

My Sexy Greek Summer

*Marie
Donovan*

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Marie Donovan

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Аннотация

A summer on a Greek island is just what grad student Cara Sokol needs to jumpstart her nonexistent sex life. Too bad she's sworn off Greek men forever, because she can't take her eyes off Yannis Petrides' sixpack abs and sultry eyes. But Cara's not going to get away that easily. In fact, some of Yannis's daydreams would make even Aphrodite blush. So if his fiery redhead wants an Xrated fling, he won't deny it even if she is hiding something more than her burning desire. . .

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“Still wild enough to swim naked with me?” Yannis asked Cara

“What do you think?” She crossed her forearms under her breasts, offering them up to him.

As he stared, her nipples tightened further, and he didn't think it was from the cool night breeze. “I think yes.” As if of its own accord, his hand rose and hovered above her right breast.

She pulled his hand to her. They gasped simultaneously. Her breast filled his palm, full and heavy like an apple ripe for the picking. He instinctively thumbed her nipple, making her shudder.

Encouraged, he cupped her other breast, teasing and plucking. She tipped back her head. “Oh, Yannis.”

He'd never felt skin so soft, so smooth before and closed his eyes in sheer sensual pleasure. Then suddenly his hands were empty.

Cara had stepped back from him and dropped the rest of her dress to the sand. She spun on her heel and ran toward the ocean, wearing only a tiny pair of black panties. “Last one in is a rotten egg!” she cheerfully called over her shoulder.

She'd literally pulled heaven from his grasp and now she called him a rotten egg? Yannis stripped down to his briefs and charged after her. Never mind calling him names—he'd have her

screaming his in no time.

Blaze

Dear Reader,

In a funny way, I've been waiting to write a book about Greece since I was a kid. My grandparents on my dad's side were both organic chemists. My grandmother was one of the first women to earn her PhD in organic chemistry from Columbia University and ran a defense lab during World War II, where she was burned in an explosion. She decided to stay home after the war to raise her kids, writing chemistry books and articles with my grandfather. The only words in these articles I ever understood were a, and and the.

Once they retired, my grandfather decided to learn Greek. Not the useful, modern Greek language, as in "I'd like to order gyros," but ancient Greek, so he could read Homer's *Odyssey*. In the original. So he did. Over the years he and my grandmother took several trips to Greece and brought me a marble statue of Athena, goddess of wisdom, which I still have. One of my favorite memories is snuggling in bed with my grandma as she quizzed me in Greek mythology.

So here is my tribute to my grandparents and the Greece they loved. I hope you enjoy Cara's story as she falls in love with Yannis and learns to love his homeland, as well.

Marie Donovan

P.S. I'm delighted to hear from my readers. Visit www.mariedonovan.com to learn more about my upcoming books.

My Sexy Greek Summer

MARIE DONOVAN



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Donovan is a Chicago-area native, who got her fill of tragedies and unhappy endings by majoring in opera/vocal performance and Spanish literature. As an antidote to all that gloom, she read romance novels voraciously throughout college and graduate school.

Donovan graduated magna cum laude with two bachelor's degrees from a Midwestern liberal arts university and speaks six languages. She worked for a large suburban public library for ten years as both a cataloguer and a bilingual Spanish story-time presenter. She enjoys reading, gardening and yoga.

Books by Marie Donovan

HARLEQUIN BLAZE

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302—HER BOOK OF PLEASURE

371—BARE NECESSITIES

To my grandmother and my grandfather.

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1

“LOOK AT HOW BEAUTIFUL this place is, Cara! I can’t believe you didn’t want to come.”

Cara Sokol elbowed her friend in the ribs from where they were leaning on the ferry railing. Emma Taylor’s cheerful voice had carried to the clumps of locals. The ones who understood English looked at Cara with marked unfriendliness.

Welcome to Greece. As if Cara needed another reason for the Greek populace to hate her. “Aphrodisias is as beautiful as its namesake,” she told Emma loudly.

At her compliment to their admittedly lovely island, the scowlers turned to gaze at the landmass they were approaching. Cara poked her friend in the ribs again. “Emma, enough about my not wanting to come to Greece. I never said it wasn’t a beautiful country.”

“Sorry, Cara.” Emma swiped a hunk of straight blond hair out of her face.

Cara had expected the wild sea winds on the ferry ride and had pulled her curly red hair back into a braid. She couldn’t get a comb through her hair on a good day, and the June Aegean trade winds would snarl her hair into a copper-wire scouring pad. “That’s okay. I know you’re excited about our trip.”

“Well, who wouldn’t be?” Emma gestured broadly at the vista in front of them. “Greece—the cradle of mathematics,

the birthplace of Euclid, Pythagoras, Archimedes—did you know that before Archimedes died at the siege of Syracuse, he requested his favorite mathematical proof be carved on his tomb?”

“Wow.” Cara would be hard-pressed to think of an appropriate proof for her own tomb. Maybe a big, fat zero with a slash through it, but she didn’t even know the fancy math name for it. She shook off her Greek-induced grumpiness and instead stared ahead. Emma was still talking about Greek mathematicians, understandably since she was a Ph.D. student in math at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where they were neighbors in the same apartment building. Emma looked like a cuddly blond cheerleader but had the brain of a supercharged computer.

While Emma subsided into silence with a happy sigh, Cara fell into the rhythm of the Greek speakers, their rapid-fire consonants and vowels sorting out into words as her ears adjusted to the language. The older men were complaining about ever-volatile Greek politics and the crooks mismanaging things in Athens, the women were discussing children and clothes, and the two young men closest to Cara and Emma were commenting on the girls passing by.

Cara hid a smile as the guys wondered if she and Emma dyed their hair and discussed their hip size in favorable terms. Chauvinistic Greek men might be, but at least they liked girls with some meat on their bones.

She straightened from the railing and let her gaze travel casually over the two young men. She knew better than to wink at them, since she didn't want them following her around Aphrodisias like eager puppy dogs. They met her gaze and grinned, obviously enjoying the idea of putting one over on the foreign girl. Sorry, dudes, I've been there and done that. She'd like to meet the Greek guy who could put one over on her now.

Despite her previous travels in Greece, Cara had never been to Aphrodisias, part of the Cyclades group of islands. The island was straight out of Greek legend, craggy hills where undoubtedly shepherds still tended their flocks, blindingly white cubic houses dotting the town and a wide crescent of sandy beach pouring out into the ocean.

Emma followed her gaze. "Oh my gosh, look at that beach! As soon as we get settled, I am going to practically live there."

"Athena says that beach is where the goddess Aphrodite first came ashore. That's why the island is named after her."

"Amazing." Emma's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "A whole island named after the Greek goddess of love? I can hardly wait to find out what kind of men must live here."

Cara could. She had things to do other than cruise around Aphrodisias for Greek men. Visit Athena, for one. She sighed quietly but Emma heard her anyway.

"Oh, hey, here I am blabbing about guys like we're on spring break in Florida and you must be worrying about your friend. What did her daughter-in-law tell you when you called from

Athens?”

Cara shrugged. “Oh, Demetria says Athena is still having complications since they brought her home from the hospital. It wasn’t so much the broken hip, but the pulmonary embolism she got after the surgery. They’re having trouble making sure she doesn’t get another clot. Athena refuses to go back to the hospital, so they’re limited in what they can do for her.”

Emma patted her back. “Nasty stuff. But I’m sure she’ll recover quickly now that she’s home.” Emma stared out at the island. “There’s something about this place...but I don’t know what.”

Cara stared at Aphrodisias. The island was something, all right. Home to the only person in the world who could get her to return to Greece.

“IS SHE HERE? Is she here?” Athena Kefalas pulled herself to her feet using the aluminum-frame walker her doctor insisted on. Walkers were for old ladies, bah! And Athena Kefalas was not an old lady at seventy. Hadn’t her own dear mother lived to ninety-five and just passed away last year, God rest her soul, O Theos na tin anapafsi. She shook out her long black skirt and clumped over to the kitchen, where Demetria was hanging up the phone.

Her daughter-in-law pursed her lips and blinked a couple times, no doubt to get some patience with her mother-in-law. As far as Athena was concerned, she was a model mother-in-

law compared to her own Giorgy's mother. Now she had been a mother-in-law straight from the Evil One himself. She had also lived to a ripe old age, probably because the daimones were afraid to have her in Hell. They had eventually relented, though, and no doubt welcomed her as one of their own.

