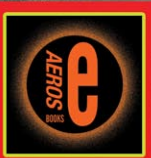


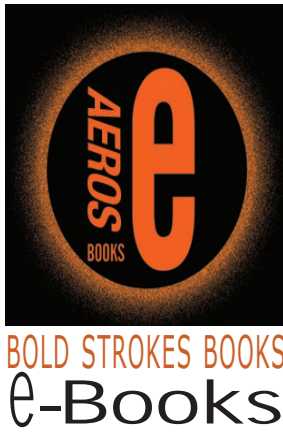


Gill McKnight



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EROSISTIBLE

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by

Gill McKnight



2009

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Dedication

For my mate Vivo McConvey.
For your friendship, support, and most excellent food.
I love you very much. x

CHAPTER ONE

Win?” The voice floated across the marble foyer toward Winifred Martin, as crisp and curt as she remembered. “My God, Win.” Then, “Where’s your other half?”

“She...she’s paying the taxi driver.” Win whipped off her sunglasses and blinked stupidly at Benedikte Fiske, her ex-girlfriend of many years.

“I meant you’d lost weight,” Benny stated abruptly. It was little comfort to Win that she looked equally astounded at bumping into each other after all this time.

Win shook her head, as if that would dissipate this bizarre image. Benny was here? Standing behind the reception desk in the elegant marble foyer of the Villa Eros, one of the most secluded, upmarket boutique hotels in the Greek Isles. The same Villa Eros that every lesbian magazine was raving about as an exclusive lovers’ getaway. Win was stunned. The most demented and annoying mistake of her life had literally popped up before her. Benedikte Fiske was *here* at Win’s luxurious holiday destination, never mind acting like a freak as usual. The heat wave had obviously boiled Win’s head to the point of hallucination. She could not understand what on earth Benny was doing here, but the snippy greeting assured her this was no mirage. This was unfortunately the real thing.

Although Benny seemed equally perturbed, it didn't stop her brusque, semi-insulting questioning.

"She's paying the taxi driver?" Benny sounded flustered and annoyed. "You're actually here with someone?" She looked totally affronted at the idea.

Win puffed in exasperation, trying to keep her temper. Benny had a habit of pushing all the wrong buttons with her. Pushing, picking, poking, prodding...

"Of course I'm here with someone." Win recovered enough to show her annoyance. "This, apparently, is a lesbian lovers' paradise. At least that's what it says in the brochure. More to the point, what are you doing here? You're a lesbian lovers' hell."

"I happen to own this hell—this establishment. I didn't see your name on the register," Benny accused right back.

"And I didn't see *your* name in the brochure, otherwise damn straight you'd not see my name on the register." Win was far too tired and cranky for this. She'd just spent three hours on a flight from London to Athens, followed by another five on a dilapidated old ferry, only to end her journey with one last brutal hour in a local taxi devoid of any air conditioning. All this through a crippling heat wave. To arrive hot and irritable and find her hotel was owned by her obstreperous ex-girlfriend. But then she was visiting the country that invented dramatic tragedy. What did she expect?



Benny had nearly short-circuited when her shapely blond ex strolled into her hotel in a breezy summer dress and dainty sandals. Even at one hundred paces and behind those enormous fashionable sunglasses, she could recognize the newly evolved Winifred Martin. Her long hair was piled up under a wide sun hat, a stylish belt clinched the dress to a new slim line waist. What the hell had happened to the chubby, sweet natured, and

totally maddening woman who had thrown her out on her ass three years ago?

She shuffled the pages on the desk and stole another quick peek. Win seemed as put out by the coincidence as Benny. She looked gorgeous though. The years had been good to her.

“Well, are you booked in or not?” Benny noted the beginnings of a tension headache, as if she needed a physical reminder that Win had just stepped back into her life.

“Of course I am. For two whole weeks. What’s wrong with your computer? Don’t tell me you’ve lost my booking. You took my money fast enough.”

Benny ruffled pages when she should have been tapping on her keyboard pulling up records. But the cool shift of quality paper stilled her trembling fingers and gave her a moment to think.

Win was here. In her hotel. Looking gorgeous in a flushed, disheveled, discordant sort of way. Benny was in a spin. Not that it was noticeable under her ice-cold Nordic exterior. She knew how to keep her cool, or at least look the part.

Why was Win looking so svelte and sexy? Why was she here at the Villa Eros hideaway? And who the hell was this “other half” busy paying the taxi?

“Is there a problem?” A voice like warmed caramel oozed across the foyer. Thick, sweet, and decadent. Benny looked up to see a stunning woman stroll over to join them. By her accent and handsome dark looks, Benny guessed she was probably French North African. She, too, was extremely elegant, dressed in a cool summer dress, her dark, glossy hair coiled up in a stylish twist. She had flair and beauty and smelled of expensive perfume and easy success. Benny hated her on sight.

“It seems they can’t find us on the register. Maybe we need name tags.” Win coolly turned her back on the desk and Benny.

“Electronic tags,” Benny muttered under her breath, “so I can see you coming on the radar of woe.”

She kept her head bent over her paperwork ignoring them both. Until the new arrival came over and stood far too close to Win. Touching her, in fact. Casually pressing up against her. Then Benny stood ramrod straight. Win's companion was a tall woman. She regarded Benny almost eye-to-eye in a friendly fashion, and quirked an amused eyebrow.

"Amira, let me introduce Benedikte Fiske. We know each other from a long time ago. Benny, this is my companion Amira."

Win was obviously trying hard to sound casual and light. Even if she had wanted to conceal their past, she could never have managed it. Win had always been compelled to tell the truth come hell or high water. Her embarrassment over the introduction was evident. Amira's other eyebrow shot up to join the first, and Benny gave a tight smile of acknowledgment. It was obvious this tall, sultry "other half" knew exactly who she was "from a long time ago." Which meant Win had been talking about her, which was probably a bad thing. Benny scowled and went back to ruffling and shuffling paper.

"Try looking for Amira Bakri," other half suggested helpfully. No sooner was it said than much to her annoyance Benny saw the name float up from the sheet before her, coupled with one *Martin, W.*

"We should be in the Aphrodite suite," Amira continued confidently, naming the villa's most luxurious set of rooms as if life held no problems a sweet smile, chilled attitude, and American Express Platinum couldn't melt away.

Benny bristled. "I'll have to check that." More paper rustling, then, "I'll need your passports."

Amira nodded cordially, her beautiful smile stretched even wider. She slipped an arm around Win's waist and gave a little squeeze. In one fluid, synchronized movement they slid their passports across the desk, a choreography of glamorous jet set lovebirds, used to traveling around the world's highways together.

Benny glowered at the comfortable pas de deux. Ignoring the glare, Win leaned in to her companion for a cuddle.

They were a handsome couple if you liked that yin and yang, night and day, dawn and dusk look. Benny didn't. She scribbled down their details and slammed some keys on the counter beside the passports.

"Eleni," she bellowed in a very un-boutique way. A teenage girl came sprinting out from the terrace to the left. She was dressed similarly to Benny in crisp white linen pants and shirt, the Villa Eros logo of a little bow and arrow on her breast pocket. Benny nodded at the keys.

"Please look after our guests, Eleni. Your luggage will follow on shortly. Enjoy your stay." She addressed Amira and Win formally and, without further comment, turned her back and pretended to be busy. In the mirrored wall behind reception, she caught Win rolling her eyes at a bemused Amira. Benny gritted her teeth as she watched Eleni begin to gather the lighter luggage.

"Excuse me, but are you Amira Bakri?" Eleni asked blushing furiously.

"Yes, I am." Amira gave a blazing smile.

Now that Eleni had mentioned it, Benny became aware of the covert looks the newcomers were receiving from the other guests as they passed through the foyer. It seemed this Amira was a well-known figure. Benny turned back to observe the passion play unfolding before her.

"Wow. I love your music." Eleni stopped and pulled a bundle of headphone wire from her pants pocket. "I've got you on my iPod. I was just listening to—" She faltered, noticing Benny's stony stare. Darting forward, she grabbed the keys from the counter and gathered up the smaller bags. "Follow me, please."

Under Benny's withering gaze Eleni led her charges away, her devoted eyes constantly sliding over to Amira Bakri. Judging by the quiet amusement on Win's face, this was a typical teenage reaction.

Benny watched them leave, confusion washing over her. So Amira Bakri was a famous musician, was she? Well, famous to the likes of Eleni who thought Bach was a flower remedy and Sibelius a sexually transmitted disease. She'd have to do an online search later and see just who this Bakri woman was that she could drag Eleni out of her usual zombiesque teen trance... and be a half of anything to Winifred Martin.

Dismissing it from her mind, Benny was humming tunelessly when five minutes later Win reappeared before the desk, her face dark with anger, gray eyes flashing. Her jaw muscles clenched and unclenched in that delightful way that reminded Benny of a venting volcano. Then Win would explode in a pyroclastic surge of red hot, scalding anger that could crisp the object of her wrath into Pompeian ashes. Benny loved it. When Win lost her temper, it was as colorful as Chinese New Year.

Calmly, Benny capped her fountain pen and raised her eyebrows in question.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“Why are we in single rooms?” Win asked through gritted teeth. “On separate floors?”

Villa Eros was a sprawling affair on two levels. It cradled an elegant, formal courtyard, and beyond that beautifully set out gardens. These in turn led to a vista of sloping vineyards that ran all the way down the hillside to the villa's private beach and the sparkling Aegean Sea.

Benny smiled benignly. “That's how you're booked in. Amira Bakri, and Martin, W.” Primly, she read out the page. “Two single rooms from the fourth to the eighteenth. Sea views, scuba, and scooter hire. Oh, and no dairy. I take it that's for you. Does cheese still make you mucousy?”

“Do you think you're being clever?”

Benny leaned across the counter. “I don't have to be clever. It's all on this paper.” She flicked it officiously.

“So, we're agreed, you're far from clever.” Win snorted.

Benny frowned, rethinking her last comment. She could see nothing wrong with it, but Win's snorting disconcerted her a little. So did Win's self-restraint. Where were the pyrotechnics? Benny straightened up. Obviously, a lot of things had changed.

"So you're saying you want to amend your booking?"

"I'm saying I'm only here five minutes and already you're spoiling my holiday. I want my original booking restored."

"I see. You're still blaming me for everything that goes wrong." She knew this sounded petulant, but Benny was still frothing over Win's arrival, never mind the oily charmer hanging on her arm.

"I'm blaming you for separate rooms. Everything else is just perfect, thank you."

"Well, then it's a pity your sleeping arrangements leave so much to be desired," Benny slid in snidely, hoping she was casting aspersions on Win's bedroom activities with Ms. "I'm-So-Super" Bakri. English wasn't Benny's first language and she had to be careful when she got emotional. Things often came out wrong. "I am sure I can fix *that* for you." She smiled coolly at Win. Now *that* sounded exactly right if Win cared to remember.

Win frowned trying to pick out genuine caustic comment from bumbling, self-important nonsense. It was easier to favor Benny's swollen sense of self than deal with a blatant reference to their past. Especially in a bedroom context. Bed had always been the best place for both of them. Horizontally, they worked; vertically, they spent all their time trying to knock each other flat again, or so it had seemed.

"We booked the Aphrodite suite. Why are we not in it?" she ground out. Win was seconds away from heat exhaustion. Through the terrace door to the left, she could see the glimmer of the infinity pool. It took all the reserve she had not to run shrieking at it, tearing off her clothes on the way, and plunge into its cool blue. Even though the entire villa was air conditioned throughout and wonderfully ambient, the earlier heat damage had

already mangled Win's patience. Today she had endured a long, tedious journey through a land of scorched earth and blistering winds. Blasted by UV rays and acrid air no moisturizer known to man could withstand. To be dragged up burned and barren mountains to...wait for it, cherry on the cake, *Benny's place*. Win felt fit to kill. All she needed was prey. And here it was—her lanky, lunatic ex. Tall, angular, white blond, and overexcitable, hopping up and down before her like a suicidal snow hare.

"You are booked into the *Aphrodisia* rooms. Those are our single rooms. It has to stay like that until Ioanna, who took the booking, comes on duty and sorts your problem out." Benny sniffed a little too smugly.

"Aphrodisia, Aphrodite. It's just a typo, for God's sake."

"I can't assume that. Ioanna has to correct it."

"When will Ioanna come back on duty?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Look." Win's hand slapped down on the counter. "Who is in the Aphrodite suite at the moment?"

"No one. It's reserved for some celebrity or other. That's all Ioanna had written down here. Celeb and '*friend*.'" Benny used finger quotes for "friend" in a way that suggested the Great Whore of Babylon had come to stay.

Win puffed in anger. "And who could that celebrity be? How many celebrities do you have arriving this afternoon with their 'friend'?" She finger quoted back.

"It's against Villa Eros's policy to give out the names of—"

"It's us, you idiot!" Another slap of the counter.

"Ahem." A discreet cough came from the marble stairway. They both ignored it.

"I don't know that. Ioanna didn't put the names on the register, just the 'Celeb' code we use for celebrities. Stop slapping my desk."

"Ahem. Can I help?" The voice came closer.

