing, a pork dish served with celery. The waiter poured Cassie some white wine and refilled Zoe's water glass before taking their menus and disappearing.

Cassie sipped her wine. She knew what she wanted to say but she was afraid to say it, afraid to endanger something new and young and fragile. After all, asking the question she had on her mind would probably put spoil the evening. But on the other hand, if she didn't ask she'd never know. And like every other day in her life, she found herself wanting answers. Ah, to hell with it, she thought.

"Why did you leave me?" She blurted it out, almost stumbling over the words.

Zoe didn't answer immediately. She had a golden coin in her hand, Cassie noticed, and was running it up and down between her fingers. "Why did you come here?"

"That's a question, not an answer."

"Actually, it's both."

Cassie thought about what to say for a while, eventually deciding just to be honest. "I was angry at first. At you leaving, I mean. I thought you had just used me to get what you wanted."

"And then?"

"Well, even when I'm angry I'm not dumb. I knew that wasn't right. I felt it here." Cassie tapped her chest, just a little above where her heart was, and gave a half-smile, almost as if she knew how foolish that sounded. But it was the truth. What else could she say? "And then I found that you'd left the pebble."

"It is yours."

"We'll see what the lawyers say about that. Cathy Hamilton certainly doesn't think so. I suppose you could even argue it belongs the Greek government." Cassie made an effort to get back to the subject at hand. "But anyway, it was then I figured out you were testing me. You told me I'd see you again if I knew where to look. That was obvious. And then you said we'd be unlucky to meet again. That was a neat clue. I was so angry I almost missed it."

"Glad you approve."

"You were born on the 13th of March. And today is Friday the 13th. Your birthday, as it happens."

"Now who's done their research?" Zoe said with a grin.

"Yes, well I haven't been idle since you left. You wanted to see if I'd follow you, didn't you? That's why you weren't really that interested in the palace this afternoon."

Zoe nodded but said nothing.

"I'm guessing you're still uncertain though."

"It wasn't a perfect plan," Zoe admitted, "but I was making it up on the fly, which I'm not used to doing. There was one flaw in particular..."

Cassie held up the pebble, which she had been sure to bring with her. "This?" Zoe nodded again. "You're not sure if I followed you or it, are you?"

A shake of the head this time but still the older woman said nothing.

Cassie sighed. "You don't give much up, do you?"

"I don't want you to look at me any differently."

"You really think I could?"

"You have an annoying habit of asking questions."

"That's probably because you don't answer enough. Why did you leave me?"

Zoe seemed surprised that Cassie wasn't letting this drop. She stared open-mouthed at Cassie for a second, then looked away, reaching for her glass. After gulping some water, she wiped at her mouth with her napkin. When the white cloth was returned to her lap, Cassie was surprised to see it had revealed a sad smile.

"I didn't want to hurt you," she finally said.

"You think I'd let you?" That wasn't the first thing Cassie thought to say, but she couldn't quite bring herself to admit she'd been hurt anyway, by the other woman leaving so abruptly. Chances were, Zoe already knew that. Truth be told, Cassie was kind of regretting asking but she stuck with it.

"I think I would hurt you, sooner or later. I still might."

"Maybe you will. Some pain is worth it though."

"Maybe," Zoe said sadly. She looked so miserable all of a sudden.

"Well," Cassie said, trying to keep her voice upbeat and cheerful, "luckily for you, you don't get to make that decision."

Looking up, Zoe caught her eye and smiled faintly. She seemed about to say something but Cassie spoke first.

"Why would I look at you differently?"

"I think I get a short reprieve from this interrogation," Zoe said, looking over Cassie's shoulder.

"You do?"

The waiter approached with two large plates, which he placed down in front of them. Zoe finally stopped playing with her coin and placed it by her glass. The food was so hot it was steaming. It looked so good. Cassie could feel her stomach demanding attention right now. It tasted good too. She hardly had to chew; the pork was so tender it almost dissolved in her mouth.

Somewhere between her third and eighth bite, she decided to put Zoe back on the hook. "Well?"

Zoe looked up at her from her food, a fork paused midway between the plate and her mouth. She glanced down at the morsel of pork, then shrugged and popped it into her mouth. She chewed for a brief moment, then swallowed, and laid her knife and fork down flat on the table. She didn't say anything for a minute or two, her eyes losing focus as she obviously thought about how to respond.

"I didn't sleep that night. Made up for it later though. I crashed in a hotel room in Chicago and slept for eighteen hours straight." She paused, appearing uncertain if she should continue. "Sorry."

"Tell it in your own way," Cassie said with a shrug. "We have time."

"I couldn't sleep because I felt empty." Zoe paused, frowning. "Look, I'm not a good person, okay? Can we just leave it at that?"

Her heart breaking at putting Zoe so on the spot, Cassie almost said yes but pushed a little more. She had to. "That's not answering my question."

"Fuck," Zoe said. Her burst of anger didn't last very long. "I'm not good for other people, okay? Is that what you want to hear? Everyone I get involved with usually ends up being hurt. Or worse. Look at Michi. Or Sam, for that matter. There are others."

"I don't believe that. Did you ever think that other people might be affecting you?"

"No, not really." She grinned, looking up at her. "That sounds egotistical, doesn't it?"

"A little," Cassie said, returning the smile, "but think about it. Your good childhood was taken away from you by someone else. No one would blame you for that."

"Not quite no one," Zoe said, her face darkening. Cassie reached out across the table and touched her hand.

"Then you're corrupted by Sam. And you try to do your best for people, even when getting what you want. Look what you did for Harry and the others. You didn't have to do that."

"I have to take responsibility for my own actions."

"I'm not saying you don't."

Silence fell for a moment.

"You remember what Sam said?" Cassie finally said.

"Sam said a lot of things."

"I meant about redemption. You mentioned that too. It's what you want really, isn't it?" She knew it was right as soon as she said it. The look on Zoe's face said as much. "That's what you're really searching for. You think you're going to find it by following an ancient riddle?"

"Maybe. And what about you. Cassandra?"

"Me?" Cassie was startled.

"Yes, what are you searching for?"

Cassie didn't honestly know how to answer that. It didn't seem to matter, for Zoe relented suddenly.

"Stupid question," she said quickly, "forget I asked. Besides, I think you might be right." When she saw Cassie was pleased at being proved right, she went on. "In a way. Maybe people do

affect me, at least as much as I affect them. More maybe. Less. I don't know. But you certainly do. You make me feel so... safe."

Zoe laughed suddenly. "Hell, that's a moodkiller, isn't it?"

"Well, that depends on the mood you were after."

"Seriously, I didn't mean..."

"I know," Cassie said, nodding.

"There's just something about you. I don't know what it is but... look, you know how I said I felt empty?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's true. And it was good emptiness, because it made me realize what I needed to be full again." Zoe chuckled again. "I'm not sure any of this is making sense."

"I'm making some sense of it. Go on."

"That's it really."

"Oh. That kinda brings us back to square one, doesn't it?"

Zoe looked baffled. "It does?"

"If I'm so good for you... and those are your words, not mine, only one of us at this table is egotistical," Cassie said and she was pleased to see Zoe laugh at that, "...then why did you leave?"

"You know the answer already."

"I know part of it. You were testing me, I get that. I get that you have trust issues, and believe me, I can understand why. I know you've been hurt and I know you're wary of it happening again. Just don't go too far with it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm here, now, and I'm not planning on going anywhere anytime soon. Not if you don't want me too. You don't have to keep testing me, okay?"

Zoe looked a little uncomfortable but she nodded, smiling. "Okay."

"You know, it's not nice to know I'm not the only one who's in the habit of making two mistakes." When Zoe looked at her questioningly, Cassie added, "You left me twice, remember?"

"Oh."

She seemed about to apologize and Cassie didn't want that, so she took on a mock stern expression. "Just don't let it happen again."

"I can't make any promises."

"You will, before long."

"You're awfully sure of yourself."

"No, I'm awfully sure of you. Big difference."

Zoe didn't reply to that. The silence continued, drawn out until they both finished their meals.

"It's still early," Zoe said as the waiter cleared the table. "Do you want dessert?"

"I might as well. I am on vacation, after all."

"Mind if I order for you?"

"Go ahead."

In perfect Greek, Zoe began talking to the waiter, who just kept beaming at her. She had that affect on people, Cassie thought. She could talk a nun into a brothel if she gave it a try. Whatever she ordered it took a long time, a lot of words and some expressive hand gestures to ask for. Cassie had a hard time keeping up with the rapid exchange. She caught some of it but a good part slipped past her. She did notice that Zoe was flirting a little with the waiter, Cassie noticed, and then realized that made her jealous. Hmm, she thought, that was unexpected.

As the waiter left, Zoe seemed to reconsider. She looked worriedly at Cassie. "You like almonds?"

When Cassie said she didn't mind them, Zoe sighed in relief. She reached for her coin again and began twisting it between her fingers again.

Cassie couldn't restrain her curiosity any longer. "What is that?"

"What, this? Just an old coin. Kind of a good luck charm, I suppose. I keep it with me when..."

"You didn't have it on you in the bank."

"No, well, I..." Zoe appeared to be a little flustered. "It's a particular type of good luck, I guess."

Cassie looked at her blankly.

"I only ever carry it with me on first dates. Stupid, I know."

"Well, it could be worse. Does it work?"

"You tell me."

Cassie grinned at that but said nothing, sipping her wine. Zoe held the coin up between two fingers for Cassie to see. On one side was a bust of what looked like a Roman emperor, laurel wreath and all. Caesar? Caligula? Claudius? Who knows? It could have been anyone, Cassie didn't know. There was lettering around the edges but she couldn't make it out in the restaurant's dim light. When Zoe flipped the coin around, Cassie saw the more easily-identifiable image of the naked Hercules, complete with huge club, a tree behind him, and a pile of apples held in his open palm.

Zoe flicked her fingers suddenly and the coin disappeared. Cassie blinked, looked down at the bare tablecloth in case she had dropped it, then back at Zoe's empty hand. Zoe was smirking. She wiggled her fingers just once, to show the coin was completely missing, then held up her other hand, the coin resting between finger and thumb.

"How did you do that?"

"Nothing to it," Zoe said, twisting the coin around in her fingers again. "Something I learned from my father."

"Well, it's impressive."

"I used to believe in magic when I was a kid," Zoe said sadly. "But it's all just a trick and usually a pretty simple one. Misdirection, that's all. The trick is the easy part. Making the audience look in a different place, that's the hard part."

"If you say so. I still enjoyed it." Cassie said. She played with the stem of her near-empty wine glass for a second, wondering if she dared to ask something. The magic trick had reminded her of the pebble. "How much of the riddle did you figure out?"

Zoe looked bothered by the question and Cassie couldn't figure out why. Then she remembered what Zoe had said earlier. She was uncertain whether Cassie had followed the pebble or her. "I mean, it's just..."

"It's okay," Zoe said, waving a hand dismissively. It didn't look okay though. She looked a little wounded. "Not much. Actually, only the first line."

"Really?" Cassie was surprised. She had expected the other woman to be two or three steps ahead of her. She always seemed to be.

"Yeah, well, it's all I could remember."

"Oh. Well, truth be told that's all I got too. I was kind of hoping that there would be something here, maybe at the palace, that would give me a hint at the rest of it. I guess you thought the same."

Zoe nodded. "I haven't had as much time as you, I suppose. And like I said, I'll need to be reminded." Immediately, Cassie held out the pebble but Zoe didn't take it. "You trust me with it?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

"I've stolen it once already."

"If you wanted it you would have taken it when I gave it to you."

"I suppose I would have," Zoe admitted. She took the pebble and peered at the faint scratches, obviously struggling to read in the dim light of the restaurant courtyard. She read the glyphs aloud. "*Where the star lies, shows the poet and the gods cannot die, sleeping Cybele will send, her wooden ships to hang horses at the world's end.*" That's the best I can do while still retaining it's original meaning. Or what I think is the original meaning. And whatever any of it means is beyond me.

"It's better than what I had," Cassie said honestly. "Damn it, I need to write that down. I had 'diseased' instead of 'sleeping'. You sure that's right?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. I'm not sure I like this gloomy tone."

Cassie looked up at her in surprise. "What?"

"Well, the end of the world is pretty ominous, don't you think? And hanging horses?"

"That could mean anything," Cassie protested.

"I suppose," Zoe said uncertainly.

"Seriously, it could," Cassie said. "I mean, look at the first line. You must have figured that out, right? Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

The waiter came back with their desserts. If the meal had been worth dying for, the desserts were worth living for. Zoe had known what she was doing when she ordered, but Cassie guessed that was the influence of her Greek heritage. They each had a square almond torte, covered liberally in a lemon-flavored syrup with whipped cream to one side. Cassie even caught herself moaning in joy as the first bite just melted perfectly on her tongue. It was embarrassing but it made Zoe laugh and that made it alright.

"You like it?" Zoe asked her, still chuckling.

"I've never tasted anything like it. It is *so* good."

"Glad you like it. And yes, I managed to piece the first part together. The 'star' refers to the Minotaur, named after his grandfather, the king of Crete." Cassie nodded. She couldn't say anything as her mouth was full. But Zoe was right. The Greek word for star, 'asterion', was the Cretan name for the Minotaur, the stepson of King Minos, who in turn was the stepson of King Asterion. "The reference to where he lies must mean his resting place, or the labyrinth at the palace at Knossos. Although where that could be is anyone's guess."

"I'm sure you figured it out quicker than I did," Zoe said modestly. "It took me a few days of nothing but thinking. You know, at first, I took it literally and tried to figure out if there had been a falling star somewhere in the Greek myths."

Cassie dropped her spoon. It hit the tablecloth with a soft thump then bounced off to clatter noisily across the floor. "Sorry," she said hastily, as the attentive waiter hurried over.

"What?" Zoe said, alarmed.

Cassie grabbed the waiter's arm and asked him for a guidebook. He frowned, bewildered by the urgent request, but when Zoe smiled charmingly at him he hastened away to get one. After a while, he reappeared with a Fodor's guide to Crete back from the kitchen, which Cassie snatched from his hands and started thumbing through.

"I am so stupid!" She felt it too. It was so obvious and she had missed it.

"Hardly. What are you getting at?"

Cassie talked in a constant stream as she flipped through the book, more to herself than to Zoe. "I was so sure... It had to be the minotaur's resting place. Oh yeah, I thought I was so damn clever. Couldn't see the forest for the trees. Here!" She slapped the guidebook down on the table, turning it around so Zoe could see, her finger jabbing at a piece of text.

Zoe glanced at it. "The astronomical chamber?"

"Yes! It really is about stars!"

"But the minotaur..." Zoe began, obviously confused.

"It's a double-meaning, don't you see? Asterion means both and here it's used in both. I know it!

Cassie jumped to her feet, almost knocking over her chair. They had to go, right now, she thought. The waiter, keeping a discreet distance until now, stepped forward, obviously concerned that something was wrong. She began to turn away but Zoe leaned over the table and grabbed onto of her wrist, holding her, keeping her from leaving.

"What are you doing?" Cassie said, looking down at the hand that held her.

"Slow down," Zoe said calmly. "Finish your torte."

"But..."

"There's no hurry."

"No hurry?" Cassie could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Aren't you curious?"

Zoe laughed. "Hell, yes. Like you wouldn't believe. But whatever we're looking for is either long-gone, in which case it won't matter, or has been there for thousands of years, so an hour or two won't make much of a difference. So relax, sit down, and finish eating." She gestured at the chair, then at the half-eaten dessert on Cassie's plate.

"But..."

"And try chewing, don't eat so fast."

"But..." Cassie said once more, than she gave up arguing. Zoe had obviously seen the fight go out of her and so let go of her wrist. Cassie reluctantly sat down again. Zoe was right, she supposed, they could always go back to Knossos tomorrow. There really was no hurry. It was a beautiful night, she tried to convince herself, and that dessert was enough of a reason to stay. Hell, that dessert was enough of a reason to do practically anything. As she picked up the new spoon the waiter had left for her, she saw Zoe was watching her with a large smile on her face. "What's so funny?"

"Just admiring your reckless enthusiasm. Besides, there's no point traipsing up the mountain again to see the palace."

"Why on earth not?"

Zoe leant forward, spinning the guidebook back around. She now pointed to another paragraph. Cassie read it. *The frieze, depicting an astronomical scene of stars, was moved in the spring of last year to the Archaeological Museum of Iraklion to undergo restoration work. After completion, it was deemed that the wall the frieze was originally mounted on was unstable. Therefore the frieze was put on display inside the museum. It is one of the few friezes still on display in the temporary exhibition during the museum's current renovation.*

"Where's the museum?" Cassie asked eagerly."

"Not far," Zoe said patiently. "A few streets away. Although they won't be open until tomorrow morning. Just in case you were thinking of charging off there this very instant."

Cassie returned her smile. "I can wait, I suppose." Cassie returned her smile before scooping up the last of the sickly-sweet syrup with her spoon. She was intent on leaving a clean plate and not

wasting a delicious drop. "Awfully lucky that the frieze wasn't in storage."

"Isn't it? But like I told you, it's a very lucky coin."

* * * * *

They left the restaurant a little later. The night was getting colder but when Zoe asked if Cassandra wanted a taxi, she shook her head, saying she'd rather walk off the indulgent dinner. It wasn't too far back to the hotel, so Zoe had agreed. Besides the traffic was pretty light, so the roads seemed safe enough to walk down. When they first left the restaurant there was only one car in sight - a dark blue rental parked across the road.

They passed through the Liondaria, listening to the soft gurgling of the water, walking in silence, both enjoying the chilly air and the darkness. It was remarkable, Zoe thought, how she could see all the stars in the sky, despite all the ambient light pollution. It made her wonder what they would find at the museum tomorrow and how stars tied into all this. Cassandra probably knew already, she thought, or at least had a very good idea. Damn she was smart. No, not just smart, she was quick too.

She frowned. It was strange, really, how annoyed she felt that Cassandra seemed to be more interested in the ancient riddle than in her. She couldn't really blame her for that, she supposed. She was more disappointed in herself, for letting this infuriating woman get under skin. And she was firmly wedged there now, buried deep under the skin, wrapped around her heart and squeezing.

The thought of going back to the same hotel with this woman, being in the very next room, and having a wall between them, was driving her crazy. She didn't want a wall there. She wanted to hold her in her arms, to kiss her, to lead her to bed and slowly peel off her clothes, to feel her, to taste her, to be truly with her.

Instead here they were, walking underneath the overhanging branches of the trees from El Greco Park, with a good foot of distance between them. Walking back to separate hotel rooms where she would spend another restless night alone.

She was acting like a fool, she realized. She tried instead to focus on the constellations, picking out the individual stars in Cassiopeia, Hercules, Andromeda, whichever ones came to mind, but she couldn't really remember how they were made up. And when she stumbled off the edge of the sidewalk because she wasn't looking where she was going, she realized it probably wasn't a very good idea. She'd have to cool her jets some other way, she supposed.

She saw Cassandra was smiling at her almost trip. "You okay?"

Zoe nodded and smiled sheepishly at the shorter woman. "It's a beautiful night."

"Isn't it?"

In an effort to keep the conversation going, Zoe said the first thing that came to mind. "You

know, I was talking about you yesterday."

"Who to?"

"It doesn't matter. But I said you were smart."

"Smart enough not to let a good thing go."

Zoe frowned. "We'll see."

"Something bothering you?"

"What brought you here? Was it the pebble or me?"

"Why are you so worried about this?"

"Who says I'm worried?"

Cassandra gave her a disbelieving look. "You really don't believe you're all that hard to read, do you?"

"Well, I used to be," Zoe said tiredly. "Maybe I'm getting old."

"Not that old," Cassandra said with a cheeky grin.

"It's just that you seemed more interested in the pebble..."

"Than in you?" When Zoe gave the briefest of nods, she saw Cassandra smiled again. She seemed to find the idea funny. "Are you kidding?"

"No." And she was sorry to say that she wasn't.

Cassandra laughed now. "You must be. You must have realized you're much more of an intriguing puzzle."

Zoe brightened a little at that. "Good answer."

"It was, wasn't it?" Cassandra was beaming.

"So what's keeping you going?"

"What?"

Zoe saw that Cassandra looked genuinely confused at the sudden change in tack. "You've told me what brought you here. Tell me why you want to keep chasing this."

"Don't you? I mean, isn't that why you went to so much trouble in Wilusa and... well, everywhere? It would be kind of crazy to quit right now, don't you think?"

"Crazy for me, maybe. Not for you."

"You don't want me involved?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Listen, I'm not asking you whether or not you want to pursue this. It's easy to see that you do."

"So..." Cassandra dragged the word out.

"I'm asking you if you want to pursue it *with me*."

"It's your plan."

"It's your pebble. So what do you say?"

Cassandra smiled and slipped her arm through Zoe's, leaning her head on her shoulder. That tiny gesture felt so right to Zoe. She tried not to move, just so Cassandra wouldn't take the arm away. "You and me against the world," Cassandra said, "that's what I say."

"Those are good odds."

"For who?"

Zoe smiled. "You could take on the world on your own."

"Yeah, but would I win?"

"Let's just say you'd put up a good fight. Maybe go the distance."

"Thanks, Adrian. "

"Are you sure about this?"

"Of course I'm sure. You know, your trouble is you can't take yes for an answer."

Yeah, *that* was her trouble, Zoe thought.

* * * * *

"Well, this is me," Cassandra said, stating the obvious as they reached the door of her hotel room.

"Yeah, I guess. So did you have a nice evening?" When the young woman chuckled at that, Zoe felt a little self-conscious. "It's a date, isn't it? Shouldn't I ask that?"

She kept laughing until she saw Zoe's expression. "I'm sorry. When was the last time you were on a date?"

"It's been a while," Zoe admitted reluctantly.

"Well, I really enjoyed myself. It was fun."

"Good."

"Oh," Cassandra said suddenly, "that reminds me. Wait here."

"What?"

Cassandra slid her keycard into her door lock and slipped inside her room. The door shut behind her. A minute or two later, just when the impatient Zoe was about to knock, she reappeared, clutching an oblong package wrapped in a rather garish gold and blue paper, with a gold bow. She thrust it towards Zoe, beaming widely. "Happy birthday."

Somewhat bewildered, Zoe took the parcel. She stared at it for a second.

"Sorry about the paper. I got it in London and there were no better colors."

"No, it's not that," Zoe said. "It's been a long time since someone gave me a gift. Usually I have to take what I want."

"Hmm," Cassandra said cheekily, "that might explain why you haven't dated in a while too."

"Very funny."

"Well? Are you going to open it?"

"You want me to?"

"You wait much longer and it won't be your birthday. Then no present. I'll have to take it back."

Zoe smiled and tore open the wrapping. She knew it was a book, she could feel the paperback bend and the pages shift as she pulled the paper off. It was a translation of *The Odyssey*. Not just any translation though, this was one of the classic translations of the work, by T.E. Lawrence. She knew if there was anyone who understood Homer, Lawrence was the one.

She was taken aback for a moment. She hadn't lied to Cassandra. The last time someone had given her a present was when she was thirteen, at a birthday party that had turned sour after her mother had taken another drunken binge. She couldn't even remember what the present had been. No, she thought, she could remember. It was a set of artist supplies. Ever since her parents' deaths she had either earned, bought or stole what she wanted. Since then no one, not even Michi

or Sam, had ever given her anything.

"I..." she began. The words she wanted to say caught in her throat.

"Do you like it?" Cassandra asked eagerly. "And yes, that is what you say when you give someone a present, if you wanted to know."

"Smart ass," Zoe said with a weak smile. "Yes, I like it. Thank you, Cassandra. It's very sweet of you."

The shorter woman stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on Zoe's cheek.

"Enjoy it. Goodnight, Zoe."

And with that she was gone, her hotel door shutting firmly behind her.

* * * * *

Zoe leant back against her closed hotel door, tilted her head back, closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. She swore under her breath a few times, banging the back of head against the wood in time with each curse word. Then she seemed to deflate, her shoulders sagging.

What the hell had all that been about? A kiss goodnight? That was it? Really? And it wasn't even a passionate kiss, just a peck on the cheek? She hadn't really been sure what she had been expecting but that wasn't it, that's for damn sure.

Did she misread the night so badly? Or Cassandra, come to that?

No, no, that wasn't it. Zoe knew the younger woman was interested in her. She *knew* it.

She kicked off her shoes and padded in her bare feet over to the French windows. The thick carpet felt so good between her toes and she flexed them as she looked out over the harbor of Iraklion. A semi-circular string of fishing boats swayed gently on the water. She almost imagined she could hear the white surf softly rolling against the rocks that lined the seawall. Sparkling lights dotted the quayside, running all the way down to the Venetian Fortress, where sunken spotlights illuminated the tanned stone walls against the midnight blue sky.

A few stories below she could see a few other hotel residents drinking and laughing as they sat on the edge of the brightly lit swimming pool. They must have been cold. But they were young, barely into their twenties at a guess, and would ignore such discomforts when it came to fun. They *could* ignore them.

She turned away and walked back to her bed. Fuck, she felt old. That was happening more and more lately. She caught sight of herself in the mirror above the bureau and stopped to look. She smoothed out a few wrinkles near the hem of her dress and slowly turned, watching the way her reflection followed her movements. There was nothing wrong with the way she looked. Damn it, she looked *good*. Yeah, sure, that was conceited, but it wasn't dishonest.

What the hell was wrong with her lately? Used to be that she saw what she wanted and she took it, no questions, no fuss, and no problem. And most of the time she got what she wanted too. Now she knew exactly what she wanted but hadn't that faintest idea of how to get it. It was like she had awoken from a coma and while time had stood still for her the world had moved on without her. She no longer knew what to do. Why the hell was that? Had something fundamental changed in the world and nobody bothered to tell her?

It wasn't as if she could just knock on Cassandra door and say: "So, you want to fuck or what?" was it? She grinned at herself. Well, she could but she'd have to phrase it differently.

She was still holding the book, she suddenly realized. She looked down at the cover and smiled. *The Odyssey*. A good choice. After all, everyone could relate to the idea of a journey to get home. Trouble was, you have to know where that home was.