Ah, but perhaps Athena was getting old, reminiscing about long ago and not focusing on the present. And more importantly, the future. "Demetria, did Karoleena arrive?"

"Yes, Mother, she and her friend arrived at the villa you arranged for them and will come to see you this afternoon. But remember, Karoleena wants us to call her Cara, her American name."

"Of course, of course." Athena nibbled at a dish of pickled olives on the sturdy kitchen table. "And when Cara and her friend come, they must think I am still sick."

Demetria snorted. "You may need that walker for a couple more weeks, but you look as healthy as a lamb in springtime."

"Hmm." Athena frowned. "I need to be pale and sickly. Demetria, bring me the flour."

"Flour? Why? Are we baking kourabiethes for Cara?"

Athena paused for a second. Karoleena did love the sugared almond cookies, but no time for baking now. "To powder my face, of course. If Karoleena knows I am well, she will leave quickly and she needs to be here on Aphrodisias."

Demetria didn't bother to ask why again but brought the flour.

Athena looked up from where she was patting the white

powder into her overly healthy-looking cheeks. “Thank you, Demetria. You are a good daughter.”

“Now, Mother, you only say that when you want me to do something.”

“Actually, if you could loan me your gray eye makeup to put circles under my eyes...”

Demetria blew out a breath strong enough to rival the ocean breeze but left to fetch the eye shadow.

Athena stared out the kitchen window overlooking the beach from where the Goddess of Love had appeared. So little love in this world anymore. But Athena had always known best, especially since her own dear mother had named her after the Goddess of Wisdom. She would do anything to help Karoleena, her poor girl who was so unhappy. And if Athena needed to wear enough flour on her face to make kourabiethes for the whole island, then by Aphrodite, she would!

CARA FINISHED UNPACKING her clothes into the dresser and took a deep breath. Athena, or probably Demetria, had chosen well in their vacation villa. The apartment was large and airy with whitewashed walls and pale gray marble floor tiles throughout. The furniture was solid dark walnut and would take a team of strapping Greek youths to move.

She walked into the big living room with a long, burnt-orange, L-shaped sectional couch and stared at the large weaving hanging on the wall. She'd seen Athena's work often enough to know

it was either hers or someone whom she'd taught. It had the look of an ancient Greek textile with its black figures on a red background, but the subject matter was typical of Athena—Artemis, the goddess of the hunt chasing down some man who had offended her. There was even a tiny arrow sticking out of the offender's butt.

Cara giggled, her first laugh since landing in Athens. Emma, coming out of her own room, saw her smiling at the weaving. "Now that's more like it. Isn't this place great? That breeze blowing through the windows—and look, a balcony." Emma hurried to the French doors and threw them open. "The flowers are amazing, and the sea beyond."

Cara followed her onto the balcony. It held a small tiled table and two chairs overlooking bright blue-painted window boxes. Masses of bougainvillea trailed from the boxes down the side of the building, their ruffled fuchsia flowers soft and delicate against the spiky dark green leaves. Prim pink geraniums stood upright as if to reprimand their lazy sisters for falling over. She inhaled a deep breath of their sweet fragrance mixed with the salty air. The startlingly blue Aegean glittered in front of them.

"I'm getting my camera." Emma rushed back to her room and returned with her small digital camera. "Say cheese, Cara."

Something loosened in her stomach. This was what she loved about Greece—the open sea; the flowers; the crisp, pure air, where the sun shone differently than it did anywhere else. Cara grinned at the camera and Emma took her picture.

“Now take mine.” They switched places and then Emma took several more photos of the harbor view.

Cara wandered back into the villa’s kitchen to pull two mineral waters from the small fridge. “Here, be sure to drink something. We haven’t had much chance since we got into Athens, and the long plane ride dries you out.”

“Thanks. Cheers.” Emma clinked her bottle against Cara’s. “Or should I say ‘Opa!’ and fling my bottle against the wall?”

“I don’t think the maid would like that. But if you want, we can find a tourist restaurant where they fling plates and dance around like Anthony Quinn in *Zorba the Greek*.”

“And of course that’s a terrible stereotype since Greeks don’t like to dance?” Emma lifted a blond eyebrow.

Cara grinned. “Of course they do.” She drank her metaleekó neró and stared at the ocean. She loved the sea—ironic, since she now lived in Michigan, a thousand miles from the nearest salt water. She spotted a sail on the horizon and her heart quickened. “Look, Emma, a sailboat.”

“That’s right, you used to crew on sailboats before you moved to Michigan. Getting paid to sail the ocean blue must have been a great gig.”

“I did travel all over—California, Mexico, the Caribbean, even once around Corfu—that’s one of the western Greek islands more influenced by Italy.” She changed the subject hurriedly. “Anyway, we should go sailing if we have time. Maybe Athena has a cousin who can take us out on the water.”

“Great! Speaking of Athena, isn’t she expecting us now?” Emma checked her leather-banded watch.

Cara laughed. “You may as well take that thing off. Greek time doesn’t work the same as American time. Athena is expecting us sometime this afternoon. And if we don’t show up until evening, she’ll just feed us then.”

Emma set down her empty bottle. “Greek time or no, I want to go explore the town. Ready?”

Cara nodded and followed, grabbing her wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. She locked the villa and they descended the narrow stone stairs down to street level. “Athena’s house is only supposed to be a half mile away. If we get lost, everyone knows where she lives.”

It was a slow half mile, with Emma stopping frequently to admire the cobalt-blue front doors and shutters and masses of pink and purple flowers. When they emerged into the sun from the shadowed back streets, Cara popped her hat and sunglasses on.

Emma glanced over at her. “You’re not going to get any color at all if you keep bundling up.” She tipped her face up to the blazing afternoon sun and chuckled happily.

“And you are going to spend your vacation crying on the couch from sun poisoning. This isn’t Michigan, you know. The sun is much stronger and you get a triple dose when it bounces off the water and sand.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any way we can pass for locals anyway,

is there?" Emma sent her a teasing glance.

"Not many redheaded Greek women out there." Cara smiled at her friend. She could have been the county fair Corn Queen for her Midwestern looks, a far cry from the supertanned blond beach bunny often spotted at topless beaches around the country.

Emma said theatrically, "Alas, alas, I'll just have to be the legendary American co-ed on summer vacation." She looked around in delight. They were now in the center of town and passing quaint tavernas and sidewalk cafés. "But I thought there'd be more people around. You did say summers were crowded in the Cyclades."

Cara studied the scene, spotting cameras and white limbs sticking out from shorts and tank tops. "The locals are probably home napping. They often have a siesta time, especially in the summer. Everybody else is a tourist."

"Including us." Emma laughed. "But we have to hit the club tonight. On a Friday night it should be pretty lively, right?"

"Definitely." Seemed as if they were in for a girls' night out. Emma wasn't used to Greek guys and didn't speak more than five words of the language. Cara snickered to herself. Too bad Cara didn't have the long black clothes and black beady glare typical of an old widowed aunt protecting her naive charge from the big, bad men of the world.

"Doesn't that sound fun, Cara?"

Actually, it did. Cara had loved going out on the town, particularly to a raucous Greek nightspot. "Sure, but don't forget

we're still getting over jet lag."

"Yes, Mother. Wait, how do you say that in Greek?"

"Ne, meetéra."

Emma repeated it with an accent awful enough to make Cara groan. "Let's practice your Greek after lunch."

Emma waved her hand. "No thanks, I'll practice on one of those Greek men tonight."

"And they'll be happy to let you." Cara turned a corner and checked her directions. "Here we are." Suddenly sick with anxiety, she pressed her hand against her stomach. She'd never been good around illness, and Athena was one of her best friends.

"Easy, Cara." Emma must have picked up on her panic. "Take a couple deep breaths and we'll see how she is." Emma reached around her and knocked on the door. "I wonder why all the doors and window shutters are painted blue."

"To keep out the Evil Eye," Cara replied automatically, clicking back into tour guide mode. "It all dates to ancient times...." She continued talking until Demetria threw open the door and beckoned them into the narrow stone-tiled foyer.

"Karoleena, is that really you?" She pulled Cara to her bosom, kissing her heartily on each cheek. "Your hair, it's so red and—how you say?—fluffy?"

"Emma, this is Demetria, Athena's daughter-in-law," Cara called to her friend as Demetria fussed over her.