"And what other secret celebrities have you got hidden away

here, huh? Who's lurking in the grounds? Elvis? Glen Miller? Janis Jop—”

“I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that information. For all I know you might be the press.”

“Press? Me? Why you absolute wank—”

“Benny, what's going on here?” The voice now had a ring of command that demanded their attention.

“This guest is unhappy with her room.” Benny was very sullen. Win took this as an indicator the Greek woman who had just appeared had some influence over her errant ex. She was also dressed in the villa's white linen uniform.

“Please, can you help me?” Win asked. “My companion and I have just arrived. We booked the Aphrodite suite but through some mixup.” She glared hard at Benny before giving full attention to this more intelligent member of staff. “We've been given separate rooms.”

“I will see to it at once, Madame. And you are?”

“Winifred Martin, and please call me Win.”

“Pleased to meet you, Win. I am Ioanna Kakos, a proprietor of the Villa Eros.” They shook hands warmly as Benny watched suspiciously. “Please let me amend your booking to your satisfaction.”

“My girlfriend's name is Amira Bakri. Her assistant made the booking, so I'm not sure how the mistake happened.” There was another glare at Benny, who ignored both her and Ioanna and belatedly began to punch information into the computer.

“See. No names beside Aphrodite, just ‘Celeb.’ How was I to know?” Benny waved belligerently at the monitor showing Ioanna something or other that supported her stance. Ioanna ignored the monitor and stared at her coolly as she passed a set of keys across to Win.

“Please forgive the mixup. It is our policy to keep the identity of our more famous guests as quiet as possible until they arrive. I'm afraid I forgot to update the booking with your details earlier

this morning. I'll have some wine and olives sent to your room by way of apology." Ioanna was faultlessly professional and polite.

Win accepted the keys gratefully. Her shoulders sagged. It had been a hard fight, but she had her romantic suite with its deep tub, cool, shuttered windows, and big, soft bed that she would collapse on to sleep away the rest of the afternoon.

"Thank you so much, Ioanna." She smiled.

"You're welcome. I'll have the rest of your luggage sent along immediately." Ioanna returned the happy smile with a little nod.

"What the hell was that?" Ioanna turned on Benny the minute Win disappeared from sight.

Benny tried to dismiss the incident. "I told you, there were no names in the—"

"Benedikte. The truth please. You deliberately pissed off one of our guests. Why? Why the hell would you want to do that?" Ioanna pinned her down with a long hard stare, her black eyes probing right into the center of Benny's shifty soul. Benny squirmed. Ioanna was some sort of witch; she was sure of it. The unwelcome answer popped into Ioanna's head and her eyes widened. "Oh, my God. Winifred Martin...she's your ex, isn't she? Well, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. So what?"

"Why did you do that to her and her girlfriend? Are you really that jealous?" Ioanna was immediately hooked by her perceived drama.

"I am not jealous. Stop being so theatrical about a booking error. *Your* booking error."

Ioanna snorted. "I don't even know this Win Martin of yours, but if Amira Bakri's her lover then even I am jealous."

"And who the hell is this Bakri deity? The whole place has gone gaga since she arrived. Even Eleni woke up." Benny huffed.

"She's one of the singers in the French Algerian group,

Araby. They're like a world music version of Abba? Even you must have heard their latest, 'Pour Amour'? Everyone's singing it, humming it, dancing to it?" Ioanna snapped her fingers and swung her hips in a seductive rhythm as she hummed a sexy snippet of a popular tune. Benny shrugged in disinterest. Ioanna sighed and stopped her little showpiece.

"Can I at least assume there will be no more upsets, Benny? We need customers like Amira Bakri. We need customers period. The season is short enough as it is without you chasing them away and ruining us." Ioanna gave her another hard look and shook her head ruefully. "How did I ever end up with a crazy Swede as a business partner? My mind was cracked as an egg."

"My wallet was cracked as an egg."

"And what a beautiful omelet we made." Ioanna waved her arms in a grand gesture at the marbled foyer with its pseudo Doric columns and cool, clipped echoes.

They grinned at each other in a shared moment of pride. Then Ioanna added, "I know you have a history with her, Benny. But please try to control it, and for God's sake, be civil."

"I'm always civil. She was slapping my desk—"

"Benny?" Ioanna warned.

Benny gave a sulky sigh in answer.

"Eleni," she called. When the young girl appeared, she ordered, "Take some wine and olives up to the Aphrodite suite." Eleni's face lit up like a beacon, much to Benny's disgust. "Oh, and cheese. Lots and lots of cheese."

CHAPTER TWO

That evening guests began to drift out to the restaurant terrace for dinner. Villa Eros boasted five-star cuisine and a world-class chef. Guests were free to drive down to the tavernas in the towns and villages dotted along the coastline, and many did for lunches and snacks throughout the day. But in the balmy evenings the most perfect place to eat was the villa with its wonderful food and exceptional views. The vast panorama swept over vineyards that rolled to the shores of the Aegean, and out to the silhouettes of islands beyond.

When filled to capacity Villa Eros catered to thirty guests who each paid a tidy sum for the luxury and privacy provided. Benny had ended her desk duty some time ago but decided to loiter around the kitchen, much to the disgruntlement of Chef Marcel. She'd already eaten but still wandered around keeping an eye on the terrace floor, watching the couples come and go under the soft lighting.

"Benny." Ioanna appeared at her shoulder. "Why are you still here? You've usually gone for an evening swim by this time."

"Oh, thought I'd relax with a drink and something to eat after work. It was a long, hot day and I'm weary."

Ioanna nodded toward a discreet table tucked away in a corner under the bougainvillea. "Let's have a glass of wine together." She led the way, Benny close on her heels.

They knew that to their guests they were an incongruous pair. Benny was a stereotypical lanky blond Swede sporting a glowing tan and humming with energy. Ioanna, her business partner, was a petite, dark, and intense Greek woman of great presence and sparkling vibrancy. But their energies were strangely complementary, like a tall bright flame flaring from a smoldering red-hot coal. Their fusion brought forth heat and urgency, and rather than pour it into a destructive, all-consuming love affair they had wisely invested these energies in creating their beautiful hotel. Their mutual passions were embedded in the bricks and mortar surrounding them, and they had become the best of friends.

A carafe of crisp house white sat between them as they watched their guests unwind to soft, ambient jazz music. In contrast to her relaxed posture, Benny's gaze kept darting to the door that led from the foyer, watching everyone that entered. She was awkwardly aware that Ioanna was observing her pretense at casualness with a small, knowing smile.

"She's coming in behind you," Ioanna murmured quietly into her wineglass. "They must have been strolling in the gardens and come up through the lower terraces."

Benny managed to stop from twisting around in her seat to watch Win and her companion being directed to their table. Instead she caught Ioanna's amused glance and felt her cheeks heat.

"So," Ioanna continued to speak softly. "Tell me about her."

"There's nothing to tell. She's just an ex-girlfriend."

"Then why are you hanging around here waiting for her to show up?"

Benny shrugged. There was no point denying her actions to someone who knew her as well as Ioanna did. "I'm curious as to why a smart lawyer turned herself into some pop star's groupie."

"Amira Bakri is far from a pop star. She is an artist who

marries Arabic indigenous sound with the best of contemporary Western music.” Ioanna wagged an admonishing finger.

“Look, if Eleni likes her then she appears on cereal boxes and her music is used for cell phone ring tones. To me that is a pop star, not some cultural ambassador with a tambourine.”

“You really are a sourpuss, aren’t you? And does it matter what she is? Pop star or ambassador, Win seems happy enough.” Ioanna flicked a glance over Benny’s shoulder to the couple in question. “She doesn’t look like a groupie to me. They seem good together. I’d say they’ve been going out for some time.”

This time Benny did gawp. Win looked gorgeous in a delicate cocktail dress. Benny’s gaze swallowed her whole from her rosy pedicured toes to the crown of her shimmering golden hair. The years following their separation had been good to Win. She had obviously looked after herself. Done all those diet and exercise things she’d always procrastinated about or could never find the time for in her busy work schedule. Win had finally found the time, it seemed. And though Benny was glad to see her looking so happy and healthy, another part of her was increasingly insecure that all this goodness seemed to have happened the minute she was out of the picture.

Win was animatedly talking to Amira about something she spied over the balustrade; perhaps the constellations twinkling on the low horizon? Win knew all about the constellations. Was she pointing out Ursa Major and Orion? Explaining the asterisms, the geometrical designs of the brightest stars, to Amira? Just as she had once whispered them into Benny’s ear as they lay on a starlit beach five islands to the south of this one. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Benny’s stomach contracted with unexpected misery.

“Pretty girl.” Ioanna’s voice floated across the table. Benny grunted a confirmation. She had always thought Win beautiful, chubby or chic, curvy or lean, through the crispbread and the chocolate, Win’s beauty was always constant even when she couldn’t see it herself.

“So why did you split up?” The question pulled Benny back from bittersweet musings.

“She wanted to,” she stated flatly. “We weren’t good together.”

Ioanna sat back patiently and waited. Benny sipped her wine and checked out the swinging kitchen doors, the waitresses passing to and fro, the silverware on the table, the bougainvillea flowering by her head. Finally she cracked, compelled to explain, to let Ioanna know the ugly truth if it. Of her.

“We were fighting a lot. She was always so busy, working or studying. Always something eating into our time together. And then I went out and slept with someone else and she dumped me.” Her voice was thick and brusque. It still hurt. The foolishness of her choices cut deep to the bone—then started sawing through to the marrow.

“Sounds as if you were pretty much spent as a couple.” Ioanna was diplomatic.

“Yeah. I’d have ended up throttling her.” Benny knee-jerked into the defensive. “She looks so cute and clever sitting over there yammering on about mythology and the constellations, but don’t be fooled. She’s totally maddening. And the stars are an old seduction trick she uses to—”

Ioanna frowned. “They’re giggling about the horny donkeys in the paddock below. All the terrace is tittering about it.”

“Huh?”

“Win is not talking about the stars. Those donkeys are at it again. We have to get them moved to another field.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” Ioanna nodded. “You can’t see from where you’re sitting.”

“Oh.” Benny felt lighter. It surprised her how keyed up she’d been imaging Win sharing the secrets of the night sky with Amira. It used to be their special thing. Even now when Benny looked up at the starry Greek skies she still remembered that evening on

the beach. It was etched on her mind as if it had happened only yesterday. She recalled other things about that night, too. Much more heavenly than the constellations. That was the night Benny discovered the words “I love you” existed in her vocabulary, and finally understood them. They slipped from her as easy as breath to become as important as air. Her entire being had wrapped around those words much as her body had wrapped and cradled Win in the dunes. Her cold universe of ever-expanding darkness had found its sun, and all her burnt-out, barren planets twinkled in its reflection like stars.

Benny shook off her sudden melancholy and fought down a heavy sigh before it could surface and give away her mood. With a last covert look at the happy couple, she resolved to ignore them for the rest of the evening. Benny didn't care anyway. Let them have their stupid magic moment over the fornicating donkeys. She called over the waitress.

“I'm in the mood for a cocktail. A Mai Tai for you?” She guessed at Ioanna's regular preference. “And I think I'll celebrate with a Horny Ass.” Benny forced a smile.



Across the floor, Win threw a surreptitious look over at Benny, relieved that her back was to their table.

“Relax.” Amira reached for her hand. “What can she do? You're her guest. She has to behave.”

“You say that now, but if it hadn't been for Ioanna we'd be in separate rooms tonight and probably on separate islands tomorrow. You've no idea what Benny's like. She's a nut.”

“Well, you're the one who went out with that nut for three years. What does that make you?”

“Anaphylactic?”

Amira laughed gently and caressed Win's hand. “I think she's still got the hots for you. Why else act so jealously?”

Win gave a most unsophisticated guffaw. “That wasn’t jealousy. That was just Benny.”

“Even so, all those years together? Something must have worked.” Amira continued to probe idly.

“Pffht, everything works in the beginning. Even clapped out old cars. But by the end we were barely rolling along with rusty bits dropping off.”

Amira laughed. A delightful tinkle that brought approving smiles from nearby tables. But then anything Amira did brought the cheerful attention of those around her.

“Tell me something good about it. When you were still under six months’ warranty.” She tweaked an eyebrow wickedly.

“You don’t want to know that.”

“Oh, I do. I really do. I’m fascinated by her dark passion and violent emotion.”

Win shrugged at Amira’s teasing. “She was actually very sweet and courtly. She knew how to woo me well...Once upon a time.”

“Knew how to woo you well.” Amira smiled slyly as she repeated the words. “But you’re a joy to woo, Winifred Martin.” They clinked glasses in salute to Win’s woo-ability. “So she screwed up?”

“More like screwed around.”

“Why was that so important? We’re not exclusive.”

“We agreed to that. Benny agreed to something else entirely, and she broke her word.”

“And your heart?”

Win sipped her wine and reflected on her answer for a moment. “She pulverized my heart. Like a millstone. She ground it down to powder and watched it blow away like so much dust.”

“That’s bad.” Amira watched Win intently. “And it still hurts?”

“No. I’m not that person anymore. Older, wiser, heartless.”