Scrunching up the wrapping paper, Zoe dropped it into the nearby trashcan, and dropped backwards onto the bed. She stared at the blank white ceiling for a few minutes. Inevitably her thoughts drifted. One second she was thinking of Cassandra, then of her smile, then of her worried look when cuffed to the bank counter. The fleeting pain of a bullet. Sam. The first clutching breath that hurt her ribs so bad. Black ink staining dirty white floor tiles. Clean white bathroom floor tiles. That stolen kiss. Cassandra's perfect smile. Joy at solving something. The pebble. The museum's opening hours. Cassandra's hand in hers. Ugly bruises on a beautiful neck. That damn kiss goodnight.

She sighed and brought the book up over her head, flipping it open to a page at random. "There is a time for many words and there is also a time for sleep."

Yeah, she thought, thanks, Homer, thanks for nothing.

* * * * *

Wait until the third date until you give it all away, her mother had told Cassie once, in one of those awkward conversations no teenager really ever wanted to have. Well, she certainly didn't, considering her mother was talking about what guys expected and the conversation took place right before she went out on a date with a girl.

Naomi. She shuddered at the memory. A college freshman whom had slipped her phone number in with the tip back when Cassie had worked one summer at the Daily Grind back in Wilusa. She remembered being so nervous when she had dialed the number, terrified at the idea of an older woman being interested in her. She had been late for the date, if she recalled correctly, thanks to the lecture from her mother. That had been the first bad thing on a whole night of bad things. Yeah, that had been one hell of a bad date. She couldn't think of a worse one, that's for sure.

Her car breaking down, the cheap restaurant, the crappy and near-empty nightclub, the surprising immaturity of Naomi, and then finally her date getting so wasted that she ended up vomiting all down the front of Cassie's dress. Yep, just one of those would have been enough to make Cassie celibate for a while. All of them together meant she hadn't dared go on another date for more

than three months.

Tonight had been good though, Cassie thought, as she unbuttoned her shirt. Hadn't it? She'd had fun, that was for sure. Soft lights, gentle music, lovely surroundings, sumptuous food, some of the best she had ever tasted, and really beautiful company. You couldn't do better.

Yeah, sure, she'd screwed up in a few places. Nothing new there. The odd stupid remark, a silly question or two, and a few clumsy moves. If that was the worst that happened, it wasn't so bad.

She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid to miss the double-meaning in the pebble's first line though. Crap, she thought, it was so obvious. Still, thanks to Zoe, she'd figured it out and Zoe had dealt with the more practical matters. They made a good team.

If she was honest with herself though, she wasn't sure how Zoe had felt about everything. But at least she'd opened up a little. That had been unexpected. Pleasant but very unexpected. It was nice to know that she was just as insecure as Cassie felt. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less, but it was a beautiful flaw. Zoe seemed so confident about everything, no matter where she was - in the middle of a bank robbery, a stranger's apartment, a foreign country, it didn't matter. The realization that she wasn't always so at ease made Cassie feel a little better, even if the thought itself also made her feel guilty.

For some reason she suddenly thought of the Taj Mahal. Hadn't that been built with some deliberate errors? So as not to offend God with its perfection? She'd read that somewhere, she was sure of it. Well, the same principle applied here, at least she thought so. That's what that little worry was: an imperfection that only made the whole more stunning.

She thought about Zoe's reaction when she had handed her the present. The bewildered look and then the fumbling hands as she took it. The tiny smile that appeared oh-so-slowly as the wrapping paper was tore open. She had seemed honestly touched by the gift. Cassie smiled.

As she pulled off her shirt, she thought about how hot Zoe had looked tonight. That black dress had looked unbelievable on her. If Cassie had thought Zoe looked good in just jeans, then she had been totally unprepared for the sight of her dressed for a classy night on the town. Cassie was pretty sure she had stood in her doorway with her mouth agape for ages. And if she hadn't been caught staring at Zoe's legs at least once during the night, then she would be surprised. God, she couldn't believe those legs. She closed her eyes and imagined Zoe lying on her back on her bed, and Cassie sitting beside, lifting one leg by the ankle, running her hand slowly up the soft skin, feeling the muscle of the calf, gently caressing the supple flesh of the thigh, moving slowly higher, and higher, until she reached...

Cassie bit her lip without thinking, hoping the pain would shift her thoughts away from that woman's perfect body. She needed to calm down. Either that or an icy cold shower.

Third date, that's all she had to wait for. After all, her mother had been proven right often enough. When exactly would that be? Tomorrow? Yeah, only if you counted extremely loosely. After all, she thought with a chuckle, not many people would count ten hours as a robbery

hostage as a first date.

But she should play hard to get. Another piece of advice from her mother, even if Cassie had never thought so at the time. And strangely, despite all of the lies of her youth, all of her indiscretions that her mother pretended not to know about, all of the mistakes she had made, Cassie still trusted that advice. That didn't mean she had to like it though.

Maybe she should take a leaf from Zoe's book. She knew what she wanted, after all, so maybe she should just go and get it. Screw playing hard to get. There was only a few feet separating her from she wanted.

She got all the way to the door before she stopped, her hand reaching for the handle.

There was always tomorrow.

9: Against the Stream

Zoe's parents were fighting again. She didn't really understand why they were fighting any more than she understood why she was picked on every day at school or why she dreamt every night of axes.

Except what she saw weren't axes, not really. She didn't know what they were. She had tried asking her history teacher about them but he had just sighed, pointed her in the direction of a book on medieval polearms (which had been no help whatsoever) and told her if she paid more attention in class she'd most likely know all this already (and probably get a better than D average grade too but that went unsaid). She hadn't dared talk to anyone else after that.

She stood in the doorway leading off the lounge and watched her parents go at it. How many times had she watched this same scene play out from the shadows? She worried often that it was because of her, although her friends told her it wasn't.

Friends. That was a joke, she thought. She was lucky enough to hang around a few other students

in school who were as much outcasts as she was, and probably only then because she or they didn't know any better. A few of them had hinted at divorce, having seen their own parents separated, trying to prepare Zoe for the worst.

She didn't know what she would do if her parents did divorce. Her father would stay here, of course, he'd never leave Vegas, but her mother might drag her back to California to leave with Nanna. She wouldn't go. She *wouldn't*.

The old TV set was flickering badly in a corner. On the screen, a sepia Judy Garland was telling everyone around her how happy she was to be home again. Zoe hated that movie, always had. She didn't quite get why Dorothy would be so happy. Life in the colorful, bright, cheery land of Oz, with respect, fame and fortune, and the prospect of adventure and danger around every corner, or the dull monochrome existence on a dusty farm in Depression-era Kansas, miles from anywhere, facing the prospect of doing the same dreary, back-breaking work everyday for the rest of your life. Yeah, that was a fun movie with a really positive message. She'd never understood why everyone else seemed to like it.

If she ever got the chance to run from home to the bright lights of Oz, she'd jump at it. Just try and stop her.

"That's where the damn money comes from!" her father was shouting. "My stupid act as you call it puts food on the damn table!"

"Don't make me laugh. We'd have a lot more food if you didn't waste all our money at that casino."

"I've had some bad luck, that's all. I've made sure all the bills get paid, haven't I?"

"Yeah, and don't think I know how. You're not the one who has to sit at home waiting for the loan sharks to come calling. And I do that while dealing with a snot-nosed brat who..."

He sighed. "Not this again. We agreed you'd stay at home to raise..."

He stopped mid-sentence when he saw Zoe watching them both from the doorway. Her mother saw his distraction, turned to see Zoe herself, then swore loudly, reaching for her tumbler of vodka. Zoe wondered how many glasses she'd drunk so far. It was nearly eleven, so if she was on her usual schedule, she'd be approaching double-digits.

Her father tried to do his best to smile. "You're supposed to be in bed, Zoe."

"I couldn't sleep," she told him.

"Nightmares?"

She shook her head. She doubted she could ever dream of anything worse than lying in bed at night listening to her parents arguing at full volume.

Her mother scowled and drained the last of her drink. "Then get back to bed or so help me..."

"Leave her alone," her father said quietly, crouching down in front of Zoe. "You want a story?"

Zoe rolled her eyes in an over-exaggerated way. "I'm a bit old for stories, Dad."

"Ah, you're never too old for a good story." He reached out, plucked three green apples from the fruit bowl on the table, and started juggling with them. "Tell you what, tomorrow night I'll tell you a story from *One Thousand and One Nights*, all about a vizier trying to solve the murder of a woman who was stuffed into a chest. Would you like that?"

She didn't really care but tried to keep him happy. "Sure, Dad." She giggled at his juggling antics, then laughed out loud as he pretended to lose control, the speed of each piece of fruit getting faster, the paths his hands took getting wilder, almost dropping an apple here or there. It never failed. It was an old schtick, as he said, but the clumsy-juggler routine always made her laugh. It was the panic-stricken look on her father's face that did it.

He dropped the apples back into the bowl, then took a pack of cards from his jacket pocket. He drew a single card out from the back of the pack, the Queen of Spades, and handed it to her. "Have you been practicing?"

"Yes, Dad," she said in an exasperated tone.

"Show me."

Zoe could hear her mother muttering something about this being a waste of time, about how her daughter would be better off learning the stuff they taught in school. She poured herself another drink and then sank into the La-Z-Boy.

Zoe held the card between her fingers, her hand flat and outstretched, the palm towards her father. She flicked her hand once and the card was gone. Just as he had taught her. She flicked again and the card reappeared but backwards, with the blue pattern visible. She waved her other hand swiftly over the card, flicked again and the card disappeared once again. This time she opened her hand, wiggling her fingers, showing both sides, proving her hand was now completely empty.

"Good. You were born to tread the boards, Zoe." He smiled, took the card from her other hand where she had palmed it, and then glanced down at his watch. "Shit, I'm late. I have to get going. You be good now, you hear me?"

She nodded and he ruffled her hair, which she jerked away from. "Dad!" she protested.

"Too old?" he asked with a smile.

"Yeah."

"I'll be back by six," he told Zoe's mother, as he stood and headed for the door.

"So early?" she said with venom. "Won't your glamorous assistant be disappointed?"

He gave her a filthy look and left without another word.

Zoe tried creeping backwards towards the door that led to her bedroom but her mother saw her.

"Come here."

Zoe took another step backwards.

"Come here!"

This time, Zoe dared to shake her head.

"It will be much the worse for you if I have to get up."

Reluctantly, dragging her feet, Zoe stepped over to where her mother sat. She saw the blow coming but it was so fast she couldn't duck in time. The back of her mother's hand struck her across the cheek, the rough skin on the knuckles drawing blood. Zoe was knocked to the floor and banged her knees painfully as she fell. Her hand rose to her face. It hurt. It really, really hurt.

"Oh, stop sniffing, for Christ's sake!" her mother said. "Damn spoilt brat. Get up and get to bed. And I don't want to hear a peep out of you, you understand?"

Her mother was holding her stomach with one hand. Zoe knew what that meant. She was thinking of the child she'd lost last year. It would have been a girl, they had told her.

Sometimes, when she was alone in her room, Zoe would pretend that she had a younger sister. Someone she could talk too and share all the thoughts that pestered her day after day. And the pain. She felt selfish and guilty for wishing such a thing, which was silly really as the sister was only imaginary, but she knew she could bear the pain more if someone else bore the brunt of her mother's affection sometimes. Just sometimes.

* * * * *

Beams of harsh morning sunlight, dust mites dancing in their path, awoke Zoe. She hadn't set the alarm or asked for a call from the front desk; there had been no point. She knew she would be up and moving in plenty of time.

She groaned and tentatively touched the left side of her head, her fingers gingerly brushing past her hair, almost as if she expected the contact to bring pain. It didn't, of course. And she couldn't feel the line that should have run from just behind her ear up to her scalp, a tiny little ridge that had never healed properly, until one cold winter's morning it had disappeared entirely, along with her tattoos and all her other physical scars. She looked down at her fingers instinctively,

checking for blood. That was odd, she thought, shaking her hand and letting it drop back to the bed with a soft thump. She hadn't done that in a long while.

Yawning, she swung her legs out of the bedclothes and sat up. Strange how some habits remained and some were gone, she thought. This time two months ago she would have been in the midst of a coughing fit, a consequence of twenty or more years of smoking. Now her lungs were clean and healthy, and she breathed deep and easily.

Just like every other day, she cast a quick glance back at the bed and thought about crawling back between the sheets to try to get a few extra hours sleep. No point in that, she thought, getting to her feet. She pulled on the bathrobe the hotel had provided. Crossing the room, she threw open the curtains, letting the room be flooded with the intense Mediterranean daylight, and tugged open the sliding glass door. The morning was decidedly chilly and she pulled the thick cloth of the robe tighter around her as she stepped out onto the balcony.

Zoe leant against the railing and looked out over the harbor. Things always looked so different in the daylight. What had appeared pretty and enchanting the night before was now dull and ordinary. Her thoughts turned to Cassandra and immediately she worried that the young woman might feel the same way. Maybe Zoe had made too much of an effort the night before, dressing too well, showing off a little at the restaurant, flirting a little too much. Like Iraklion itself, she had let the night make herself look more attractive; now in the stark light of day, her true self might not prove appealing. Reality would sink in and Cassandra might not like what she saw.

She watched a horde of seagulls take flight from their nesting place on the quayside. No doubt they were about to assault the passenger ferry that was just nudging into the bay. Even from here Zoe could smell the sea, the air having that familiar tang of salt that was always present in coastal towns. It smelt good. She smiled suddenly. She was worrying over nothing. After all, Cassandra had seen her look much worse, and she was still here, wasn't she?

Looking down Zoe saw there was someone in the pool again. The few guests the hotel had were certainly making the most of the luxury, she thought. She watched the woman swim laps for a little while, smoothly cleaving her way through the water, alternating backstroke and crawl on each lap.

It wasn't until the woman pulled herself effortlessly out of the side of the pool that Zoe realized it was Cassandra. Her mouth dropped open in shock and she was unable to look away, even though she felt she should. She felt kind of like a grubby peeping tom.

Cassandra padded over to a nearby deckchair, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind her on the stone slabs, and picked up a white towel. Tilting her head to one side, she twisted the towel around her head and began vigorously rubbing her short hair dry.

She wore a pea-green two-piece bathing suit that showed off a healthy amount of barely-tanned flesh. She may have been short, Zoe thought, but she had a good body. No, she corrected herself, a fucking fantastic body. Nice legs, flawlessly flat abs, small, perfectly rounded breasts. If she didn't work out she must have done a good deal with God. Maybe an early-morning swim was

part of her everyday routine, Zoe thought, but as she lived among all that snow and ice of Wilusa it was doubtful. Maybe she went running instead. But she must work out. No one looked that good without some effort.

A soft chill breeze caused Zoe to shiver and broke the spell. She blinked, then turned away, but only a little, only enough to keep Cassandra in her peripheral vision. Couldn't it be like this forever, she wondered? The sunshine, the cool sea air, the relaxation. Everything was perfect. Well, she thought with a frown, almost perfect. Damn it, she should have made a move last night. What was wrong with her?

She glanced back down and right then, almost as if she knew she was being watched, Cassandra looked up, right into Zoe's eyes. And the smile that suddenly appeared was so natural and heartfelt that it almost made Zoe reel backwards.

The young blonde threw the towel over her and made a big show of waving up at the balcony. Her hair was a scruffy, tangled mess but it suited her somehow.

Zoe lifted her own hand in a half-hearted wave. She could feel a stupid-looking smile growing on her own face.

Oh great, she thought to herself, she's a morning person.

* * * * *

Hannah Hudson shivered behind the wheel of her rental car. She had always been comfortable in hot climates and disliked cold weather. Being born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, then spending most of your adult life in Los Angeles, would do that for you. Stupidly then, she had thought she would be okay dressing in a thin tee and shorts. After all, you say Greece or the Mediterranean to someone, and the first thing they probably think of is baking heat. You never really think that these places have winter months, just like everywhere else. And even if the month of March was pretty mild as winters went, it didn't matter if you were stupid enough to dress expecting temperatures in the hundreds.

She lifted her big-lensed sunglasses and rubbed at her eye. Her hand came away a little sticky. The eye hurt like hell. Fuck, the entire left side of her face was hurting badly. She leaned over and pulled open the glove compartment and took out a bottle of ibuprofen. She needed something a lot stronger but that wasn't really an option right now. There was a long dead paper cup on the dashboard. She popped four of the small red pills into her mouth, washing them down with the thick and sweet coffee. It was so cold it almost made her gag.

She shivered again. Sweat was getting into her eyes. She lifted the edge of her shirt and wiped at her forehead. The fabric caught on an end of one of her stitches as she lowered it and the sudden tugging sensation caused a fresh burst of pain. She swore and slammed her palm hard into the steering wheel.

God, she felt so cold. Hungry too, although she wasn't about to go get something to eat anytime soon. She'd eat when she could. This wasn't the first stakeout she'd been on in her career. Not

that her career really mattered much anymore, she supposed. That was one of the many bridges she'd napalmed into ashes recently. No going back.

She caught sight of movement at the front of the Kastro Hotel. Her attention immediately shifted, ignoring the pain and discomfort she was in, refocusing on the task at hand. At last, she thought, when she saw it was Mercouri and Wayward stepping out of the hotel lobby and onto the sun-bleached sidewalk.

It had surprised her yesterday when she had seen Wayward meet Mercouri. She supposed some shock was natural, at seeing someone you knew for certain was dead up and moving around as if nothing had ever happened, but strangely she was only surprised at how quickly she had took it all in stride. It was as if her brain had just recognized the impossible and accepted it without a fuss. She'd known people driven insane over less.

After all, she supposed, she had always suspected Wayward had been up to something, she just wasn't sure what. She still wasn't. But she did know exactly where the stupid blonde was going, having memorized every detail of her vacation itinerary when she broke into her apartment. And she knew that it was no use trying to convince anyone else of her suspicions. So she had moved quickly, losing Grace at the hospital, sneaking *into* Mexico and then, after arranging for both some backstreet doctoring on her face and some adequate false paperwork, she had flown to England. In London, she had waited for Wayward to arrive and since then had followed her across Europe, always a few paces behind. In Crete, she had kept an eye on Wayward as she ate in cafes, shopped in overpriced tourist traps, and walked around historic sites. She had been waiting for something, Hannah had thought at the time. Then yesterday morning, when she parked in the near-empty secondary lot beneath the palace at Knossos and watched the girl trek up the hill through binoculars, she had discovered that she had instead been waiting for *someone*.

Of course, Mercouri's unexplained reappearance didn't solve anything. Hannah still had no clue what she or Wayward were up to. It couldn't really be as simple as the pair of them spending their ill-gotten gains, could it? No, that made no sense. They got nothing out of the bank robbery and Hamilton's real daughter had her father's estate tied up in so many legal knots Wayward would probably be old and grey before she saw any of it, if at all. No dice there then. So what the hell was going on? It was a vacation, everyone had said. Bullshit. She knew it was more than that. It had to be. And she was going to find out, that's for damn sure.

She had been right so far, hadn't she? Didn't this prove what she had been telling Grace? And that dumb cow had refused to listen to her! Too damn lovestruck over that dopey-looking Sherriff. So much for their six years of being partners. So much for trust. You do what you can for someone, protect them, keep them on the right path, even if it means you stray off it a little, and what thanks do you get? Fuck all, that's what. Amazing how quickly something like that got flushed. Hannah swore angrily again as she watched the walking corpse hail a taxi.

The two women were dressed in light summer clothing, although both wore layers as a protection against the cold morning air. At least they seemed capable of learning from their mistakes, she thought sourly. Mercouri was laughing at something her companion had said. What made her think she had the God-given right to be so happy? Hannah could feel her temper flaring

again. Her hands clutched at the steering wheel so hard the knuckles turned white.

As the pair climbed into the taxi, Hannah noticed they carried no bags or suitcases, so they obviously planned on returning. That was good to know. She waited patiently until the taxi moved away and then pulled down her sunglasses, turned the key in the ignition, and pulled her dark blue car out into traffic.

* * * * *

Cassie couldn't help feeling a little underwhelmed by the Archaeological Museum. She tried telling herself that it was only because the annex which visitors were currently allowed entry to was only a temporary site and the vast majority of the Minoan artifacts were in storage somewhere. Or that she had been so over-excited at visiting that it could only be an anti-climax. Or perhaps it was a combination of the two.

Of course, it might also have been sheer impatience. A strong part of her wanted to run through the halls until she found what she was looking for. Zoe had seemed keen to take her time, to go slow and savor each and every exhibit. It was infuriating in a way, but Cassie had tried her best to be patient and take everything in, knowing full well that she wouldn't get another chance to look at such historic objects again any time soon.

Zoe had been in an odd mood that morning, Cassie thought, one minute laughing and smiling, the next seeming worried and pensive. She had looked tired and still had the faintest of dark circles under her eyes. Cassie imagined she didn't sleep well. She wondered if Zoe was still plagued by bad dreams. Most likely she was, although she hadn't mentioned them. Cassie felt a little guilty about that. She had had a great night's sleep, having sunk into a comfortable bed with a smile on her face, a full stomach, and nothing but anticipation on her mind.

They'd spent half-an-hour or more looking at stunningly beautiful jewelry, ancient vases, golden statuettes of various gods and goddesses, untranslated clay tablets, and countless other ancient treasures, most of it in silence. When they finally reached the large room which housed the frescos, it was all she could do to stop herself breaking into a sprint.

Zoe walked over to the far wall where the recently restored 'Prince of the Lilies' fresco was housed in pride of place. Her footsteps sounded heavy on the smoothly polished wooden floor. She seemed more interested in the large glass cabinet that stood beside the large mural; inside were numerous double-headed axes, their blackened aged metal standing out in stark contrast to the eggshell blue wall behind.

Cassie didn't follow her. Instead she took a second to look around, studying all the walls until she found what she was searching for. She could feel her heart beating faster as she stepped over to the astronomical fresco.

"Over here," she called out. Her voice echoed slightly in the large, high-ceilinged room. She felt strangely conspicuous, almost as if she was about to rob the place. It gave her a small thrill and she wondered briefly if this was what Zoe had felt before walking into the Bank of Arcadia. All the same, she glanced around nervously. She needn't have worried as the museum was almost

empty. There had been a German couple waiting in line for the place to open when Zoe and Cassie had arrived but they had long since disappeared.

She heard Zoe walk up behind her. The older woman stopped by the standing plaque and began to read it aloud. "First discovered in the summer of 1903, this astronomical fresco was repainted by the Gilléron family. It was painstakingly restored in 1999 by a team from the UOC, with the modern paintwork being stripped away to reveal the original astronomical art beneath. Judging from the Mycenaean Greek language used, it is believed to date from circa 1,250 BC." She paused, looking up. "Doesn't really tell us much, does it?"

Cassie shook her head. She was a few steps in front of Zoe, leaning forward and trying her best to peer through the protective glass to make out the details of the painting encased inside. If her mind wasn't racing with thoughts about the riddle, she would have been overawed with the sheer beauty of the art. But that was probably true of everything she'd seen in the museum so far.

It was a square piece of plaster, roughly four feet in width and height, that had for millennia adorned a wall in the royal chambers of the palace at Knossos but which had since been removed and attached to more modern stonework for stability. Despite cracks here and there, and the occasional bare patch showing the rough plaster beneath, it was still in remarkably good condition for something more than three thousand years old. The restoration team had done a good job, Cassie thought, although she was baffled as to why anyone would want to paint over it in the first place.

The paint was a vibrant dark blue, with streaks of a lighter shade daubed here and there, almost in a pattern, although Cassie's mind couldn't quite tell what it was. There were several large white dots scattered widely out from the centre of the fresco, each representing a star, with thin strokes of Greek text encircling each. The stars were themselves surrounded on the top and two the sides by an erratic semi-circle of the lighter blue color.

Try as she might, Cassie couldn't figure out the text around each star. Her Greek language skills were limited; a language this ancient was completely beyond her. "You have any idea what these say?"

"Yes."

Cassie looked back, impressed. "You can read this?"

"No," said Zoe with a faint smile, "but it lists them here on the plaque. In the Greek section only."

"Smart ass," Cassie muttered, which only made Zoe's smile turn into a large grin. She turned back to the mural and pointed at one star at random. "What's this one?"

"Erato."

"And this one?"

"Melpomene."

"Hmm. Interesting."

"What?"

Cassie waved a hand behind her without looking around, hushing Zoe. She was busy counting the stars. "Now, that is odd."

"The only odd thing I can see is that it doesn't look like any constellation I know."

"I'll take your word for it. Although that makes sense, if I'm right."

"Right about what?"

"Let me guess what this one is. Clio?"

Zoe looked down the list, comparing the Mycenaean words with the Greek words next to each. "Yep. How did you know that?"

"But here's the weird thing," Cassie said, ignoring the question. "There are ten stars painted here."

"So?"

"You don't recognize the names?"

"Hold on," Zoe said, looking down at the list again. "Terpsichore..." she read. "One of the muses right? Calypso? She's another. But there were nine muses." She glanced at Cassie with a puzzled expression.

"Exactly." Cassie tapped a finger on the glass over the tenth star, which was much higher than the rest, over in the northeast of the fresco. "So what's this one?"

"Well, the only name I don't recognize is Kallisto," Zoe said.

"Kallisto?"

"That's what it says..." Zoe's light blue eyes suddenly widened as a thought struck her. She held a hand over her open mouth for a second. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet. "It's an island. They're not stars, they're all islands. Look, the largest one must be Crete. Which makes sense, as they've labeled it Urania, considering this is supposed to be an astronomical chart. This one is Rhodes, this one is Chios, here's Samos. Well, you get the idea. And Kalliste is one of the Ancient Greek names for Santorini." She looked at Cassie for confirmation. "That's it, right?" Cassie didn't answer right away, so Zoe had to prompt her.

"Maybe," Cassie said. She thought Zoe was on the right track but something wasn't quite right. She leaned over again and stared closely at the fresco, trying to work out what it was that bothered her. She felt a heat in the back of her neck, conscious suddenly of being watched, and she glanced up at Zoe's ghostly reflection in the glass.

"Maybe?"

"Well, like you, the Minoans were renowned for being devious and planning everything out to the last detail. Unlike you, however, they probably don't keep staring at my ass whenever they think I'm not looking." She smiled over her shoulder. Had she finally made Zoe blush? She certainly seemed a little redder in the face than before and now she was intently studying the plaque text again. Cassie knew she shouldn't laugh, so she bit back the fit of giggles she felt coming on by explaining her doubts. "I think you're half-right. Or two-thirds right. Or... well, you're close, anyway. But then I think this is only half the story. It's definitely Kallisto, right?"