"Oh, look at you! So round and healthy!" Demetria eyed Cara's breasts and hips, which had expanded a bit since they last

met. “You’re eating now!”

Time to change the subject. “Demetria, this is my friend Emma Taylor. She was kind enough to come to Aphrodisias with me.”

“Emma!” Demetria fell on a startled Emma with the same fervor with which she’d greeted Cara. After kissing Emma on the cheeks, she pulled back. “Another lovely girl! And so fair!” She pinched Emma’s cheek. “The boys here will love you. If only my son Spiro wasn’t away for the summer. A pretty blond American—he’ll be heartbroken he missed you.”

“Demetria...” an old voice quavered from a room beyond.

“Is that Athena?” Cara tried to control her nervousness, meanwhile, Demetria’s cheerful expression had turned grim.

“Yes. We’re coming,” she called. “Mother has been anxious to see you.” She ushered them into a sitting room where Athena lay on a couch, swathed in blankets.

Cara bit back a gasp. Her old friend looked terrible, pale and shadowed. “Oh, Athena, how are you?” She reached for Athena’s hand, and Athena grasped hers with surprising strength.

“Better, now that you are here.”

Cara looked over her shoulder at Demetria for confirmation. Demetria nodded. “It’s a miracle how much better she is.”

Athena let out a little moan and Cara spun back to her. “I’m glad to see you again,” she said soothingly. “And Aphrodisias is even more beautiful than you described.”

Athena nodded. “My birthplace, the place I knew I would

return to in my old age. The place to fulfill my dream of a museum of Greek island weaving and other women's arts."

"When you feel better, you can work on your project."

Athena's black eyes went wide. "I was just about to purchase the perfect property when I fell and broke my hip. I was at the market and stepped on an olive. An olive, I tell you! I have been walking on my own two feet for over sixty-five years and a miserable olive trips me." She lapsed into Greek and muttered several imprecations against that hapless squished fruit.

Emma looked blankly at Cara and Cara shrugged. Those weren't words Emma needed to practice for polite conversation. "Emma, come meet my friend Athena."

Cara made the introductions and Emma shook Athena's hand gently. "Thank you for inviting me to come with Cara. I have nothing but the highest respect for the Greek land and its wonderful history of mathematics."

Athena nodded regally, accepting all honors to Euclid, Pythagorus & Co. as her due. "Would you like to see Demetria's lovely garden? The flowers are beautiful, thanks to a wet spring."

Emma agreed and followed Demetria toward the end of the house, leaving Cara and Athena together.

Athena continued in Greek. "Karoleena, your friend speaks Greek?"

"Oxi." Cara shook her head.

"Good. How does she think you and I know each other?"

"I told her I was working on a cruise ship through the islands

and let her assume we met that way.”

“And that is all she knows?” Gone was the sick old lady, and in her place was the woman spearheading a new museum.

“Yes, Athena.” Cara checked Emma’s whereabouts, her voice faded as she went into the courtyard garden.

“Fine. I will keep your privacy, if that is what you wish.”

“Efkhareestó, Athena.”

“You’re welcome, chriso mou.” Athena smiled up at her with such sweetness that Cara bent down and hugged her gently. Chriso mou—my golden one. It had been so long since she’d heard those words. Athena patted her on the back.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Athena heaved a sigh. “Yet not well enough to continue my project, which is why I need you.”

Cara sat up on the edge of the couch. “Me? What do I know about building a museum?”

Her friend waved a negligent hand. “You will be my eyes and ears. Just some minor details to finish, and if the men do not know you understand Greek, so much the better.”

“Athena...” Cara stood. “I only came to Aphrodisias because you were so sick and I wanted to make sure you were getting better. I wasn’t planning to stay.”

“Do you have a job in America you need to return to?” Athena raised an eyebrow.

Cara paced across the room. Stay in Greece? “No, but I’m taking classes at the university.”

“During the summer?”

“Well, kind of.” Athena gave her one of those baleful black stares older Greek women had perfected. “Well, they start in September, which is technically summer, at least until the twenty-first.” Cara never could lie to Athena.

“September? Pfft. It’s only June. And your friend Emma can stay, as well, unless she has a job.”

“No, she can work on her studies from here.” Cara looked out the window facing the courtyard. Emma was having a ball, sniffing the flowers and laughing at whatever Demetria was telling her. “Summer in Greece?” she murmured.

“It will do you good. Put some color in your cheeks and take that frown off your face.”

Cara made an effort to smile. Poor her. A summer on an idyllic Greek island with nothing to do but help an old, ailing friend. Boo hoo.

“Ah, that’s better.” Athena struggled to her elbows and smiled up at her. “Now come here for a kiss and have Demetria make us some coffee.”

Cara kissed Athena on both cheeks as she was bid and then sneezed. Something dusty was tickling her nose.

“Yia sou,” Athena blessed her.

“Thanks.” Cara sniffled and sought out Emma and Demetria in the garden.

Emma predictably squealed in glee at the idea of a Greek summer but then got a worried look on her face. “Be sure to

tell me how much I owe you for rent and groceries, that kind of thing.”

Cara exchanged glances with Demetria. “Don’t worry about the money. We’ll get a deal since it’s a long-term rental.”

“Great!” Emma hugged her and pulled away. “Cara, you have some white stuff in your hair.” Emma brushed it out.

“Probably some dust or sand. So you girls are staying for the summer!” Demetria hugged them and pinched their cheeks again.

“Anything to help Athena.”

Demetria led them into the kitchen and began measuring cold water into the small metal coffeepot. “With you here, I think my mother-in-law will recover faster than you expect.”

2

“IS THAT TRUE, CARA, what Athena said about Aphrodisias?”

Cara blinked as Emma’s voice penetrated the late-afternoon haze as they stretched out on beach towels on the warm, sun-drenched sand. “Hmmm?” She took off her floppy sun hat and raised her head from where she’d been cradling it on her forearms.

Emma had been lying on her back in a tiny lavender-purple bikini but she’d propped herself up on her elbows. “You know, about the island being a magnet for lovers?”

Cara gestured to the surrounding beach. “It’s a popular vacation spot. People either bring their lovers or find a new one here.” She and Emma were practically the only non-romantic couple there. Pretty girls were snuggling with men, from potential male underwear models to men who should have had their banana-hammock swimsuits confiscated by Greek border security before they even entered the country.

Cara winced at one particularly gray and hairy dude in a neon-orange bikini bottom, the color of a traffic hazard cone. Warning, warning, hazardous materials, stay away...

Emma continued, “Athena said there was more to it than just fun and sun. She said the old ways still hold sway here.”

“I suppose that’s fair to say of many of the islands. Like you

asked me before, the blue paint on doors and roofs is to block the Evil Eye, and some of the old gods were folded into Christian customs. That's probably what Athena meant."

"Maybe. But while you were in the kitchen with Demetria making coffee, she said that those who have been unlucky in love would always find love on Aphrodisias."

"What?" Cara rolled onto her side and sat up. "What does that mean?"

Emma shrugged. "Something about Aphrodite taking pity on losers in the game of love."

Great. Not only was Cara a loser pitied by her friend Athena, but also pitied by an ancient Greek goddess. "Are you looking to get lucky in love here?" Cara sure wasn't.

"Love?" Emma pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I think I'd settle for sex at this point."

Cara gaped at her usually staid friend, who wagged a finger at her. "Don't look at me like that. I just wrapped up one set of my Ph.D. exams and haven't even been on a date for months. The only men I've had any contact with are my happily married academic advisor and a couple fellow students who either want to rip off my work or discuss the Freudenthal suspension theorem in loving detail. So I deserve a little personal time with a man who has more to offer than his perspective on advanced mathematics."

"If that's what you want, you won't have any trouble. Like Demetria said, Greek guys love blond Americans." Several of

the men on the beach, accompanied or not, had noticed Emma reclining on her towel, her bikini a perfect foil for her creamy skin.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but what about you, Cara? Not that you’re unlucky in love—who hasn’t been?”

Cara muffled an ironic snort. Calling her unlucky in love was like calling the Titanic unlucky in seaworthiness.

Emma lifted her sunglasses and looked around. “But Aphrodisias certainly has a nice crop of men. If you don’t find one you like, wait for the next ferry to bring another. And when he leaves, look for a different one. We have the whole summer.”