“Win Martin, you are never heartless. Even for a lawyer.”

“Hey, are you casting aspersions on my professionalism?” Win joked, veering the topic away from her bruised past. Her cheery laugh tilted Benny’s head in their direction though she didn’t turn to look. Amira nodded at the small movement, pointing it out with more than a little relish.

“See. She notices you. Every little thing. Even your laughter. I think I have a love rival. Maybe I’ll kiss you here and now and make her jealous.” Her dark eyes twinkled with amusement. “Or is that a little too cruel for our host? After all, I’ve already wooed you and won you, and I want to keep you.” A warm smile accompanied her words dissolving the hint of ego in them.

Win smiled at the engaging face across the table but knew Amira’s confident assertion was wrong. Amira had never wooed her. Win had simply fallen into bed with her, naturally and easily, for once confident in both her body and her emotional well-being. She had worked damned hard to get this new svelte body and she was proud of it. Win had buried herself alive in her work and a gym membership when Benny left. It was the only thing she could think of to do, to change from the inside out and right back in again. To metamorphose from a chubby, self-doubting loser to the confident, professional woman she was today.

Amira and Win had met in a business setting. Win was newly employed as a copyright lawyer for the law firm looking after Araby’s European affairs. Her working relationship with the eager, up and coming music group had brought a lot of fun and positive experience into her life. Her romance with Amira was an unexpected but welcome bonus. For Win this affair with Amira was lighthearted and relaxed. And that was all she needed right now. A great holiday, a sexy lover, and a lot of sea and sun. And here it all was, laid out on a platter...at Benny’s. The universe was a perverse place governed by bored and capricious gods.

Win lightly brushed Amira’s knuckles with her fingertips. She felt as if every envious eye in the room was on her. A lot of women would love to fill her Patrick Cox sandals at this moment, and that was all right as long as they gave the shoes back. This

was just a fling. An extremely high profile, talked about fling, and she was happy with that. Fancy shoes or not, after Benny it had taken her some time to find her feet again and it would be a long time before she lost her balance and fell head over expensive heels for another woman. A very long time.



“From sourpuss to horny ass, you’re running a gamut of emotions tonight, not to mention the animal kingdom,” Ioanna observed dryly over her cocktail. “Just as long as there are no more dirty rats. Do you hear me, Benny? This is your time to let it go. To let her go.”

“I let her go ages—”

“You know what I mean. Your actions earlier were not those of an emotionally healthy woman. Seeing Win again has fused your wits.” Ioanna took a small sip of her Mai Tai.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Benny shifted in her seat and crossed her legs. Miffed at Ioanna’s interpretation of this afternoon’s events, she looked away, straight into the startled eyes of Win.

I am over you. I am over you, Benny frantically repeated her brand new mantra.

Win’s gaze had drifted over to Benny and Ioanna’s table, discreetly set behind flowering vines. It was a casual glance thrown without a thought, until she locked eyes with an icy blue, so cold and hard it could cut diamond. Benny’s stare drilled through her like an ice bore, before dropping to her fingers idly stroking the back of Amira’s dusky hand. Momentarily shaken by the intensity of the look, Win turned her palm and clasped Amira’s playful fingers with her own, holding them tightly for a split second. She needed the connection of having another hand to hold.

Benny glared. *I am sooo over you,* her mantra drilled on into her head. As if to test her newfound inner strength, she allowed

her gaze to linger on Win's fingers playing with Amira's. *So, so over you.* Anger flashed through Benny leaving her guts a furnace of white heat. *I am so damn well over you...* She felt raw and incredibly angry. Win's fingers danced over Amira's. *Over you, I am over you...* A nitrate of pure jealousy hissed through Benny's veins dissolving her blood to vinegar. *I am ove—Stop that, you little tramp!*

CHAPTER THREE

Win scooted along the corridor rummaging through the depths of her beach bag. She rounded a corner and ended up with a nose full of Benny's crisp white shirt.

"Oh, sorry."

"Good morning." They spoke over each other.

Benny's hands cupped Win's shoulders to steady her, but Win stepped back abruptly. The heat of Benny's fingers remained on her skin scorching up to her cheeks. She felt silly with this awkwardness. Since the moment of her arrival, being near Benny had left her stomach in a tight knot, every twist and turn an unwelcome memory or wretched emotion. It was all such a long time ago, but a part of Win's heart was forever locked into that stunned, empty moment of silence as the door closed behind Benny for the last time. That quiet click a never-ending echo resonating through her life to this day, coloring her choices, forming her actions, molding who she was today. Win didn't want to go back to that painful time and place ever again. Never wanted to return to that lost, cold loneliness, where the whole world had ended and nobody knew it but her.

"Sorry," she repeated and side stepped around Benny. Much to her consternation, Benny fell into step beside her. In fact, she seemed intent to accompany her all the way out to the pool terrace. "Weren't you going the other way?" They were certainly going in opposite directions when they collided.

“No.”

Win sped up her step, but Benny’s long strides effortlessly gobbled up the marbled floor as she cruised alongside.

“Um...so, how’s London?” Benny groped at a conversation topic. Win rolled her eyes. Why did Benny even bother? Why not just turn around and go back the way she’d come instead of putting them both through this lame charade of hospitality? It was a little too late to play the perfect host.

“It’s still the capital.”

“No. I meant the house. Did you get that sycamore lopped before the branches damaged the roof tiles?” Benny settled on a favorite complaint unaware her domestic interests were falling on unreceptive ears.

“No, I didn’t. I sold the house. It’s not my problem anymore.”

Benny staggered to a halt. “You sold the house?”

“Yes.” Win sailed on ahead.

“But it was a beautiful home. House.” Benny rushed to catch up, hoping she’d hidden her slip. She was still in shock. Win’s small Dulwich townhouse had once been the happiest place on earth for Benny. It was home. Well, actually it wasn’t, not anymore. However, in some recess of her heart it still was and always would be, no matter how settled she was here on her island. She couldn’t believe Win had sold it. She felt as if a huge part of her emotional history had just been amputated.

“Now I have an apartment over in Chelsea. It’s closer to work. I moved on, Benny.”

They arrived at the poolside and, with a bright, forced smile, Win slid onto a sun lounger beside Amira. “I brought your book.”

“Thanks, baby,” Amira murmured, inattentive and drowsy with the heat.

Win sat upright in her lounger, still wearing her sarong. She shot Benny a frowning sideways look, refusing to relax under

her tall, lurking shadow. Benny shuffled awkwardly, reluctant to move. She wanted to ask more questions about their old house and Win's new place. How did she feel about selling up and "moving on"? What was living in Chelsea like? What did she mean, close to work? And what exactly was her new job anyhow? Questions like that, and lots of other questions about the last three years. Lots. All this change made Benny anxious even though she had not been part of it. How did Win feel about it all? How did Win feel about anything? Benny wanted to ask her, to talk to her, to tell her—

"May I have another water?" Amira lifted her head and wiggled her empty glass at Benny. Benny glared at her, but it was wasted. Amira had already turned her attention to creaming her long, burnished legs. Benny took in the sight before her. Win hunched up, chin resting on her knees staring into the depths of the pool, looking small and curiously sad. And Amira, oblivious to everything and everybody, rubbing lotion on her long, bronzed, overheated body.

Benny wheeled away to the pool bar where Eleni covetously caressed a CD in a quiet moment. She looked up and actually smiled as Benny descended on her.

"Look," she chirped happily, a strange occurrence for Eleni around Benny. "Amira Bakri gave me a marketing disc of Araby's new song, 'Aegean Eyes.' It hasn't even been released yet."

"Good. Sell it on eBay and retire, but first take a mineral water over to the fabulous Miss Bakri."

Eleni jumped to her chore. It was clear her adoration of the fabulous Miss Bakri surpassed even her discomfort around her huffy boss.

Disgusted and disgruntled, Benny left the terrace and stomped along the garden's gravel paths. A few yards away she paused to prod at a sprinkler with her toe, scooting it a yard to the left before moving on. She passed a water stand and stopped to turn the tap with its attached hosepipe on full. Casually, she

strode toward the nearest exit. She was halfway across the garden before a chorus of squawks and squeals hit her ears. The sprinkler's lazy arc showered stone cold water down on the poolside occupants. With a big grin, Benny reached the side gate.

"Drink that." She wandered on contentedly, leaving the villa grounds, and a million unanswered questions, behind her.



On her return in the late afternoon she found Eleni scurrying along the corridor to the Aphrodite suite, a bag from the local pharmacist gripped in her hand.

"Eleni?" She nodded at the bag. "What's going on? Someone sick?"

Eleni came to a sudden halt. "Sunburn lotion. Ms. Martin got burned by the pool. Ioanna said the local stuff was much better than the after sun cream she had brought with her. She's had some delivered."

Benny frowned. The local pharmacist did stock a homemade lotion, culled from an old recipe of his grandmother. If Benny remembered rightly, it was mostly olive oil, goat curds, and an herbal balm. It was a brilliant salve, but it stank to high heaven. Maybe Win had better think twice before smearing the goo on her shoulders, or legs, or wherever. Suddenly, Benny wanted to know all about this sunburning incident. When she left the poolside, Win was under a parasol and covered with factor one hundred of whatever light-skinned Europeans had to plaster on themselves. Benny was lucky; her Scandinavian heritage allowed her the luxury of white-blond hair but with a complexion that bronzed at the first rays of sun. Win burned easily if she was not careful, and she usually was very careful.

Benny took the bag from a forlorn Eleni who no doubt wanted an excuse to call on her idol.

"I'll deal with this. You get back to work." Benny had no

hesitation in heartlessly dismissing Eleni and her juvenile crush. In a few steps she was at the door of Win and Amira's room, rapping smartly.

Amira answered. Over her shoulder Benny could see Win belly down on the couch, her bare back an angry red. Benny bristled but tried to hide it.

"Oh, hi." Amira obviously hadn't expected her to be the delivery boy.

"I hear you need lotion." With a curt nod Benny held up the paper bag and stepped past Amira into the room, not caring if it was rude and tactless. She wanted to see Win's back up close. It looked painful.

She loomed over Win, peering down at the sunburned skin, uncaring of the glare she received over Win's shoulder. Mortified, Win pressed her front deeper onto the cushions.

Yeah, like I haven't seen it all before, Benny snorted inwardly. Outwardly, she gave a concerned tut.

"How did this happen? You know how to look after yourself in the sun." She had a suspicion she knew exactly what happened... Amira had not looked after Win. That's what had happened. Amira had not dolloped huge quantities of cream on the tender back like Benny used to do. Amira had not followed the track of the sun all afternoon and adjusted the parasol accordingly. Amira had not suggested it was time to go indoors after the prescribed half an hour for fair-skinned people to toast nicely. And Amira now received an intense, accusing glower that made her blink in surprise.

"We fell asleep and the damage was done." Win grimaced, the slightest twitch of movement stung. "I swear it wasn't even twenty minutes, but when I woke up I felt all tight and tingly on my shoulders and back." She was miserable, and Benny looming over her only compounded the pain of the afternoon.

"Fell asleep? Fell asleep?" Benny threw Amira a look that could curl wallpaper onto a floor. Amira had the grace to blush, but angrily.

“What’s in the bag? Will it help?” She reached out, but Benny moved it slightly out of reach.

“It’s the local remedy.” Benny was protective. “I need to rub—”

“Good. Let’s hope it’s better than the stuff we brought with us. It just locked in the heat.” Amira reached out, but Benny thwarted her again with another sly hand move.

“It has to be applied with—”

“I’ll do it. Just rub it on, right?” Amira made a quick snatch and managed to swipe the bag from Benny’s fingers. With a smug smile of triumph, she ripped it open and examined the glass jar. “It’s in Greek. I just rub it on?”

Benny shrugged, trying to hide her outrage at Amira’s sneaky lunge. “Yeah. Use all of it. You’ll need to apply it several times throughout the night.”

“Okay, that’s easy enough.” Amira strode over to the door and opened it, looking pointedly at Benny. Reluctantly, Benny moved toward it with one last look over her shoulder at the prostrate Win. *She* wanted to be the one to nurse her, not this charlatan who had fried her in the first place. Amira was obviously not qualified to look after Win properly.

The door clicked shut on her heels. Unsure what to do next, Benny loitered for a moment. Time enough for the jar lid to be unscrewed.

“Ugh, what the hell is that stink?”

“Jesus, it’s like goat piss.” The words floated through the door. Benny smiled and moved on to her next task, wondering if it was worth going back to tell Amira to, for God’s sake, use gloves.

CHAPTER FOUR

Most mornings Benny walked to work along the beach. Unlike Ioanna who liked to live nearby in a cabin on the Villa Eros grounds, Benny preferred to get away from the place. She had bought and refurbished a disused grape press house attached to one of the neighborhood farms, turning it into a modest home. Her daily habit was to wake early, swim, and then either walk to work along the shore or ride her little scooter up the mountain road to the villa. If she had time then the beach walk won.

Today should have been her weekend off. She had planned to hang out with her friend Dimitri on the other side of the island, helping him with his vines, but late last night, sitting on her small porch sipping retsina and watching for shooting stars, she found herself inventing chores to keep her at the villa on her time off.