"Yes," Zoe said quietly, with a small sheepish smile. She didn't look up to meet Cassie's eyes. "But that makes no sense. There is no island called Kallisto."

"No, there isn't. But there aren't any islands named after the other Muses either."

"So..."

"Well, it's a guess, and only a guess, but I'd say everything's pointing towards Lesbos."

"Lesbos?" Zoe seemed unconvinced. "What makes you think that?"

Cassie tapped the glass again. "The three stars, or islands, nearest the one marked Kallisto. Look at their names."

"Calliope, Erato, Polyhymnia," Zoe read aloud. "All muses of poetry, right?"

"Uh-huh. And look at the placement of all of these stars. It's not a perfect map, by any means, but isn't Santorini quite close to Crete?"

"Yeah, pretty close."

"So if we're right in thinking Urania represents Crete, look how far away this star is. It's almost in the right place for Lesbos. And this star," Cassie added, pointing to the image labeled Thalia, "more likely represents Santorini."

"Are you sure?"

Cassie shrugged. "No. I don't think I could be sure. But it fits. There's a labrys on the reverse of the pebble. I thought that was another indicator of Crete, but I suppose it could hint at Lesbos. And then there's the mention of Cybele."

"Okay..."

"Cybele was a mother goddess. Another reference to a strong female presence, I suppose you could say. And if I remember correctly, for a while she was worshipped by the islanders of Lesbos. Then there's Sappho, of course."

"The poet?"

"Yes. Plato called her the tenth muse, after all."

"Oh," Zoe said quietly. "Yeah, that really does fit, doesn't it? But then what does Kallisto have to do with any of this?"

"What do you know about her?"

Zoe looked a little shocked to be asked. "Hold on, let me think. Kallisto was a nymph, right? Wasn't she one of Artemis' followers? She was gay too, least that's what I always thought. Zeus tried it on with her..."

"Who didn't he try it on with?"

"Fair point. But Zeus has to disguise himself as a woman..."

"Artemis," Cassie interrupted again.

"Right, and they promptly do the nasty. But quite where that leads us, I don't know."

"I think it's another double-meaning."

Zoe sighed. "Another one?"

Cassie looked at her and smiled. "Are you not enjoying this?"

"Word puzzles were never my strong point. Too limiting, never give you the chance to think ahead. Besides, I don't like feeling like I'm trapped in a third-rate Dan Brown novel."

"I wasn't aware there was any other kind. But yes, it's another double-meaning. At least, I think so. And that makes sense too."

"It does?"

Nodding, Cassie pointed over to the cabinet of axes. "The labrys, the ancient symbol of Minos."

"Ah. So what's the other meaning?"

"You said it yourself."

"I did?"

"If Kallisto was gay, where does that point?"

Zoe nodded, seeing what she meant. "Lesvos."

"So that's our next stop," Cassie said eagerly, clutching at Zoe's arm. "We have to get there. I suppose there must be regular ferries, even in the off-season, right?"

"Whoa, slow down! Where on Lesvos? It's not a small island, you know."

"I'm not sure," Cassie said honestly. "But the answer has to be somewhere in the riddle, right? And I know I can figure it out. Just give me time."

"You can have all the time in the world," Zoe said. "There's no hurry, after all. We could spend some time looking at a few more of the sights, if you like."

Cassie smiled sweetly. "There will be plenty of things to see on Lesvos, I'm sure."

"You're awfully persistent."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes," Zoe said with a grin, "yes, you are."

* * * * *

Zoe had suggested they look for flights. It was a longshot, she knew, but if it paid off than it would be much quicker than riding the ferry. And, Zoe thought, the quicker they got there the happier Cassandra would be. And that made her happy.

They had gone back to hotel and checked out. It had amused her to see how eager Cassandra was to keep going. She supposed adventures like this only came along once in a lifetime for most people. She wished that was true for her. She was growing tired of always chasing and never getting what she wanted, what she needed. Hell, she was getting tired, period.

But then, depending on how you looked at things, she had had more than one lifetime. The rules no longer applied to her. She was void where applicable. Maybe even past her Best Before date. She grinned to herself as that thought struck her.

She'd phoned the airport from the lobby while waiting for Cassandra to finish packing. She had kept things simple and packed lightly for this journey, and therefore found there was plenty of time to wait. After several calls to various domestic airlines, she was lucky enough to find a SkyExpress flight leaving at one. That meant a little more waiting; she hoped Cassandra wouldn't be too upset about it. But even the wait and the half-hour flight combined was a lot quicker;

they'd be in Mytilene by late afternoon. If they had chosen to take the ferry instead, they wouldn't have been there until tomorrow.

The Cretan airport, located on the eastern outskirts of Iraklion, had been remarkably quiet. Maybe that had been true yesterday morning when she flown in, but if so she hadn't noticed. Most of the traffic did seem to be arrivals, which surprised her considering the season. With so few people around and little background noise, you could easily hear any passing conversations and every sound echoed off the starkly tiled walls.

There had been a line waiting at the SkyExpress counter and so Zoe had suggested that Cassandra sit and wait for her to pick up the tickets. No point in both of them standing there, she had said. What she didn't say was that Cassandra had had her nose buried in that damn guidebook for the entire taxi ride from the hotel, responding to Zoe's efforts at conversation mostly in grunts or the barest of yes or no answers, and so she knew Cassandra would probably prefer to be reading somewhere. Did she ever stop reading, Zoe wondered?

Cassandra had ignored her suggestion but she hadn't waited in line either. She'd headed for the nearest gift shop and reappeared a few minutes later with two more freshly purchased different guidebooks. Zoe rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the small smile playing on her face. No doubt she had worn the first guidebook out already.

The guy behind her, a stocky man dressed in cheap clothes and wearing enough gold jewelry to put King Tut to shame, was standing a little too close for comfort. Every time the line thinned out a little more and she shuffled forward, he did the same, always right behind her, a little too close. Some people didn't respect personal space. She could smell the faint odor of garlic mixed with cheap cologne, and she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

After paying a goodly sum for the tickets, using one of the credit cards she'd obtained a few days earlier in her new name, Zoe walked back to the row of conjoined metal chairs where Cassandra had elected to wait with their luggage. Even her bags were small enough and light enough to be classed as carry-on, which was a relief.

"Probably another half-hour before we can board."

Cassandra grunted, not really listening. Her attention was focused solely on the pages of one of the new guidebooks. This one was a thinner volume than the others, solely dedicated to the attractions of Lesbos. Damn, Zoe thought, she looked so cute with her tiny square sunglasses perched on top of her head, frowning as she concentrated hard on the text, flicking back from one page to another. She was scribbling notes in the margins as she read. The other guidebooks sat discarded on the empty chair beside her.

Cassandra looked up as Zoe moved the books down one chair and sat down. "You know I think I might have figured another part out."

Zoe handed her the tickets and she looked at them, gave them a cursory glance. Then something caught her eye. "Helene Stavros?" she said quizzically, looking up at Zoe.

"It's... complicated."

"Not really," Cassandra said. Her voice was kept low. "You can hardly travel under your real name, I suppose." Zoe frowned, hoping that the tone she detected in Cassandra's voice wasn't one of disappointment. "Besides, it's only half a lie, isn't it?"

"That's what I thought," Zoe said, smiling in relief. Funny how important this woman's good opinion of her had become. She used to not care what people thought of her. Even Sam, so long as he respected her thieving skills, she didn't care.

"Don't look so guilty. I don't mind, honestly. So long as you don't expect me to call you Helene."

"Wouldn't dream of it. So what's the next part then, genius?"

"Oh, well, the second line references a poet. That has to be Sappho."

"That would be my guess," Zoe said with a nod, although she truly hadn't given it much thought. Something was scratching at the back of her neck. It wasn't a physical sensation, although it felt so much so like one Zoe reached back and scratched beneath her long blonde hair. More it was an odd feeling, like a cat's hackles slowly rising as it realized it had mistakenly wandered deep into dog territory by mistake. Like she was being watched. Instinctively, she looked over her shoulder. There was no line at the SkyExpress counter now. She wondered briefly if that meant their flight would be crowded or if she had just coincidentally got in the ticket-line at the same time as all the other few passengers.

One of those passengers, the guy who stood behind her in line, was now looking up the departures board intently, as if by studying it he could will the times to change. From there he could see the entire airport lobby, especially the rows of seats. Something about the way he stood there, not moving, was unnerving. She began to worry. What the hell was he doing? Why would anyone just keep staring at the board like that? They wouldn't. So he must be watching the airport, right? And, although it was immodest, Zoe couldn't think of anyone else in the airport worth watching apart from herself.

Could he be working for Antiphates? Could he have followed her here? Why? Well, there was only one answer to that, wasn't there? Antiphates wouldn't risk leaving her alive... no, that was foolish. He'd have to know she would have recourse if anything happened to her. The traditional 'evidence left with my lawyer to be revealed upon my death' trick. Not that she had, of course, but just the idea of the threat was enough to keep Antiphates in check. Antiphates wasn't stupid, after all. His daughter was another matter, but Zoe was pretty sure she'd be kept in check by her more practically-minded father.

She shuddered. Or maybe she was just being stupid. Maybe he was just an innocent traveler, making his way back to Lesvos. She was getting jumpy.

Cassandra touched her arm. "Are you listening?"

A little startled, Zoe looked back at her. "What?"

"You okay?"

Zoe tried to ignore her worries. "Yeah, fine. What were you saying?"

"I was telling you that if we have Sappho and Olympus..."

"Mount Olympus ?" Zoe interrupted.

Shaking her head, Cassandra said, "No, this one is Olympus Peak. There are several mountains sharing that name in Greece, apparently. But you see, this makes sense according to the second line of the riddle. Or poem, I should say. It has to be a poem."

"And Olympus Peak is somewhere on Lesbos?" At least we don't have to find the one on Mars, Zoe thought. Then she'd find herself trying to talk her way into NASA headquarters, just to impress this beautiful woman.

Cassandra nodded, flicking back to an earlier page in her guidebook and showing Zoe a photo. "Yes, in the southeast. We'll be passing it as we travel north."

"North? You seem to have things mapped out already," she said. The words came out a little acidly, although she hadn't meant them to. Maybe she was still on edge. Or maybe, she reluctantly admitted to herself, she didn't like someone else doing all the planning. This was turning into a vacation for her. Maybe she could relax and enjoy it. Yeah, right.

"Well," Cassandra looked a little sheepish, "I figure we need to look at the petrified forest."

"The petrified forest? Sounds like something straight out of Oz."

"Well, I doubt these trees will be calling us names or throwing apples. You see, a large part of the northwestern part of the island was once covered by trees but due to a lot of volcanic activity over many centuries those trees fossilized. So now they're almost like rock. It has something to do with the chemicals in the ground. I'm not sure I understand it all, but it's fascinating."

"Yeah, fascinating."

She playfully elbowed Zoe in the ribs. "Apparently there are a lot of trees once but you can't see most of them now as over the years they've been buried by more and more volcanic material. So most of the trees are actually underground." Pausing, she seemed to think about that for a moment.

"So why there?"

Cassandra flipped through the guidebook until she came to a detailed map of the island. She

showed it Zoe, pointing at the symbol of a town on the northern edge of the large semi-circular bay. "That's Eresos, where Sappho was supposedly born. I'd say that's most likely what the reference to an undying poet means. One of the meanings, anyway. If there's another, and there probably is, I haven't found it yet."

Zoe nodded, understanding.

"And a mountain named Olympus is a pretty obvious link. I doubt a god could die anyway, but it's unlikely to happen in their heaven, is it?"

Zoe studied the map Cassandra was showing her and found the outline of the forest. It was to the east of the town of Eresos, up in the northwest of the island, quite some distance from the mountain and the airport in Mytilene. She frowned. "Not really between the two, is it?"

"I suppose not. But it might have been. Originally, I mean, before the volcanic eruption, the forest may have covered most of the island. No one really knows."

Zoe frowned. "It's one hell of a longshot."

"Not really." Cassandra looked a little affronted, as if it hurt that Zoe was doubting her words. "After all, the last line refers to wooden ships. You're going to get wood from a forest, aren't you?"

Zoe thought she was tilting at windmills there. But on the other hand, she'd been right about everything so far.

* * * * *

Hannah had been kept waiting for a good half-hour outside the airport. She'd parked illegally, quite close to the taxi row, but she had reckoned she'd be fine. If one of the patrolling police officers confronted her, she'd just tell him she was waiting for a friend to arrive on an incoming flight. Play the ignorant American tourist, that usually worked. Bribing was too dangerous, turning on the charm was no longer an option, but acting the annoying fool would do the job. The imaginary cop would just roll his eyes and tell her to move the car. And she would oblige, circle the terminal, and pull into the same space again.

She sat perched on the side of the dark blue rental car's hood, smoking yet another cigarette. It was a piece of crap, this car. A fucking Citroen, Hannah thought. Who in the hell would buy a fucking Citroen? It's not as if the French were renowned for making cars, was it? Why not something decent? Something from GMC or Ford or Honda. Hell, even something German if they wanted to keep it in the European family. She sighed, blowing out a torrent of thick smoke. Ah well, it was the same the world over. Foist the crap off on the tourists as they won't know any better.

She shivered, suddenly and violently, almost dropping her cigarette. She chose to stub it out on the wing of the car. It wasn't even that cold, so was the hell was she shivering? She grimaced. Her eye ached. She felt like she wanted to tear it out of the socket herself but supposed she

should be grateful; right now it was nothing more than a dull ache. But the pain was going to get worse again, she could tell.

She reached into a pocket of her jacket - her new jacket, the jacket she had bought that morning after finally giving in and realizing that the cold was too much for her, the jacket that had cost her nearly a hundred fucking Euros - and drew out a bottle of painkillers. She popped four into her mouth and washed them down with the stale, warm soda that rested on the car's roof beside her.

She looked at the empty can, turning it over and over in her hand. Kinnie. What the fuck kind of drink was that? It tasted like watered down cough syrup. The damn stupid vending machine in her cheap hotel had been nearly empty. She had never seen it full. No Coke, no Pepsi, not even a Dr. Pepper. Just this Kinnie crap. God, she hated this fucking country.

She saw Nikos hurrying towards her, almost running from the nearest airport entrance. Bribery had worked on him. It did on most people, she'd found.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

He said nothing but held out his hand, palm up and smiled wolfishly. She paid him the other half of the money she'd promised him. It would probably just go towards more gold for his neck. She knew he wouldn't spend it on his taxi. That piece of four-wheeled crap was worse than her Citroen.

He was still smiling. "What's so funny?"

"You Americans." He spoke in good but heavily accented English. Still, it was better than her Greek. "Always so free with money, as if it doesn't matter to you."

"Maybe it doesn't."

"But you always overpay. You never..." he paused, frowning as he searched for the right word in English. "Bargain?" He looked at her for confirmation of the word, but she just stared at him. "You never question the cost of anything."

"We don't need to. We always get what we want."

He took the hint. It wasn't a particularly subtle hint, she thought, but then Nikos wasn't a particularly subtle man. "They had tickets reserved for the one o'clock flight to Lesbos."

"Lesbos?" she repeated, using the English pronunciation. She thought about that for a second then grunted in amusement. "Well, that shouldn't really surprise me, should it? Fucking Mecca for dykes, I guess."

"Eh?" Nikos said in puzzlement, thinking she was talking to him. She waved the comment away.

"Are there any more flights?" She didn't think it was too wise or inconspicuous to catch the same flight.

He shook his head. "Not until tomorrow afternoon."

She swore at that. "What about the ferries?"

He shrugged in a typically Mediterranean gesture of indifference. "Sure. All the time. But you'll have to go from here to Piraeus and then overnight to Sigri. You still won't get there until tomorrow. And you won't come in near the airport unless you want a longer trip. The ferries go to the other side of the island mostly, it's quicker."

She'd take a ferry then. If she was going to be behind them by a day whatever she did, at least she could travel in comfort. Maybe even get some sleep. Chance would be a fine thing, she thought. The pain of her eye was keeping her awake most nights. Besides it would be a lot easier to keep her gun on a ferry. The security on even domestic flights was pretty strong these days.

The problem was, she mused, a day's gap in the chase meant she'd most likely lose Mercouri and Wayward. Sometimes, when shadowing someone, you had to keep pretty far back. But a day was too much.

Nikos seemed intent on carrying on the conversation. She looked at him sternly and he quailed a little. "I have a cousin who lives on Lesbos," he said finally.

"Do you now?"

He nodded. "He works as a taxi driver out of Loutra. Family business, you see," he added with a shrug, as if that explained everything. She knew where he was leading with this but let him talk all the same. That was her detective training, but it had always come natural to her. Let the suspect talk. They'll want to fill the silence. And the more they talk, the more you know. "He often drives to the airport for fares during these quiet times. If you wanted..." He trailed off.

She nodded, letting him know she understood him. The movement sent a sharp stab of pain through her eye socket and she winced. Lifting up her sunglasses, she rubbed roughly at the puckered line of flesh held together by crude stitching.

Nikos gasped instinctively. "Who did that to you?"

She quickly dropped her hand, turning away. "Nobody."

* * * * *

Zoe had requested the seat away from the window. Was she scared of flying, Cassie wondered? It seemed odd if she was. There wasn't much Zoe didn't take in her stride. She almost asked her, opening her mouth to pose the question as they took their seats, then hesitated. A thought had struck her. It wasn't the flying that unnerved Zoe. It was everything. They were doing everything off the cuff, not planning ahead, not thinking things through before acting. If she knew anything

about Zoe, and she liked to think she knew a lot, then it was that she only felt truly comfortable when she was in charge, when she had a plan that she could work on.

Cassie had her guidebook to Lesvos open on her lap but wasn't really reading it. She had tried several times but couldn't concentrate, just kept reading the same line over and over again.

"So," she said eventually, wanting to break the silence but more still to take Zoe's mind of her worries, "tell me about how this all began."

"I already have."

"You have?"

"Back in the bank, remember?" Her hand touched the side of her head. She didn't even know she was doing it, as she looked a little startled when Cassandra reached out and gently pulled her hand down.

"I didn't mean that. I mean, tell me about the pebble."

Zoe turned away from the window, where she was looking out into the clear blue sky, and considered the request for a second. She was frowning, not in anger but in puzzlement. "What's there to tell? You know more about it than I do."

Cassie smiled sweetly. "Not about where it comes from. Why don't you tell me about where you found it."

"Your bank."

"You know what I mean."

She looked hesitant for a moment.

"Please?"

A sigh. "If you insist."

"And I do."

When Zoe didn't say anything for a moment, Cassie almost impatiently prompted her, but just as she opened her mouth, Zoe spoke.

"There was a cement slab protecting it, did you know that?" Cassie shook her head. "Hamilton must have put it there as a warning."

She looked up suddenly, obviously alarmed at mentioning the name of Cassie's estranged late father. She had such a concerned expression on her face, Cassie thought. It was sweet really. She

smiled reassuredly. It was enough to show that she understood no harm had been meant.

"A warning?" Cassie said.

"He had carved an inscription. A quotation from Socrates, no less. 'Death is a debt we all must pay.'"

"Interesting. Obviously he had figured out what was there, why else would he write such a thing?"

"I guess. Unless Hamilton was into double-meanings too."

"Strange that he just left the ambrosia there though."

"I think he didn't trust anyone enough with it. Maybe that's why he took the pebble too."

"Maybe. So where was this slab?"

Zoe told her. She told her of her time in Greece last year, of how she had first studied the ruins of Athens and then travelled from dig to dig, always asking questions, always exploring. She explained how she had felt drawn to Khalkidhiki, for reasons she couldn't put into words, and had stumbled across the dig almost by accident. She even told of how she met Michi, although it obviously pained her to do so, and she kept this part of the tale brief.

Cassie let her talk. She was interested, but so long as it distracted her from her fears, then that was all that mattered. She just listened attentively, watching the woman's animation as she described what had happened, taking joy in the movement of her hands, the changing expressions.

Zoe went on to explain how she had funded the dig outside Nea Potidea, bribing Michi away to lead the excavation, and how she had again felt strangely drawn to one particular spot, and the fortuitous discovery of the chest that held the ambrosia.

When she had finished talking, Cassie smiled and thanked her. Zoe seemed somewhat embarrassed by that. They still had a little time left on the flight though, so Cassie decided to do her best to keep her talking.

"Okay," she said, "so what do you do when you're not robbing banks?"

Zoe grinned. "As little as possible. A life of crime has been good to me." Even if life itself had not, Cassie thought, but she didn't say anything. "And I have enough to live out the rest of my life comfortably enough."

"But where?"

"I have a house in Amfipoli, with some large grounds too. There used to be a large olive orchard

until DSE troops destroyed it. They burnt most of the house too." She saw Cassie looking confused and so added, by way of an explanation, "It was an old family home that was abandoned when my grandparents fled the civil war."

"Civil war?"

Zoe laughed. "Not that one. I'm not that old."

"No, I meant..." Cassie was feeling a little flustered. "I've just never heard of a Greek Civil War."

"Nice to know you don't know everything about Greece," said Zoe, seemingly taking great delight in the other woman's discomfort. "Anyway, I bought the house last year and had a lot of work done on it. Not that there was much choice, it was practically a ruin. It's taken a long time to get back to being habitable but it's just about finished now. I planned to retire there while I was in prison."

"Yeah, but isn't that a little... conspicuous?"

"What?"

"I mean, if the house is in your name, then won't..."

"Ah," Zoe interrupted, understanding. "It's not in my name. It's owned by a non-existent landlord who lives in Bern. As Helene, I pay rent, believe it or not, but the money's funneled through a Swiss bank account that I control. The staff were hired through contacts and they tend to not treat me very well. They don't really like the idea of someone from Athens living there."

"You have staff?" Cassie blinked in shock.

"It's not like it sounds. I don't have an English butler or..."

"A French maid?"

Zoe laughed again. "No, 'fraid not."

"Pity." Cassie said with a cheeky grin.

"There's a cleaning lady who is so old she might well have been the person who wrote this riddle. Her granddaughter also works on the house, cleaning, tending the garden, getting groceries and running general errands. And before you ask, she's not exactly my type."

"Yeah? Am I?"

"Well, you'll do until my type comes along."

"Very funny," Cassie said, just as the overhead speakers announced the plane was about to make

its final approach to Odysseas Elytis airport. She settled back into her seat and closed her eyes, content that she had done a good job cheering Zoe up.

10: No One Can Confidently Say

The trip to Mytilene International Airport had taken a little longer than usual, the flight attendants had said, due to unusually strong headwinds. It was unfortunately out of their hands, they said, although they had been sure to apologize over and over again for it anyway. And just in case any of the passengers doubted the veracity of these excuses, nature had decided to prove their claims.

As soon Zoe and Cassandra walked out of the airport, they were buffeted by a strong gust of wind. It seemed to come down from the mountain with a howl, battering them backwards toward the open airport doors. If Zoe was a superstitious person, and she was not, then she would have said the island was trying to drive them back. But then, just as quickly as the wind had hit them both, it slackened.

It must have rained recently, as the roads were slick and wet, although they were drying fast, and there was a rainbow off in the distance. A bluebird fluttered down and pecked at a discarded half-eaten falafel but scattered away as Cassandra hefted her bag to a more comfortable position. Zoe looked down the taxi rank and considered her options.

"You ladies need taxi?"

The speaker was a middle-aged man with slicked back dark hair and a thick moustache. He was handsome in a brutish kind of way, she supposed. He certainly looked fit enough. His light blue shirt was a little bit too tight for him and it showed off a good physique.

His English was not so good, Zoe thought, but something else in what he said bothered her slightly. She couldn't quite pin the worry down though. Instead, she glanced down at her young companion and raised an eyebrow questioningly. She'd let her take the lead again.

Cassandra smiled at her and asked the man if he was willing to take them all the way across the island.

"Of course! I drive anywhere, anytime, anyone," he said, beaming a wide smile. He made a big gesture to the north with both arms. "I live in Eresos, if you need more driving. Always happy to drive."

"Well, that's a bit of luck," Cassandra said.

He nodded, still grinning broadly. "Ah, luck always falls at feet of beautiful ladies."

Well, he was a real charmer, wasn't he, Zoe thought? Cassandra certainly seemed to have taken a shine to him. She didn't resist in the slightest when he took her bag off her shoulder. Something about the way he stood close to Cassandra bothered Zoe. Was she jealous, she wondered? No, that was ridiculous. She *couldn't* be jealous.

As he carried the bags across the road, motioning with a tilt of his head for them to follow him, he *actually* banged on his chest with his free hand and proclaimed, "I am Pavlos," like it was something he was inordinately proud of. Was this guy for real?

His taxi wasn't in the rank but sat on the other side of the road. It was an older BMW but kept in pretty good condition. Surprisingly clean too, Zoe noted, which was a rarity amongst taxis anywhere in the world. Pavlos casually threw their bags in the trunk, slammed it shut, then hurried around to open the rear door for Cassandra. He even gave her a small but gallant bow. He didn't even pretend to try to open Zoe's door. That made Cassandra grin more than ever.

He jumped in, started the ignition, and pulled the car out into the busy traffic, almost running a moped off the road. It seem like they were moving before Zoe had even tugged her door shut. She would later swear blind that she could see the tarmac fly by for a second.

"You here on holidays?" Pavlos said.

Cassandra was rummaging through the backpack on her lap and didn't seem likely to answer. When she drew out her guidebook, Zoe knew that hoping she'd get involved in the idle chitchat was pointless. She sighed.

"Something like that," she answered.

He nodded eagerly. "You two will have fun here. Lots to do. Lots of fun. Great place. I know where to find party. You want dancing?"

"Not really."

He kept nodding. He hadn't stopped since he got into the car. He was like one of those cheap plastic bobbleheads on speed. "You want beach? I know best beach."

"No, we don't want beach." She sighed, realizing what she had said. "I mean, we don't want to go to the beach. Thank you."

"You want men?"

"No!" Zoe said sharply. Cassandra had a wicked grin on her face, although she was still pretending not to be listening.

His eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror. He was paying more attention to them than he was the road, which was slightly disconcerting. Especially seeing as how most of the other traffic on the road was going a lot slower. "Ah," he said knowingly. "I know you ladies. You like girls, yes?"