Cara was momentarily speechless at her friend’s logical approach, and couldn’t help but tease her. “And if we don’t find suitable men here,” Cara went on, “we could always hop the ferry over to Naxos or Paros and search there. Or would leaving the island negate the Aphrodite Effect?”

Emma scoffed. “You’re still not getting into this place, are you?”

Cara shifted and rested her head on her arms so Emma couldn’t see her expression. “It’s lovely, and I don’t mean to rain on your vacation.”

“So don’t. You’ve needed to unwind ever since we’ve met, and this is your chance. Come fall, it’s back to the salt mines.”

Cara couldn’t disagree. She was signed up for a full course load, leaving no time for even thoughts of hot beaches and hotter men. “We’ll see about the men.” Maybe a nice, calm Brit or

German would pass through to do a spot of bird-watching or nature photography. She could dip her toe in the water with a guy named Graham or Klaus.

“Although if you’re going to be lucky at love, you’ll need a hotter swimsuit than that.” Emma made a disparaging gesture at Cara’s white terry cloth cover-up and perfectly serviceable black one-piece suit. “Put a skirt on that thing and you’d look like my grandma going to her water aerobics class.”

Cara groaned. “Nice, very nice.”

Emma stretched her arms over her head. “I think I’ve had enough sun for the first day. Like you said, I don’t want to spend the summer crying on the couch from sun poisoning.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have that problem with a swimsuit like mine.” Cara couldn’t resist the gibe.

“Smart off all you want, but we’re going to the swimsuit shop on our way back to the villa.” Emma sat up and reached for her shorts and sandals. “My treat.”

“You don’t need to pay for a swimsuit for me.” Emma was a typical cash-strapped grad student.

Emma stood and brushed the sand off her limbs. “Consider it a thanks for this incredible summer vacation.” She offered a hand up to Cara. “I insist.”

Cara started to protest, but changed her mind. Emma had her pride, and Cara understood pride. After all, how much could a bikini cost?

“ONE HUNDRED twenty-five euros? Are you nuts?” Cara yanked at the spaghetti straps of the turquoise string bikini. On reflection, she shouldn’t have been surprised. Any swimsuit store located half a block from a tourist beach was not going to be a bargain hunter’s paradise.

Emma lightly slapped her hands away from the neck ties. “Come on, Cara, this suit looks amazing on you. The color makes your eyes as blue as the ocean—”

“And my skin as pale as the sand,” Cara interjected.

“So you aren’t tanned to the consistency of saddle leather. I’m telling you, this is the suit for you and I won’t take no for an answer.”

“But—”

“The proper response is ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you, Emma.”

Emma pulled her into a hug. “No, thank you. I’m going to look at that hot-pink bikini while you change.” She left Cara in the small curtained changing room.

Cara studied her reflection. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d examined herself closely in the mirror. Once upon a time, she had done practically everything but measure herself with calipers to see how fat she’d been. Which was to say, not fat at all.

And she still wasn’t fat, despite how her former self would have fainted with horror to know how much weight Cara had gained over the past couple years.

Cara shook her head, glad to be past that craziness. Instead, she looked healthy. She pivoted to see her back in the mirror. Her butt looked full but not jiggly under the thin stretch material, and she even had a couple dimples at the base of her spine. She turned to see the front view and cupped her breasts to make sure the two triangles of fabric would be sufficient. Not that that really mattered since no one batted an eye at topless sunbathing. As she adjusted her breasts, her nipples tightened and poked against the fabric. She impulsively brushed one with her thumb and shuddered in pleasure. The suit was too tight, she should have realized. It rubbed all sorts of sensitive areas, her breasts, nipples, especially the strip between her legs.

“Cara? Are you ready?” Emma called. Cara started; she’d been about to slip her hand inside her suit bottom.

“Just a minute.” She hurriedly changed back into her heavy black swimsuit and white terry cloth cover-up. They felt like a muumuu in comparison to the sexy blue bikini. She burst out of the curtained cubicle, suit in hand. “I’ll take it.”

“I’m paying, remember?” Emma plucked it away and set it on the counter in front of the young, dark-haired girl.

Cara turned to the salesclerk. “Do you have it in any other colors?”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “I told you it was a great suit.”

The clerk ambled over to the racks and selected three suits—one black, one yellow, and the last a melon-orange. Emma shook her head at the yellow. “You’ll look like your liver’s acting up

with that color. How about the black?”

“I like the melon color.” Cara held it up in front of her.

“You look very nice in that color—most ladies not so much,” the clerk offered.

“She’s right, Cara. It’s great with your hair and the gold trim on the cups and beads on the ties really make it shine.”

Cara took the black one from the clerk, as well. “The blue, the black and the orange.” She reached over to another rack. “And both of these crocheted cover-ups. I think the white one will look nice with the turquoise and the black with the black bikini, of course. And those three pairs of matching thong sandals in American size nine.” The woman scurried around, gathering up Cara’s selections. “Emma, what are you getting?”

Emma’s eyes had widened. “Cara, are you sure you should get all this? We’ll be here for longer than we planned moneywise.”

Cara stopped for a second. “Really, Emma, don’t worry about it. I built some shopping into my budget. You know how frugally I live.”

Emma laughed and visibly relaxed. “Frugally is right. Some might even call it cheaply. But shopping spree or no, the blue suit’s still on my bill.”

“Agreed.” But Cara noticed how Emma returned the hot-pink bikini that she’d been admiring to the rack.

Emma paid for the blue suit with a wad of euros and took the parcel. Cara caught the clerk’s eye and gestured for her to pull that hot-pink suit back out. The woman nodded. “Emma, why

don't you walk down to that café we passed and grab a sidewalk table for us? We should have an afternoon snack since dinner doesn't start until about nine or ten o'clock."

"You have a good idea," the clerk chimed in. "The outdoor tables are always busy and they have excellent pastries, as well."

"Sure!" Emma scooted out of the shop. She'd been eager to try different Greek desserts. Once she was gone, Cara quickly selected a matching cover-up and sandals for the hot-pink bikini. The total came to over six hundred euros, which Cara put on her platinum credit card without a second thought.

As the clerk was wrapping her purchases, a jewelry display under the glass countertop caught Cara's eye. Definitely beach jewelry—various ankle bracelets, toe rings and belly button rings. She stopped and touched her own navel. Her piercing was still open, although she almost never wore anything but a plain tiny silver ring.

"Would the lady like to see the jewelry? We have a gold-and-pink ankle bracelet that would look lovely with your friend's suit," the clerk offered.

Cara cursorily eyed the bracelet. "Fine, add the matching toe ring, as well." But she couldn't take her eyes off the belly button rings. "What about the light blue stone?" It was large and the same color as the afternoon Aegean sky.

"Very high quality. In Greek is akouamarina—water of the sea. In English, nearly the same."

"Aquamarine." A stone named after seawater was a perfect

choice for an island summer. Almost...destiny? Cara dismissed the echo of Athena's words. "I'll take it, as well."

The clerk did a little half leap of joy but managed to restrain herself enough to tally up the second bill. Cara figured it was fitting to return some of her dough to the Greek economy, back from whence it came.

"You come back again, okay? You ask for me. My name is Niki, and I take good care of you."

"Thank you." Cara was royally ushered to the exit, where Niki held the door for her. The late-afternoon sun blasted her in the face, so she popped her hat and sunglasses back on.

The café Emma was waiting at was only about two or three blocks down the main road from the shop. Cara strolled down the sidewalk and walked in front of a narrow alleyway.

A screech of brakes made her stop dead in her tracks as a Vespa-type motor scooter skidded to a halt a foot from her legs. The sunglasses-wearing driver gave an angry shout in Greek that questioned her brains and skills of observance.

Cara fought the urge to tell him where to get off, using several pungent Greek verbs, and instead pulled her sunglasses off, giving the young, curly-haired guy her best freezing glare. "Why don't you look where you're going, you bonehead? Pulling out of an alley where you can't see who might be walking in front of you—where'd you learn how to drive—Apollonias?" She figured that might twist the knife a bit. Apollonias was the nearest island and Aphrodisias's fiercest rival for soccer matches and tourist

dollars. She didn't know if he'd understand much of her English tirade, but it felt good to get it off her chest. When in Greece, do as the Greeks, and they hadn't been the silent, stoic type for several thousand years.

The guy's jaw dropped, and instead of continuing their insult-fest, he began to laugh. "Woo, watch out for those American girls—they'll straighten you out anytime." He repeated his comment in Greek for the interested passersby, who all laughed.