Several glasses later she was relaxed enough to examine the truth behind her new work ethic. Win's arrival was napalm to her raw emotions. Benny was caught completely off guard at seeing her again, never mind Win's evolution into a sophisticated, sexy woman with beautiful, rich lovers. Deep into the night, with a half empty bottle and no wishing stars in sight, she had finally admitted to herself she was crazy with jealousy. Oh, how Ioanna would have laughed. The witch had known it all along.

The villa's gardens meandered partway down the hillside

to where a single well-worn track took guests past vineyards to a small private beach for residents' use. Now Benny walked along the edge of the surf, in baggy T-shirt and shorts, swinging her flip-flops and mulling over life and her diminutive place in it. Thursday's events had stunned her out of her happy little island daze. She had been lost in that haze for nearly three years between setting up and running this place. Burying herself in her new enterprise after her small CCTV software company had been gobbled up by a larger corporation. It suited her to take the money and run; she was tired of her old life, her old self. The cash injection allowed her to break free and plan a new future. And this island and Villa Eros was it, her fortune cast, her mind set. She was recreating her life to a specific formula, one that she was sure would bring her peace if nothing else. But her simple recipe for emotional self-sufficiency had dissolved to nothing with one click of Win's high heeled sandals over the threshold of Benny's precious little haven.

The cause of all this inner unrest had sashayed into her perfectly balanced world on Thursday afternoon, all tarted up and hanging on to the arm of some one-hit wonder. So much for Benny's theories for a peaceful life. All it took was one look from Win Martin and the numbers jumbled in her head, equations slid and skittered across the floor, and nothing computed anymore. She was in total meltdown. Benny hated it that after all these years Win still had that power over her. Now her unsettled and unhappy heart had awoken and was howling for attention, demanding its right to love and happy-ever-afters and all the other nonsense foolish and neglected hearts felt entitled to. It remembered better times when it beat to another rhythm; one click from those heels and it had defibrillated back into its old bad habits.

It was too early in the morning for even the hardiest of guests to surface, never mind make it beyond breakfast on the pool terrace, so Benny was surprised and then concerned to hear a small whimper from behind a rock outcrop. Intrigued, she moved nearer only to pick up her pace as she recognized Win's voice.

“Oh, it hurts. God dammit. I’m such a stupid bitch.”

“Win?” Benny rounded the rocks to find Win sitting in the sand dressed in bikini bottoms and a loose top, her hair tied back off her face, and nursing an obviously painful foot. “Are you okay?”

Win looked up startled, squinting into the morning sun as Benny’s shadow hung over her. Her eyes were the same pewter gray they always deepened to when she was upset and on the point of tears. She sighed in a deeply forlorn way that indicated the day was not getting any better.

“Hey. What’s wrong?” Benny’s concern was genuine.

“I think I stepped on a sea urchin.” Win gave in to her physical discomfort and indicated the foot resting on her knee. She twisted it around to see the damage. “It stings like crazy. I’m so stupid. I didn’t even see them.”

Benny sucked in a sympathetic breath. Sea urchin spikes really hurt, especially in the sole of a foot. She knelt down before Win and gently took her foot in her hands.

“Let me see. What happened?”

“I was out running and decided to have a swim to cool down.”

Benny quirked a surprised eyebrow before she could stop herself. Seeing it, Win snapped, “Yes. I run now. And I love it. You have an opinion on that?”

“No,” Benny snipped right back. “So...you run barefoot or what?”

“My trainers are over there with my beach bag.” Win nodded at a bag and towel halfway up the beach. “I hardly go swimming in them. I was exploring the rock pools over there.” She pointed to a group of rocks about twenty meters away.

Benny nodded knowingly. “Yeah, you can get urchins there sometimes. How did you get all the way back over here?”

“Swam, hopped, cried...”

“Hold still while I take a look.” She held up the foot for inspection, expecting to see a multitude of little black dots where

the spines had penetrated the skin and snapped off. There were none. Instead, she saw a row of nasty gashes that oozed small beads of blood. The seawater had washed the cuts clean and the bleeding had as good as stopped.

“I think you stepped on broken glass or something just as sharp.” Benny was angry. On warm nights guests frequently came down for naked frolics in the surf, usually with bottles of champagne and glasses. Not all the empties were returned, and usually a member of staff came down on a litter patrol each morning to clear up and prevent this sort of thing from happening. Benny examined the cuts further.

“I can’t see anything in there. The cuts aren’t deep, more like scratches really, and they look clean to me. I think a lot of the discomfort is the salt water sting.”

“Broken glass? This holiday is officially cursed. I had to sleep in the balcony hammock last night. That ooze you brought stunk to high heaven. It was heinous.”

Benny hid her smile as she continued to examine the cuts. “Did it work?”

“It worked a treat. It even repelled the mosquitoes. My back is great and all the heat is gone—Oh, Oh.”

Benny glanced up to see Win’s face contort in pain.

“Oh God. Bloody hell—” Win cried out, grabbing her thigh.

“What? What?”

“Cramp. Charley horse. Jesus—”

“Okay, okay. I know what to do.” Dozens of times in their relationship Win had suffered from leg cramps. Obviously, examining her injured foot had stretched a protesting muscle a little too far and now it had spasmed her thigh. The muscle had probably not cooled down after her run. Benny knew exactly what to do; in fact, she was an expert after years of living with Win. She placed the foot on her shoulder and, crouching between Win’s legs, gently began to massage the rock hard and painfully tight thigh muscle with skillful fingers.

“Oh my God.” Win yelped. “More. Quicker.”

“No. This speed works best.”

“Harder.”

“I know what I’m doing. Spent half my life rubbing your bleeding cramps,” she muttered. Benny’s fingers soothed and smoothed the damp thigh. It curved under her touch, tight and plump. Gym muscle, tread-mastered, cross-trained, squatted, the lot had been thrown at it. And it felt delicious under Benny’s cool fingers. It arced to the rim of Win’s bikini bottoms, and there a whole different set of curves, and dips, and sexy shadows began. Benny averted her eyes. It would be so easy to give in to her light-headedness and swoon forward hoping for a miracle. The palm of her hand brushed against the silkiness of Win’s flesh. Win always had the softest skin. She smelled of coconut sunscreen and heat and salt. A sexy, lickable sort of smell. It made Benny edgy and anxious and very excited all at the same time.

“Do it harder or it’s no use,” Win whined. The fact she could whine proved to Benny her massage was already working.

“Stop bossing me,” Benny scolded back, settling more comfortably between Win’s legs. She could feel the muscle begin to relax under her touch but kept on rubbing. Round and round in soft, slow circles. It was addictive; she could do this all summer. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes. What *are* you doing?” A shadow stretched over them as they crouched on the sand behind the rocks. Benny peered up into Ioanna’s cynical face. She felt Win stiffen under her hands.

“Charley horse,” Benny explained dourly, annoyed at Ioanna’s implication that all was not aboveboard. There was no need for that tone, despite Win’s leg flung over her shoulder and her hands all over her thigh. There were a million reasons she could be on her knees between her ex-girlfriend’s legs. A million. And she’d love to demonstrate each and every one. “Win’s got a charley horse.”

“More like a horny pony.” She barely made out Ioanna’s muttered reply, but Benny felt her ears roast. A quick peep at

Win told her that though she had missed the caustic comment she was embarrassed with the situation. She tried to pull away but Benny tightened her hold on her thigh. Her fingers were glued. She didn't want to let go.

"Maybe Win needs to walk it off?" Ioanna volunteered most unhelpfully.

"Are you down here to look for litter or what?" Benny noticed the plastic bin bag in Ioanna's grasp. "If you are, check out those rocks. Win stepped on something sharp, might be broken glass." She wanted Ioanna and her stupid suggestions out of the way.

Ioanna looked anxiously at Win's foot where it rested on Benny's shoulder. "Broken glass? Does she need first aid?"

"What do you think this is?" Benny huffed at Ioanna's continued attention.

Ioanna raised an eyebrow. "Médecin sans Frontières?" But taking the hint she wandered away in search of the broken glass.

Pink-faced, Win again tried to withdraw her leg, more forcefully this time. "It feels a lot better now. Ioanna's right. I do need to walk on it," she mumbled, refusing to look Benny in the eye.

"It's not like I was trying to grope you," Benny grouched quietly as Win scrambled onto her good foot, holding on to the outcrop for balance.

"I never thought for a moment you were, or I'd have been on my feet sooner." She pointed to her towel and beach bag a few yards away. "Could you get me my trainers, please? I don't want to get sand in my cuts."

Benny fetched them, still happy to help although she was also miffed with the inference that stroking Win's thigh was less than philanthropic. She was indignant that both Win and Ioanna thought she was taking advantage when that clearly was not the case. If anything, it was a blessing she happened along when she did.

Win shuffled her feet into her unlaced running shoes as Benny held her by the elbow for support.

“I’m going to help you back to the villa,” Benny declared in a voice that brooked no nonsense. She threw a hard look across at Ioanna who gave an expressive shrug and poked in the surf for offending glass. The knowing smile on her face irritated Benny, as it was probably meant to.

Benny managed to help Win hobble over to collect the rest of her gear. Letting go of her charge, Benny bent to retrieve the beach bag and towel when, without warning, an un-propped Win lost her balance on the soft sand. Toppling with the grace of an axed tree, she landed flat on top of Benny’s bent back, flooring them both. Benny tried to wriggle out from under, her face flaming. Win rolled around flailing uselessly. Together for a heated, sand swamped moment they wrestled, limbs all confused, slipping and sliding, flushed faces nose-to-nose and far too close for comfort. Ioanna’s burst of laughter from farther down the beach had them scrabbling to part. Benny shot Ioanna a filthy look filled with silent warning, her legendary Nordic cool now a melted puddle in the sand. Ioanna said nothing but grinned gleefully as she watched them slowly untangle themselves.

“You didn’t warn me you were going to let go of my arm,” Win huffed.

“What? Like I was going to levitate your beach bag into my hands? It was obvious I had to let go.”

“Oh, shut up and help me.”

They struggled onto their feet, brushing at their sandy clothes and general dishevelment. Win looked at the steep earthen trail winding up through the vineyards to the villa’s garden walls. If simply standing unaided keeled her over then Win had little hope of navigating the rough track. It would take her three days on her hands and knees.

“Has this island any mountain goats? I may need one to get up there,” she stated dryly.

“I’ll carry you.”

“And there’s my answer. Who the hell are you, Rhett Butler?” The gallant offer was met with a rude guffaw.

“Not carry you like that.” Benny hooked her arms before her in explanation. “On my back. A piggy ride.” She thumbed over her shoulder.

Win looked dubious. “A piggyback?”

“Yes. I can manage. I’ve carried you like that a hundred times before, and you’re lighter now.”

“Yeah, and you’re older.” Win gave a small snort but was clearly speculating if it were possible. They both knew she had to get up there somehow, and Benny was the only goat in sight.

“Come on, hop up.” Benny took the initiative and handed over the beach bag for Win to shoulder.

“You’re going to carry her all the way up to Villa Eros?” Ioanna asked, incredulous. Benny bristled.

“Yeah. Of course I can cope. Don’t you have me doing *all* the heavy work as it is, carrying the wine crates, the laundry bags, huge sacks of potatoes—”

“I’m right here beside you, you know. Who are you calling a huge sack of potatoes?” Win snipped, bristling in her own right.

Ioanna snorted at the mortified look on Benny’s face. She returned to her litter patrol. “Love born out of chaos,” she said.

“What was that?” Win was curious. Ioanna looked back.

“Love born out of chaos. It’s the origin of Eros. Of love. We named our hotel after him. A stroke of genius, eh, Benny?” There was a twinkle in her eye that alerted Win to some private joke, except that Benny did not seem to be enjoying it. Her face flaming unbecomingly at Ioanna’s little dig.

“Eros was a petulant, childish deity,” Ioanna explained. “Sometimes he was even depicted as blindfolded, shooting his arrows at mankind on a whim. He was the bearer of the sweetest bliss or the bleakest misery, piercing the human heart with either arrows of gold, or barbs of lead.” She shrugged, her eyes again leveling on Benny. “I think the ancients had it right. Love is whimsical, capricious, and sometimes even cruel.”

“We called it Villa Eros because it’s easy to remember.” Benny dismissed Ioanna’s romanticism and positioned herself so

Win could easily hoist herself up. With a no nonsense gesture she thumbed at her back. “Come on. Up. I need to get to work. You’re not the only thing I’ve got to hump around today, you know.”

With Win glued to her back, Benny began the long march across the sand to the start of the vineyard terraces and the steep hillside. To her Win was light as a feather, lighter than air, sunbeams weighed more. She was as light as Benny’s own spinning, blown-away thoughts. Bright and breezy. Sun shot, and bone melting with warmth. Win was here, on her island, at her hotel, and at this very minute pressed against her, her legs straddling Benny’s waist, arms wrapped around her shoulders, chattering in her ear. Benny rolled along with easy strength and a relaxed gait, her head tilted as she listened intently to Win’s every word. Her body was vibrant and alive, she was enjoying the unexpected pleasure of once again carrying Win home.