Zoe stared at him, surprised by the blunt comment. She saw that Cassandra's grin had grown even wider, if that was possible, more at Zoe's discomfort than at what was being said. She could only nod dumbly.

"We get many ladies here in summer. Not many this time though."

"This time?" She couldn't help asking.

"In cold." He gestured with both hands at the sky. She was kinda wishing he'd keep at least one on the steering wheel.

"Oh, the off-season."

He nodded again. "So you want girls? I know lots of nice girls. My sister, she like..."

"No, no!" Zoe blurted out. "That's okay, honestly!"

Cassandra was giggling now, trying her best to hide behind the open guidebook. Zoe gave her an evil glare, which only encouraged her. She was getting red in the face.

The taxi driver didn't bat an eyelid. "You are couple, yes?"

Zoe honestly didn't know how to answer that, so she glanced at Cassandra, hoping that she didn't look as desperate as she felt. From the look on Cassandra's face she knew she did. Eventually Cassandra managed to get her giggles under control long enough to blurt out, "Yes, we're a couple." Zoe sent her a stare that said 'you were a big help'.

"So no girls for you." He shrugged as if it didn't matter. "You have lots of fun with no girls. Is no problem."

His eyes met Zoe's again in the rearview mirror. "You stick with Pavlos," he said. "Pavlos take good care of you."

* * * * *

The beach was remarkably narrow but also wonderfully peaceful. Perfectly blue waves rolled gently against the dark grey sand. A line of thickly foliated trees shaded the edge of the beach for nearly its entire two-mile length. Past the trees were the distinctive white-walled houses, their orange tiled roofs contrasting against the dusty yellow scrubland of the hills.

This was a beautiful part of a beautiful country, Zoe thought, playfully kicking up the sand a little as she walked. She wondered if the people who lived here saw the beauty anymore, or if they were just so accustomed to it all that they took it in stride. They didn't know how lucky they were.

She had a smile on her face and she wasn't exactly sure why.

They had asked Pavlos to take them to a hotel in Skala Eresos, to which he had enthused that he knew just the place. And he'd made a good choice. The Mascot Hotel, a beautifully square white-washed building with contrasting pale wooden trimmings, was very near the seafront and sheltered from the sun by some stunningly green trees. Pavlos repeated several times that this hotel was the best for them.

It seemed like Pavlos couldn't do enough for them. He'd even helped them into the lobby with their bags. Hell, she thought he'd even undercharged them. But there was something about him that still bothered Zoe. She tried to put the worry out of her mind. Maybe he was just trying to make sure they used his taxi if they made any future excursions; he'd certainly dropped enough hints about that. It was the slow season for taxi drivers, she supposed, so yeah, maybe he was just trying to hang on to their business. That made sense.

Up ahead, she could see Cassandra sitting cross-legged on the edge of a low stone jetty. She was reading again, concentrating hard on one page before flicking impatiently to another, then putting the first book down beside her and picking up another, thumbing through until she found the page she wanted. She had a chewed-up pen stuck behind one ear. She wasn't smiling and that worried Zoe a little.

While waiting for Pavlos to get their bags out of the car, Cassandra had asked if it was okay if she went down to the beach while Zoe checked them in. She had appeared almost lost in thought, her fingers drumming idly on her thigh, and had hardly seemed to hear Zoe telling her of course it was fine and that she'd take care of everything.

As Zoe approached, she saw Cassandra throw her guidebook down in the sand in disgust. A loud, and surprisingly rude, swearword burst out from between her lips. Zoe looked around, a little self-consciously, but saw that they had the beach virtually all to themselves. A couple of fishermen were chatting further down the jetty and even on this cool day there were several semi-clad men and women lying on the sand, soaking up the late afternoon sun. No one was near enough to hear the outburst though.

"What's wrong?"

Cassandra held a hand to her head, then ran it wearily through her windswept hair, tousling it even further in her frustration. Not that it mattered, Zoe thought, she carried the scruffy look off well. Although she probably didn't mean to.

"I can't figure it out," she said almost pleadingly. "I know it has to be here, I know it."

"Don't worry," said Zoe, giving her a reassuring smile, "it will come to you."

"How can you be so calm?"

Zoe didn't reply at first. She bent down and picked up the guidebook, brushing sand off it. Some of the pages were creased and she did her best to straighten them out before offering it back to Cassandra. "I have faith in you." She had thought about what to say and that wasn't it. The words just came. She smiled at how she could even surprise herself now. Go figure.

Cassandra took a deep breath and smiled a little insecure smile. She took the book and placed it with her others.

"Funny," Zoe said, "you never struck me as someone who had a temper."

A shrug. "I don't, not really. It's just when things get frustrating..."

"You need to take a step back. You're on a great beach on an exotic island, a place that just breathes history, and here you are looking at it all in a guidebook." For a second there was the hint of a pout on Cassandra's face, then she must have seen the wisdom in the words as she smiled again.

"Relax a little," Zoe went on, gesturing around her. "Enjoy your surroundings."

"You're right," Cassandra conceded.

"Well, it happens occasionally."

"Even when you're not planning ahead?"

"Even then." Zoe looked up at the waning afternoon sun. "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. What do you say we go get some dinner?"

She was rewarded with a sly twinkle appearing in those pale green eyes and a stunning smile. An honest smile. "I am starving, actually. Low blood sugar would explain why I'm having trouble concentrating." She reached back for her guidebooks.

Zoe swore under her breath. She thinks far too much. Moving fast, Zoe leaned past Cassandra, deliberately close enough so that the younger woman had to twist back a little to avoid being bumped into. Whether or not that move was an instinctive response or not she didn't know, but it did the trick. It took Cassandra's mind immediately off the puzzle. She was blushing, Zoe noticed

with a dirty grin.

"I'll take those," she said, snatching up the books before Cassandra could. She walked backwards a few steps up the beach, almost jogging, keeping her eyes on the other woman. "You're going to take a break, whether you like it or not."

Cassandra stared after her for a second or two, then shook her head in disbelief. But a smile appeared on her face, Zoe was pleased to see, as she beckoned for her to follow.

* * * * *

The two women walked back up the beach towards their hotel. They found Pavlos sitting on the trunk of his BMW, eating something messy and sloppy out of a tinfoil wrap. There was a fried onion strand hanging from his chin, crumbs in his moustache, and he chewed with his mouth open. While Pavlos was undeniably an attractive man, Zoe could only believe he hung onto whatever girlfriends he had because he never let them see him eat.

Cassandra asked him if there was somewhere local they could get some dinner and he was only too happy to point them in the direction of a restaurant. Whatever he was eating smelt disgusting, so Zoe wasn't entirely pleased that they'd asked for his advice. Hopefully his recommendation wasn't the same place where he had got his dinner.

The restaurant, called Moksha and impossible to miss according to Pavlos, was at the far end of the beach but the walk only helped increase their appetites. Moksha. Zoe knew the word from somewhere, but it eluded her.

It was a nice place, quiet and peaceful, although there was an odd, deep rumbling sound coming from somewhere in the back. When they walked in, one of the women sitting outside stubbed out her cigarette and followed them, introducing herself as Epimelia, in near-perfect English, although she made a point of stressing that they should call her Mel. She had hair that was so blonde it could almost be mistaken for white and seemed friendly enough, although it was obvious she wanted to get them seated and served, so she could get back to her friends as quickly as possible.

Cassandra wanted to sit outside on the porch that overlooked the beach, so they were shown through a beaded curtain and onto a wooden porch. Mel handed them two menus, then shouted as she walked back inside, yelling at her father (who was obviously the chef) that they had customers. When the rumbling stopped, Zoe realized the waitress' father must have been asleep and snoring loudly.

Zoe had a quick look through the menu. She ordered quickly, choosing a beef dish, cooked with potatoes and tomatoes before throwing her menu back onto the wooden planked table. Cassandra took more time, eventually settling on a pasta dish, tagetelli with gorgonzola and walnuts.

"I'm not sure I like Pavlos," Zoe said, while they waited for Mel to come back and take their orders.

Cassandra looked at her, frowning. "He's okay. What's wrong with him?"

"Something about him bothers me. Did you notice he spoke English to us?"

"Well, we're tourists. He probably just assumed we were American."

Zoe grunted skeptically but said nothing more. She turned away, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair, watching the waves rolling in over the dark sand. She could hear the gentle sound of the surf, the occasional laughter of people in the street, the screeching of gulls high above. Why the hell couldn't she relax? She looked back at Cassandra and saw she was reading that damn guidebook again.

She reached across the table and put her hand over the pages. When Cassandra looked up in confusion, Zoe tried her best to smile. "Leave it."

"It has to be here," Cassandra insisted. "I have to know."

Zoe sighed and drew her hand back, but whatever she wanted to say would have to keep.

Mel appeared through the beads and placed two glasses of water on the table. She smiled at them both, then glanced down at the open guidebook. "Looking at the forest?" she asked.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"There's not much else to see around here. If you're not working on your tan or shopping for souvenirs, you'll be going to the museum. That's closed right now though. Won't be open again until June."

"Pity," Cassandra said sadly.

"You could go on some walking tours, if you really want to see the forest," Mel said. "My boyfriend works at the museum during the summer; he'll be happy to show you around if you want. He knows everything about the forest."

"That's really kind of you. Do you know of any wooden ships around here?"

"You mean in the harbor?" The waitress looked perplexed.

"Maybe."

"Well, there are plenty of fishing ships. Some might even take you out on a tour of the harbor, so you can see the seals."

Cassandra tried a different tack. "What about horses?"

"Horses? You want to go riding?"

"It doesn't matter," Zoe intervened.

Mel shrugged and took their orders. It didn't take long for their dishes to arrive, both steaming hot and beautifully presented. It may not have been as good as the food at Loukoulos but it was still tasty and filling, more like good home-cooking than fine dining. Her beef was a little spicy, each bite having a little kick, and the more she ate the more she enjoyed it. Cassandra seemed to like her meal too, although she seemed a little subdued.

They talked while they ate, although Zoe was careful to steer the conversation away from the riddle. Instead, they chatted about the town, what they liked about it, and how some parts of it were very scenic and other parts far too touristy. Then Cassandra started asking about where else in the world Zoe had been and that took the rest of the meal to explain. It also helped to raise the younger woman's spirits, although she seemed a little envious of Zoe's travels.

Zoe paid the check and the two women left. As they passed through the front door of the restaurant, Mel called them over. She was back sitting with her friends, although she was leaning against a young blonde man with strikingly blue eyes. Holding a lit cigarette in one hand and a glass of tsipuro in the other, she gestured at him. "This is Gustav Renetten, my boyfriend."

"Mel said you were looking for wooden ships?" he asked them in English. He had a trace of an accent but Zoe was sure it wasn't Greek. German probably, judging by the name. When Cassandra nodded excitedly, he smiled at them. It was the kind of condescending smile that locals always gave tourists. "You mean the three nymphs."

Cassandra looked up at Zoe. "No," she said, disappointedly, "it's definitely ships."

He shook his head. "Someone's playing a joke on you."

"What? I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Gustav stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray that was already overflowing. "There's a triangle of trees up in the hills outside western Sigri. They're called the three nymphs."

"But we don't want nymphs..."

He held up a hand to stem her impatience. His fingertips were stained yellow, Zoe noticed. "It's just a name. Some of the older folks around here will tell you they were dryads who, because they chose to attend a mother goddess, Zeus turned them into stone. It's one story, anyway." He tilted his head as if this story held no interest for him. Maybe it didn't. Maybe to him it was just another tale to spin to visitors with too much money and too little sense.

"But another is that when the Trojans invaded Italy, they landed here first. Their ships were in need of repair and they used the wood from a sacred forest to do so. And when they reached Italy, so the story goes, the ships were due to be burned. Some say the Italians planned it to cut off the Trojans line of retreat, others say the Trojans themselves wanted to do it to prove their

commitment; it doesn't matter. Zeus had promised the mother goddess that her trees would be safe but he had acted too late. To make up for it, when the first flames scorched the wood, he transformed the ships into sea nymphs. They swam home, where Zeus completed his promise by turning the wood into stone."

"A mother goddess?" Cassandra throwing Zoe a knowing look.

"Sacred trees?" Zoe said incredulously.

"Most of the old Lesvos myths have a mother goddess mentioned somewhere," Gustav said. "The Ancient Greeks just adopted the myths of the island's original inhabitants, absorbing them into their own. They don't always make sense."

"See?" Mel said proudly, hanging an arm around her boyfriend's neck. "I told you he knew everything, didn't I?"

Gustav tried to look cool and nonchalant, as if what she said didn't bother him in the slightest. He didn't quite make it. "It's just a story. Something to tell gullible tourists." He smirked at them both when he said that.

"Can you take us there?" Cassandra blurted out, then she looked behind her at Zoe. "If you think that's okay."

Zoe smiled. What could she say? "It's fine. Keep me tired, why don't you?"

"Just give me the opportunity," Cassandra said with a sly grin. She turned back to Gustav and Mel. "Well?"

He glanced at his girlfriend for approval. Mel nodded and told him, "Sure, always take the chance to make some money."

That was subtle, Zoe thought. Not that she had supposed even for one minute that he'd help them for free.

"How about first thing tomorrow?" Gustav suggested.

"How about right now?"

Again, the young German looked towards Mel; this time she only shrugged. "It's going to cost you more. You'll be ruining my evening."

Zoe rolled her eyes. She saw Cassandra had caught the gesture and was biting her own tongue to stop from grinning. "We'll pay you," Zoe said, "for your time and trouble."

"Then we'd better go," Gustav said, getting to his feet. "Seriously, it's going to get dark in an hour or so."

* * * * *

"Don't I know this song?" Cassie asked Zoe. The radio was blaring, loud even here in the back seat of the taxi.

"Hmm?" Zoe had only been half-listening. "It's *Paliatsos kai Listis*, an oldie."

"It sounds so familiar." She tried to put it out of her mind and concentrate on what they stood to find further up the road. "This has to be it." She spoke softly but the loud music and the sounds of the noisy ill-cared for engine covered her words. The two men in the front couldn't hear her. "Come on, a reference to a mother goddess?"

Zoe leaned closer. She was frowning. "I don't get it."

"Cybele was seen as a traditional mother goddess. She was an earth goddess too. But trees were sacred to her. And if she had a whole forest of them..."

"You figure it might be the petrified forest?"

Cassie watched the scrubland outside rush by. They'd travelled through Sigri a few minutes ago, a town even smaller than Eresos, and were now traveling up through the northern hills. It was beginning to get a little dark but there was still plenty of light to see. Up front, Gustav was giving directions to Pavlos, who was arguing loudly that he knew the way well enough, thank you very much.

"Could be. After all, that brings up the change from virgins to stone of the trees. That's a common thread in most mythologies, actually," she said, thinking it over. "There's a stone circle in England named the Nine Maidens, another called the Merry Maidens, another..."

"How do you know this stuff?" Zoe tried to stem the flow. That was fair enough, Cassie thought, sometimes she carried on talking too much without realizing it.

"While you were reading *The Odyssey* last night, I was catching up on the travel guides."

"Yeah, I can see that," Zoe said pointedly, glancing down at the pile of guidebooks on Cassie's lap. She frowned, a sudden thought having struck her. "And how did you know I read *The Odyssey* last night?"

"I gave it to you as a present. I'm kind of hoping you didn't just throw it to one side."

Zoe shook her head. "I didn't. And anyway, it's not just that, you seemed to know what Gustav there was talking about."

"Well, like I told you before, I read a lot. He was referring to *The Aeneid*."

"The what?"

"It's a Roman myth, based in part on *The Iliad*. It tells the story of the Trojan survivors who flee the city."

"Yeah? You know, I'm getting the impression that whoever wrote this riddle," said Zoe, "knew an awful lot about myths. But we still don't know what it means."

"Maybe we will when we get there."

"But she's sleeping, the mother goddess, what's that mean?"

"Well, that's why I wanted to go now," Cassie said urgently. "She's a nature goddess in every aspect and that includes the sun."

Zoe nodded, understanding. "Ah, sleeping. You think it refers to the sun going down."

"It's my best guess," Cassie admitted with a shrug. She was taken aback when Zoe wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug. She seemed oddly proud of her.

"Sounds like a good guess to me."

* * * * *

Gustav spoke almost flawless Greek, Zoe noted. He was still giving directions to Pavlos, who was now just listening quietly. Either he didn't know the way after all or had apparently given up arguing. Or maybe it was the fact that they were getting close and he no longer needed directions.

They were getting further away from the coastline now and higher up in the hills. She had glanced over her shoulder a few times, looking through the rear window whenever a car appeared behind them. Nothing had seemed out of place. And now they were on smaller, less-travelled roads, plumes of dust kicking up behind them. They hadn't past another car in over five minutes.

She looked back at the blonde in the seat beside her. If Cassandra had noticed her fretting, she had made no sign of it. She was alternating between looking out of the window at the trees rushing by and checking her guidebooks.

Pavlos pulled the car over onto side of road, into an area which could only be most generously described as a layby. On the narrow Lesvos roads, it was probably most likely a short passing area or perhaps an emergency braking zone for runaway trucks. Gustav looked over his shoulder and smiled broadly at them.

"From here on, we walk," he told them, and there was a faintly malicious tone to his voice.

"Not me," Pavlos said. "I drive, not walk. I need a smoke."

They all got out and the German pointed up the hillside. On a wide rocky outcrop, some way up but also less than a third of the distance below the crest of the hill, they saw three large rocky structures jutting up into the darkening blue sky. There was no missing them. There were no other rocks as large anywhere near.

"Those are the three nymphs," Gustav said. He started to head up the trail but Zoe caught him by his shoulder.

"We can make it the rest of the way on our own. Thanks, though." She turned back to Pavlos. "You'll stay here?" He gave a shrug of his shoulders. The meter was still running, she noticed.

She and Cassandra began trekking up the trail. It wasn't that steep but it was still hard-going. The path wasn't straight, instead it twisted and turned, which made it even worse. The rocky shale was loose beneath their feet and it took great care not to slither and fall. Even so, both women slipped more than once. She was glad Cassandra was going ahead of her, as she could keep a cautious eye on her. On several occasions the younger woman had slipped badly, only to be caught and supported by Zoe until she found her footing again. There was no one to help Zoe, although to her credit Cassandra tried after each time, turning back and reaching out to pull Zoe to her feet.

It took them twenty minutes or more to reach the outcropping. The western sky was getting darker as the sun began to dip. Zoe had come off worse. She'd torn her shorts slightly on one hem and had grazes and cuts all over her legs, including a nasty looking scrape on her left knee.

"Fuck," she said, trying to slow her heavy breathing, "that was not easy." She looked over at Cassandra who seemed to already be bouncing all around the three rocky pillars. Damn, how much energy did the woman have?

Cassandra looked over at her, her sudden excitement quickly replaced by a sudden concern. "You okay? You need a minute?"

More like fifteen, Zoe thought. And didn't that make her feel so much better? "I'm fine. Fuck, I'm too young to feel this old."

Cassandra smiled at her. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You're not in such bad shape."

"Glad you think so." Zoe smiled at that. Cassandra turned back to walking around the pillars. She was a lot more careful when she neared the crest.

Zoe looked down at the ground and almost jumped out of her skin. There was a snake by her boots. It took a second for her brain to register that it wasn't moving, and then a further moment or two before she realized it was missing its head. Her heart eventually slowed to an almost normal pace and she looked back at the stones that had once been trees.

There were three of them, just as both the myths and Gustav had promised, set in a triangle. Two were on the very edge of the outcrop, one further back, nearer the slope of the continuing hill.

Each was of a different height and each colored differently. For the most part, they were bleached white by time and erosion, but here and there she could see patches of lustrous oranges and browns. It was stunning, really. It looked like bark, it really did, but when Zoe reached out and touched the surface of the nearest tree, it was cold and smooth to the touch.

If she didn't know better she'd say they were man-made pillars, albeit thousands of years old, carved out of the rock to support the walls of a temple or a guardhouse or something. But no, they were once trees. Living, growing, spreading, leafy trees. It was hard to believe.

"So now we wait?" she said.

"That's the idea," Cassandra said, removing her sunglasses and looking up at the crest of the hill. The sun was completely out of sight now, only a thick orange glow in the sky. Light was fading fast. She shivered from the cold.

Zoe thought for a moment about getting back to a warm hotel room, maybe having a nice long, soak in a hot bath. She was cold, dirty and tired. She hurt too. Her leg muscles were aching and her back was sore. The sooner they got back to the hotel the better. Surely this could all wait until tomorrow? She smiled ruefully. Yeah, she could try convincing Cassandra of that.

Besides, Zoe thought, she really wasn't looking forward to going back down that path in the dark. When they did, she'd make sure to go first, just in case. What were they supposed to be waiting for? She thought over the verse on the pebble. They'd figured out... no, she corrected herself, Cassandra had figured out most of it already. What was left? Hanging horses and the end of the world. She shivered again. Well, the first part meant nothing to her. If Cassandra knew, she hadn't said anything. And the second part just unnerved her. Could this really be the end? She'd have to talk to Cassandra about it, ask her if...

"Jesus Christ!" she heard Cassandra exclaim suddenly.

The first thought that had popped unbidden into her head was that Cassandra had fallen. "Cassandra!" She saw her still standing though, dimly illuminated by the setting sunlight, staring down at the open rocky ground between the trees, her mouth agape. "You okay?"

Cassandra nodded but pointed between the trees. "Look at the shadows."

Zoe was confused. "What?" She looked down at the ground. She saw all three shadows, faint in the near-twilight, converging to meet some distance further up the hill, a little distance away from the continuing trail path. She was puzzled for a second, wondering what had grabbed Cassandra's attention, then her brain finally processed what her eyes were seeing. The shadows were converging up the hill... *towards* the setting sun. She looked at Cassandra's shadow, still disappearing over the edge of the outcrop, and then her own, still spreading out and falling in front of her. Both were natural and looked... right.

"That's impossible," she said quietly.

Having recovered from her initial shock, Cassandra smiled. "So says the woman who came back from the dead."

Zoe tilted her head in acknowledgement of that comment. "Good point." You'd think there was nothing that would surprise her any more.

"They're still moving," Cassandra whispered. She wasn't taking her eyes off the point where the three shadows met. "But they're slowing."

Zoe looked up the side of the hill. It was hard to see in the gloom but the patch of hillside looked the same as all the rest. Dry, dusty scrubland, with a few rocks and the occasional patch of grass. No different to every other bit of ground around here.

"It's a marker." Cassandra said excitedly. "An arrow pointing the way."

Zoe wasn't so sure. "There's nothing there."

"There must be." She moved closer to Zoe, carefully stepping over the tree's shadows Zoe noted, which struck her as absurdly superstitious. "It could be a cave, don't you think? Cybele was the goddess of caves."

Was there anything that goddess didn't hold sacred, Zoe wondered?

"Let's head up there!" Cassandra said eagerly.

"Hold on, let's be patient."

"Why? Don't you want to know what's up there?"

"Yes, but just think for a moment. It's getting dark. By the time we get up there it's going to be pitch black. And that's just outside. If you're right about it being a cave somehow," and something told Zoe that Cassandra was right, even if it seemed unlikely, after all she'd been right about pretty much everything so far, "we need to be safe. We'll need flashlights, rope, other tools... and that's just the start."

Cassandra grinned. "Okay, you've made your point. I suppose it wouldn't do any good for me to argue, would it?"

"You could try," Zoe said, "but if you do, let's do it in some comfort back at the hotel. I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

* * * * *

Back at the hotel Cassie had got changed hastily, stripping out of her sweaty and dirty clothes, taking a really quick shower, and then pulling on a fresh shirt and shorts. As it turned out, she could have taken her time, as she had to wait for a good twenty minutes in the lobby until Zoe showed up. The taller woman had obviously bathed; her hair was still a little wet and she smelt

of fresh oranges. Cassie was a little disappointed to see she was wearing light slacks but she understood why.

In the hasty taxi ride back to Eresos, she had ordered the grumbling Pavlos to switch on the overhead light so she could see how scratched up Zoe was. There were numerous cuts and grazes on her knees and shins, even some on her elbows. They needed tending to; cleaning, antiseptic, and bandaging. She had suggested that she accompany Zoe back to her hotel room to take care of the injuries, but Zoe had waved her off, telling her they were nothing.

Instead Zoe had insisted on making a list of what they were going to need tomorrow, speaking quietly so neither of the men could hear. Backpacks they already had but they needed rope, flashlights, lanterns, and a ton of other stuff. She had waited until they got out of the taxi in front of the Mascot before asking Gustav if there was a store in the area where they could purchase all of it. She hadn't wanted Pavlos to hear the question, Cassie had realized. She guessed that was second nature to Zoe; she was still a thief at heart, after all. Trust didn't come easy to her.

They arranged for Gustav to buy what they needed, he claimed to know the owner of the only hiking store in the vicinity and could get him to open early. Zoe had given him a large wad of cash, which was probably way more than was needed, but she hadn't complained. He had given both of them his cellphone number and told them to call them when they were ready tomorrow morning.

They had found a quiet bar a few streets from the Mascot, one of the many ouzeries hidden away on the pedestrianized beachfront. There were a few tables out on the sidewalk that overlooked the slope leading down to the sea and those seemed crowded enough, with a mixture of businessmen drinking wine and farmers arguing about the cost of seeds, so they chose to go inside. The interior was dark, decorated in a mostly traditional Greek islander fashion, and empty save for a young man behind the bar reading a magazine. He looked up when they walked in and smiled graciously.

There was a small electric fan rotating at one end of the bar, doing a pitiful job of circulating the air. It wasn't particularly hot right now, especially now night had fallen, but it was a little warm and stuffy inside the bar, even with the door wide open. Cassie thought about suggesting they drank outside on the patio. But this way it would seem like they'd have the whole place to themselves. And her mind was made up when she saw the jukebox.

Zoe didn't seem as excited as Cassie was when she told her but she smiled indulgently. Cassie left Zoe at the bar to get the drinks and wandered over to the multi-colored jukebox. If it was a replica, it was an old one. And a good one too. It looked like it had been delivered in the fifties and then forgotten about. She peered through the top glass, seeing banks of CDs inside. So it was a replica then. There was a coin slot on the left side but the markings indicated it took drachmas only. Her Euros were useless then. She frowned, annoyed that she wouldn't get it to play.