Cara fought a smile, but the corners of her mouth must have given her away, because Vespa-Boy turned his charm in her direction. "And they don't hold grudges, either, do they? Come for coffee with me, beautiful blue-eyed girl. Everyone knows Americans are so friendly." He spoke English well, the hint of a Greek accent lending a sexy touch.

"I'm not that friendly," she retorted, ignoring the curl of awareness running down her spine. "Try running over an Italian girl—they go for that sort of thing."

He laughed again and adjusted his stance to balance the scooter. She couldn't help notice how his strong thighs straddled the narrow seat, the denim pulling across his zipper. "But will she be as clever as you?"

Cara gave him a pull-the-other-leg look. "A guy like you doesn't do cleverness."

He leaned close to her, close enough for her to see the black stubble along his hard jaw and smell the tang of sun and sweat. "You'd be surprised what I do. And who I do it with."

Wow. Suddenly her staid one-piece suit was rubbing the same places as the racy turquoise bikini had. She licked her suddenly dry lips, her face reflected in the lenses of his sunglasses. Vespa-Boy's nostrils flared, picking up on her unexpected response.

He started to say something, but another scooter came up the alley behind him and the driver shouted for him to get out of the way. "I'll see you around, clever American." He made it a promise and zoomed past her.

Cara exhaled noisily and walked toward the café, mentally scolding herself. She was here to help Athena and take a break after her first year of college, not boink the first guy who had floated her boat in years.

Emma caught sight of her and waved from the café. Cara made her way through the maze of tables and set down her packages. "Good, you went ahead and ordered." An assortment of desserts crowded the small table.

"I just pointed at a bunch of items on the menu and told the waiter to bring coffee, too. You'll have to tell me what these all are."

Glad for the distraction, Cara fell into tourist guide mode. "That custard with phyllo dough is galaktobouriko, the almond nut cake is amygdalopita, various cookies and the ubiquitous baklava." She leaned over the table. "Purists insist baklava has Turkish roots, but the last person who claimed that out loud was run out of Greece."

Emma laughed, drawing the admiration of the young waiter

who'd just arrived with their coffee. He bowed. "Enjoy your sweets. I am at your disposal." He tossed a meaningful look at Emma, who just smiled.

"A possibility," she said, once he'd departed.

"A possibility for what?" Cara made a face. "He's probably seventeen years old."

"True," Emma agreed. "I don't want to find out the hard way the Greek penalties for fooling around with minors."

"Believe me, you won't have any trouble finding men who are old enough to stay up past curfew." Cara shoved the passing thought of reckless motorscooter drivers out of her mind and remembered her plan for finding an even-tempered Northern European type to test the waters with. No drama kings for her.

She spotted a possibility of her own and leaned over the table to Emma. "Emma, do you see that blond guy a few tables away?"

Emma casually turned as if she were watching people passing by and turned back. "That guy? The one wearing the hemp-looking Peruvian hoodie and sandals?"

"Emma, it is perfectly acceptable for European men to wear sandals."

"With woolen hiking socks?" Emma didn't wait for a response, mostly because there wasn't one Cara could think of. She gestured broadly. "All these Greek guys dying to meet American women and you're looking at some yahoo who probably has five pairs of lederhosen and yodels on the weekend?"

“Maybe Greek men aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

“And maybe we should conduct a scientific sampling of the population to prove or disprove your hypothesis.”

Cara lifted her hands in surrender. “Fine, sample away.”

“I intend to.” Emma broke off a chunk of nut cake and passed it to her. “Eat up. We’re going out tonight, and you need your strength.”

Cara accepted the cake and washed it down with her superstrong coffee. She flagged down the teenage waiter for another pot. She’d need the caffeine to keep up with Emma.

CARA HAD JUST FINISHED her shower and was toweling her hair dry in the bathroom when Emma knocked on the door. “Your cell phone’s ringing.”

“Oh, could you get it out of my purse and see who’s calling?” Only a handful of people had her number and they wouldn’t call just to chitchat. She hoped it wasn’t her brother, Rick, calling with bad news about their grandmother, who was elderly and a bit senile.

Cara grabbed her terry cloth robe and wrapped herself in it, following Emma into the living room.

Emma handed her the phone. “It’s a credit card company.”

She sat down on the sectional couch and answered, “Hello?” After answering a multitude of security questions, she assured them she was indeed on a Greek island and likely to make even more purchases with her card. “What’s my credit limit?”

She listened to the six-figure amount without blinking. “That should be fine.” She had more than enough in her money market accounts to cover her purchases, short of buying the entire island.

Emma was watching her closely throughout her phone conversation. Cara hung up and wasn’t surprised when Emma burst into questions. “Did you go over your card limit with all those suits? Do you need me to loan you some money?”

“No, no, I’m good, really—”

Emma paced back and forth over the marble floor. “Oh my gosh, Cara, I don’t want you to go broke on this trip. I know we’re both strapped for cash, and this trip out here must be costing you a fortune. Oh, I am so thoughtless. I have my teaching fellowship and living stipend, and you don’t have any scholarships at the university.”

“Emma, Emma, wait.” Cara held up her hands and her friend finally stopped. “Come sit with me, Emma. It’s okay.”

Emma plopped down on the couch next to her. Cara thought for a second, considering the best way to alleviate her friend’s worries. “Before I started college, I was married for a few years.”

Whatever her friend was expecting, it obviously wasn’t a confession of matrimony. “Cara, you were married? You never mentioned that before.”

“It turned out not to be a good fit.” That was the understatement of the century. “My husband was a bit older than I was and pretty set in his ways. I was young and naive and didn’t realize he and I were looking for different things from life.” Con

had wanted a baby-maker, and she had wanted a faithful husband.

“Oh, wow.” Emma’s brown eyes widened. “Married. I just can’t imagine it. Where did you live?”

“We had a condo in Chicago.” Her brother had lived there for a brief time and then put it on the market for her when he moved out and got married. That alone had brought her a significant dollar amount. “When my marriage ended, I got a pretty good financial settlement, enough to send me back to school and allow for occasional trips.”

“Your ex, do you see him anymore?”

“No, never.” Cara heaved a sigh despite herself.

Emma must have picked up on her melancholy mood, because Cara found herself enveloped in a bear hug. “Thanks for telling me, Cara. I won’t worry about you moneywise anymore.”

Cara realized her lip was trembling. Aside from a couple people sworn to secrecy, she hadn’t told anyone that her supposedly fairy-tale marriage was straight out of the legends of the Greek Furies. “Believe me, money is not a problem.” She forced her expression into a determinedly cheerful one.

“Let’s list what you do need. Fabulous summer in Greece—check. Hot bikinis and great beach to wear them on—check. Sexy Greek boy toy to give the beach and bikinis a workout—nope, you need to add him to your list.”

“Back to the men again.” But Cara giggled, encouraging Emma to continue.

“Back to the men, front to the men, sideways to the men—any

way you like to the men. Now go get dressed. Like that weaving of Artemis above the couch, we're man-hunting tonight."

3

“THIS ONE.” CARA STOPPED in front of a taverna around the corner from the main drag.

Emma looked at the unprepossessing building. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. You wanted authentic Greek island culture, this is it. No neon signs, no two-for-one drink specials or limbo contests.” She hooked her arm through Emma’s and drew her inside.

Once the cloud of cigarette smoke around her face disappeared, Cara saw several small tables and booths set around a dance floor. Piped-in Greek pop music came over the speakers. Cara pointed out a hand-lettered sign. “Looks like the live music starts in a half hour. Let’s get a drink and grab a table before they fill up.”

“Great.” Now that they had a plan, Emma made her way to the bar and ordered a white wine for herself and red for Cara. Cara waved to her from the corner booth she’d claimed.

“Now what?” Emma asked after a few sips.

Cara shrugged. “Toss your hair, cast a few meaningful looks around the room. I suppose you could lick your lips seductively, but that might be a bit obvious.” Just as she had licked her lips for Vespa-Boy.

“Not that. Besides, I think my outfit takes care of the obvious

part.” Cara had to agree. Emma wore a low-cut white halter top with a matching miniskirt and backless white shoes with a kitten heel. “Not to belabor the point, Cara, but maybe you should go to another of these boutiques for a more fun dress.”