CHAPTER FIVE

The warm throb in Win's foot was nothing to the scorching heat slowly turning her insides to putty. Glued to Benny's back, she was carted effortlessly up the hillside to Villa Eros, acutely aware of Benny's muscles bunching and sliding under her chest and belly. Of Benny's lungs expanding and contracting, of the roll of her hips as she strode along. Win clung on for dear life, unsure how clever it was to end up with the fragrance of Benny's shampoo mixed with the salt of the sea and her warm sweat only inches from her face.

It was a bizarre morning. But then everything about this holiday had turned out to be bizarre. And Benny was at the heart of it, in the epicenter of all Win's chaos and confusion as usual. Win had thought she'd moved beyond all this. Outgrown, matured, rationalized, and compartmentalized it all away. Five minutes in the presence of her ex and she was knee deep in emotional rubble. Her self-contained life had been blitzed.

The loose T-shirt she wore over her swimwear was no barrier to the pulsing heat and pumping heartbeat thrumming through Benny's body into every inch of her own. With her legs and arms wrapped tightly around Benny, all she had to do was close her eyes to drift away on scent-fueled memories, and once again they could be lying on a tousled bed. Win shot her eyes open as far as they would go hoping the bright morning light would laser

through her retinas and burn the stupidity out of her brain. She scanned the leafy fields they were passing, looking for something, anything, to distract her.

“What type of grapes are these?” *God, what a daft question.*

“Assyrtico.” Benny puffed out the answer and looked across the swathes of carefully tended greenery. They paused for a moment while she caught her breath and considered her answer. “That’s what they all grow around here. A white grape cultivar.”

“I’ve never heard of it. Does it give a nice wine?” Win asked, pleased she’d landed on a safe and not too stupid topic.

“You drank some at the villa. It’s the house white. And yes, it’s a great local wine. The Greeks don’t export it. That’s probably why you’ve not heard of it. It’s indigenous to this area, the Aegean in particular.” Benny seemed pleased at Win’s questions.

“Then I like it. The house wine is lovely. How come you know so much about the local vines?”

Benny shrugged and took advantage to shift Win further up her back. She began to trudge onward again.

“Because I live among them and the people who grow them,” she murmured. “And because this is my new home and I want to be happy here. Understanding the island’s culture helps with that.”

“You don’t stay at the villa?”

“No. I live a mile away, in a quieter spot. I’ve an old grape press house I fixed up. It’s basic but I love it.”

“A vineyard by the sea. I never thought that would be your dream. You were always the Paris apartment type with summer in Cannes. At least that used to be your early retirement plan.”

Again Benny shrugged to resettlement Win’s weight. “I changed my mind. I’m different now. I want things small and simple. I want to cope easily...and be happy. Most of all to be happy.”

Win mulled this over. It was a massive compass swing. She was aware she should politely respond with some glib statement like “How nice” or “Good luck with that,” but she couldn’t. She

had to process this turnaround. It rumbled inside her, low and distant like the subway underfoot or the thunder vibrations of a storm front closing in. It meant something important. It was a clue, an answer, but she was unsure what the riddle was.

What was real happiness for Benedikte Fiske? Was that the question? Looking out over waves of soft green vines rippled by the breezes, Win would never have guessed this. It felt serene, nourishing, enriching. Beyond the vineyards the beautiful blue of the Aegean twinkled, encrusted with a million diamonds that had shone for almost as long as the stars. Over the eons how many wondering eyes had stared out at that ageless sea just as she was now? How many questions had been asked of it? Win shook herself out of her reverie feeling totally silly and beguiled. *God, this place is freaky. You'd float away before you knew it.*

“Good luck with that,” she mumbled.

When they reached the lower terrace Benny set her down carefully and let her balance on her arm flamingo style.

“I can manage from here. Thanks for the lift.” Win gave a genuine smile of gratitude.

Benny shook her head. “No. I’m helping you to your room. Then I’m going to collect the first aid kit and clean your foot properly. If it looks bad we’ll call the doctor.” Grasping Win by the arm, she took a step forward forcing her to move slowly alongside her.

“Benny.” Win tried to twist away. “Please. Let me get myself back to my room. I can send for the first aid kit later if I need it. But first I want a bath. We both know my cuts are painful but not that deep.”

“You’ll need a tetanus injection.” Benny was headstrong. Win could see it in the set of her jawline. She knew this face well.

“Been there, done that. I had all those inoculations a few months ago when I went to Algiers. Believe me, beriberi could bounce off me. Anyway, Amira can help me dress my foot if I need it.”

Benny blinked, stung at the reference to Algiers. Had Win been there with Amira? Had she been visiting the singer's home and family? How serious were they?

"And just where is she? She let you go swimming alone. That can be dangerous. There are currents." Benny decided to change targets, firmly focusing on another example of Amira's willful neglect.

"I told Ioanna I was going swimming. I'm not daft." Win bristled. "Amira is a musician. She sleeps late and stays up all night. She's practically nocturnal."

"Oh, like wombats." Benny was un-endearred by the nocturnal habits of either wombats or artistic types. "Tell you what. Ioanna will be back soon. I'll ask her to look at your foot. She's our First Aider. Deal?"

"Sure." Win compromised, glad not to have to fight over a doctor's visit, though she suspected that was not the real problem. Benny was backing off because she assumed Win did not want her near her suite while her new girlfriend was asleep in the bedroom. Win considered this momentarily and decided it was all too complicated to even try to sort out, nor did she particularly care to. Benny's behavior on her day of arrival still rankled and was still inexcusable. Her role of rescuer this morning had only managed to complicate, not soothe Win's emotions, a typical Benny contribution. It was best to leave her to her assumptions and use them as a buffer between them. Benny was already encroaching far too much on the reason why Win had come here in the first place, to enjoy a romantic break with her occasional lover. They had little enough time together as it was without Benny buzzing around them like an angry hornet.



As satisfied as she could be with the arrangement, Benny left Win to make her own way to the Aphrodite suite. She nipped into the staff locker room and showered quickly, pulling on her freshly

laundered uniform of white linen. It felt cool and crisp against her damp skin. She hummed all over, vibrating like a lyre string. She hadn't felt at all uncomfortable around Win. If anything, she was buzzing. Adrenaline danced through her; colors seemed brighter; the sweet scent of bougainvillea and jasmine invaded her senses and she floated even higher.

Cradled in this unexpected but much appreciated cloud of feel good, she wandered into the main foyer. Crooning a cheerful Swedish tune, she tidied up the brochure table with its excursion leaflets, and pamphlets, and complimentary international newspapers—and froze.

Her bubble of happiness burst like the useless skin of soap and air it was. A newspaper lay open at the gossip page showing a picture of Amira Bakri with her arms around a small blond woman...who wasn't Winifred Martin. Who was some up and coming French actress according to the caption. Benny was stunned. At first she was unsure what to feel. A little smug maybe? A little curious? Then she realized what she really felt was anger. She was very, very angry that someone would humiliate Win like this. Would use her like...well...

Benny shuffled the tabloid pages into some semblance of order, folded the covers closed and set it neatly back on the foyer table. She walked to the reception desk. *No business of mine what they do.* Partway, she stopped, spun around, and lunged for the paper, savagely scrunching it with both hands into a big crumpled ball. She strode back to her desk and shoved the paper into the depths of the wastepaper basket. She was furious. Win was a wonderful woman who deserved to have lots of love and lots of happiness in her life. Millions of it! Benny wanted to march right up to Amira Bakri's room and toss her out the window. Except she couldn't. Win was there and would see. Plus she'd be sued off the face of the earth.

Benny flipped folders and tapped buttons and poked at pens and pencils, all the time fantasizing about the multitude of ways she could murder Amira Bakri and get away with it.

“What’s wrong?” Ioanna appeared before her. Benny hadn’t even seen her come in.

“Nothing.”

“Did she get mad at you?”

“No. Surprisingly we were okay. She’s in her room. Maybe you could take the first aid kit over and look at her foot?” Benny kept her eyes on the desk and her hands busy with a bunch of bills.

“What’s wrong?” Ioanna asked again, frowning. “Are you worried about her cuts?”

“I think they’re okay. But have a look anyway.”

“So what’s upsetting you?” Ioanna reached over and stilled Benny’s hands. “If you fold that paper any more you’ll have a swan, not an invoice. What’s driven you to bad origami?”

With an exasperated sigh and a furtive look to make sure they were alone, Benny ducked under the desk and groped in the bin.

“Page five. Second picture down,” she muttered like a crack dealer in a side alley and shoved the ball of mashed up newspaper into Ioanna’s hands.

“More origami.” Bemused, Ioanna smoothed out the paper to page five and had a brief look. “Ah. I see.”

She carefully refolded the crumpled daily and patted it down on the desktop. “It’s none of our business, Benny. We don’t know what their relationship is. And I’m sure this is not news to Win if that’s what’s worrying you. She seems far too tuned in.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Ah, so this was in the depths of the bin because?”

Benny glared at her. “Look at the state of it. Someone left it back on the table like that,” she lied. “I was just tidying up.”

Ioanna pffhed, not fooled for one moment. “After the escapade with their arrival I’d have thought you’d be delighted. You seemed to want them kept apart.”

“I don’t want Win hurt or publicly humiliated. Not by some stupid ‘It girl.’” Benny was much more upset than she expected

to be and wasn't hiding it very well. The day had zeroed out for her in an uncontrollable nosedive.

"It's her life, Benny. Let her live it. You had your time with her, and maybe that's your problem."

"What? What's my problem now?" Benny was losing patience with Ioanna's pragmatism. It sucked.

"That you were unfaithful, too." Ioanna cruised past her to collect the first aid box, leaving Benny's torpedoed remains in her wake. Benny floundered, listed, took on water, and sank without trace. Dismayed into silence at the simple truth of Ioanna's parting words, Benny simply watched as Ioanna headed for the Aphrodite suite to patch up at least one thing that had gone wrong that morning.

CHAPTER SIX

That afternoon, with the wisdom of ancients, Ioanna sent Benny away on errands to Valleri, their local market town.

There she dropped off mail at the post office, visited the baker to pay the weekly bill, and did the same at the small cooperative shop that supplied the villa with fresh vegetables and olives. Chores done, Benny sat at a pavement café and drank bitter Greek coffee watching the world bustle by on the dusty streets. It gave her time to process the morning's events. But no amount of straight thinking could rationalize away her feelings. She was still in love with Winifred Martin. It was as simple as that. It was cut into her, like a line of compressed geological strata. There, in the soft mudslide of her life among the fossilized remains of achievements, successes, and disappointments lay a broad, straight line, darker and truer than the rest. It ran unfragmented and firm, reduced by the passage of time and the pressures of living into a tight band of the richest, purest ore. A stratigraphy of love.

Her happiest memories were still of coming home to that tiny London townhouse and to Win. Benny remembered winter nights when rain hammered on the roof of her car, and the mad dash up the garden path to the red front door with the shiny brass letterbox. Then through into Win's home, *their* home, and the

smell of hotpots, or stews, curries or chili, home cooking, all mixed up with the perfume of fresh flowers in the chipped vase on the hall table. The open fire and soft lamplight in the little living room pooled out warmth and welcome, and Win in the kitchen scolding her to towel her hair and change into dry clothes as dinner was almost ready.

Or summer evenings when Benny would come home early and light the barbeque in the small back garden draped with wisteria and honeysuckle. She'd chill wine, marinate the vegetables, and prep the steaks. Lazy London summers, when the flowerbeds were a riot of clashing color, and the hazy city sky crisscrossed with fluffy vapor trails. Win would arrive tired from work, happy Benny was home before her and had dinner started. She'd accept the glass of chilled wine and sit and tell Benny all the minutiae of her day, kicking off her shoes and wiggling her cramped toes.

When had it not been enough?

Benny knew this torture well. For too many sleepless nights she had sat awake mulling over the biggest mistake she had ever made. Why had she spoiled it all with her idiotic behavior and petty materialism? Benny had always been driven, always wanting more, and better, and faster, too. Win had been calmer, more connected and studious, a much more paced and rounded person.

While Win had sat in at weekends studying for her diplomas, cramming for exams, trying to shuffle her way up the professional ladder to her dream job, Benny had not been truly supportive of her. Not really. She had made all the right encouraging noises, gave Win space to study, kept out of the way. But in reality she had been too busy clubbing, filling her face with recreational drugs, feeling clever and fine. I'm networking, she'd told herself. I'm out there meeting the right people, making all the right moves in hustling, bustling London. Benny was on top of the world with a flourishing business and a wonderful girlfriend. Benny had it all.

“Benny was an ass,” she said with enough vehemence to draw curious looks from the surrounding tables.

She had blown it. Literally. Her drink, her drugs, her great friends, her high life had blown Win straight out the window. And now she wanted it back. She desperately wanted the real parts of their old life back.

Living on this island had grounded her. Had made her see sense and alter her life. But now Win had arrived like a ghost from the past, making Benny ache for the days before she was a fool and threw her life with Win away. Here at Villa Eros she had found peace. Now Benny was ready for more. Now she wanted happiness back. She wanted the old days, the old love.