She looked back to the bar. Zoe had already bought two bottles of local beer and was seated in a booth. Then she saw that there was a jar on the bar, full to the brim with old Greek coins, and a smaller, empty jar was next to it, labeled 'For Songs'. Ah, she thought, well, that made things

easier.

"They have some David Devant, can you believe it?" Cassie said excitedly as she slipped into the booth seat opposite Zoe. She knew she was acting a little hyper but she couldn't help it. Everything seemed to be going right. They'd found where the riddle on the Kafkania pebble had been leading them, she was on a beautiful Greek island, she was having fun, and she was here with Zoe. And for the second time in her life she'd seen a miracle happen right in front of her. She couldn't think of any other times in her life when she had been so happy.

Zoe looked up, confused. "Who's that?"

"What, not who. It's a group. Some really funky Britpop. I have all their albums although sometimes I think I'm the only person in the world who's heard of them." She bopped her head a little in time with the beat of the first song she had selected. The lyrics came bubbling up her throat and she almost began to sing along. Instead, she bit them down. She couldn't stop smiling. So much so, it was hard to take a drink. She managed though. As Danny would say, there wasn't much that could come between her and an ice cold beer.

For some reason Zoe didn't look so happy. She was frowning, staring at the beer bottle in front of her, watching the rivulets of condensation run down the green glass. She hadn't even touched it yet. Cassie had never seen her like this. No, sadly, that wasn't true. She'd been like this that morning after the bank. Was it simply a case of the comedowns? Now that Zoe had got what she wanted, or almost, was the fun of it all draining away?

"You seem..." Cassie searched for the right word. "...quiet. Everything okay?"

Zoe began to nod, then the movement was changed to a shake of the head. "I think we should stop."

Cassie paused, her beer bottle halfway to her mouth. She placed it softly back on the coaster and stared at Zoe for a moment. "What?"

"Hamilton was a very smart man."

"Never mind that, what do you mean, stop?"

Zoe ignored the question. "I've been thinking. He found the chest, the ambrosia, and he took the pebble. But why didn't he follow the puzzle?"

"Maybe he couldn't figure it out," Cassie suggested, although she knew that was stupid as soon as she said it. He probably had known more about Ancient Greece and Greek mythology than she would ever learn. "Maybe he was planning to."

Zoe shook her head again. "No, I don't think so. I think he took it to keep it safe."

"Safe from what?"

Zoe looked up at her. "From us?" It was more of a question than a statement. "He certainly was reluctant to part with it." A shadow crossed her face briefly, a look of haunting guilt. "Or maybe to keep us safe. Maybe his warning wasn't about the ambrosia. Maybe it was about the puzzle. Or what the puzzle led to." She paused, then said in an even quieter tone: "Or what the puzzle would make people do."

Another double meaning, Cassie thought. That would be fitting, although it was one hell of a coincidence. "That's... unlikely..." was all she could say.

"You think? There's plenty of references to death in the puzzle, aren't there? The resting place of the Minotaur, the death of gods and poets, you could read it into 'sleeping Cybele', and neither of us knows what the hell a hanging horse is but it doesn't sound good. And then it pretty much states the world will end."

"That could mean anything, I told you that. You could argue that your world ended once already."

"I suppose so. But I don't want anything to happen."

"What could happen?" Cassie said with a laugh, a joy she didn't really feel all of a sudden. She shivered suddenly and tried to hide it by pretending to bop along with the upbeat tune coming from the jukebox.

"Everyone pays the same debt," Zoe said, and Cassie knew she was referring to Hamilton's quotation, "sooner or later. And I figure I owe twice as much as you."

"Well, as Danny would say, they can't hang you more than once."

Zoe was now playing with the Mythos label on the beer bottle, her fingernails - still slightly dirty after the climb up that precipitous trail less than an hour ago - digging under the paper's edge and trying to loosen it. Perhaps she was seeing if she could peel the entire label off in one go, placing some big decision on her success. Who hadn't played that game at least once in their life, Cassie wondered?

"No," she said eventually, "but that's not what I meant."

Cassie frowned. She didn't understand that. She was about to ask what was meant when Zoe suddenly straightened up and smiled. It was a forced smile and perhaps meant to be reassuring, but it hurt Cassie to see how hard Zoe was trying.

"Look, let's be honest with each other." Shit, Cassie thought, no good conversation ever started like that. "Things aren't always going to be like this. Soon, tomorrow even, things are going to change. Everything will settle down and..." Zoe seemed uncertain of what to say or possibly how to say what was on her mind. "I'm just not sure we'll be together."

Cassie's heart seemed to skip a little. So she was thinking of leaving her again. Go now then, she thought. Why bother wasting time? There's the out, she thought, looking towards the open door or the bar. She could hear laughter coming from the patio and see the lights someone had strung around the trees that lined the edge of the beachfront. The jukebox clicked and moved to another song. When I first met you, it was in a crowded room, Mister Solo was singing. She was surprised that there was no anger in her this time. She wondered why not. Frustration, sure. Disappointment, certainly. But no anger.

"Would you rather I leave now?" she said quietly. "Would that suit you?"

Surprisingly, Zoe looked shocked. "No, that's not what I said."

"Huh," grunted Cassie, more confused than ever. She tried to think hard about what Zoe *had* said. She'd thought at first that it was the brush-off again. That maybe Zoe had used Cassie, now got what she wanted, and was trying her best to pat her on the head, send her on her way, and give her a generous parting gift. Just like she had with Harry and the others. Was that it? Was Cassie just a means to an end for Zoe? Now that Cassie had shown her the final step, had found the hidden cave, was Zoe wanting to move ahead on her own? Was the blunt warning about death an attempt to scare her off?

No, Zoe didn't want her to go. She was willing to let her see this through to the end. Let her, Cassie thought sourly, like she was the one who got to make the decisions. But Zoe was also making it clear that after all was said and done, after they'd gone into that cave and found whatever it was they'd been seeking, it was over. They'd come out into the bright sunlight, shake hands, and go their separate ways. Things won't always be like this, Zoe had said. Things are going to change.

Fuck, Cassie thought, almost saying the word aloud. Well, she wasn't going anywhere. Not right now anyway. She had as much right to see what was in that cave as Zoe had. More probably. Wasn't the pebble hers? Well, maybe. More hers than Zoe's, that's for damn sure.

Again, she found herself wondering why she wasn't angry, but she supposed she was madder at herself than she was at Zoe. After all, she'd known what she was getting into. It was her own damn fault, wasn't it? Following a woman she'd hardly known all the way to Greece. Damn, she could be so stupid.

But no, she thought, she couldn't blame Zoe. And she didn't want to hurt her, even if she had been hurt herself. So she thought long and hard about what to say.

Eventually, she began.

"You know, when I was a kid I loved the holidays. But Christmas Day itself, well, that sucked. Always hated it. Still do, a little, I guess."

Zoe opened her mouth to say something then shut it again, obviously thinking it was best to let Cassie say what she wanted... no, needed... to say.

"My mother worked hard, every day of her life. Too hard, probably," Cassie said sadly. "And she did it all for me. But we were never what you'd call secure. Money-wise, I mean. Don't get me wrong, we weren't poor, but we were close. Some times closer than others, if you know what I mean." She caught Zoe's eye and gave a tilt of her head to show that she knew Zoe's childhood had been much worse. "But I always had a roof over my head and food to eat, so I shouldn't complain."

"Come the end of October, it got colder, we started getting snow, the days got darker sooner. There were pretty lights everywhere and decorations and the stores made an effort to change things up and people were friendlier. The town put up a tree in the square. People started singing carols. And you knew presents were coming. My mother always made sure I had at least one present."

"Usually a book, right?" Zoe said with a faint smile.

"More often than not," Cassie said, nodding in agreement. "And then there were friends and family too. So I knew there would be presents appearing under the tree. And it was fun to dream about what those presents would be. Sometimes I'd imagine they would be something amazing, something no one could afford or would dream of letting me have, like a pony or a Red Ryder BB gun or something, other times I'd be more grounded and just dream about more realistic presents, like games and clothes and stuff. And it was fun to drop hints too and hope that my mother was paying close attention, although I don't remember ever being very subtle."

"Don't get me wrong, I wasn't selfish. Well, I don't think so. No more than the next kid, I suppose. Besides, I always found buying presents was just as much fun. The planning, trying to figure out what my mom really wanted, the counting of my allowance, getting to go to a store and pick out the perfect present. You know what I mean. Thinking about how much joy that little present would give, that was so much fun."

"All this time, a month or more, every year, the excitement just kept growing. And that was the best part. The anticipation of something amazing just around the corner."

"And Christmas Day...?" Zoe prompted her.

Cassie shrugged. "Always a disappointment. How could it not be? Don't get me wrong, the presents were good, being with family was nice, and we usually had a good time and a good meal. But it took me until I was about fourteen to realize that after all that build-up, year after year, it was only natural to be a little let down. So I shifted my attitude. I guess I grew up a little. I learned to enjoy the ride more than the destination, I suppose. Now, I enjoy the holidays on my own terms, and if I'm a little disappointed at the end," she shrugged again, "it's not a big deal. I had fun on the way."

Zoe said nothing but took a sip of her beer. She'd hardly drunk any; Cassie's bottle was empty. She wanted another but it could wait. The silence stretched on. And on.

"I have a point," Cassie said finally.

"I'm sure you do."

"We may be disappointed in what we find tomorrow. And as for what comes after that... I think I get what you're saying." Yeah, she got it alright. "Just let me enjoy the chase for now."

Zoe smiled weakly and nodded. "If that's what you want."

Cassie rolled her empty beer bottle between her hands, then cocked her head to listen to the new tune that had started on the jukebox. *Industry*, she recognized, another of the David Devant songs she'd paid for on the jukebox. It was an upbeat tune, and despite the sadness encroaching on her heart, she felt herself tapping a foot in time with the chorus. Screw it, she thought, she had to live in the now. She smiled suddenly, then felt the smile was the only thing holding back her tears.

She got to her feet. "Come on!"

Zoe looked up at her, puzzled. "What?"

"Dance with me."

"I don't think so," Zoe said with a startled laugh.

"Why not? This is a great song."

"I'm more of a Sinatra girl."

"You're kidding, right? So you won't dance?"

Zoe shook her head, then slid out of the booth and stood up. "I have many skills but dancing definitely isn't one of them." She took one of Cassie's hands, squeezed it softly, then kissed her lightly on the top of her head. "I think I need to get to bed. If you really want to explore the cave tomorrow, we'll need to make an early start to get supplies. And that means I'll need my sleep."

Like you'll sleep, Cassie felt like saying pityingly, or at least you won't sleep peacefully, will you? But instead she gave what she hoped was a cheeky grin. "Alright, old blue eyes, whatever you say."

Zoe chuckled at the joke, squeezed her hand once more, then walked out.

Cassie watched her leave. Then the smile faded from her face. Fake it 'til you make it, isn't that what they say? Well, she'd done her best. She sighed and picked up the beer bottles from off the booth table. Noting that Zoe had drunk only about half of hers, she returned them to the bar. She caught the bartender's eye and waggled one of the bottles at him. He nodded and brought her a fresh drink.

She felt like getting drunk. Really drunk. Blind, stinking, totally, utterly drunk. She couldn't, of course, and wouldn't. The last thing she wanted was to do something stupid due to some alcohol-clouded judgment. Still, one more beer wouldn't hurt. Maybe two. Then maybe she'd get an early night too. No point staying up, was there?

Cassie stood at the bar and thought about what had been said, between gulps of chilled beer. She couldn't believe Zoe was telling her it was over. Or would be, at any rate. Oh, she had known reality would have set in sooner or later, that this life of adventure and excitement couldn't last forever. It was just a vacation, wasn't it? And what happened after a vacation? You settled back into your routine. Things would get back to normal, as Zoe had put it. So maybe she should have been expecting this.

But damn it, that didn't make the rejection any easier, did it?

She set the beer bottle down, a little more forcefully than she had planned, and the loud clink made the bartender look up in alarm. She waved an apologetic hand and he turned away. Ah, here was the anger, she realized. Well, she could either stay here and try to blot it out with a few more beers or she could go vent it.

Another song had begun playing over the speakers mounted high on the bar's walls, much louder this time. She glanced over at the jukebox, wondering if someone had turned the volume up somehow. It was the last song she had selected. Just time enough to finish her drink, she thought, nodding along with the chorus. She mouthed the words. 'Next time, I'm going to spend my money on an old-fashioned girl who finds me amusing. Next week, I'm going to come out fighting and I'll put my differences down in writing.'

Hell yeah, Cassie thought. Time to fight for what she wanted.

* * * * *

Zoe was cleaning her teeth when she heard the knock on her door. She rinsed, spat blue-tinged water into the sink, then dried her mouth. She thought about putting a robe on but decided against it. After all, it wasn't as if she was stark naked. A white wifebeater and grey boxer shorts meant she was dressed decently enough, surely?

Besides, she knew who would be at the door. No doubt a second beer had given Cassandra false courage. That woman had a persistent streak which could almost be admired, she thought, although it would probably bring her more pain than joy in her life. She was young and so hadn't learned that particular life lesson yet. She would, Zoe was sadly sure of that; she just hoped she herself wouldn't be the cause of it.

The persistent rapping came again. She sighed. Maybe she could ignore it, pretend she wasn't here. No, that would be cowardly. What did Cassandra want, Zoe wondered? The young woman had made it plain that she wasn't planning on sticking around. She was on vacation, after all, and no doubt would leave as soon as all the fun had been wrung from this little adventure. That story she had told about hating Christmas... well, there was a point, wasn't there? You couldn't get more clear than that. Enjoy the chase, live through the subsequent disappointment, and then

move on.

Damn it. Zoe caught sight of her reflection, its hand touching the old scar on the side of her head, hidden beneath the dark tresses. She lowered her hand self-consciously. Why did the idea of Cassandra leaving her bother her so much? There had been plenty of other women in her life, after all. She grinned at her other self. But in all honesty she had never met another woman with so much life in her.

She walked out of the bathroom and over to the door. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to calm herself. After a second or two, as she let the breath out, she pulled the door open.

Cassandra was leaning against one of the dark wooden beams that supported the overhang. She still had a beer bottle from the bar, Zoe noticed with some amusement. It was almost empty and she saw Zoe looking at it, so placed it awkwardly on the edge of the balcony. The night sky was black behind her and she was partly hidden in shadow. When she looked up, Zoe could see a fire in her eyes. There was that frustrated temper again, she thought.

"I've been thinking," Cassandra said, and then fell silent.

Zoe had to prompt her. "And?"

"After tomorrow things are going to get back to usual, isn't that what you said?"

"That's right."

"Well," said Cassandra forcefully, pushing her way past Zoe and into her hotel room, "this time I get to decide what's usual."

Bemused, Zoe shut the door. Come on in, she thought, why don't you? "Okay, Cassandra, why don't you tell me what you expect to be usual?"

Cassandra had turned back to face her, and was standing in the middle of the room, her arms folded. "I don't know. But I do know that for me it won't be in Wilusa and it won't be without you."

Zoe started at that. It wasn't something she had been expecting. There was definitely anger there, she could sense that easily enough, and she was just as sure it was directed at her, but now something was telling her that there was another reason for it. She wasn't sure how to respond. All she could think of was: "Don't I get a say in this?"

"No, you've already had your say."

"I have?"

"Things are going to change, remember? You made it quite clear that after this you wanted

nothing more to do with me. Well, you don't get to make that decision."

Zoe stared open-mouthed at the younger woman for a second, then burst out laughing. She couldn't help it. Her reaction surprised Cassandra; but hell, it surprised her just as much.

"What's so damn funny?" Cassandra said angrily.

"I'm sorry." Zoe gulped a couple of deep breaths, which wasn't easy, and wiped her watery eyes. She chuckled again and tried to restrain herself. "I really am. Both for laughing and for not being clear. I never said I wanted to be rid of you. I said that I wasn't sure we'd be together."

Cassandra sneered, her temper still high. "Exactly," she said, "and..."

You could almost see the penny drop, Zoe thought. For someone as smart as she was, sometimes this infuriatingly appealing woman could be oblivious to what was right in front of her. Still, she couldn't really blame her. After all, she had made the same mistake, hadn't she?

"Oh," Cassandra said quietly. She was turning a little red, obviously embarrassed and uncomfortable. "You thought..."

Zoe decided to come to her rescue. "I plan on retiring. I told you that. I have a big house in some beautiful countryside and I intend to stay there for a while. No more adventures. No more crime. Just time to think and relax. Maybe catch up on my reading." She added the last bit to try to make the embarrassed Cassandra smile; it worked. "I was worried that you'd find that kind of life boring. I assumed - wrongly, I'm guessing, judging from your little show of stubbornness here - that you wouldn't want to live that life with me."

"Well, why didn't you say that?"

"I thought I had," Zoe admitted, scratching the back of her head.

Cassandra looked more humiliated than ever. "Damn it. I'm such an idiot. I thought..."

"It's okay," Zoe interrupted with a forgiving smile. "The offer's still open, in case you were wondering."

"What?"

"Like I said, it's a big house."

That brought a wide, natural smile to Cassie's face. "You know," she said, a sly look appearing on her face, "it's funny. If I were half as smart as you seem to think I am, I would have realized a lot sooner I was trying to piece together the wrong damn puzzle."

"You were?" If Zoe was bewildered by this sudden change of tack, she was caught taken completely aback by what happened next.

Cassandra peeled off her shirt, lifting the fabric over her head and letting it drop on to the carpet.

Zoe could feel her heart pounding and knew it was both fear and excitement that was making her blood race. She was unable to stop her gaze drifting down, following the line of the slender neck, still marked by that distressing ring of bruises, past the bare shoulders, to the small bust barely concealed by a pale green sports bra, then a little lower...

Holy shit, Zoe swore inwardly, she had a stomach that was almost perfectly flat and the rest of her body was just as toned. She felt the briefest twinge of jealousy, then a little humiliation. She half-turned, conscious of her own body's failings and age, and fervently wishing that she had donned her robe earlier. All the same, she didn't look away.

"You're a thief but not a liar," Cassandra intoned, taking a few steps closer. "You do things that most people couldn't even dream of but at the same time you're scared of such simple little things."

Zoe looked back up and saw that the woman was smiling. But this was no playful smile, no cheeky grin. This was pure sin, poured on thick.

There was barely a hair's breadth separating them now. Zoe felt Cassandra's hands on her hips, the gentle smoothness of her palms on her own skin. She was finding it hard to breathe. She could feel the heat of this woman's body pressing against her. She hardly dared move.

"And you want me," Cassandra said, almost whispering now, her lips so close to Zoe's neck that the soft, warm breath left goosebumps in its wake, "but you won't touch me. Why is that?"

Right now, Zoe honestly didn't have a good answer. She wanted to say as much but the words wouldn't come. Cassandra had slipped a hand beneath the fabric of Zoe's shirt and cupped a breast. "I..." was all she managed to utter but she was finding it impossible to focus. She gasped as Cassandra ran a thumb over the erect nipple, the air shuddering out from her lungs.

Another small hand was deftly slipping under the elastic band of Zoe's boxers, moving down and easing between her legs. Zoe repositioned herself to give Cassandra all the space she needed. The briefest of touches of those slender fingers on her clit made Zoe gasp again, her breathing already growing shorter and more rapid.

She felt Cassandra's arm move upwards and she hastily made a grab for her wrist, keeping her hand locked in place. "Don't stop," she said, half-begging and half-commanding. Anticipation might have been great, but she needed the end result.

Cassandra ignored the plea, instead dropping down to kneel before her. She tugged at the waistband of the shorts, pulling them down past the band-aids on the hips, over the scraped and grazed knees. As the fabric reached the floor, Zoe clumsily stepped out of them. Even now, she felt strangely self-conscious and twisted a little away as if to hide her nakedness. She saw Cassandra looking up at her with a wicked smile, felt her hands on her lower thighs, gently

applying pressure and pushing the legs apart again.

She had to lean back against the dresser to keep her balance, holding on to the edge with both hands, gripping so tight her knuckles were turning white. She felt Cassandra slide a single finger up inside her and for some stupid reason she tried to say something, but all that bubbled up from her throat was an awkward grunt of passion.

A few more rhythmic thrusts and then another finger slipped in. Zoe had to bite her lip to keep from moaning again. When she felt the soft wet touch of Cassandra's tongue circling her clit, she almost drew blood. She was breathing hard now, her nails threatening to break as she dug them into the underside of the wooden dresser.

The younger woman's tongue danced over her clitoris, just as her fingers continued to plunge inside her, and then Zoe's hips bucked uncontrollably, pressing hard against Cassandra's hand. Zoe grunted loudly and her whole body shook for a long moment.

When Zoe had finally stopped shaking, Cassandra rose, her hands smoothly sliding up Zoe's back, maintaining the closeness. Her lips touched Zoe's neck, the tip of her tongue darting out to gently lick the silky skin.

Zoe's breathing was still labored. She made a conscious effort to slow down, to take deeper breaths. It wasn't helping. God, it had been so long.

Just then, something seemed to connect for Zoe and she unfroze, releasing her grip at long last. She flexed her fingers once, trying to ease out the tension she felt in the bones, then grabbed Cassandra and pulled her in tight. She gripped the nape of her neck, compelling the young woman to look up, and then she kissed her, hard, forcing her tongue past the soft pink lips, relishing the heady mix of beer and her own taste.

Zoe kissed Cassandra hard again, to hurt her, not out of meanness but just to make sure she would always remember her. And then she pushed her backwards towards the bed.

11: With Impartial Tread

A trio of roosters crowing woke Zoe, which surprised her. This might be mostly a tourist town, she thought, but there were still some true elements of rural Greek life here. Somewhere close somebody must be keeping chickens. Perhaps one of the fishermen's families.

It was bright in her hotel room. The curtains had been left open last night and now sparkling morning sunlight streamed through the windows and bounced off the white walls. Quiet sounds of traffic, birdsong, and the gentle rolling of the sea filtered in along with the light.

She tried to look over at the alarm clock beside her bed, although it was difficult to do so without moving too much. And she didn't want to move right now, as that might disturb Cassandra. The young woman was laying on her side, close to Zoe, with one arm bent up in front of her face, the fingers loosely touching Zoe's collar-bone. She was breathing lightly and Zoe could feel the warmth of her chest rising and falling against her own ribs, each gentle exhalation raising tiny goosebumps on Zoe's exposed skin.

Zoe twisted a little, banging her head against the large wooden headboard, which was ornately carved in the pattern of a thickly-leaved tree. Seven-thirty, she finally saw. It couldn't be. The clock had to be wrong. Was it really seven-thirty in the morning? Had she really slept for a solid eight hours? Through the night? She knew she had. She felt so rested and peaceful. She felt like weeping she was so happy.

Cassandra moaned softly and shifted in position. Her mouth moved a little, the dry lips brushing against Zoe's neck. She was obviously waking slowly. Zoe dared to lower her right arm and wrapped it down and around the slim waist, her fingers tucking under the thin fabric of the panties.

The movement, or perhaps the touch, made Cassie nuzzle into her neck. Another low moan escaped her mouth and Zoe could feel the vibration of the sound on her own skin. She shuffled a little, rubbing one leg against the other, and felt passion rising within her. How the hell could this woman make her so hot and bothered even when she was asleep? How was that even possible?

The young woman yawned, waking at last, and rubbed at her eyes. After a moment or two, she looked up at Zoe blearily. "Good morning."

"Like you wouldn't believe," Zoe answered. That got a smile. "I slept well."

"Yeah?" It took a moment to sink in, then Cassandra blinked in surprise. "Really? No nightmares?"

"Not a one."

"That's so great."

Cassandra lay down again, resting her head heavily on Zoe's right shoulder, draping an arm across her chest and entwining a leg around hers. It was as if she wanted to trap Zoe here. That

was okay, Zoe decided. Some traps were worth falling into.

She traced a pattern on Zoe's shoulder with a fingertip and it took Zoe a second or two to realize she was following the pattern of a phoenix wing that had once curled around her shoulder and neck. Another of her qualities, Zoe thought, was an astonishingly good memory.

Their eyes met and Cassandra smiled sheepishly. She took her hand away. "I miss your tattoos."

"Something you'll have to get used to, I'm afraid."

"I suppose." She yawned again. "Sorry. You tired me out last night."

Zoe raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you should stay in bed for a while. After all, you'll need your rest."

"Oh," she said with a soft chuckle, "is that a promise?"

Actually, she had been talking about the hard and tiring day they had in front of them, but she could play along. "Well, I don't like to brag, but I was only firing on half-cylinders last night."

"Yeah? You're dangerous when well-rested, are you?"

"You'll find out."

"Now that has to be a promise."

"More of a threat, really."

Cassandra laughed loudly, her body shaking against Zoe's. She shuffled down the bed a little, rolling over on to her front, resting her chin on her hands. Zoe sat up a little, leaning against the ornate headboard.

"I suppose we should be getting up."

"We have time."

"Pity there isn't a pool."

"You could go down to the beach," Zoe suggested, then she added with a little touch of jealousy, "not that you need the exercise."

Cassandra gave her a shy smile at that. "You don't think so?"

"Well, let's just say you have a faultless body and a blameless mind."

"Someone's been reading."

"It was a gift. It would be rude not to." Zoe paused for a second, thinking. "Back on Crete..."

"Yes?"

"You said I was looking for redemption."

"I did?" Cassandra said.

"Well, I was."

"Okay..."

"I mean, I *was*. I thought that was the answer. But I think now I'm just going to have to learn to live with everything I've done. I can't keep trying to make up for it all."

"I don't think you have to. So what are you searching for?"

"I think... I think I'm trying to find home again. But you know what they say, you can't go home again, right?"

Cassandra reached out and took her hand. "Maybe not. But I'll make a new home with you."

If there were sweeter words that could be said, be they in English or ancient Greek verse, right then Zoe couldn't imagine them. She smiled and lifted Cassandra's hand to her lips, kissing it tenderly. "I'm going to take a shower," she said, clambering out of the bed.

* * * * *

Pavlos yawned and scratched under one arm. The taxi driver was annoyed at being woken so early, and disgruntled that what he had told this intrusive American woman hadn't encouraged enough of a reward.