“You think this dress isn’t fun?” Cara put on a hurt look, but burst into laughter at Emma’s worried face. “Okay, okay, maybe this isn’t the fanciest dress ever.” That was an understatement. Her dress was a sleeveless black tunic with no discernible waistline, and she wore the same plain sandals she’d worn to the beach.

“There have to be some clothing boutiques around here. You need something that doesn’t come from the sackcloth-and-ashes store. It’s not like you’re one of these Greek widows.” Emma checked around the taverna and sipped her wine.

Cara blinked a couple times and looked down at her dress. Sew some sleeves on it, and she would look like an elderly widow. Many of them wore black for the rest of their lives after their husbands died. Athena did most of the time, and Athena’s mother had worn nothing but black, if Cara remembered correctly. But they were decades older than she was—Athena in her seventies and her mother had pushed one hundred.

Although Cara felt ancient sometimes, she was only twenty-eight. Too young to dress in widow’s clothing. “Emma?”

“Hmmm?” Her friend pulled her attention away from where the band was setting up.

“Do I wear a lot of black?”

“Aside from that dress and your one-piece swimsuit?”

Cara'd forgotten about her old-lady suit, but that was proving Emma's point. “I mean in general. Like back home in Michigan.”

Emma furrowed her brow. “Come to think of it, you do. It's nice black clothing, like your cashmere turtleneck you loaned me and that really warm, long, wool skirt, but yeah, lots of your wardrobe is black.”

“I had no idea.” Cara mentally sorted through her closet at home. Aside from some warm-weather T-shirts and shorts, she did have a ton of black clothes.

“You look great in black, Cara,” her friend reassured her. “It's a very cosmopolitan look, almost European.”

Oh, boy. She'd been dressing in widow's weeds, to coin a British phrase from one of her literature classes. Mourning her marriage? Atoning for its painful ending? She knew Con wouldn't have wasted any time on regrets or recriminations, especially since he had considered everything to be all her fault.

Suddenly, her shapeless clothing offended her. Why should Con have any more say in what she wore? “Emma, this dress sucks.”

Emma choked on her wine, sputtering a couple drops on her sleek white outfit. Cara passed her a cocktail napkin. “Oh my gosh, Cara,” she said after regaining her ability to talk. “You shouldn't startle me like that. Good thing I'm not drinking red wine.”

“But you agree.”

“Well...not in so many words, but yes, it could do with a good bonfire.”

Cara laughed. “How about my old black one-piece swimsuit?”

“That, too. But it has so much padding and synthetic stretch fabric I think we might get arrested for air pollution if we did try to burn it.” Emma drummed her fingers on the table. “How about we throw it all away and start fresh? Not to be indelicate, but your lingerie could use some spiffing up, as well.”

“It’s a plan.” She’d stop in the swimsuit boutique tomorrow and ask that clerk Niki about the best places to shop. She drained her wineglass and set it down. “You want another glass of wine, Emma?”

“That would be great.”

Cara’s trip to and from the bar took a bit longer than before. The place was starting to fill up with mostly locals as far as she could tell. Cara knew she stood out as an obvious foreigner, but no one paid her much attention aside from a few stares from the men. They’d need X-ray vision tonight to guess what her body looked like.

Cara turned the corner and stopped. Their cozy booth had just become a bit cozier. Emma was sitting between two Greek guys, her blond hair in stark contrast with their black. Unsure if her friend had invited them to sit or if they needed running off, Cara approached cautiously.

Emma spotted her. “There you are! Come meet Nick.” She gestured to the man practically sitting in her lap, a guy with short

black hair and dark brown eyes. "And this is his friend..." She was having trouble with the second guy's name, so he supplied it.

"Yannis." He turned to look at Cara. Despite his lack of sunglasses, the poor lighting and the fact that he wasn't straddling a scooter in tight jeans, Cara recognized him right away. Vespa-Boy. And he had the bluest, bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Wow. Good thing he'd kept his sunglasses on while they argued that afternoon, or else she might have licked more than just her lips.

"Yannis! I knew it was something like that. What is that in English?" Emma giggled. Cara reluctantly set her white wine down in front of her. Emma didn't have much alcohol tolerance.

"John," Cara and Yannis answered simultaneously and looked at each other.

He smiled slowly. "You speak Greek?"

"Not really," Cara fibbed. Fortunately Nick was doing his best to charm Emma so she wasn't paying attention.

"A clever American girl like you should be able to pick up Greek during your stay. I'll teach you some if you sit with me." Yannis gestured to the small slice of booth next to him. She'd practically have to sit in the guy's lap to avoid falling on the floor, which was probably the whole idea. And a bad idea. Right? A very bad idea.

"I'm afraid I need more room than that."

He looked disappointed but gave her more space. She sat cautiously and sipped her wine, unsure of what to do next.

Yannis had no uncertainties. "You never did tell me your

name.”

She swallowed her wine. “Cara.”

“Cara? Just Cara?”

“Cara Sokol.”

“And I am Yannis Petrides. Born on Aphrodisias, grew up here—I even learned how to drive here. Not on Apollonias.” He lifted one black eyebrow in amusement.

Cara burst into laughter, remembering her insult regarding his driving skills.

“Ah, much better, Cara Sokol. I am sorry I almost ran you down today. All I can say is that your beauty stunned me so much I forgot how to stop my scooter.”

She laughed even harder. “Oh, come on. In that outfit I could have been your grandma.”

“My grandmother doesn’t have eyes blue as the sea or hair as red as the sun when it drops into the ocean.” He didn’t touch her with anything but his words and his gaze, but that was more than enough.

Again at a loss, Cara glanced away. Really, she needed to get a grip. She was no blushing virgin ready to fall at the feet of a smooth-talking Greek charmer. And please, just because his blue eyes sparkled in his handsome bronzed face was no reason to go all stupid over the man. He was probably a total dud in bed.

After all, who wanted to sleep with a guy whose shoulders were wide from some kind of manual labor, whose hard thigh had pressed on hers, whose strong forearms would be more than

able to hold his weight as he moved on top of her.... She drank more wine. "Oh, my, looks like I drank it all. I'll just go get a refill." She needed to catch her breath and stood, but he came out of the booth right after her.

He plucked her empty glass from her hand, his firm, callused fingers brushing hers. His white, straight teeth flashed in the dim light, his lips perfectly curved around them. "And what kind of Aphrodisian would I be if I let a lovely visitor get her own wine?"

For a split second, Cara thought he had said aphrodisiac. Oh, yes, Yannis Petrides was a potent aphrodisiac for her, judging from how her breathing had sped up and her nipples had tightened under the baggy black linen dress. She tossed a look Emma's way, but she was engrossed in dark-eyed Nick.

Yannis seemed to pick up on her nervousness. "Will you still be here when I come back with your wine, Cara?" he asked quietly. "Or will you run like a frightened maiden from the pursuits of the Old Ones?"

He meant like the girls who tried to escape the amorous attentions of Apollo and Zeus in Greek mythology. Cara tipped her chin up at him. "Why? Are you going to turn me into a tree if I don't return your attentions?"

He grinned again. "Ah, very good. You do know our stories." "Since I didn't see Apollo's sun-chariot parked outside the taverna, I think I'm safe. And I don't run." At least not anymore. "Good. Although if you spend much time here, you'll find Greek men enjoy the chase."

“But do you know what to do once you’ve caught your prey?” she retorted, annoyed yet aroused at the idea of him chasing her.

Yannis gave her a long sweeping look from her feet to her rapidly heating face. “I can’t say for other men, but yes, I definitely do.”

YANNIS BLEW OUT a long breath as he stood at the bar waiting for Cara’s red wine. He’d planned to go out for a few drinks with his old friend Niko Theodoridis, listen to some live music, and maybe talk about the latest football matches. But he’d never expected to meet the girl he’d almost run down earlier. He felt a bit guilty, speeding down a narrow alley and then shouting at her for not paying attention. She hadn’t understood his Greek, but had sure understood his message, giving it back to him in full measure.

He grinned. When he’d seen her beautiful blue eyes and the fiery red hair poking out from her ugly beach hat, she could have called him the son of a motherless goat and he would have just stood there and nodded.

Why was redheaded Cara here and not at an obnoxious tourist bar? Niko had tried to convince him to go to one of them since Niko had a thing for blondes, but Yannis had not wanted the lights and noise tonight.

Not to say he hadn’t planned to find Cara. He had seen her shopping bag from the store where his cousin Niki worked and would have asked Niki about her tomorrow.