Not the garden, not the townhouse; she wanted the love back. The companionship, the togetherness, the friendship. She ached for the way they were before, the love they’d shared. She was every tired cliché in the dog-eared book, the sad old song, the florid love poem. Anything badly written on losing in love could hold her up as example. Her heart had no pride; it would crawl out of her chest in a blink and cross a mile of sea urchins to snuggle up with Win Martin again.

Benny shook off the self-pity and sat up straight trying to rein her usually rational mind back to order. She needed to apply logic to her problem. Win had given her love and taught her how to return it. Win had made that happen, had made Benny love her. Ergo, Win owned her love. It was plain and simple. All her love, warped and twisted as it was, belonged to Win. It had been created for and by her. And Benny’s love simply wanted to go home, to find Win again. It had been alone in the world far too long. Satisfied she understood what was happening to her emotionally, Benny relaxed back in her seat.

I love my ex-girlfriend. I never stopped loving her, and now that I’m a better person I’ve got to make her love me all over again. Simple. So. How do I do that?



When Benny finally returned in the late afternoon Win was not to be found, but Amira was again lolling on a sun lounger by the pool. This seemed to be the extent of her holiday plans—lying around being waited on and admired. Benny wondered how Win coped. She had always been an active explorer on their previous holidays together, never a pool queen. They had loved to wander down side alleys and discover bustling plazas or quiet parks. The heat of the day found them in the cool interiors of churches, antique shops, and galleries. Evenings were spent in little restaurants and cafés well off the tourist track. They would hike miles to simply stand and marvel at a vista. The shelves of their home had been covered with photos of their sunny faces smiling and laughing at the wonder of the world and the joy they shared in discovering it together.

There was so much to this island Win would adore. Why was she not exploring the castles, aqueducts, and broken down temples? Where had her sense of adventure gone? Benny looked at the reason why, idling on a sun lounger like a basking lizard. A cell phone was glued to Amira's ear, a huge smile pasted all over her face. Her conversation was obviously thrilling. Benny resisted the urge to tip her into the pool. Ioanna was right. It was not her battle, but that didn't mean she couldn't worry for the walking wounded.



Benny stayed late, deciding to dine at the villa rather than head home as usual. Ioanna shook her head but remained silent. The staff were subdued and twitchy. For a second night in a row Benny was slinking around the terrace like a hungry python.

After dinner she found a job restocking the cellar with the new delivery from their vintner. It kept her on the premises with the guise of something to do for a couple of hours. The cool of the cellar and the concentration used in correctly racking the wine inventory soothed the headache that had pressed down on her all

afternoon. She felt emotionally drained and strung out as if the sun had leeches the strength right out of her.

Finally, she re-emerged into the bar in time to hear a generous round of applause and delighted laughter coming from the dining terrace.

“What’s happening?” she asked Eleni, who was on bar duty that evening. She looked up from popping the corks on a series of champagne bottles.

“Amira Bakri has ordered champagne for every table. She’s celebrating Araby breaking into the American top twenty. She’s just made an announcement.” Eleni was delighted at the news too it seemed.

“Top twenty what?” *Tambourine shaking love rats?* Benny refused to be impressed with all this celebratory rubbish. Her headache returned full force settling on her like a lead hat.

“The music charts, of course. They’ve broken into the American market. Araby’s going to be huge now. Huge.” Eleni was a blur of activity. “I think we need more ice buckets. There should be some on the lower shelf.”

Benny began delivering champagne to each table. Much to her disgust the lighting had been dimmed on the small dance floor and several couples were swaying to the sultry weave of Araby’s “Pour Amour.” It was the type of soulful rhythm that made dancers press close and whisper as body temperatures soared and eyes took on a feverish glow.

One of these couples was Amira and Win, Amira sticking to Win like cheap Velcro to pure cashmere. Win rested her head on Amira’s shoulder, her eyes closed, a blissful smile traced across her lips. Her arms were wrapped loosely around Amira’s waist, and in turn her hips were cupped intimately against Amira’s.

Benny was thoroughly disquieted with the affectionate display. In a calculated moment she swung past the swaying couple and said loudly, “I see you’re still limping. It must be so uncomfortable, all this standing around.”

Her voice cut through the music, and several nearby couples

turned their heads to look over. Sympathetic glances fell to Win's beautiful sandals and her bandaged foot. She shuffled closer to Amira, who, with a startled look of guilt, stepped back, breaking their dance.

"God, I never thought. You should have said." She managed to sound slightly put out.

"No, no. It's fine. My foot's fine. Honest." Win's protests were ignored as she was carefully led back to the table by the now overly attentive Amira. Romantic clinches over and done with, Benny floated away, depositing another bottle of expensive celebratory champagne with a relaxed smile.

Later Benny was hovering by the trellis, a good vantage point for spying with its obscuring greenery, when Win approached. Obviously she was not obscured enough. She steeled herself, waiting for Win to start scolding her earlier interference but was surprised at receiving a tight smile instead.

"I just wanted to thank you again for your help this morning," Win stated. Behind her Amira smiled over encouragingly from their table. Benny realized Win had been sent over on some sort of public diplomacy effort. If this was at Amira's behest then it annoyed Benny immensely.

"It was nothing. You were hurt and I was there." She shrugged stiffly. She wanted to scream. *Leave her! Leave the lying adulteress; she'll only hurt you more. Leave her and run away with...with... Just run.*

"Well, I wanted to thank you. It was kind of you." Win made to turn away.

"Leave her," Benny blurted. *Shit!*

"Pardon me?"

"Leave her for a moment and talk to me."

Win frowned and hesitated. "Talk about what?"

"Are...do...are you enjoying your stay?" *Oh, that's genius.*

"Let me see. What would I put on a postcard? Day One, journey from hell in a heat wave. Have to fight a lunatic for my

room. Day Two, sheep dip is rubbed all over my back. Have to sleep outside because of the stink. Day Three, stand on broken glass. Can't run, apparently can't dance either. Day Four...oh wait, that's tomorrow. Perhaps you've something I can choke on for breakfast?"

"I'll ask the cook."

"Look. How about we agree to let me have what's left of my holiday in peace." Win sighed. "I came over to thank you, and as usual it's become a brawl. Let's just give each other a wide berth for the rest of the evening. Amira's heading off to America tomorrow and—"

"She's leaving?" Benny straightened up, delighted with this news. *I could become religious.*

"I'm going with her."

Benny slumped. *The gods are dead to me.* "Why? Why would you want to do that?"

Win looked at Benny strangely. "Why on earth not? It's America. Araby's just broken into the charts. It will be fun. Massive parties, radio, and television."

"Groupies and hangers-on more like. She'll take another lover." Benny spewed it out before she could silence herself. "She'll dump you for the next good thing that catches her eye."

Win looked stunned. "Where the hell did that little dollop of poison come from? I swear you are one twisted..." She spun angrily to leave. Benny lunged for her arm.

"Hey. It's not me. I saw it in the paper. She has all sorts of flings and affairs. I saw a photo of her with that French actress at Cannes—the trampy one!"

"That's her half sister, you idiot."

"Oh."

Win squared up and poked her on the shoulder with a very forceful finger. "You just can't handle it can you?"

"Huh?"

"That it worked out for me. That I didn't fall to pieces after

you left. That I turned my life around and got a great new job and a fantastic new lover. That I feel good about myself. It galls you doesn't it?"

"It does not. I couldn't care—"

"Oh, bullshit. You're a terrible liar. Let's face it, if you could lie I'd probably still be with you while you bonked half of London."

"That's not fair. I never...I didn't—"

"Oh, shut up, Benny. Let go of my arm. I need to get back to my gorgeous, sexy girlfriend. It's our last night in Greece and I want her to remember it..." Win yanked her arm free. "...all the way to America." She flashed Benny an angry look before striding away as best she could on a sore foot. Head high, back straight, shoulders squared, anger sparking around her like fireflies.

Benny watched her go and hissed in frustration. The papers had said other things, other stories about Amira Bakri's love life. Benny had looked her up online, too. The woman was a walking courtesan tent. She *did* have affairs and she *was* seeing other people.

Well, if Win wanted Amira to have a night to remember all the way to freaking America, Benny would damn well make sure she did.



The celebration wound down in the early hours as amorous couples drifted off to bed. Much last minute congratulations, handshakes, and even quick hugs followed as those who had imbibed in Araby's good fortunes said farewell. Everyone knew Amira and Win would be leaving early in the morning.

Benny watched the golden couple sourly from her lookout behind the bar while a rueful Eleni tiptoed around her. Benny had taken up this position earlier in the evening polishing already shining glasses while she continued her spying. Fiercely, she rubbed at a glass until it squeaked in protest as she watched every

move Win made. Her little sideways glances at Amira, filled with sizzling promise. A casual hand grazing the curve of Amira's hipbone, her shoulder brushing against Amira's arm, gold against cocoa, teasing, electrifying...Benny steamed, the polished glass squealed, and Eleni winced.

Amira smiled and took Win's hand leading her away from the terrace to bed. Benny watched it all with a glower that made Eleni perspire. There was brimstone in the air, the smell of slow burning fuses and sparking matches, and Benny knew it would be mere moments before she went boom.

The bar shutters finally came down. The doors were locked and tired staff headed home. Ioanna was safely tucked up in her cabin. Maria, the night receptionist, had been sent to the kitchen for her coffee break...and Benny prowled.

They would be naked now, she brooded. Win would be draped across that wide bed. The very bed Benny had chosen from a catalogue when they furnished the villa. Who knew the likes of Amira Bakri would be sorely abusing it. *I might as well have put down straw if all they're going to do is rut.* She huffed and puffed and rattled doors she already knew were locked. *That's an orthopedic bed. It's very expensive.*

Amira would be leaning over her now, kissing her neck, nibbling her jawline, making Win moan. Win loved to be kissed. It really turned her on. Was Amira a kisser? Benny nearly spat out her distaste on the marble tiles. Any lover worth her salt would know to simply kiss Win until she went limp. Until she slowly writhed under you, her skin warm and sweet like cream, like silken, slippery, sensual, sweetness. Promising heaven, promising everything. Benny stopped prowling...counted to three. And hit the fire alarm.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The fire bell shrilled out in a series of short, sharp bursts. Win jerked her head back in shock and hit Amira squarely on the chin. She was belly down on the bed with Amira lying over her kissing her neck. Win clutched the back of her head and Amira cupped her jaw in pain as they rolled apart and onto their feet.

“Shit, my face.”

“It’s the fire alarm,” Win said unnecessarily, a little panicked, she plucked at her dress where it lay heaped on the floor.

“Here.” Amira tossed her a robe, straightening her own clothes. She was still dressed, but barely.

“Grab the passports,” Win said, knotting the silk robe around her. She stared crazily round the room, unwilling to leave before retrieving some other essential item from the path of the inferno—but what? Handbag? Credit cards? Her running shoes! She made a lunge for them.

“Come on.” Amira yanked her away before she could grab the trainers, rushing her toward the door and flinging it open. With the shrill alarm ringing overhead Win fully expected to find the corridor choked with billowing smoke and panicked guests. Instead, Benny stood calmly in the middle of the hallway a few doors down, nursing a clipboard and bellowing at everybody shuffling past her.

“Keep to the left. Head for the emergency exit. Muster point

is at the fountain.” She snapped at their heels like a bad tempered, sarcastic sheepdog. “Don’t any of you people read the emergency instructions? You know? The little card pinned to the back of your bedroom door.”

Win hesitated and squinted at her suspiciously, receiving a cool and very self-satisfied look in return.

“Move along,” she was ordered.

“Is this a drill?” Win came to a belligerent halt.

“Move along,” she was ordered again. “The muster point is at—”

“It is. It’s a frigging fire drill. At two thirty in the morning? You’re a maniac!” Her voice rose in anger.

“Follow my instructions immediately, please. Or I’ll put you in the logbook for obstruction,” Benny threatened, flushing brightly as other evacuees began to mutter reproaches as they trailed past.

“A drill? At this time of night?”

“I nearly had a heart attack when that alarm went off.”

“If this is a drill, I’m asking for a discount.”

“I swear, if—” Win began, but Amira was dragging her along the corridor toward the emergency exit with the rest of the guests. All were in a similar state of exhausted disarray, enforced sobriety, and subdued alarm.

“Out!” Benny yelled after her. “Out, or it’s the log book for you.”

Despite the scolding, her eyes managed to sweep Win from top to toe, making her very aware of the clingy material glued to her hot, flushed skin. Unsettled, Win threw back one last filthy look before Amira ushered her outside to where a wide-eyed Maria directed everyone to the ornamental fountain at the heart of the gardens.

“She’s a bloody lunatic.” Win cursed in exasperation. At least the night air was balmy and warm. “Ow.” She winced as her sore foot trod on the sharp grit of the path.

“Is my chin bruising?” Amira turned to her now that they were safely out of the building.

“Oh, baby. Let me see.” Win gave Amira her full attention, ignoring the stinging of her own injury.