No doubt his good-for-nothing cousin had told him that Hannah had a limitless supply of money. Well, she didn't. In fact, she was getting close to being broke. She could hardly withdraw any more cash from her bank account or use a credit card. No doubt her former colleagues were keeping a close eye on her accounts activity, if they hadn't just gone the whole hog and frozen them all already. What she had brought with her had to do. It would just have to stretch a little further, that's all.

Like him, she had not slept well. The cabin on the ferry from Limnos in Athens may not have been first-class but it was pretty damn comfortable. So she had hidden away there, lying on the soft bunk, and before she knew it she was asleep. And she had only woken when one of the NEL stewards knocked loudly on the cabin door, calling out to her that the six-hour trip was over and the ship was docking in Sigri harbor. She'd been sweating in her sleep, the crumpled and tangled sheets were filthy and soaked, and as soon as she sat up she threw up. It had taken her a good half-hour to compose herself enough to walk off the ship.

Pavlos had been waiting for her at the docks. He'd been told to watch for her by Nikos. She supposed she wasn't particularly hard to miss, if you knew to look for her.

He'd been casting surreptitious glances at her eye all morning, trying to see past the darkened lenses, but had stopped when she had caught him looking. She'd asked him angrily if he had really wanted to see, leaning across the table outside the taverna, getting close, right up in his face, staring at him hard, and of course he had backed down. Everyone backed down. No one had any balls anymore.

"Tell me again," she demanded.

He looked down nervously at the pistol she had in her hands. She was stripping the weapon, ensuring that it was in perfect working order, her hands moving fast, nimbly, professionally. She had been right about the ferries. Getting the pistol on board hadn't posed a problem; the customs officials hadn't even glanced at her, neither at Iraklion, Piraeus or Limnos. Security here was a fucking joke. The gun was a cheap piece of crap, mass-produced by Hellenic Defense Systems, but she figured it would serve. She had bought it a week before in Athens. Just like in every other big city in the world, anything was available for the right price and if you knew the right people. Or at least where to find those people.

"They wanted to see the forest," he said anxiously. "Something about nymphs. They had a guide, a German boy. He works at museum during summer. They climbed the hill, spent about twenty minutes up the crest, then came down."

"Could you see what they were up to?"

He shook his head. "You no see crest from road."

"What's so special about the nymphs?" she asked without looking up. Her fingers were deftly reloading the magazine with glistening bullets, one after the other.

Pavlos didn't know. "They were excited when they came down. Talk, talk, talk." He gestured with his hand to show what he meant. He didn't really need to but seeing as his English was poor it was probably just as well.

"And they are heading back there this morning?"

A nod. "Day is better to see, they said."

Hannah grunted at that. Well, it didn't matter. She couldn't give a shit what they were looking for nor whether they found it or not. What did matter was they were planning on going underground. Pavlos had told her they had asked Gustav to buy climbing gear and lights. What else could they be doing? But even if they weren't, this place would be perfect by the sound of it. Secluded, hidden from view, miles from the nearest town.

But first she had to phone Grace. The bitch might have betrayed her, might not have chosen to believe her, but she would have to eat her words now.

* * * * *

Grace rolled over and slammed a big hand down on her alarm clock. Danny grunted, more in irritation at her stealing the covers than anything else. She doubted he was even awake enough to be aware of what he was doing.

The ringing didn't stop. It kept going even after she hit the clock again, more angrily this time. Her sleep-fuddled brain took a while to figure that out. It wasn't until Danny spoke, mumbling through the duvet, that she got it.

"Are you going to get that?"

It was the phone, she finally realized. She struggled to sit up, reaching out to switch on the bedside lamp, and then picked up the receiver. "Hello? Do you have any idea what fucking time it is?"

The voice on the other end was tinny and distant. "Yes, it's eight in the morning."

Grace yawned and stared at the clock. It said it was a little past ten. She'd only been asleep for less than an hour, after a particularly grueling day answering question after question after question. She was exhausted and had begged Danny for an early night, falling asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. She hadn't even had the energy to fool around.

Danny hadn't really minded the early night, she thought. He wasn't really comfortable here in Los Angeles. He was simply a small-town guy and that meant he was out of his element here. But he had insisted on being with her when she had been recalled to the city, which was really sweet of him. Her apartment was too small for the both of them though, even if it was blessedly high above the clouds of smog that covered the city.

"Eight?" she said groggily. "Where the hell are you calling from?"

"Greece."

She almost dropped the phone in shock. She knew she should have recognized the voice but the bad line and the disturbed night had slowed her senses. Grace elbowed Danny hard, hitting him in the upper arm. He grunted again and turned over a little more, trying his best to ignore her, but she wouldn't give up prodding him until he sat up too.

"What?" he said angrily.

She ignored him and instead talked into the phone. "Greece? Oh, Hannah, tell me you haven't done something stupid."

The name got Danny's attention. Suddenly, like her, he was wide awake. He mouthed something

to her but she was concentrating on what Hannah was saying and couldn't make it out.

"She's alive, Grace."

"Cassie?" Oh, thank God, Grace thought. Danny was frantically signaling to her now. She waved him off but turned the receiver so he could hear.

"No, not her," she heard Hannah say. Then who could she mean? "Mercouri."

Grace could hardly believe what she was hearing. "What? You're not making any sense..."

"I don't know how she did it and frankly I don't really care. But she's alive."

"That's impossible, Hannah. You saw her body..."

"Don't call me a fucking liar!" Hannah snapped angrily. "I saw her yesterday, walking around, eating at a restaurant, catching a plane. You think you can do any of that if you're dead?"

"Hannah..."

"Wayward came out here to meet her. I told you, didn't I? I told you the two of them had planned everything together. But you wouldn't listen. Well, I'll prove it."

"How?"

"I'm going to make sure she stays dead this time."

"Hannah," Grace tried to keep her tone calm and level, "come home, face up to what you've done."

"The investigation? So no bookkeeping errors then?"

"No."

"But you're my partner; you've got my back, right?"

It was hard to miss the heavy sarcasm in those words, Grace thought. "I've resigned, Hannah. That's all I can do."

"Same old Grace. Always scared of commitment."

"Hannah..."

"You never liked seeing something through to the end, did you, Grace? Good thing for everyone that I do."

There was a click and the line went dead.

"Fuck," Grace said. She held on to the receiver for a moment, staring at it, then slowly returned it to the cradle. She looked over her shoulder to see Danny was getting dressed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going out there."

"To Greece?"

"Yes, of course, to Greece."

"Don't be stupid..."

He whirled around, venting his anger on her. "She's not going to hurt Cassie! Can you understand that? I won't let her!"

"Danny, just think for a second." She touched his arm, very gently. "Please."

He hesitated. She could see his anger bubbling away just under the surface and knew he was doing his best to control it.

"You have to get a flight," she told him. "Then that's probably at least a day's worth of travelling before you could even get to Athens. And then you don't have a clue where Cassie is. If Hannah's going to do something, you'll never get there in time." She hated saying this to him, hated having to point out how futile his actions would be, but knew it had to be said.

"Okay," he said slowly, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "So what do I do?"

She handed him the phone. "You call Cassie and warn her. That's all we can do right now."

* * * * *

Cassie woke to the sound of her cellphone loudly rattling its way across the dresser. She must have fallen asleep again after Zoe left her. She stretched, yawning again, then slid out of the bed and padded over to pick up her phone. She felt a little self-conscious walking around naked but doubted anyone was going to see her. She could hear the shower still running, so thankfully she couldn't have been asleep for long. She imagined Zoe would tease her for the rest of the day if she had found her sleeping.

The caller ID told her it was Danny calling. He had given her this phone a few days before she left, telling her he gotten her a temporary international plan and already programmed in all the numbers she had needed. She was surprised he hadn't called her earlier. She knew Grace had kindly promised to try to keep him from calling her every day but she doubted the FBI agent would have any luck, especially since what had happened.

She flipped the phone open as she climbed back into the warm bed. "Hey, Danny, what's up?"

"Cassie, I..."

"You know, I can't thank you and Grace enough for this trip."

She could sense the smile creeping over his face. "Are you having fun?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. Guess where I am. Go on, guess."

"I don't know. Listen, Cassie..."

She interrupted him again. "Lesvos! Can you believe it? It's beautiful here, Danny, you should..."

"Hannah just called Grace."

She felt cold all of a sudden. "I thought..."

"I know. A lot has happened since you left."

"I'm listening." It was all Cassie could say. She lay there on the bed, one hand on her head, staring at the ceiling as she listened to Danny telling her how Hannah was being investigated by the FBI's Internal Affairs on suspicion of corruption, how she had disappeared from the hospital and then right off the map, and how she had called Grace. Finally, he told her that Hannah had admitted to being in Greece and following her.

Cassie felt her blood turn to ice at the idea that Hannah could be here on the island. She glanced around nervously, even though she knew it was stupid to do so, then glanced at the hotel door, making sure it was locked.

"You remember how she threatened you?"

"I remember," she said quietly.

"So does she. She's looking to hurt you, Cassie. Maybe even worse." When she said nothing, he obviously felt the need to add something. "I wish I was there."

"It's okay, Danny. We... I'll handle it." Fuck, why had she said that? She hit her head with her fist. She was so damned stupid!

There was a hesitation. He must have noticed it. Oh, please, please think she's just found some local girl.

"So it's true?"

Oh crap. "What's that?" she said with a calmness she didn't really feel. Maybe she could still bluff her way out of this. The shower had stopped. Her heart was really pounding now. She felt

like panicking.

"Mercouri's alive, isn't she?"

"Yes." She had wanted to lie, to protect Zoe if nothing else, but she just couldn't. Not to Danny.

"How is that possible?"

"It's one hell of a long story, Danny. She's gone straight, I swear, and she's not coming back to the States and we're..."

He interrupted her now. "Was anything Hannah said true?"

"No," Cassie said quickly, "no, I swear, Danny. You have to believe me. I didn't even know who Zoe was until the robbery."

There was a longer pause. She could hear Grace talking in the background and then Danny was saying something but it was muffled and indistinct. He must have been discussing it with Grace, maybe holding his hand over the phone.

"Danny?"

"Are you happy?"

"What?" The question surprised her.

"We have a bad connection, Cassie," Danny said, "I haven't heard much of what you said. Static, I guess. Hopefully, you've heard some of what I've said."

She felt tears running down past her ears and into her hair as she lay there, and she tried to brush them away. God, she didn't deserve to have him as a friend, she really didn't.

"Yeah, it's a bad line, Danny. And yes, I'm very happy."

"Well, that's all that matters. Promise me you'll be careful."

"I will."

"And that you'll call me

"Yes, Danny. I promise."

"I don't suppose I can ask you to go to the police?"

"You know me, Danny, I don't trust cops."

"Yeah, right." There was a moment's silence and she could hear Grace saying something. "Alright, alright, I will," Danny was saying. "Grace sends her love."

He hung up. She sniffled. Damn, these tears wouldn't stop. She threw the cellphone down on the bed. Damn it, she couldn't believe Hannah was here. She should have told Zoe everything, right from the get-go. She had to tell her now, that was for sure, but god alone knew what her reaction would be. Cassie wouldn't blame her if she left, walked right out. Crap, she had been so damn stupid.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at her hands. She was shaking. Was that because of anger, fear? Fear of what Zoe would say or of what Hannah would do to her? She'd hardly been able to escape her last time. What chance did she have now? And she knew Zoe was alive. What did that mean? And she'd told Grace. What about Grace? Danny she could trust to keep his mouth shut. But Grace might talk... and if she did... No, she wouldn't. That's what Danny had been telling her, when she sent her love. Digging up Mercouri would probably cause more trouble for Grace than she would want right now, what with Internal Affairs hassling her. And it would piss off Danny, too, and she had a pretty strong feeling that was last thing Grace wanted. So Zoe's resurrection was still secret, she was sure of that.

She heard the bathroom door open and hurriedly tried to dry her eyes. Zoe walked back in, still drying her hair furiously with a thick blue towel. She was naked from the waist up, wearing only a fresh pair of boxers. The towel hung over her head, so she didn't see Cassie or her tears at first. It was only when she stood before the mirror that hung at the back the dresser, that she caught sight of Cassie's reflection.

"What's wrong?" she said, turning.

Slowly, Cassie looked up at her. She had to do this; she had to tell her. "You want to know how I got these bruises?" she finally said, touching her neck.

"Only if you want to tell me."

Cassie had been concerned that there might have been anger in Zoe's voice but no. There wasn't even worry, just a sincere self-confidence that whatever it was, she could take care of it. All the doubts that had been laying Zoe low had disappeared. She was cheerful and sunny all of a sudden. It was good to see. It gave Cassie a little hope.

Zoe stood by Cassie for a moment, reaching down and resting her hand on her cheek. She wiped away some of the tears with her thumb. Her hand moved down, slowly and gently, touching the marked neck. Her fingers lingered on those bruises, now yellowing.

The tears wouldn't stop, damn it. Cassie wiped the length of her forearm against her face and sniffled noisily again. God, this was embarrassing.

Zoe knelt down in front of her and took hold of her hands. "It's okay. Whatever it is, I'll face it with you."

Cassie gave her a watery smile, took a deep breath, then told her the whole story.

* * * * *

The outcrop looked very different in the stark light of day. Cassie saw Zoe checking the shadows and she couldn't really blame her. It was unnerving to say the least. Everything looked so normal this morning. She tried joking about it but Zoe wasn't biting.

She supposed the older woman was still a little mad at her. She had said she wasn't but Cassie wasn't so sure. Crap, why hadn't she told her earlier? But how was she supposed to know Hannah would be so psychotic to follow her here? She'd been looking over her shoulder all morning, even though Zoe had told she should act as natural, but she hadn't seen anything. They'd called Gustav, who had turned up quickly with everything they'd asked for, although quite how he'd managed in such a short space of time, Cassie honestly didn't know. And a tired-looking Pavlos was waiting for them when they left the hotel, just as he'd promised, and he'd driven them out here without complaint. Her paranoia must have been catching, Cassie thought, because Pavlos had kept checking his rearview mirror.

"I don't think we'll be able to move that," Zoe said, indicating the huge boulder that blocked the cave's entrance.

They'd found the cave after about half-an-hour's intense searching. It was hard to remember exactly where the shadows had pointed. Cassie had thought it would be easy but instead had been surprised at how different everything looked. She saw rocks and shrubs she hadn't noticed yesterday in the dark and those threw her off. They had to shoo some ravens away from the top of the boulder, although the birds hadn't been keen to leave their perch.

Cassie looked at the narrow gap behind the large rock. "I don't think we'll have to. I'm pretty sure I can squeeze through." She glanced back at Zoe. "You too, I guess."

"You guess?"

Cassie tried smiling to show it was just a stupid joke, but Zoe turned away, crouching to rummage through her backpack. She slid her sunglasses up and began readying their equipment. Back at the hotel, she had told Cassie she would go first, just in case.

Cassie watched as Zoe flattened herself against the sloping hill, bracing her knees, and shuffled sideways, edging herself slowly through the gap. Despite Cassie's weak joke, she looked like she had to breathe in. And even so, the rock must have been scraping against her back, scratching at the bare skin on her legs. She swore once when the fabric of her shirt caught on a jagged piece of rock and she had to tug until she was free. She kept moving. She had the flashlight in her right hand so she could see a little of what lay ahead, Cassie could see the beam waving around as she moved. Zoe kept moving, inch by inch, further through the gap, eventually disappearing from view. A moment later, she called to Cassie.

"What do you see?" Cassie asked her eagerly.

"Very little." Her voice was echoing. "Some of this doesn't look natural though. Pass the backpacks through."

Cassie sealed up both the rucksacks and pushed them through, one at a time. She had to crunch them up a little to get them past the rocks, then wait while Zoe groped for them. Then came her turn. It was a tight squeeze even for her and she was a little slimmer than Zoe, at least in her build. On the other hand, at least she didn't have to crouch when she finally made it through. The ceiling of the chamber she found herself in was so low the taller woman was having to keep her head ducked all the time. The air was musty but dry, Cassie noted, and smelt of something moldy and rotten.

She switched on her own flashlight and took a look around. "I see what you mean. These walls have definitely been carved, crudely, but carved." The twin beams of light fluttered around, creating small circles of grayish-brown amidst all the black. The walls were rough but not enough to be entirely natural. It was like someone had found the cave and started work on it, to change it, to make it into something else, although quite what eluded Cassie. Or perhaps it had been completed. Who knew how long this cave had existed? Maybe at one point, thousands of years in the past, the walls had been smooth, the ceiling unblemished, but over time nature had taken its toll, reclaiming the cave. No matter how good your workmanship was, not many things lasted for a couple of millennia.

They had to be careful when they moved. Although the floor looked pretty even, there were still some stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

"There's a passageway over here," Zoe called out.

Cassie followed the beam of Zoe's flashlight and saw another narrow gap at the top of a pile of rocks, caught between two smooth vertical walls. It once might have been a passageway but it looked like most of the ceiling had collapsed and now this rock pile blocked the way. She wondered briefly what had caused it.

"Looks pretty risky," Zoe said.

"You do want to go back?"

"I didn't say that." Zoe scrambled up the rock pile, her booted toes sending little avalanches of pebbles scattering down to the floor.

"Be careful." It didn't need to be said. This wasn't exactly the wisest thing to do.

Zoe lay flat against the top of the pile of rubble. Cassie could see some of the sharper rocks digging deep into the fabric of her shirt, although she didn't complain. She peered through the gap, then looked back at Cassie. "Pass me a lantern." Cassie got one from a backpack and handed it up to, then watched as Zoe pushed the lantern through the gap and lowered it as far as she could. You could hear it tumbling down the other side of the rocks, rolling down across the floor,

the light almost strobing through the narrow space until it came to rest. "Definitely a passageway. And man-made."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Zoe said over her shoulder. "The walls are too straight and even for anything natural. Besides, there's some kind of carving on the walls, I can't make it out. I can't see much further but I think it opens up a little. Probably another cave."

"Any other blockages?"

"Not that I can see." She looked back at Cassie and smiled, her teeth white in the ray of Cassie's flashlight. "Almost there. Last chance to change your mind."

"Are you kidding?" Cassie said. She felt a ton of relief at that smile, as if it was forgiveness. "We've come this far and you want to turn back?"

"Just checking." Zoe turned back and began wriggling through the small opening. It wasn't easy, Cassie could see that. Zoe had a fairly trim body and so wasn't all skin and bones, but even so there was more than enough space for her to get through. The problem was, however, that the rock pile wasn't very stable. As she scrambled over the crest of the mound, the surface beneath her shifted, sending more rocks and pebbles scattering. There was nothing to hold on to either, so she could hardly pull herself up. Instead she was forced to keep pushing upwards with her feet, loosening even more rocks.

Eventually, however, she disappeared from sight and tumbled down the other side in a clutter of sound. She swore as she tumbled.

Cassie jumped forward, scrambling up the rocks as fast as she could.

"Zoe? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Zoe called back. "Come on through. Just watch that first step, it's a doozy."

Cassie passed the rucksack containing the other lanterns through first, and then made her own way through the gap. As she reached the other side of the pile, she stumbled and Zoe had to catch her to keep her from falling. Crap, she thought, that was tough. And Zoe had made it look easy. Well, easier. She thanked Zoe and recovered her flashlight that she had dropped during her progress. Luckily they built these things tough these days. She looked around her. As Zoe had said, it was a corridor, with walls carved out of the solid rock beneath the hill. She pointed her flashlight down the corridor. She could see where the walls ended, each curving back as the corridor changed to a chamber, but it was hard to see anything more.

"What do you make of these carvings?"

"Pretty crude, aren't they?"

"They look like a river. I mean, two parallel waving lines, right? Like on a map." Zoe bent down and recovered the lantern, which she set at about waist-height on the debris behind them before switching it on. The light wasn't that powerful but it was a blessed relief after all the stygian darkness. She glanced up at the ceiling, studying the large concave gap from where the rocks had fallen and all the cracks that spread out from it like a dying spider's legs. She sighed and then returned her attention to the walls. She swung her flashlight from one wall to the other. "On both sides. Doesn't that resemble a stylized river?"

Cassie reached out and touched one of the walls, running her fingers along the deep grooves. "Maybe." She reached the rock pile, noticing that the grooves disappeared behind it and whatever else was carved there was hidden from sight.

"Let's hope it's not another map," Zoe said, rolling her eyes.

"No, it's not a map. I think it's a snake."

"A snake? Why would they carve a snake into the wall?"

Cassie shrugged then realized that Zoe might not be able to see her. "I don't know. Let's keep going."

Together, shoulder to shoulder, they made their way slowly down the passage. They walked cautiously, wary of the loose stone fragments on the floor. As they moved, Cassie kept her eyes on the undulating carving on the wall. With each peak and trough, the carving grew less crude and more detailed and ornate. After a few feet she was able to make out the faint details of scales between the two deeply gouged lines. She was right; it had been a serpent of some kind, although the over-exaggerated size of the whole thing still made her wonder.

She didn't even notice they were approaching the end of the corridor until Zoe spoke.

"Holy crap," she heard the woman whisper.

Cassie looked up from the carvings on the wall, shone her flashlight forward and saw what Zoe saw.

"Yeah," she said in awed tones, "that pretty much says it all."

* * * * *

Pavlos unscrewed the bottle he was holding and took a long swig of ouzo. He had promised his wife he wouldn't drink any more but then promises were so hard to keep these days, what with one thing and another. He sat on a large boulder, feeling the sun beat down and slowly warm the hard rock beneath him. The ouzo was warm and burned his throat as he swallowed it.

His mother would be disappointed in him for failing to keep his wife happy. But that wasn't so unusual. It was the province of all Greek men to disappoint their mothers, he thought. In a good

summer there were so many mothers sighing.

He was beginning to wish he'd never let his cousin talk him into this. Easy money, his lousy cousin Nikos had said. Just a little driving, a little spying, and a ton of cash. And he'd agreed. You'd think he would be old enough to know better. There was no such thing as easy money, especially where that fool Nikos was concerned. Just because he lived on Crete he thought he was a bigshot, always telling the family what to do. Well, the driving and spying, that had been easy enough, he supposed. Saint Irene, even all the waiting was easy. But that damn blonde woman with the scar scared the shit out of him.

He glanced at his watch. Past eleven. He'd been waiting here for over thirty minutes now. He'd called the American as soon as the two women had started up the trail. She should be here any time soon, if she was leaving from Sigri as she had said.

What three tourists wanted with this pile of junk, he didn't know. He didn't exactly see why anyone would be interested in a bunch of rocks, even rocks that had once been trees, although he kind of doubted that particular theory no matter how true everyone said it was.

But then these American women were all crazy. Well, all women were crazy in his experience. But foreign women were crazier still and American women the craziest of the lot. He didn't know how American men put up with them. Or survived, come to think of it. Maybe it was the blonde hair that did it. All three were crazy, all three had blonde hair. Maybe there was some correlation there. You didn't see good brunette Greek women traipsing around, getting excited over a bunch of rocks, chasing each other; for whatever reason.

Another taxi, a battered Citroën that had seen better days, pulled up behind his own dusty BMW. He saw the scarred woman get out of the back seat. She was wearing the same clothes he'd seen when she'd woken him that morning by constant ringing the doorbell on his apartment. That had pleased the wife. Money's money, he had told her, especially these days. It hadn't made much difference. She was still going to be in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Thank god for the scar. Without it, his wife would have been a lot more suspicious of his early start to the day. Marriage is all a matter of balance, after all. You marry a pretty girl and you'll be unhappy, always doubting her actions. You marry an ugly girl, you won't care, but she'll always be suspicious of you. Balance was the key. He made a promise to himself to use some of the money to buy his wife a present. Another promise that he probably wouldn't keep.

The scarred woman was arguing with her driver. It was Yanni, he noticed, driving his father's car. Good to see the boy helping out the family. Yanni looked over at him and Pavlos shrugged in a 'what-can-you-do' gesture. By then the woman had given up and was paying the no doubt exorbitant fee Yanni was charging her for the short trip. It was hard to argue in a foreign language. She knew no Greek, he knew that much. He doubted she spoke any language other than English. Most Americans didn't. Those other two, well, they were the exception that proved the rule.

As Yanni drove by, honking his horn in greeting to Pavlos, the woman walked over. He crossed himself, hopefully quickly enough so she wouldn't notice, then jumped off the rocks. He'd never

asked her name; didn't dare to. He supposed it didn't matter. Money's money, after all. He sighed.

"They up there?"

He nodded. He didn't trust himself to say anything.

She pulled the gun out of the waistband of her shorts, checked it over quickly. Pavlos nervously played with the bottle cap. He really needed another drink but he didn't dare while she was here.

The woman gave him a wad of cash. As he counted it, she seemed to think for a little while and then dug in her pockets, giving him everything she had, every note, every coin. She even gave him a box of matches and a half-full pack of cigarettes. He didn't smoke but he thanked her and took them anyway. She looked pretty solemn when she handed it all over. It was like she was divesting herself of all her worldly goods. That old saying came back to him. You can't take it with you.

He looked up at her, puzzled and worried. She smiled at him and he shivered again. That smile really did scare the shit out of him.

* * * * *

The look on Cassandra's face alone was worth the trek, Zoe had decided. The shorter woman stared open-mouthed at the cavernous chamber that lay before them, her eyes wide and her pale skin illuminated by the lantern's light. And something else, Zoe saw, as there was something in the walls that reflected the sparse light. Flecks of phosphorous maybe.

She knew she probably had a similar look on her own face, although maybe not quite as goofy-looking. She chuckled, hoping Cassandra would not notice her amusement. But damn, she was cute, if with that silly stunned expression. Cassandra stood stock still, entranced by the wonders she saw, overawed by something that no human eye had laid sight on for centuries, if not millennia. Her innocence, her naivety, her sheer joy at being a part of all this; it made the world-weary Zoe feel so happy.

Zoe sighed. It was a pity that the danger she had only feared before had now coalesced into something real. Still, nothing could be done about that now. Better to face danger, to stare it down, than to run from it, if standing meant the danger would end. One way or another.

She'd told Cassandra as much, back in the hotel room, once the younger woman had done telling her what had happened back in North Dakota. Sometimes you don't get to draw extra cards; you just have to play the hand you're dealt from the start and hope for the best. In those kinds of situations, it always came down to who bluffed the best.