“Yannis!” Niko thumped him on the shoulder and ordered two white wines, what the blond girl had been drinking. While the bartender poured, Niko leaned his back on the bar and rested his elbows on top. “You’re a great friend, man.” His grin spread from ear to ear.

“What for?”

“For picking such a great place tonight.”

They’d both been there dozens of times. “Glad I could find you your blond girl.” Not really. Niko put too much store in looks. “It’s been, what? A couple weeks since the last?”

“Yeah, Monika went back to Sweden in May. I’ve been lonely ever since.”

Yannis shrugged. Niko liked the tourist girls because one, they left for home before things got awkward; two, they weren’t related to him as half the girls on Aphrodisias were; and three, his mother was certainly not going to pressure him to marry some foreigner from Scandinavia, Great Britain, or God forbid, America.

The bartender passed them the wineglasses, and the men paid. Niko took a sip from his white and grimaced. “Give me a beer anytime.”

“So get a beer.” That actually sounded good to Yannis, so he ordered one.

Niko shook his head. “No, the girls like it if you drink the same thing they are. Makes you look more compatible.”

“Whatever.” Yannis reached into his pocket to pay for his

beer, but Niko tossed some euros on the bar.

“This one’s on me—as a thanks for distracting that redhead so I can get a little alone time with Emma.”

“What?” Yannis set his bottle down on the bar with a decided thunk. “You think I’m talking with her as a favor to you?”

“Why else? It’s not like you can see her body under that awful dress, and her hair’s so red and pulled into that braid thingie.” Niko made a face.

Well, if Niko couldn’t see anything but blatant charms, Yannis wasn’t about to point out the generous curves of Cara’s breasts and hips that even that dress couldn’t hide. And as for her hair... it was the color of the sun as it set over the western coast. Loose, it would drape over her pale shoulders like the painting of Aphrodite rising from the sea that he’d seen on a trip to Florence.

Yannis picked up his beer and Cara’s wine. “Let’s get back to the ladies, shall we? They might think we’ve ditched them and left.”

Niko’s look of alarm was almost amusing enough to distract him from his lustful thoughts of Cara. Almost, but not quite.

“WOW, CARA, you really picked a great place tonight.” Emma had stars in her eyes. “This Nick guy is so-o-o-o cute.”

“Great.” This was not what Cara had planned. None of it. Vespa-Boy had a name—Yannis Petrides.

Cara listened halfheartedly while Emma chattered about Nick’s manly charms. “Don’t you think that sounds fun, Cara?”

“What?” Cara dragged her thoughts away from Yannis and focused on her friend.

“Double-dating. Maybe if tonight goes well, we can go out with Nick and his friend again. Nick seems fun, and Ya—Ya—”

“Yannis,” Cara supplied.

“Whatever his name is, he sure seems into you.” Emma giggled. “With him around, you can forget about that hippie hiker you were eyeing earlier.”

Cara fought the urge to tell her that Greek men wore sandals, too, and usually despite extremely hairy feet, as well. “I just don’t want to get involved with a Greek guy, Emma. They have the home field advantage, and they don’t go home at the end of the week. I’d rather not spend the rest of the summer ducking down alleys to avoid running into the guy again. Too awkward.”

Emma waved a hand negligently. “Who cares? Move on to the next guy.”

Cara shook her head. Emma just didn’t understand how a small Greek island worked. “All these guys grew up together and half of them are related to each other. It would be like dumping a guy and then dating his brother or cousin.”

“I’m the one going home at the end of the summer, so who cares what the guys think? Besides, if Nick turns out to be as hot as I think he is, I won’t need to look any further.”

“As long as you have a plan,” Cara commented drily.

“You should seriously consider following the same plan. What happens on Aphrodisias stays on Aphrodisias. Oh, look, here

they come.”

Cara hadn't needed Emma to tell her that. Her guy-dar had gone off as soon as Yannis was within ten feet of her.

He slid in the booth next to her. “Your wine, despinis,” he announced with the suavity of an experienced waiter. Across the table, Nick delivered a white wine to Emma.

Cute. He'd called her miss. “Thank you.” Cara took several sips while she thought of something to say. “This wine isn't what I had before.”

“You like it? It's one of the island's vintages. The bartender usually saves it for the locals.”

Cara could already feel its headier buzz rushing through her veins and wondered if he was trying to get her tipsy. “I guess it's okay.” She felt as if she'd kicked a puppy when Yannis's face fell. “Well, you must not like it, since you're drinking a beer.”

“I like it fine. My grandfather makes it from his vineyard.” His sentences were short and clipped.

“Oh.” Well, that certainly was an uncomfortable exchange. She toyed with the stem of her wineglass and looked anywhere but at Yannis.

Her gaze fell on Emma. Her alcohol intolerance was kicking in, and she gave a big yawn before snuggling on Nick's shoulder.

Cara needed to draw this evening to a close. “Emma, time to go.” Her friend blinked a couple times and then shut her eyes.

“What?” Nick protested. “We just got here. The dancing hasn't even started.” He wrapped an arm around Emma's

shoulders.

“We also just got here from overseas. Emma’s barely conscious thanks to the booze and jet lag.” Cara tugged her friend out from under his overfriendly embrace. “Besides, Greek men can dance with each other. You two should go for a spin.”

Nick gave her a blank look, but Yannis snorted and replied to his friend in Greek, “Look, Niko, they obviously don’t want to hang around with us.”

“But the blonde does—”

“Her friend’s right. She’s almost passed out. What fun is that?”

Cara broke in then, “Excuse me, please, Yannis.” She scooted into him, and her hip pressed along his. The long muscles of his thigh flexed at the contact, and she felt an answering pull. “Yannis?”

He shook his head and stood, letting her slide free. Emma fussed a bit, but straggled after her.

“You sure you can get her back to your hotel?” Yannis asked. “We can walk with you.” Nick was pouting into his wineglass and didn’t bother seconding Yannis’s offer.

“No, thanks. We’re not far.” Cara tugged Emma’s elbow.

“Nick, we’re at the Aphrodite Bay Villas, Apartment Three,” Emma announced loudly, unfortunately not drunk enough to forget their hotel information. “Call me.”

Nick raised his head and a grin erased his sulky expression. “How do you Americans say it? Oh, yes. Count on it.”

Probably too far into the busy season to find another hotel.

Oh, well, Emma was a big girl, and hell-bent on getting her Greek groove on. In the meantime, Cara would try for a handsome tourist who'd be off to another island once the ferry arrived.

"Good night, then." Yannis gave her a curt nod and sat next to Nick. He reached for her wine and raised it mockingly. "Yia sou." He toasted her and drained the glass dry. "Ah, delicious. I'll have to tell my pappous what a good job he did on this vintage. There's a good reason we save it for ourselves and don't waste it on tourists."

She spun on her heel but forgot she was still holding onto Emma, who teetered dangerously on her flimsy shoes. Emma threw her arms around Cara's shoulders for balance and Cara staggered a bit under the weight. "Come on, Em, straighten up," she muttered, peeling Emma off her.

"Eh, it's okay here for women to dance together, too, but most of them wait for the music," Yannis called.

Cara tossed him a nasty glance and stalked off. The dignity of their exit was ruined, however, by Emma blowing a kiss to the men and giggling again.

Cara finally got them out the door into the warm Grecian night and steered Emma uphill to their villa.

"Cara, the blue-eyed guy likes you! Could be something special."

Cara groaned. Since meeting Yannis Petrides for the very first time less than eight hours ago, he had almost run her down, she had chewed him out on the street, he had tried to get her tipsy and

she had insulted his beloved grandfather's wine. Special wasn't the word that came to mind, but the other words that did would shock even a drunken Emma.

“SO HOW WAS YOUR EVENING OUT with Niko Theodoridis?” Yannis’s aunt Eleni poured him a cup of coffee and set plates of hard-boiled eggs, olives and thick slices of homemade bread on the table in front of him.

“Eh, all right. I had some of Pappous’s wine at the taverna.”

“Must not have been too much, or else you wouldn’t have found your way home. Your uncle uses that wine to clean tarnished brass sometimes. It works like a charm.”

It sure hadn’t charmed a certain Cara Sokol. Ah, well. The ferry that brought her would take her away soon enough.

“Eat, eat!” his aunt urged. “A big handsome boy like yourself needs good food, especially to work construction for your slave driver uncle.”