“You’re a lunatic.” Ioanna flung her hands in the air. Benny held her ground, arms folded, standing ramrod straight. They were in a small antechamber just off the main foyer. Benny had been cloistered there sipping coffee and more or less avoiding Ioanna until she’d properly fortified herself for the inevitable dressing down. Unfortunately, Ioanna had sniffed her out, though Benny suspected Maria ratted on her. She couldn’t blame the young girl, all the staff quaked on the rare occasions Ioanna fell into foul temper, including Benny, not that she would ever admit it. “Why did you do it? Why? Why?”

“It was a shambles.” Benny attempted to rationalize the evening. “One of them even went back for her duty-free booze. They were all sitting round the fountain drinking vodka and singing until four a.m.”

“They’re our guests. Why the hell were they sitting out there in the dead of night in the first place?”

“It’s the muster point.”

“You know what I mean. A fire drill? A fire drill in the middle of the night? Are you mad? We’re ruined.” Ioanna’s voice rose. “Why not just light a fire and burn the place to the ground? Pour gasoline over everything and strike a match.” Her arms windmilled in a passionate Mediterranean way. Benny hunched further into herself in a brooding Scandinavian way.

“These things are best done at night and—”

“Don’t you *dare* feed me that crap.” Ioanna fired each word as rapidly and pointedly as a nail gun pinning Benny to the spot. “Have you seen Amira Bakri’s face? She’s black and blue. And

Win is limping again. And the woman in room three had an asthma attack. Everyone is grumbling about discounts.”

Benny looked away and fidgeted with the crumpled hem of her staff shirt.

Ioanna’s anger was remorseless. “I’ve had a string of complaints since I came on duty this morning. Do you want to ruin us? Do you? Do you?”

Benny shifted uncomfortably. *Stupid guests. What if there’d been a bomb? Or an earthquake, or a tsunami? They’d all want to know where the muster point was then.*

A couple of guests passed by on their way to breakfast and scowled at her. Benny could feel the hard looks burning into her profile. This was the third time she’d endured the wrath of paying guests already this morning. Her unpopularity was palpable. Her mind drifted, finding comfort in listing the domestic ingredients for bomb making. *Flour, bleach, what else...*

“Good morning. Beautiful day, isn’t it?” Ioanna smiled benignly at her guests like the matron saint of children’s hospitals. Benny mumbled something appropriate and avoided eye contact. Ioanna waited until the couple were out of earshot before continuing her inquisition. “Well?” she snapped. “What have you to say?”

...*Ah, caustic soda.* “Well what?”

“I know what you were up to.”

“I checked the log book. We were overdue for a fire drill.” Benny began to sidle away. She was tired. It had been a long night. She hadn’t bargained on her guests not returning to bed immediately once the exercise was over. A drunken singsong at the muster point was not an anticipated response to her catastrophe contingency plans. Unsuccessfully deflecting Ioanna’s anger was draining Benny of her last ounces of energy.

“I want you to go home right now and take the rest of the day off. Go fishing or something. But stay away for at least twenty-four hours. And think over what you did and why.” Ioanna was not joking. Not one bit.

“The log book—”

“Benny. You have been borderline psychotic since Win Martin arrived. I want you well away from here when she checks out.”

“But I want to say goodbye.”

“No. Duck out while your head is still on your shoulders. Most of the people in this villa could cheerfully punt it into the bay from the topmost terrace this morning.” Ioanna turned away, angry disgust etched across her shoulders and back. Benny watched her go and decided to take her advice. Deciding it *was* advice and not an order. Yes, she would go fishing...after a big sleep. After all, she was exhausted. It had been a long, tiresome nightshift, but at least the health and safety schedule was up to date.



Win sat out on the shaded lower terrace and watched the dust plume from the taxi billow all the way down the mountain track.

“I thought you might like a cool drink.” Ioanna appeared with a tall frosted glass. “It’s vanilla yogurt, honey, and crushed ice. It will give you a little boost.”

“Thank you, I really need one.” Win smiled ruefully.

“The doctor will be here soon. In fact, Amira’s taxi will probably pass him on the way up.” They both gazed at the distant glint of sun on chrome. Then the cab was swallowed up by olive groves where the road flattened onto the valley floor.

Win’s throbbing foot was elevated on the chair opposite. She had woken up in discomfort, her cuts inflamed. Exhausted from their nighttime adventure of angst and vodka rather than the planned sex and champagne, Win and Amira had managed to oversleep. A quick inspection of Win’s infected foot with its angry red cuts, and Amira had insisted she remain and see a doctor before following her to New York. The decision had

disappointed Win, but she was pragmatic. Amira had a series of flights to connect with. Win was really only going along for the adventure. She would catch up when it was more comfortable for her to do so.

“Rest and relaxation for a few more days is all you need,” Ioanna reassured her.

“And probably a course of antibiotics.” Win smiled and sipped her drink, pleased when Ioanna slipped onto the seat beside her to keep her company for a few moments.

“We’ll get you whatever you need. I’m glad you decided to stay and recover properly before traveling again.”

“Well, it’s all going to be one big, mad whirl. Not much fun when you’re limping through it. You’re right. A few days’ rest will make all the difference. Pity I won’t be able to go running though. You have some great jogging paths around the gardens and down to the beach.”

“You like to keep fit, don’t you?”

“Yes, it’s one of the better additions to my life. I love it. Makes me wonder why I waited so long to look after myself.”

Ioanna shrugged. “Sometimes we need a catalyst to make that big jump and alter our lifestyles for the better.”

“Was opening this place a life altering jump for you?”

“For me it was more right time, right place. And right partner, believe it or not.” Ioanna laughed. “I met Benny through mutual friends. I was ready for a new direction and she came along and spun my head like a weather vane.”

“Oh, she can be a catalyst all right.” Win remembered that twirling sensation well. Hadn’t Benny pushed her to get the extra qualifications that gave her the great job she had now? Shooing her along like a broody hen until, step by step, it had all come together for Win. Only Benny, in turn, had been shooed right out of her life by then.

“I had some money and was looking for a business opportunity out in the islands,” Ioanna said. “I wanted away from Athens. I’d been mulling over whether to invest in a small language school

on Crete. Benny was already living here in her little house and knew of a rundown hotel just on the market that only needed a cash boost and some imagination to turn it into an upscale establishment. She had some funding but not enough, so she encouraged me to come out to take a look. I did and immediately saw the potential.” An expressive shrug accompanied her words. “If I had to do anything in this life with Benny it would be open a business with her. She’s shrewd. She sees things other people don’t.”

Win understood she was being told Benny and Ioanna had never been lovers, nor was it likely. She wondered why Ioanna felt it necessary to subtly point this out. It was no concern of Win’s what she and Benny were to each other.

“I know what you mean. She is a mover and shaker when she wants to be. Benny got me onto a course of study that allowed me to move from a really boring, unsatisfying job to the one I do now, the one I love.” She didn’t mention it was also one of the reasons they’d drifted, then ripped, apart. The very gift Benny had given her, the motivation to study, to improve herself, had also brought the one thing Benny couldn’t handle, time for herself. Benny had found it impossible to sit still as Win had locked herself away with the laptop hour after hour, every evening and weekend possible. Benny had begun hanging out with friends, destructive, fast living friends, and slowly spiraled away from her. “Yes, Benny was always good at business. People skills are another matter. But I’m glad she found this place. It’s peaceful.”

Ioanna hooted. “Ha. You are a terrible liar, Winifred Martin. This place has been manic since the moment you arrived.”

“Well, you do have a great big maniac on the premises, Ms. Kakos. But I meant on another more archaic level. This place feels very...healing. Is that the right word?”

“They say the island’s blessed by Eros himself. Those who seek love will find it here. If it heals anything, it’s the heart.”

Win mulled this over. Was Benny healed? Gone was

the frantic gallop that guided Benny through her former life. She seemed so much happier here, more relaxed, unstressed, complete...almost. Almost.

"Heals the heart and soothes the soul." Win murmured, "You need to put that in your brochure. It's a sure-fire winner."

"And market ourselves as a lesbian love spa." They both laughed at that.

"A love spa?" Win hooted. "I don't think Benny is giving out the right kind of energy for a love spa somehow, not after spoiling everybody's love groove with the fire drill last night."

"I've always thought of Benny as a misplaced energy. She's bubbling with something she needs to find a home for. It's as if a part of her is missing..."

"The sane part."

"I'm sure it was there last week, right before you arrived."

"Ah ha, so now *I'm* the catalyst. I think you're just seeing a different side of her. The side I know all too well."

"You certainly have an effect on her. I've seen her a *little* like this before with the poor workmen who remodeled this place. She practically stood over them like an avenging Valkyrie, demanding everything be built to anti-seismic standards."

"I know that mania well. I've always found her like that. Impossible, demanding, wearying."

"No good times?"

"Plenty of good times. Too many, in fact. Unfortunately, it's the endings that matter. It's the last days that leave the aftertaste."

Ioanna held Win's gaze. "Maybe you just need to refresh your palate. Lots of things change. People, too."

Win was a little bemused that Benny had inspired such loyalty in her business partner and friend. It pleased her to see it. Benny would be all right with people like Ioanna in her life.

"So Benny's calmer and I run. Seems we both made the best of the break." Win smiled easily. She was not bitter about her history with Benny. Resigned, wary, cautious of new relationships,

but not bitter. She reckoned that was a good thing. Her affair with Amira was exactly what she wanted—upbeat, open, and free.

“Excuse me, but the doctor’s here.” Eleni came onto the terrace with the news. Win sat up and put her weight on her foot gingerly.

“Great. I’ll see him in my room.”

Ioanna rose too. She offered a hand to Win. “Do you need help?”

“No. I can manage. It feels a lot better already. Not as painful. Hopefully, the doctor will sort it out and I can get a flight later in the week.” She could do a hell of a lot worse than while away the days on a beautiful Greek island waiting to heal.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Benny reeled in her line and looked in disgust at the spinner. It winked back devoid of both fish and bait. Something out there was very clever at nibbling the hook but avoiding the barb. With a huge sigh, she halfheartedly poked in the bait bucket at her feet. She threaded part of a squid tentacle onto the hook and recast the line. She drove the hilt into the sand beside her and plopped down to sit alongside it idly scanning the azure horizon for passing white sails.

Bait. She'd had no problem baiting and tormenting Win and her girlfriend at every opportunity. Now she couldn't even catch a sea minnow. So much for being a better, more balanced person. She was sick with jealousy. Benny felt defeated. Up until now she had believed she had everything she'd wanted since selling her software company. A relaxing life on a wonderful island, a sweet little home, and a boutique hotel business that was prospering year after year. It was exactly what she'd dreamed of. So what if Win had moved on, too? Why was it bugging her? She had her time with Win, and it had all come down to a heartbreaking end it had taken her ages to get over. Win had flung her out. Abandoned her. Why was Benny still so hung up on her?

Let Win get on with her own misguided life. She was obviously well beyond Benny's reach now. So much had changed over the years. If being a groupie was part of Win's reincarnation, so be it. She'd obviously hit her cheap goal bang on. It was not

Benny's problem that Win had lost all her common sense and sky-high morals along with those extra pounds.

Out of the blue, it seemed imperative to say that final goodbye. Ioanna was wrong ordering Benny to stay away as if she were in disgrace. No. Benny would stand up straight behind her reception desk and wish Win and her crooner a safe onward journey—and a long and happy life together. Hah! Some hope.

Why was she letting Win slip off the island without getting the last word? That was not Benny's style, especially where Winifred Martin was concerned. Benny *deserved* to have the last word. She had waited three years for the last word. She was not going to walk away from it now.

Decision made, she sprung to her feet and hurriedly reeled in her line. The hook was clean. She'd been outsmarted again.



Benny's little moped poot-pooted around to the rear of the villa to be abandoned by the staff door. She leapt off and thundered through the kitchen much to Marcel's displeasure.

"This is a kitchen, not a bowling alley," he roared at the swing doors flapping at her whirlwind exit.

The foyer was quiet. Eleni lounged behind the reception desk casually flicking through a glossy magazine. She straightened up guiltily when Benny approached, her curious glance taking in Benny's grubby, sand-encrusted T-shirt and shorts.

"Has Ms. Martin gone yet?"

"No, she's out by the pool with Ioanna." Eleni pointed helpfully to the pool terrace. Benny hurried over glad to have caught Win before she left. She steeled herself to face Win and her sleazy girlfriend and give her final farewells. Benny didn't expect to see Win ever again after this, except maybe in the gossip papers, and she vowed to avoid those if she could. This would be the last time she would give any of her time and attention to Winifred Martin and whatsherface.

This was goodbye. This was the end. Now it was finally over. Fate had brought Win into her life so she could at last have closure. Ioanna was right; it was time to let it all go. And that was exactly what she was going to do. Say her goodbyes.

Benny's steps faltered. Win and Ioanna were sitting by the poolside sipping iced tea and chatting away. Win did not look like someone ready for imminent departure. She was dressed in aqua bikini bottoms with a loose, raw muslin overshirt that didn't quite hide her tanned belly. Her foot was freshly bandaged and raised on a stool before her. She glanced up at Benny's galloping approach.