Besides, things would work out for she was lucky. She'd realized that upon waking this morning. She had suffered many misfortunes, that was true, but all were of her own doing, and even so, look at her life now. She had more money than most people would know what to do with, knew secrets that no one else knew, and had someone to share those secrets with, if she so wished. All she needed now was a little peace of mind.

So she was lucky. How else could she explain it? Fate, perhaps? Oh yes, she liked that idea. A little egotistical, maybe, she thought, but a nice idea. To go from so much darkness and into so much light, that suggested a destiny, didn't it? She ran a hand through her hair, feeling the spot where the bone had never set properly. It felt like it had happened so long ago. She pulled her hand away sharply, angry at herself for touching the past again. She would never be rid of it but she had to try to move on. She promised herself, live through this day, and more importantly ensure Cassandra lived, and she'd never think of it again.

Zoe placed one of the lanterns on a nearby boulder, made sure it was stable, then looked back to see Cassandra stepping forward, moving slowly and cautiously down the few stone steps that led to the stone-slabbed circular floor.

The roof of the chamber was supported by the largest object visible, a huge pillar that rose up from deep within the ground and blossomed out, stretching stone fingers across and into the earth above their heads, like wooden beams in an old building. If it wasn't natural, and Zoe thought most likely it was, then it had been very crudely carved. It reminded Zoe of something but she couldn't think what. It looked incredibly strong, as if it were holding up the entire earth.

She watched as her young companion circled the pillar, looking up and down its length. She reached out to touch it at one point, and then snatched her hand away, as if when her skin had almost made contact static had shocked her. She caught Zoe's eye, smiled in embarrassment, and bravely laid her palm against the stone. Something about the contact made her close her eyes contentedly.

Zoe began setting up the other lanterns, following Cassandra down into the chamber. She placed one by the feet of one of the three statues that were standing evenly-spaced in a circle around the pillar. They were darker than the stone around them and it wasn't until more light hit them that Zoe realized they were not stone but instead cast of bronze and were astonishingly well-sculpted. Zoe believed she hadn't seen finer examples of the severe style outside some of the richer museums. They couldn't have been as old as the chamber, that went without saying, but they were still ancient.

She brushed dust off the inscription at the bare feet of the statue she crouched by. *Asterope*. It didn't mean anything to her. It certainly wasn't one of the Muses this time. The statue was of a female figure of stark beauty, clad in simple chiton robes, holding a wax writing tablet in one hand and a large vase under the other arm. All three were similar, but subtly different, most noticeably in what they carried. All held vases, but one held a lyre and the other was empty-handed, but had her face covered by a veil.

She looked over at Cassandra, thinking of asking her, but saw the woman was still admiring the pillar, although now she was frowning. She kept quiet and instead turned, looking for somewhere to place the last lantern.

Zoe saw now that the parallel, wavy lines continued around the chamber's wall. If Cassandra was right (and Zoe was beginning to believe she always was) and it was a snake, then they had seen

nothing but its body. The head and tail must have been hidden by the rockfall they had clambered over earlier. She wondered what the carving meant.

The last remaining item of interest within the chamber was a large, oblong stone structure, a thick slab topping it, with images and writing ornately carved into the sides. There was no missing what it was. An ancient coffin. Zoe shivered. She crossed over to it, thought twice about lowering the lamp onto the slab, then decided it was mere superstition that made her hesitate.

She called over her shoulder. "What do you make of this?"

Cassandra turned away from the pillar and moved to stand beside her. "It's a sarcophagus," she said reverentially, then looked around again. She shivered. "This whole place is a sepulcher."

"Interesting. Any idea who's buried here?"

"Interred," Cassandra said, crouching to read the inscription.

"What?"

"Interred, not buried."

"Whatever," Zoe said with a smile. Sooner or later she'd learn not to argue with Cassandra, at least not where this kind of stuff was concerned.

Cassandra ran her fingers along the writing, her fingertips tracing each one. They were thickly caked in dust and the passing of time had eroded many of the characters. She had to shuffle along the rocky ground as she read, as the inscription ran all the way around each side of the sarcophagus.

Zoe could have probably read the inscription quicker but she knew this was something the other woman not only wanted to be involved in, but to solve. It was important to her. And, Zoe admitted to herself, Cassandra probably much had a much better chance of understanding the meaning behind the words than she would. Besides, there was no harm in taking a backseat for once.

"Could it be Sappho?" Zoe asked.

Cassandra shook her head. "Maybe but I don't think so. There's no name here. It's a poet of high renown though."

"Bard, I think," Zoe suggested tentatively.

"Are you sure?"

Zoe nodded. "Small difference, I'm sure it doesn't matter."

"It might do. A bard who saw the world unfold around her..." She looked up at Zoe and grinned. "Sounds like you."

"I'm no writer."

"And kept the world in check... no, in balance... by standing with the darkness to show light the way. Means nothing to me." Cassandra stood up and dusted off her knees. She gave Zoe a stern look. "I hope you're not thinking of opening it."

"Are you kidding? You think even both of us could lift that? Besides, it's empty."

"What? How do you know?"

Zoe indicated a large crack in the top of the slab. Through it, the dim light from their flashlights shone on an empty interior.

Walking back over to the statues, Zoe gingerly touched the arm of one, feeling the chilled metal beneath her fingertips, ran her hand down to the vase... and accidentally knocked the lid off. It hit the floor with a loud clank, and the ringing as it spun for a second before settling echoed around the chamber.

"Shit," she said in shock. "There are scrolls in here." It was true. The vase was hollow and housed at least half-a-dozen rolled up scrolls. She reached in and drew a slim one out. Like the others, it was encased in a leather slip that amazingly still felt slightly slick with protective oils, with the twin tips of the wooden roll-holders jutting out of each end. In places though, the leather was dry and cracked, and pieces crumbled from her very touch.

It was so incredibly fragile, she regretted instantly at having even opened the jar. The seal must have been keeping the scrolls safe from the elements, she realized, for all these centuries. And now she had doomed the scrolls as surely as if she had thrown them on a fire. She glanced up at the other vases.

Cassandra immediately rushed over to her side, almost tripping over some of the debris in her haste. It was clear she wanted to snatch the scroll from Zoe's hands but she dared not. Instead she reached out to pull another from the vase, so very carefully.

Zoe watched as Cassandra gradually eased the leather casing off, inch by inch. She twisted the scroll around so as to unroll it. The parchment splintered as she did so, tiny fragments breaking off and scattering over the floor. She read, her brow furrowing in concentration.

"There's a name... 'My mother, Hekabe, daughter of Eunoe, daughter of the gods, has...' She paused, struggling over the translation, "'forgiven...' I think that's right... 'has forgiven her for robbing...' no, 'for stealing me away...'"

"There are universities and museums with the ability to deal with these," Zoe suggested, interrupting. "We'd get a good price for them too."

Cassandra looked up sharply at her. "You want to sell them?" There was the tiniest hint of disapproval in her voice.

"What did you think we were going to do with them?"

"I don't like the idea of being a grave robber."

Zoe raised an eyebrow and smiled sardonically. "Hmm, well it's probably just as well. I need to keep a low profile and explaining where they came from would be difficult at best. Anyway, you're not exactly the Indiana Jones type."

"You're teasing me."

"Just a little."

"So do we leave them all here?"

"If you really want these scrolls to be cared for, it's going to have to be done by specialists. That's going to be difficult. I suppose we could bribe one of the locals to say he found this place. That would keep our names out of it, although it's a big risk to take. Word might get out."

Cassandra nodded. "Maybe it's better if it's left undisturbed. I just feel so selfish even thinking that, though."

"Don't. I think you're right." Zoe looked around the chamber as Cassandra carefully rolled up the scroll again. "I still don't get the last line of the puzzle though. What the hell does any of this have to do with hanging horses and the end of the world?"

"World's end," Cassandra said quietly, her brow furrowing in thought.

"Same difference. Do you think it might be a reference to a life coming to an end?" Cassandra didn't answer. She was staring at the huge central pillar again. Zoe didn't get the fascination.

"What else could it be? There's nothing else around here. We're in the middle of a non-existent forest. The answer has to be here somewhere."

She winced suddenly as Cassandra grabbed hard at her arm.

"How stupid can I be?" The younger woman exclaimed. "You were right the first time. Just like you were with the stars."

"Okay, if you say so..."

"It *was* Kallisto but also a reference to Kalliste, don't you get it?"

Zoe thought back to the astronomical frieze they had studied back on Crete. "The island?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm sure they meant this place. No, it's this." She pointed at the pillar. "That's what all this has been leading to."

"That rock?"

"It's not a rock."

It dawned on Zoe suddenly. "Oh, it's a tree, right?"

"It's *the* tree. And it's not the end of the world; it really is world's end!"

"You said that already."

"I mean it's not referring to a time but a place. It's another double-meaning."

"Like..." Zoe thought it over. She wasn't sure she was following. "Are you saying, the Ancient Greeks thought this island was the end of the world? That makes no sense."

"Not geographically, maybe, but if you know what's here..."

"And what is here?" She saw where Cassandra was looking. "What? That tree? Sorry, *the* tree?"

"The Norse called it Ygraddsil. The Anglo-Saxons anthropomorphized it into their Green Man." As she spoke, Zoe finally realized where she was going with this. "Some say it's mentioned in *Cad Goddeu*. The pagan Germanic tribes called it Irminsul. But the Ancient Greeks called it..."

"Hesperides," Zoe finished for her. She could hardly believe it. "And Kalliste means..."

"For the most beautiful," Cassandra said in hushed tones, awed by the tree towering over her.

"Fitting really," Zoe said quietly, watching her.

"What?"

"I said..." Zoe smiled. "Well, never mind what I said. So Kalliste is something to do with the golden apples, right? That trouble that caused the Trojan War?"

Cassandra nodded. "The apple of discord. Funny really." She put her hand on the side of the pillar again. The tree, Zoe corrected herself, and on its bark, she supposed. "It's been here a long, long time."

"So old Hamilton did know. He *must* have done."

"I suppose so," Cassandra said. She knelt down and began to poke among the rocks that littered the base of the tree, picking up tiny pebbles, discarding some, pocketing others. Zoe could see

now, that once the jumble of debris might once have been thick roots, fertile and alive, although long since fossilized and broken into mere rubble.

"His warning, I mean. He wasn't talking about the ambrosia. It was this tree." She looked up at the roof, seeing now, as if for the first time, how what she had thought of as support beams were actually the solidified branches. It was sad in a way. Something once so alive, always so unbelievable, now lost forever. "And what it might have offered."

"Immortality," Cassandra said, so quietly Zoe almost didn't hear her.

"Still," Zoe went on, "there's one last part we haven't figured out yet. What the hell is a hanging horse?"

Cassandra shrugged. "I have no idea."

"I do," said a soft voice from behind them.

12: Only Those Who Strive Mightily

Despite knowing who it would be, Cassandra was startled by the interruption and spun around. She looked... not scared, but apprehensive, even going so far as to take an instinctive step backwards. She banged into the solid tree, stumbled a little, regained her footing and looked upwards at the towering form, the stone branches reaching out over her, perhaps sheltering her.

Zoe turned more slowly, a knowing smile spreading across her face. "You took your time. We were beginning to wonder if you would ever show up."

Hannah Hudson walked down the chamber steps gradually. She was dusty and a little disheveled from her climb but no more than they. Like them she wore light clothing, a sky-blue tee and white shorts. Large sunglasses hid her eyes and Zoe found herself wondering why she had kept

them on during the dark traverse of the cave. It must have made the scramble over the rock pile a lot harder.

Hannah had a hard, stern look on her face. More alarming than that, one hand held a large caliber pistol. "Let me guess," she said quietly, "Grace called you."

"Sheriff Reeve actually," Zoe admitted, "but it amounts to the same."

The thin, almost gangly woman grunted in acknowledgement. "Hmm. Do you know how I found this place? It wasn't easy. But you tore your shirt on the rocks at the entrance. A rag and a rock, that's all it took. You're getting careless in your old age, Zoe. I've had to speak to you about that before."

And you're getting psychotic in yours, Zoe thought, but said nothing. If she had ever doubted Cassandra's explanation of events as she had told them this morning, and she for not one second had she, she knew the truth now. There was a madness about Hannah. It hung around her like a cloud of flies pestered a rotting corpse. It was evident in the way she moved, the way she spoke, the way she breathed.

Maybe it had always been there, hidden just below the surface of respectability and normalcy. In all the years she'd been pursued by this woman, Zoe had never seen it. But had she ever truly looked?

"The horse of the hanged is another name for the gallows," Hannah told them. She had reached the chamber floor now and came to a halt. The gun was kept level, aimed between the two women, although Zoe thought she detected a slight shake. Perhaps Hannah was a little out of breath after her rushed journey here. "Appropriate, considering where we have ended up. But why would you want to know about that, I wonder?"

There had been a gentle decency in the way she spoke once, even if what she said was hard and unbending. Now each word was laden with anger and hatred and... was it sadness? Right now, Zoe was finding it hard to care.

"It's a long story. One that's gone on too long, most likely."

"Well, I can help you both bring it to an end. So this is what you were after?" She waved the gun casually around her, indicating the statues, the sarcophagus, and the circular chamber as a whole. She could not have heard much of their conversation save the very end, Zoe deduced, for she paid no attention whatsoever to the tree. She clucked disapprovingly. "Still obsessed with this... junk."

"You could say that," Zoe said. She kept her voice low and even, her tone placatory.

"And what's it all for? I mean, what are you two planning to do with all this? Sell every last bit of old crap to the highest bidder, no doubt. Is it just money? It can't be the fame. You obviously like the idea of everyone thinking you're dead. Or are you still insisting you're the descendant of

some Ancient Greek hero?"

"Hardly a hero."

"Whatever. Is that what this is all about, Zoe?"

"Does it really matter?"

She shrugged. "No, I suppose not. I'm just curious for your reasons, that's all. I guess the how is more important to me than the why."

Important enough to beat poor Cassandra and then to chase her all the way to Greece, Zoe thought bitterly. Also important enough to hold us at gunpoint. Which she really should do something about, Zoe supposed. She stepped away from Cassandra.

"So fill in some gaps for me. You two planned the robbery together, didn't you?"

"If you say so." Zoe took another couple of steps to her left. She saw Cassandra was also beginning to edge around. Smart girl.

Unfortunately, Hannah noticed. "Uh-uh," she said, waving the gun at both of them. There was definitely some jittering there. "Back together, please. I thought as much. That was the only thing that made sense to me."

She turned towards Cassandra. "You wanted something from your father, right?"

"I didn't even know he was my father."

"Don't lie to me!" Hannah yelled, the sudden outburst echoing loudly around the burial chamber. Her face was contorted in fury. Cassandra stepped back, the pure anger shocking her.

But the rage was gone almost as quickly as it had sprung free. When Hannah spoke next, her voice was quiet again. She even smiled. "There was something he had you couldn't get. Maybe he wouldn't give it to you. I mean, he disowned you once, didn't he? So you hired Mercouri here to get it for you, isn't that right?"

Cassandra seemed to have learned her lesson and wisely took a leaf from Zoe's book. "You seem to be sure of it," she said ambiguously.

"Maybe she threatened the old man a little. But Hamilton wouldn't play ball, so you had him killed. You didn't care. You said it yourself; you didn't consider him your father. He was nothing to you. And I'm guessing at the beginning you were paying Zoe to do your dirty work, right? Or at least, promising to pay her with your inheritance. Of course, when that didn't come through you probably had to pay her in a different currency. Am I on the right track, Zoe? You earned yourself a little blonde pussy?"

Zoe had enough sense not to let the comment get to her, although she could feel herself getting riled. She glanced sideways and saw that Cassandra was blushing. She hoped she'd keep her cool. Just agree with her, she found herself willing, stay calm, stick to the plan. Her hand dropped to the pocket of her shorts, but she kept the movement slow so as not to alarm the gun-toting maniac in front of her. She could feel the small cube of ambrosia nestling there.

Let her talk, she thought, just let her talk. Hannah always did like the sound of her own voice.

Seeming a little amused, either by her own joke or the pair's restrained reactions, Hannah continued. "But when Hamilton died you found out somehow that what you wanted wasn't included in his will. What was it? Notes on his digs or something?"

"Something like that," Zoe said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Maybe a description of a site he wanted to dig but could never get funding for. I'm guessing he suspected this place was here but couldn't prove it, so he wrote up some notes about. Never published them, it would make him look foolish. But kept them somewhere safe.

"So you rob the bank together. And somehow get the notes out of the bank without anyone knowing. Maybe that kid in the morgue was right. Maybe you swallowed them, I don't know.

"Of course, here's the question I've got to ask." She looked at Zoe. "The sixty-four thousand dollar question. Final jeopardy. How in hell did you fake your own death?"

"You'd never believe me." Zoe didn't have to lie with that one.

"You really wouldn't," Cassandra added.

"What, magic, was it?"

Zoe smiled. "More like misdirection."

"Huh. Alright then, here's another question for you. Was it all worth it?"

Zoe glanced at Cassandra, met her eyes. "Some of it has been."

"Good," Hannah said. "Then you can die happy.

And she shot Zoe.

* * * * *

Cassie found herself screaming. Later, much later, she would express astonishment at the very idea of her screaming. She'd never been the kind of woman who would scream at the slightest hint of danger. What next, she would joke, would she trip over and sprain her ankle after a few feet of running?

But at the time, as the loud thunderclap of the shot echoed around the cavern, she wasn't even aware she was screaming. It was only when her throat ached and she gasped for breath that she realized the noise was coming from her. She didn't know if it was Zoe's name she was calling out, or just an unintelligible yell.

Zoe had collapsed instantly, falling back hard against the feet of the second statue, the impact knocking the breath from her lungs. The pain of the stone edges jabbing into her back made her grunt in pain, and she rolled to one side. She was clutching at her right thigh with both hands and blood was seeping out between the fingers.

Cassie spun around and dropped to her knees, turning her back on Hannah. That might have been foolish. In the back of her mind she was conscious that any second another bullet might tear through her own body, perhaps even kill her, and she'd never even see it coming. She ignored the fear as best she could.

"Let me see." She was speaking loudly, the shot having deafened her momentarily.

Zoe shook her head. She was clenching her jaw tight.

"You have to let me look, Zoe."

"It's alright. I've had worse," she said through gritted teeth. She took a deep breath and did her best to grin. "You know that better than anyone."

Managing to pry Zoe's hands away, Cassie saw a small tear in the fabric of her shorts, which were already richly stained with blood, and beneath that, when she pushed the hem up, she saw a similarly sized hole in the fleshy part of her thigh. She gasped

Blood was trickling from the dark and sickly red bullet hole. She supposed that was a good sign. Better than spurting, anyway. She tried to remember anything she had ever been taught about first aid. "You have to keep pressure on it," she blurted out.

"Yeah, thanks," Zoe said, "that's what I *was* doing."

There was a gradually growing pool of blood underneath her leg, Cassie noticed. She felt around the thigh and found a slightly larger hole. When her fingers touched the wound, Zoe cried out involuntarily. Cassie mumbled a quick apology.

"Looks like the bullet passed through," she said. She was pretty sure that was a good thing. Her reddened fingers fumbled with Zoe's belt buckle.

Zoe caught Cassie's eye and tried to grin. "Now is really not the time, sweetheart."

"Quit being funny," Cassie warned and pulled the thick cotton belt free from its loops. She then wrapped it around Zoe's thigh, making sure it went flat over the bullet wound, and tied it in a

knot so tight it made Zoe wince. "It will keep, until..." She left the sentence unfinished.

Zoe nodded, understanding.

"When you're quite finished..." Hannah said impatiently. She was holding her free hand to her head, as if a migraine had just overtaken her. "...being Florence fucking Nightingale..."

"You're crazy!" Cassie said angrily.

"Cassandra..." Zoe warned.

"Oh relax, Wayward, it's just a graze. You know, at Quantico, I was top of my class on every shooting range, every year. If I wanted her dead, she'd be dead." She was lying, Cassandra was sure of it. Her aim had been thrown off by her hand shaking. She had been trembling when she had walked in; Cassie had seen it clearly and was pretty sure Zoe had noticed too. Now she was shaking; there was no hiding it.

A good amount of blood had splattered over one of the lanterns, giving the chamber an eerie pale pink glow. The shadows moved in odd patterns as the drops of blood ran down the lantern glass. The wavy carvings on the walls appeared to undulate, rising and falling. It was unnerving. Cassie shivered. "And you don't?" she said, getting to her feet.

"Not yet. And not quickly. She has to suffer for what she's done to me." She scratched frantically under one lens of her sunglasses. "And I think the best way to make her suffer is to kill you first." She leveled the gun towards the short woman.

Cassie's heart was pounding, her lungs heaving, and she knew adrenalin was coursing through her veins. Even in the bank, with all those guns being waved around, she hadn't been this scared. She had known then, somehow, that no harm would come to her. She had a protector watching out for her, even if neither of them knew it. Now, though, her protector lay bleeding in the dirt.

She closed her eyes and waited. She felt there was nothing else she could do. One thing, maybe. She touched the small lump in her pocket and hoped that Zoe would get to her in time.

"Damn it!" she heard Hannah say. "Keep still, bullets aren't cheap."

Cassie hadn't moved. She opened her eyes and saw that the former FBI agent was swaying. She seemed unsteady on her feet, shuffling a tiny bit back and forwards, trying to keep her balance. Was there something wrong with her? She had taken off her sunglasses, holding them by the wire frame with the fingers of her pistol hand. Her other hand was rubbing frantically at her injured eye. When she took her hand away and looked back at her two hostages Cassie was shocked to see how bad she looked. The stitches were crude and nasty, the skin around them red and raw, and the eye... Cassie covered her mouth. She felt sick.

The left eye was now a pale grey, the iris and pupil both almost blackened with decay but marked by an almost circular white line that resembled a... Cassie shivered again... a snake. A

pale snake that had slithered around to bite its own tail.

"Your handiwork, Wayward," Hannah said angrily, gesturing at that side of her face. "This is what you did to me."

"You did it yourself. You were going to kill me, remember? For no damn reason."

"Oh, she had a reason," Zoe said.

Cassie looked over her shoulder and saw Zoe was struggling to get to her feet, grasping hold of the arm of the nearest statue to haul herself up. She hurried back and slipped an arm around the older woman's waist, taking some of her weight.

"Shut up, Mercouri," said Hannah warningly.

"What do you mean?"

Zoe waved Cassie away and hobbled over to rest against the sarcophagus. She had a distinct limp and each step obviously hurt but she was up and moving, under her own steam. That was a small relief.

"She wanted revenge. She still does. She took it out on you because she couldn't get to me." Zoe grinned sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Shut up!" Hannah blinked rapidly and rubbed at her eye again. Was she having trouble focusing? She dropped the sunglasses. One lens shattered as it hit the rocky ground.

"Revenge for what?"

"I killed Sam."

Cassie stared at her, dumbfounded. "Sam?"

"I always wondered how Sam kept me out of jail for so long. I was a good thief. Hell," she said with a smile, "I was the best. But it doesn't matter how good you are, the cops are always better. Well, maybe better isn't the right word. It's just they have more time, more resources, more manpower. And worst of all, if they make a mistake they get a second chance. Or even a third. Thieves usually aren't so fortunate." She looked at Hannah, who swayed a little but said nothing. She seemed to have given up trying to keep them both quiet. "But they never caught me."

"They..."

She held up a hand to silence Cassie. "No, that doesn't count. Sam set me up. I know he planted that evidence on me. I'm sure he tipped Hannah and Grace off. I don't know why he did it but I know he did. Maybe he was trying to rein me in a little, keep me in check." She winced, as if the memory hurt her more than the hole in her leg did. "I was getting a little too wild, I will admit."

She sighed and shifted position, trying to take some of the weight off her injured leg. "So Sam had to have someone working for him, I just didn't know who. Back then, I didn't care."

"*With him*," Hannah said, giving her a baleful stare.

"If you say so."

Cassie was shocked. "You mean...?"

"Sam liked to be in control. It makes sense he recruited a cop. An FBI agent though? Well, that's something else. Although it never paid to underestimate Sam. I found that out the hard way."

It made a certain amount of sense, Cassie realized. After all, Danny had told her that Hannah was under investigation for corruption and from what little she knew of Sam, it sounded like he could corrupt anyone. And on the night after they had all discovered Zoe's disappearance, Danny had told her over a few beers that prior evidence had gone missing. Who was in a better position to steal it than Hannah? No wonder she was so desperate right now. But to go to these lengths for revenge over losing her job? Or at worst serving some prison time? That didn't seem to add up.

As if she was reading her thoughts, Zoe spoke again and gave her the answer. "But try as he might, there was one way Sam couldn't control me, no matter how much he wanted to. And believe me, he tried. Gave up eventually but he always resented my rejection. It doesn't surprise me that he turned to someone else."

"It wasn't like that," Hannah said. There was anger there still but right now it was being swallowed up by weariness and pain.

"So why don't you tell us how it was?"

"I loved him," said Hannah quietly.

"I don't doubt it."

"And he loved me."

"Now that I find hard to believe."

"What would you know, you filthy fucking dyke?" spat Hannah furiously, turning on Zoe.
"Damn it, this fucking hurts!"

She was rubbing her eye again. Was she talking about that, Cassie wondered, or the pain of her confession?

"It started about four years ago." Hannah turned to Cassie and explained for her benefit. "We'd been working with the Art Crime Team, chasing her over the theft of *The Son of Man* from the

Getty."

"The Son of Man?"

Zoe smiled, remembering. "A Magritte painting. It was on surprise loan, so we had less than two weeks to get a plan worked out. Still, it was worth the trouble. The insurance company paid me twenty million for its safe return."

Grunting with disapproval, Hannah carried on. "We got lucky when the LAPD pulled him in on an alleged assault charge. Something about a bar fight, I think. They couldn't pin anything on him, of course, he was fair to clever for that, and that bastard Roberts had one of his associates there within hours." Cassie opened her mouth to ask who Roberts was but Hannah continued before she could. It was probably just as well. "But his name was in the system and L.A.'s finest hung onto him long enough for us to get there. Not that we could do anything. We put pressure on him, threatened him, tried to entice him, all the usual routines. We even told him we were more interested in putting her behind bars than him, which was only half-true, I suppose. None of it did any good.

"So we had to let him go. And I took him out for a drink, can you believe it? I asked him, I don't know what got into me, and he said yes. I think I was hoping that he'd let something slip after a drink or two; maybe he was hoping the same of me.