Yannis helped himself to the eggs and olives and drizzled local wild honey on the bread. He smiled up at Theia Eleni after a couple mouthfuls. “It’s as delicious as you are beautiful.”

She beamed down at him and patted her carefully combed and sprayed black hair. He’d seen her only once with her face bare and her hair limp and wet around her shoulders and had for a split second wondered if his uncle had sneaked a girlfriend into the house. “Oh, you! Your mother warned me you were a charmer. Like I told you before, my friend Georgia has a daughter who would be perfect for you. Just let me know if you want to meet

her. Such a nice girl and a good cook.” His aunt pinched his cheek and hustled back to the stove.

Yannis winced. Most of his aunt’s friends were on the lookout for a husband for their girls, but he wasn’t interested in girls in their late teens who only giggled when he tried to talk about more than the weather.

His uncle Gus came into the kitchen, still buckling his belt. Uncle Gus was wearing one of his dressier shirts today, a button-down white linen with embroidered panels down the chest over black dress pants. He must not be planning to visit a job site today. He sat and gestured to the empty table in front of him. “Coffee.” Yannis’s aunt quickly filled his cup and set down an ashtray, as well.

Yannis took a deep breath of the last clear air of the morning. Sure enough, his uncle lit a cigarette to smoke while drinking his coffee. Having grown up in Greece, Yannis was used to cigarette smoke, but didn’t care for it at meals, where it seemed to change the flavor of his food.

He popped a couple more olives into his mouth and pushed the bowl toward Uncle Gus who raised a work-roughened hand in refusal.

“None for me. Time to go to work, anyway.” He stubbed out his cigarette and stood. Yannis followed, his aunt fluttering after them with a couple bundles of pastries for their kolatsio, or midmorning snack. Yannis’s uncle more than made up for missing breakfast then.

“Have a good day! I’m making lamb for dinner tonight.” Aunt Eleni waved goodbye and then went back into the house, presumably to do whatever Greek women did all day at home.

“Lamb, eh?” Uncle Gus grinned at him as they hopped in his white compact car and backed out of the driveway. “And not even your name day for another couple weeks.”

Yannis grinned. His name day was June 24, the birthday feast, or Nativity, of Agios Ioannis Prodromos, St. John the Baptist. Yannis’s own birthday was in September, but name day feasts were celebrated more than birthdays, especially on an island where at least a quarter of the men were named some version of Ioannis.

“Ah, well, your aunt loves to have somebody else around to cook for since the girls are off in Athens.” He lit another cigarette. “Up to no good there, I’m sure. But they won those islander scholarships to university and were on the next ferry out.”

Yannis rolled down his window to let the ocean breeze blow through the car and privately thought his two cousins Marina and Petra had done well to get their education. Aside from tourism, fishing and small-scale farming, Aphrodisias didn’t have many career opportunities. “Athens isn’t as pretty as here. I’m sure they miss the island.”

Uncle Gus grunted. “Probably marry boys from the mainland and only come back once a year.”

Yannis nodded. That was a real possibility. Marina and Petra

were related to half the guys on Aphrodisias and knew the other half too well to ever want to marry them. His uncle finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in the car's full ashtray. The island was too dry during the summer to flick butts out the window. Nobody wanted a brushfire, especially his uncle, who was in the middle of several building projects. "What's the plan for today, Uncle Gus?"

"You go over to the villa site and make sure those lazy bastards who call themselves finish carpenters are doing the door and window moldings correctly. The buyers are Germans and they'll come in with magnifying glasses and rulers to make sure everything's square." Uncle Gus would take foreigners' money for building houses, but that didn't mean he approved of them moving to Aphrodisias.

"Sure thing, Uncle."

"After our kolatsio, get them working again and then come back to the office. I want you to sit in on a meeting with some Belgian property investors. They're brand-new to the island and I don't want them to sign a contract with my competitors."

That would explain his uncle's dressier clothes. Yannis looked down at his own light blue T-shirt, well-worn jeans and steel-toed brown construction boots. "Should I change before the meeting?"

Uncle Gus made a dismissive gesture. "No. Let them see we are real working men who are not afraid to get dirty."

Yannis wasn't sure he wanted to be the poster boy for dirty working men, but he wasn't the boss. "What property is this

about?”

His uncle pulled into a small parking spot in the alley behind his office and got out of the car. Yannis grabbed his tool belt out of the trunk. “One we don’t have yet. Kyria Nomikou was about to sell it to Athena Kefalas for some weaving museum, but Kyria Nomikou just died a couple days ago, before any papers were signed. Her nephew from Athens is asking around to see if he can get a better price—maybe he can, if these Belgians are interested in building their villa condominiums there. If we can help arrange the real estate, they are interested in contracting us for the build.” His uncle tipped him a wink as he unlocked the office door. “Now take a truck to the site, but—” he held up a hand “—park behind the trees where they can’t see you and sneak up on them.”

Yannis laughed. Sneaking up on men while he wore heavy boots and a bulky, noisy tool belt would be quite a feat. “Just how lazy are these carpenters?”

“Eh, they’re from Apollonias. They think they’re the sun god himself and the world revolves around them.” His uncle tossed him one of the pastry bundles. “Bribe them with your aunt’s baking if you have to. Those German buyers are coming next week and I need them to release the rest of the construction money—they won’t, not unless everything is perfect. And don’t forget to come back for the meeting.”

“Okay, Uncle.” Yannis stowed his gear in the battered Aphrodisias Builders pickup truck and hopped behind the wheel.

The engine roared to life with a cloud of black exhaust. He pulled away and shook his head. So much for sneaking up on the lazy Apollonian carpenters—they'd hear and smell the truck a mile away.

“WAKE UP, SLEEPYHEAD, it's shopping time!”

Cara cracked open an eyelid and squinted up at the giant lemon sitting on her bed. She peeled open the other eye and realized it was Emma wearing a yellow T-shirt and matching shorts, her blond hair fluffed around her face. “Why am I feeling the wine and you aren't? You were a riot to get home last night.”

“First, I seem to remember you made me drink a lot of water and take some aspirin before I fell asleep. Second, white wine makes you less hungover than red.”

Cara grunted. She'd had several disturbing dreams featuring Yannis Petrides that had left her tossing and achy with need. Probably jet lag thrown in on top of it, too. “What time is it?”

Emma checked Cara's bedside clock-radio. “Ten o'clock.”

“Good. Just in time for kolatsio.” Cara sat up in bed, the sheet falling away from the oversize T-shirt she customarily wore to bed.

Emma grimaced. “What's with the big duck on that shirt?”

“It's comfortable.” The caption below read, I'm on the Verge of a Quack-up, which had appealed to Cara's dark sense of humor a couple years back.

“Maybe we can give it to the housekeeper for her cleaning

supplies. Don't be surprised if it mysteriously disappears. Even that hempy hippie you were eyeing yesterday would turn up his nose at it."

"But I sleep well when I wear it."

"Who said anything about sleep?" Emma winked at her and stood up. "I'll run to the bakery downstairs and get some breakfast. What sounds good?"

"Oh, get me a bougatsa—that's a baked phyllo pastry with sweet cheese if they have any fresh ones. Otherwise, whatever looks good."

"It all looks good to me. How do you want your coffee?"

"Black. I don't need the sugar and cream calories," she replied automatically.

Emma laughed. "Cara, you dingbat. You want me to get you a cheese-stuffed pie-thingie and you're worried about a packet of sugar and a drop of cream?"

Cara took a deep breath. Emma was right. As long as Cara walked or swam every day and didn't eat only bougatsa, she would be fine. "Okay, cream and sugar both." She liked her coffee a bit lighter and sweeter thanks to the strong brewing customs.

"That's more like it. And don't worry, I have no intention of letting you sit on your heinie on the beach all day. Have I mentioned we're going shopping?"

"Only about ten times," Cara replied drily. "Now be off with you and don't come back without my food."

"Yes, ma'am!" Emma saluted briskly and hurried out the door.

Cara hopped out of bed and looked down at her night-shirt. “No more quack-ups—or crack-ups, either.” She stripped off the shirt and dropped it into the wastebasket.

By the time she’d finished her shower and wrestled her hair into submission, Emma was setting up breakfast on the terrace table.

“These cheese pastries are fresh out of the oven.” Emma slid them onto bright blue-and-yellow plates from the villa kitchen and poured coffee from the foam containers into matching mugs. “Sit, sit.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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