"We ended up sleeping together. Next morning, we talked. It could have been a drunken mistake, after all. I've made plenty of those before. But it wasn't. We both knew it. We saw each other again and again, stealing away whenever our paths crossed. Which," she said pointedly to Zoe, "they did a lot, thanks to you."

Zoe nodded. "How long was it before he asked you for a favor or two?"

"Not long. At the start, we agreed not to talk about work. But it didn't last. We were both pretty obsessive; work was all we had. And before I even knew what I was doing, I was stealing documents, destroying evidence, intimidating witnesses." When she saw the looks on their faces she frowned. "You don't know how persuasive he could be."

"Believe me, I know," Zoe said scathingly.

Hannah didn't seem to hear Zoe but shook her head sadly. "The things I did... but none of it mattered, so long as I had him." Her voice rose in volume again as she angrily turned on Zoe. "And you took him away from me!"

"Wait!" Cassie found herself blurting out and as the woman faced her, she repeated the word. She held her hands out in a calming gesture. "Wait, just wait, please. You were the one who told Zoe what Sam did to Michi, remember?"

"I had no choice!" Hannah said defensively. "Grace was pestering me to tell in the hopes it would encourage her to give up. I knew it was a bad idea. But what could I say?"

Nothing, Cassie knew, not without giving herself away to her colleagues.

"And I wasn't expecting..." Her voice trailed off.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Cassie said, keeping her voice calm, low and level.

"Cassandra..." Zoe quietly said, warningly.

Zoe was worried that she was straying from the plan, Cassie knew. But she had to try to reach Hannah, to give her a chance to stop this before it went too far. Everyone had been hurt so much already; she *had* to convince this woman that inflicting further pain was pointless. If she could just keep her talking. After all, not everybody made two mistakes, but everybody deserved a second chance.

"Sam betrayed both of you. He took something away from you both. He's the one at fault here, nobody else."

Hannah gave her a hard look and Cassie had to fight from recoiling at the sight of that pustering, infected, and strangely soulless grey eye. "Maybe he did," Hannah said with a scowl. "But he was still mine."

Her arm jerked up and she fired. Zoe dropped to her right, swearing as her injured leg jolted against the stone floor. It made no difference as Hannah's aim was off, her hands still shaking, and the bullet ricocheted off the wall to bury itself in the ground behind the tomb.

The overwhelming sound jarred at Cassie's hearing, but it wasn't truly deafening. She still heard the soft metallic click of the automatic pistol chambering another round and the clinking of the expended cartridge scattering across the stones. Blueish smoke rose up from the barrel to merge with the dust and debris falling from stone above.

Dumbly, Cassie took a step forward. Perhaps her subconscious mind had finally settled the argument between fight over flight. Maybe she just didn't know what she was doing. She saw rocks falling behind Hannah but she ignored them. She stepped forward again. One hand was outstretched, palm up, almost as if she was calmly telling a disobedient child to hand over a catapult. A falling stone hit her on the forearm, stinging strongly enough to leave a mark. She couldn't think, only act.

Hannah was twisting towards her, the weapon swinging around. She could distantly hear Zoe screaming at her to stop, to move, to run, something, and then the gun was firing again. She felt the air pressure change to her left, felt her hair shift, felt the heat on her face as the bullet missed her by less than an inch.

Amazingly, Hannah didn't fire again. She was rubbing at her injured eye with the back of the hand holding the pistol, then a second later with both hands. She was mouthing something unintelligible when she clutched at the wound but soon began screaming for 'it' to get out,

whatever that meant. Much later, Cassie would try to convince herself that it was just a piece of embedded glass that had worked loose and had suddenly started cutting Hannah again, causing the intense pain. That and the fever from her infection had made her delirious, so she thought. But Cassie knew the truth. In that one moment, when Hannah looked up at her, dropping her hands, blood pouring from around her eye where she had desperately ripped open the stitches, she saw that white dragon in the grey orb swirl around and roar from within its retinal cage. It was something that would haunt her for the rest of her life, try as she might to forget it. The bloody image of the two beasts screaming in both pain and frustration.

More rocks fell, each larger than the last, and one struck the screaming Hannah on the side of the skull with a loud thumping sound. Her head twisted to one side at an almost unnatural angle then she collapsed heavily amidst the rubble. The pistol flew from her unresponsive fingers and skittered over to disappear in the shadows.

That clattering sound was enough to break the spell. Cassie looked up and saw there were large cracks appearing in the stone overhead, some growing and expanding even as she watched. She looked at the unmoving prone form of Hannah, then at the fallen Zoe, who was struggling to get up, and back at the tree and its three protectors.

And she knew what she had to do.

* * * * *

As Hannah fell, Zoe tried to push herself up as best she could. She could put weight on her wounded leg but it hurt like all the hells with each step. Right now, just getting up was proving to be difficult. Debris and rocks beneath her, pressing painfully into the palms of her hands. Sharper rocks had cut her in several places as she had dove for safety from Hannah's wild shooting, and it felt like her entire body was bruised and aching.

She had to get up. It was either that or be buried alive here. It seemed like the entire hillside was threatening to fall in on them and crush them from existence.

She wasn't about to die here. She smiled wryly to herself. There were a few better places she could think of.

But to live she had to stand up. More dust fell. A series of pebbles stung her back. She felt a hand touch her and looked up. Cassandra had scurried over to her, slipping a hand under one shoulder, and was now trying to haul her up. Her efforts weren't exactly graceful or careful, but it helped. Zoe managed to get to her feet. She rested for a moment against the side of the tomb, giving the pain in her throbbing leg a second or two to subside. It didn't. The movement had caused fresh blood to seep from under the tightened belt.

Cassandra stood in front of her, shuffling her feet to keep her balance. She looked Zoe up and down, her mouth pursing in worry as she saw the freshly-acquired injuries. "What's happening?" she said, yelling to make herself heard above the din of falling rubble.

"Earthquake? Maybe all that gunfire weakened the earth above us, I don't know. " Zoe said with

a shrug. She gripped Cassandra's arm urgently. "We have to get out of here before the whole place caves in." As to emphasize her words, more dust fell.

Cassandra looked worried but kept glancing over her shoulder. Not to her right, Zoe noticed, not towards the unconscious Hannah, but over her left, back towards the tree and the statues. "Can you walk?"

"I'm fine," Zoe said loudly. "We need to go."

She moved past the younger woman and limped over to the fallen Hannah. Her leg ached but that was okay. She could live with that. The ground seemed to shake under her booted feet. Maybe she was right about the earthquake; or maybe it was just the additional rubble and her unsteadiness. She had to kneel to get to Hannah and that hurt bad but at least by kneeling she could get up easier.

There was a fine coating of dust already covering most of the unconscious woman. Zoe had to heft two larger rocks away just to get near her. Her fingers dug beneath the dirty hair, running over the neck until she found the pulse. "She's still breathing," she said, "but you're going to have to help me with her. I can't manage her on my own."

There was no response. She looked back to find Cassandra had moved from the sarcophagus to stand in front of the open vase of the statue labeled Lipara, pulling out the scrolls two or three at a time. Some were crumbling under her careless touch but she was piling them into the crook of her other arm.

"Cassandra, don't..."

"Two minutes! I just want to gather some of these scrolls."

"We don't have time!"

"Then go without me! I can't leave these here! I can't!" She didn't even glance at Zoe, just kept pulling out the scrolls. She had retrieved her backpack and had obviously tipped the contents out over the floor, not caring, for the bag was now empty. She had it open and was dumping the smaller scrolls inside. There was a sound like lightning striking a tree and a large crack suddenly appeared in the towering stone pillar, running from the branches on the ceiling down to head-height.

Cassandra didn't even notice. She was just reaching further in the vase, grabbing at more scrolls, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings. There was a look on her face, a preoccupied, desperate look. Zoe recognized that look. She'd seen it in the mirror often enough. And she almost despaired.

A large flat boulder, the size of the hood of a car, fell with a heavy thump on the tomb, breaking the slab in two. A torrent of earth and rubble followed it, showering that curve of the chamber with a dust cloud that billowed out as more dust kept falling. Cracks had appeared in the smooth

wall and big chunks were being dislodged here and there, making it look as if the carving of the snake was twisting free.

"Cassandra!" Zoe called again. She got to her feet, ignoring the pain. "Cassie!"

That seemed to do the trick. Cassandra paused, her hands still clutching at scrolls, and turned to face Zoe. She blinked, slowly, as if she had suddenly realized where she was and what danger she was in.

"Like you," Zoe said, "all these things are beautiful and irreplaceable. Unlike you, I can bear to lose them all."

Cassandra's reaction was instant; she dropped the remainder of the scrolls, not caring where they fell, or even how much they disintegrated as they hit the floor, and rushed over to Zoe. She grabbed one of Hannah's arms and managed to pull her into a sitting position. Then Zoe bent to grab the other arm and the pair of them heaved Hannah up, holding tight onto her hands and wrapping her arms around their shoulders. The woman hung unconscious between them, her feet dragging on the floor. They managed to make it up the steps, but it was painfully slow-going.

Zoe asked Cassandra to stop and then, making sure he had all the weight on her good leg, she scooped Hannah up and threw her over her favored shoulder.

This wasn't going to be easy, Zoe thought, and they had very little time.

* * * * *

It looked like they had only just made it out in time.

They had stumbled down the hillside as fast as they could, the makeshift trail treacherous beneath their feet. Cassandra had gone first; Zoe had lumbered behind, encumbered as she was by the weight of the unconscious Hannah and the painful wound in her leg. Twice she had almost fell; once her footing had slipped from under her and she had narrowly avoiding dropping backwards; another time she had moved a little too quickly and the downward momentum had almost made her topple over.

If it had been tough making it down the slope, it had been damn near impossible getting out of the cavern with their burden. Zoe had found it hard enough to scramble over the rock pile at the near end of the corridor, with her leg stiff and aching, but to then drag the deadweight behind her, with Cassie grunting in effort as she pushed upwards, and with jagged, pointed rocks falling all around them... that had not been easy, to say the least. Squeezing her upright through the thin gap that formed the cavern entrance had been a breeze after that.

She would have been lying if she said the thought of leaving Hannah to die hadn't crossed her mind. But she couldn't do that, if only because she knew it wouldn't be what Cassandra wanted.

Now they sat on the ledge, between the two of the three stone nymphs. The shadows looked natural and unmoving, Zoe was slightly relieved to see. The dust from the collapsing tunnel was

still billowing out from the thin cavern entrance far above them.

The pair of them were covered in dust, scratched, grazed, bloody and bruised. Their clothes were torn and soaked with sweat and they were both breathing hard. Their grueling escape had taken a lot out of them, so they just sat there for a while, not able to move or speak.

Blood seeped from the wound in her thigh. It would heal. It would need cleaning and a doctor's attention, but that would most likely draw the attention of the Greek police. So she'd do what she could with it. After all, if it was really bad the 'medicine' she had would solve anything.

She caught Cassandra's eye and grinned. The younger woman smiled back, then leaned over and nudged her playfully with her shoulder. The relief they both felt at living through that was seeping out of them with every gesture and expression.

Cassandra shook her head violently and then ran both hands through her own hair, causing a shower of dust to fall. She sighed. "What is it with me being held captive by women in small places?"

"Occupational hazard," Zoe said with a grin. "You'll have to learn to expect it."

"Oh no, this is not going to happen again."

Zoe glanced over her shoulder, looking back up at the hillside. Aside from the clouds of dust, which were even now dispersing on the strong wind, there was no sign that anything had ever happened. It had been impossible to see the entrance to the cavern from here anyway; now it was completely sealed off by falling rocks inside she doubted it would ever be found again.

"Looks like no one's going to be finding that cave again."

"No," Cassandra said quietly.

"It's probably for the best."

"I suppose."

She looked a little downcast and so Zoe tried her best to be sympathetic. "It's a shame we came out empty-handed. Although, I'm glad we're both in one piece."

"Me too. I..." Cassandra's voice dried up.

"It's okay," Zoe said, pre-empting the apology she suspected was coming. She wrapped an arm around Cassandra's waist and hugged her tight. "You're here and that's what matters."

Cassandra rested her head on Zoe's shoulder. "What are we going to do about her?"

The unconscious form of Hannah was propped up in a sitting position against the rocks on the

hillside. Zoe had dumped her there unceremoniously as soon as she could.

Zoe thought about it for a moment. She stared down the road. Pavlos and his taxi were nowhere to be seen; that pretty much confirmed her suspicions about him. Still, that was a good thing. She could probably apply a little pressure on him, and he'd break pretty easily, she was sure of that. Confronted with the threat of being proven an accessory to attempted murder, even if she and Cassandra had no intention of pursuing such a course, Pavlos would crack and say whatever they wanted him to say. Maybe they should leave Hannah here, or near here at least, somewhere in the shade, and get Pavlos to come out here to find her. He could take responsibility for her.

"I'll take care of it. We can say there was a fall. Treacherous ground this. We'll get her to a doctor and then maybe you can contact Grace. She'll take care of her, I'm sure."

"What if she talks?"

Zoe shrugged, which made Cassandra straighten up again. "Who'll believe her?" Zoe said. "She's clearly out of her mind."

This was undeniably true, although Hannah could still cause trouble. Not that she was likely to talk anytime soon. Zoe didn't know much about medicine and even less about head wounds, but the hit Hannah had taken from the falling debris was pretty nasty. Most likely she wouldn't regain consciousness for a while, by which time Zoe and Cassandra would be long gone.

"So, what now?"

"A long walk back to Sigri, that's what," she said, finally. "Or maybe you could call Gustav and get him to pick us up. Then back to the hotel, a hot bath, a cold beer, and... well, I'll think of something else."

"All three sound good to me," Cassandra said. "And then back to Amfipoli? Together?"

"If you're sure..."

"Don't start that again. And we didn't exactly come out empty-handed." She had a slightly guilty look on her face, Zoe noticed, but she was smiling too. She dug into a pocket of her shorts and when she unfurled her hand, Zoe saw about a dozen tiny white pebbles resting on her palm. For a moment, Zoe was confused, then she remembered how Cassandra had dug around the roots of the tree in the cave. And that meant that they weren't rocks at all.

Zoe grinned broadly. "Cassand..." she began, then resigned herself. "Cassie, I could kiss you!"

Cassie laughed. "Do you hear me saying no?"

Epilogue: Death Does Not Concern Us

It was early autumn and the heat of the long Greek summer had hardly begun to wane. In the shaded area of the patio of her house in Amfipoli, Zoe was trying her best to doze on a lounge. Sleep came easy to her now, a blessed relief after so many months of sleepless nights, but especially this afternoon. She was exhausted from a long morning looking after little Gaia. Quite how she had let herself be talked into babysitting Louiza's infant daughter, she didn't know. Yes, she did. Cassie had volunteered, that's how, and she couldn't say no to that damn woman.

And Louiza and her family had taken to Cassie immediately, which made Zoe more than a little envious. The housekeeper mothered Cassie, Louiza treated her like a big sister, and even the intimidating aunt beamed at her every time their paths crossed. Hell, Cassie had even been the one who suggested the newborn's name back in May. If she asked for anything, they'd go to any lengths to get it for her. If Zoe asked, it was fetched reluctantly if at all. And she was the one paying their wages. Go figure.

Zoe's dozing was disturbed by the house phone ringing. She ignored it at first, thinking Cassie might get it, but the constant irregular clacking of typewriter keys convinced her that wasn't about to happen, so after the third ring she shook herself fully awake and got up, crossing to where one of the handset sat on the iron table.

"Hello?" she said. She spoke in Greek, which was second nature by now.

"So, Helene," Grace Cory said cheerfully, "how's life treating you?"

Zoe smiled and instinctively switched to English. "I can't complain, Grace. Or should I call you Deputy?"

The internal FBI investigation had ended mid-summer and Grace had moved from Los Angeles as soon as she could. With her experience in law enforcement, there were plenty of jobs she could have taken but only one she wanted. Now she was a Deputy in the Pembina County Sheriff's Department, working closely with her husband. Apparently, fifth time was the charm. Cassie had travelled back to the States for the wedding, staying for a couple of weeks. To Zoe, it had seemed a lot longer at the time.

"Grace will do."

"Any news on Hannah?"

There was a short pause. "They still haven't set a trial date; I doubt they ever will. The 5150 they slapped her with is keeping her in Patton State. If she ever gets out, I'll be surprised. I try to visit her, as often as I can, and probably not as often as I should. Sometimes she doesn't even recognize me; they keep her pretty doped up. Other times, she tries to explain to me what happened. None of it makes sense. Her sentences are all jumbled; she never seems to finish one before starting another. She's been violent, a couple of times. I wish..."

She fell silent. Zoe said nothing. Whatever she could think of to say wouldn't be enough. She was well aware, despite everything Hannah had done, how people could still feel sympathy, pity, and regret for her. She knew that Cassie felt much the same. She didn't quite understand it, but she knew it. She felt none of those things, which often made her think how much a better person Cassie was than she.

"Should I not ask how her eye healed so well?" Grace said.

It would be difficult to explain, Zoe thought. But it had been Cassandra's idea to give the unconscious Hannah some ambrosia back on Lesvos. They'd argued about it but Zoe was leaning she was destined never to win an argument with Cassandra. The ambrosia had miraculously healed Hannah's eye within seconds but it also had another unexpected effect. She had woken and almost immediately seemed wholly disinterested in them. While a bare half-hour before she had been intent on killing them both, now Hannah ignored them. She had got to her feet, looked down at her dirty and disheveled clothes, and then started walking. That was the last Cassie and Zoe had seen of her.

Cassie had thought her strange change in behavior was due to the ambrosia. Maybe it healed emotional scars as much as it did the physical. Zoe doubted it, although she hadn't said as much.

Hannah had, so Grace had later told Cassie, eventually made her way back to Athens, then caught a series of flights back to California, where she had turned herself in to her director at the FBI. Internal Affairs had swooped down on her almost immediately.

The agents investigating her had been disappointed. Hannah hadn't cooperated with all the questioning though; apparently her newfound passiveness only went so far. Instead she had sat through hours upon hours of interviews without saying a word. It was only when Mercouri's name was mentioned that she broke her silence. She became enraged, spitting, punching and kicking, yelling that a snake was trying to kill them all, but only by dying in its gullet could they stand a chance of living, and when forcefully subdued she retreated in a catatonic state, curling up into a ball and muttering that the world was ending, over and over again.

So Hannah was insane, it had finally been decided. Most of the investigators thought it was an act, but a good one nonetheless. She had been studied and examined by psychiatrists and

psychologists, and they had all agreed, so she had been locked away for her own safety. The FBI seemed happy enough with her imprisonment in a mental faculty, knowing perhaps that she'd serve more time there than she would ever have done in a Federal prison.

The case wasn't officially closed, but Grace had learnt from her former colleagues in the now disbanded taskforce that it was considered over and done with. Randall was dead, Mercouri was dead and Hudson was insane. There was no one left to punish.

"It's probably best you don't," Zoe said.

"Hmm. Yeah, I've learnt that about a lot of questions I want to ask you." She was laughing, obviously trying to fight back her curiosity. "Cassie wouldn't tell me either. I hope you're taking good care of her."

"It's more like the other way around."

"Hmm." Grace grunted in acknowledgement. Then her voice took on a warning tone. "Not many people get a second chance, Helene. Be sure you make the most of it."

"Don't worry, I intend to."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and Grace dropped a few hints about she and Danny visiting for the holidays, which Zoe did her best to nimbly avoid, although she supposed she'd have to mention it to Cassie sooner or later, and then the phone call wrapped up.

Zoe placed the phone on the ground beside the lounge and picked up the book she'd been reading, which had obviously slid out of her hands as she fell asleep. The front cover had been bent over and creased in the fall. She sighed, trying to straighten it out as best she could. Cassie was always hassling her to take better care of her books. And woe betide her if she got caught reading one of Cassie's prized collection.

This, however, was a second-hand copy of *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves that she had bought in a bookstore in Serres last week. She had plenty of time to read now. Retirement was being good to her. And she had someone right on-hand who had a never-ending supply of recommendations.

She got up and stretched, trying to ease out the kinks and tension in her muscles. She must have slept in a bad position, she thought, as her back was a little sore. She decided to take a walk, to make the most of the warm weather. The exercise would do her good. She left the patio, walked down the gentle grassy slope that lead to the orchard, and then meandered slowly through the neat lines of the dozen or so orange trees, enjoying the shade the overhead leaves provided and the soft rustling sound of the branches moving in the afternoon breeze.

It was impossible that the orchard had grown so fast, Zoe thought. Some of the locals, when gossiping, said it was magic of some kind. Most, however, had convinced themselves that orchard had always been here. She could understand why. She stopped and studied the nearest

tree. It looked old and weathered, as if it had been part of the surroundings for countless years. In reality, just a few months before this ancient place of olive groves had been nothing but dirt, weeds, and grass.

Zoe reached out and gently touched the bark. She swore she could almost feel the life within it, and perhaps even the energy within all the trees around her. She'd seen some strange stuff in her life but this was something else. She'd never grow tired of the beauty of these trees, she thought. She looked up, gazing into the clear blue sky framed by dark green leaves.

And then she saw the orange. It was small but looked ripe. There were others, higher up, she noticed. None of them as ripe as the first, and most much smaller. She glanced at the other trees and saw that there were oranges beginning to appear there too. She knew they hadn't been there last week. Some strange things indeed, she thought.

Zoe looked back up at the house, at the large French windows that were open to the patio, then back at the slowly ripening orange. A smile appeared on her lips.

* * * * *

She found Cassie exactly where she had left her after lunch. The short woman was sitting at her desk in the handsomely appointed library, surrounded by several piles of books and balls of discarded, crunched-up paper. It looked like she hadn't moved all afternoon.

The library had been extensively remodeled over the summer, with two of the four walls now lined with near-full bookshelves. Built into a third wall was a large fireplace which hadn't seen use yet, although Zoe was looking forward to the coming winter evenings when it would be.

There was a chessboard on a small table between two plush chairs, with a game in mid-progress. The white pieces was losing but seeing as how Zoe was playing those pieces this time, that wasn't all that unusual. Cassie had made the effort (and a considerable effort it was proving to be) over the last few months to teach Zoe how to play. Contrary to what both of them had once thought, she hadn't proved very good at the game.

As it stood right now, the pieces hadn't been touched in two days. That was deliberate. When pressed, Zoe had said she needed time to think about her next move but in reality she didn't have a clue what to do and was just stalling in the hopes Cassie would get bored and start a new game. That had never worked yet but there was always hope. Cassie knew what she was doing, of course. Winning by fatigue, she called it. But she'd tolerate it for another day or two before forcing Zoe to make her move.

If there was one room in the house that Zoe could confidently claim was complete, the library was it. Of course, Cassie didn't think so. She just kept buying books, every chance she could get. And every one was needed, she claimed. It wasn't like she was just buying them for fun, she promised. Zoe chuckled at that thought. If she kept it up, they'd have to get bookshelves built around the French windows too.

Cassie couldn't have read all these books. There was just no way, Zoe thought, even if she was

awake twenty-four hours a day. No one could. But in another day or two she'd come up with some excuse to go to Serres or Thessaloniki and, once there, would drag a playfully reluctant Zoe back into all the bookstores.

Zoe heard the clacking of the heavy keys of the old-fashioned typewriter before she had even walked on to the patio. It was a huge machine, a relic from the 1950s, and Cassie loved it. Zoe had offered to buy her a brand new laptop but Cassie had refused. She had found the typewriter, months before, dusty and forgotten in one of the antiques stores of Athens and had insisted on buying it, even it had meant lugging it around for the rest of the day.

She'd cleaned it, restored it, and even managed to find some new ink ribbons from somewhere. It was now her pride and joy. As if reading was enough, she was using the typewriter to write. Zoe wasn't exactly sure what she was writing, as it seemed to change a little from day to day, but she was pleased to see Cassie so happy, focused and involved.

Cassie hadn't let Zoe look at the manuscript yet. Zoe had been told quite firmly that she could read it when it was finished and not before. But she had talked about it quite often. She had become interested in the 'tomb of the unnamed bard' as she called it, and with what she and Zoe could remember about the inscription. The scrolls they had come so close to obtaining in that hidden cave on Lesbos might have been lost forever but that didn't mean there weren't other sources she could turn to.

As Zoe walked in through the French windows she saw Cassie was hunched over the typewriter, furiously thumping away at the keys. Then she paused, grabbing a book from the nearest pile, flicking through the pages, reading one section, and then flicking to the index and back, before resuming her happy typing. She was so absorbed in her work that she didn't hear Zoe approach.

Zoe gently placed the orange on the wooden desk. "I have a present for you."

Cassie nodded distractedly but didn't look up. She wasn't really listening. "This is amazing, you know?" she said excitedly. Her enthusiasm and energy seemed to be boundless. Infectious too, as Zoe immediately found herself grinning back. "I've found a great source on the bard. Euhemerus claims that she's a mythic figure who never really existed but was just the tool through which stories could be told. I'm beginning to think she's not going to be the focus though. It seems she had a mentor. Not another poet, like you'd think, but a warrior, can you believe that? Acusilaus even claims she had royal lineage of some kind, although he's a little fuzzy on the details..."

"Sounds great," said Zoe, managing finally to get a word in edgewise when Cassie paused to breathe, "but I have a present for you."

Cassie glanced up at her. "You do?"

Smiling patiently, Zoe nodded towards the orange. Cassie looked at it, frowned for a second, and then it dawned on her.

"No!"

"Yes."

"Already? How is that possible?"

"You tell me," Zoe said, shrugging.

Cassie picked up the orange and squeezed it very gently, almost as if she was testing to see if it was real. Apparently satisfied, she dug a thumbnail into the skin and began peeling it impatiently. She broke the peeled fruit into separate pieces and laid them out in a neat row on the desk. She stared at them closely.

Zoe knew what she was thinking. She reached out and took a piece and Cassie cautiously followed suit. They didn't say anything for a second, each awed at holding something in their hands that had no right to exist. Cassie held her orange piece up to the light, turning it over and over in her fingers, almost as if she was looking for some kind of flaw. It seemed to glow, not with light but with life. Zoe merely held her own segment a scant inch or two from her lips.

Cassie caught her eye and smiled nervously

Zoe grinned back at her. "You first."

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