"Hello," Benny mumbled, unsure what was going on.

"What's the emergency now? Global warming? Pollen count too high? Perhaps the tilt of my parasol is too jaunty for your log book?"

"No, I've had complaints about non-stop whining by the poolside." Benny frowned. Something wasn't adding up. "Why aren't you packed? I thought you were leaving today."

"Amira left me—"

"I knew it!"

Ioanna shook her head sorrowfully and Win glared hard at Benny before continuing.

"She flew on ahead. I had to stay behind and see a doctor because my cuts are infected." Her voice had an edge. "I'll follow her to New York in a few days time."

"Oh." Benny was unsure what to make of this. Ioanna shot her a warning look, so she tried to be diplomatic. "So...you'll hop on a later plane."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Huh? No." Benny bristled.

"The doctor came out and had a look at Win's foot. He cleaned the cuts and left some ointment." Ioanna tried to save the conversation from further dysfunction. "Win got a lot of dirt and grit in her scrapes last night."

"After tramping around the gardens in the dark." Win gave

Benny an accusatory stare. “Of course it could have been much worse...I could have ended up in the log book.”

“It’s the rules.” Benny began to defend her fire drill yet again. Why didn’t anybody respect the rules? And why hadn’t that worthless tambourine shaker looked after Win’s foot? After all, Win had fussed enough over her stupid face.

“To throw your guests out in the middle of the night? That’s the rules for eviction, you big twit.” Win was scathing.

“I didn’t know you’d be daft enough to run outside without any shoes. Listen, if I had anything against your foot I wouldn’t have carried you on my back all the way up from the beach.” In full martyr mode, Benny pointed at the steep hill beyond the gardens as if it were her personal Calvary and Win her current cross to bear.

“The way I feel right now, if you had anything against my foot it would be your backside. Have you any idea of the fantastic parties I’m missing because of your stupid fire drill?”

“It was not stupid. It was the rules.”

“Can we please just let it go?” Ioanna implored. Other guests were beginning to take notice of the heated discussion. They had only just managed to calm everyone down after last night’s episode. “Look, I need to go to the front desk and free Eleni for her lunch break. Would you like a mezze plate brought out to you here, Win?”

“Thanks, Ioanna, but I’m tired. I think I’ll take lunch on my balcony and then have a siesta.”

“I’ll have the kitchen send it to your room.” Ioanna smiled and left. Win didn’t hang around either. She stood stiffly and hobbled over to the top of the stone steps that led down to the lower terraces. From there it was a short walk to her suite.

“Here.” Benny strode over to help Win’s slow and delicate descent. Her foot was obviously still stinging from the doctor’s earlier ministrations.

Benny stood a few steps below to allow Win to lean on her shoulder if she wished. Win didn’t wish, so Benny supported

her with a light hand on her waist whether she wanted it or not. Benny had witnessed Win's lack of balance on the beach earlier and had no doubt Win was capable of falling flat on her face at any moment.

"Let me go. I can manage by myself," Win muttered irritably, swatting at Benny's supporting hand. "You're only getting in the way."

"I don't need you falling down the stairs in my hotel. You're clumsy enough as it is." Benny's eyes were glued to Win's bandaged foot as it inched along, expecting it to slip off a stone step at any moment.

"I am not clumsy. You bring me bad luck."

The comment snared Benny's attention and she raised her head to argue, only to find her gaze level with a very pink and pert nipple. The diaphanous material of Win's shirt barely hid the rosy bud, its outline was perfectly clear. Win prattled on overhead unaware of Benny's frozen stare even as the nipple, sentient of its owner and willfully flirtatious, hardened coyly under her gaze. Benny's mouth dried. She took a deep swallow, licked her lips, and expelled a desperate puff of air.

"Did you just blow on my nipple?" The accusation floated down from above.

"What? I did not."

"Yes, you did. I felt it, for God's sake. You blew on it."

"I did *not* blow on it. I was just looking," Benny defended hotly.

"You're ogling my nipples when you were supposed to be assisting me? What sort of sleazy helper are you?"

They both looked at the body part in question. It was rock hard and poked brazenly through its thin covering, pointing accusingly at Benny who stood shocked at its duplicity.

"I was not. If anything it looked at me first," she blurted, her face burning. "I mean...I just puffed in exasperation."

"What? It out-stared you so you blew at it? Did it blink?" Win was intent on crucifying her over this.

“Huh? No. I didn’t blow *at* it. I just blew in general,” she trailed off pathetically. Benny knew she was beaten. She was too embarrassed to deal with this and Win sensed her weakness and was merciless.

“I think it may have outsmarted as well as out-blinked you.”

Benny stood back glumly and watched Win hobble down the remaining steps. It was ludicrous that she refused help when she so obviously needed it. She wasn’t quite bad enough for a crutch, but perhaps a walking stick would help her a little. Benny tried at reconciliation.

“Can I get you a stick?” she offered.

“That’s very gallant, Benny, but I forgive you. However, blow on my breasts again and I promise to trounce you with the nearest thing to hand.”

“I was only trying to help.”

“If I need help I’ll ask my nipples. Apparently they’re smarter than you.”

Benny twitched as the gaze of every guest lounging around the pool bored inquiringly into her back. With a fixed stare, she slowly descended the steps then bolted to hide in the cool of the villa.

CHAPTER NINE

Win smiled happily all through lunch. Benny's flustered face and glowing ears kept popping into her mind and she'd give another happy chuckle. She'd almost forgotten what fun it was to watch Benny flounder like an overturned turtle, desperately trying to rock her way out of the situation she'd gotten herself into. Watching Benny wriggle had brightened up an otherwise depressing morning.

While she was annoyed not to be able to head off with Amira and live it up in New York, part of her was also grateful for this opportunity to rest. This holiday had been all about R&R for her. Somewhere quiet and out of the way from the pushy executives, awestruck young fans, never-ending phone calls. Everyone was clamoring for a piece of Amira. Not that Win minded sharing. Truth was she was having fun in this relationship, and her career had taken an upswing attending to Araby's copyright issues. But the result was a quick burnout. She needed to refuel.

What amazed her was that as she became more and more used up, Amira positively thrived. She relished the attention and constant buzz. But then this was Amira's dream, her big plan. Win wasn't even sure what her own plans were anymore. All she knew was everything felt tired and old, especially herself.

She sipped her wine and relaxed on the balcony that overlooked the gardens. It was blissfully quiet this time of day. The stone walls and floor were painted in off-whites and soft

pastels, picking up on the vibrancy of the flowering shrubs that spilled over the balustrade blurring the boundary between inside and out.

So this was Benny's dream. Her great escape. Looking around her, Win approved, though she never would have guessed this would be Benny's idea of a worldly retreat. Benny had always been in the fast lane when she was with Win, impossible to keep up with. Fanatical about money, and success, and materialism in all its forms. For the woman who had practically frog marched Win up the ladder of success, this place was...well, too slow. Too relaxed and measured for the Benny she used to know. Okay, so her hotel was successful, but it hardly had her run off her big fat feet. How the hell was it enough to contain her? They had both changed, it would seem. Maybe for the better, but with Benny's erratic behavior toward her these past few days, Win was uncertain what was really going on with her.

The subject had even arisen earlier that morning. After the doctor's visit she had met up again with Ioanna by the pool for iced tea. Ioanna had laid the blame for Benny's behavior at Win's newly ointmented feet.

"She was fine until you came along and broke her head." This was delivered with a casual shrug and the raising of perfectly shaped black eyebrows loaded with question.

"What do you mean until I came along? Her 'head's been broke' for as long as I've known her...and believe me, that's longer than some people get for robbing mail trains. I've paid my dues." And she had. She'd cried her dues away many a year ago.

"All I know is she was great until you walked through that door, then boom!" Ioanna clapped her hands together startling Win and the nearby sun worshippers. "Look. Here she comes now. I sent her home to let you pack and leave in peace, but still she comes. See, drawn to you like a magnet." Ioanna rolled her eyes and sighed deeply.

Win glanced over her shoulder to see Benny hurrying toward

the pool terrace only to falter when she noticed Win and Ioanna sitting there.

“Yup. She’s a lodestone round my neck, all right,” Win murmured.

Benny approached with an uneasy “Hello” before Win launched into taunting her with, “What’s the emergency now? Global warming? Pollen count too high?” Win smiled as she remembered the rest of the morning’s conversation culminating in the nipple-blowing incident. Benny had been so confounded with Win’s accusation. It was delightful teasing her like that. It was fun. They used to have so much fun.

The phone rang and she shuffled inside to answer it, perching on the edge of the huge bed.

“Hi, Amira...Just over two hours? Why the hell didn’t we catch *that* ferry instead of the old margarine tub we ended up on?...So Athens is hot.” She lay back and watched the ceiling fan slowly rotate. “Ugh, poor baby. Grab a room and have a shower and nap before the flight...Yeah...Benny? I saw her this morning. She came back to say goodbye, apparently...Please, we’ve already had words...Oh, never mind. It wasn’t important... Okay. Have a safe flight, honey...Don’t be nervous. It will be fine. Remember, it’s more dangerous to cross a road than fly... Miss you, too. Bye.”

Amira was already in Athens. She’d managed to catch the express ferry and now had time to kill in the sweltering heat of the Greek capital. She hadn’t sounded surprised that Benny had reappeared as soon as she was off the island. She’d even laughed about it. Amira found what she described as Benny’s infatuation, highly amusing. She was usually the one with the ardent admirers and crazy stalkers. Win hadn’t felt inclined to add to the Benny jokes by sharing her nipple-blowing story. There was a secret in all this she had yet to unravel, and she wasn’t quite sure if the puzzle had to do with her or Benny. So maybe it was best to keep Amira’s jibes and jests away from it.

With the phone back in its cradle, Win continued to lie and

watch the lazy swirl of the white blades above her. There would be no siesta for her today. She was too wired and overheated. Perhaps a solitary swim? But she knew she preferred the sea to the pool and was uncertain if she could hobble all the way down to the beach never mind return up that slope.

The poot-poot of a stressed little engine burped outside the balcony doors. She sat up and through the billowing curtains saw Benny weaving awkwardly through the narrow garden pathways on her dented little moped. She was moving so slowly she wobbled from side to side and occasionally had to put a foot down to stop from toppling over. Her blond head kept turning in the direction of Win's balcony as she pattered to and fro around the grounds.

Win smiled at the juvenility of it. It was so gawkishly teenage. She brushed aside the muslin curtain and stepped out into the noonday heat. *Let's see what Romeo's up to.* Win relaxed against the balcony rail, face turned to the sun. Bait taken, the poot-pooting inched closer.

"Hi." Benny tried to sound casual. Cutting her engine, she perched on her moped and looked up at Win.

Win condescendingly lowered her eyes to meet Benny's squinting blue gaze, an intense reflection of sky and the shimmering sea beyond. The deep, navy haze of the horizon line was echoed in the smudge around her iris. Her short wavy hair held sunshine, as rich and golden as summer cornfields. She was bronzed and beautiful, sprung up from the soil like a classical child of myth—Benny blinked her Aegean blues and shifted awkwardly under the fixed stare, startling Win out of her bewitchment.

"You're not napping then?" Benny tried to restart the conversation.

"No. Not sleeping. I was just thinking." Win straightened and collected her silly thoughts. *Child of myth? Good grief, my head's addled in the heat.*

“About what?” Benny was obviously grasping at straws, unwilling to pass by and go about her business.

“Oh, gods and goddesses, man and myth. How they spring up out of nowhere and blow your well ordered world apart. That sort of thing.” It amused Win to honestly express the little heart blip she had just experienced. The little rent in the curtain of reality. For one frozen moment she had seen Benny for all she was, the sum of her—the good and bad, the beauty and the ugliness, the love and selfishness all rolled into one, and in that unguarded instance she had again adored her.

“Oh.” Benny looked surprised at this; her eyes darted about as she thought something through. “Well. If you’re interested in myths I could show you a special place, if you’d like?” She remembered Win loved to explore and knew she had seen little of the island, glued as she was to Amira, who in turn seemed glued to her sun lounger.

Win could see it was an impulsive offer, and she knew Benny well enough for a special place to be exactly that and more. Benny had lots of special secrets, things she hugged to herself and refused to share. This was a secret she was offering up and Win felt a tingle run through her like wind chimes and good wine.

“Yes. Show me,” she said. This impulsiveness was catching.

A huge smile broke over Benny’s face as if deep down inside she shone with pure happiness. Another thrill ran through Win. The smile was infectious, too. She smiled back giddily.

“Grab a swimsuit,” Benny said. “And a fresh bandage in case the one you’re wearing gets dirty.” She swung off her bike and with a small leap hoisted a leg over the balcony rail. Soon she stood beside Win in the breezy bedroom directing what she should pack into a small beach bag. Sunscreen, towels, water, sunglasses, foot ointment, and then she slung the bag over her shoulder and helped Win hop over the railings, easily lifting her over the flowerbed and out onto the graveled path.

“Hold on to my waist.” Benny sat astride the moped as Win gingerly slid on behind her. They dipped their sunglasses in unison, Benny hit a gear, and then they were wobbling off through the winding garden paths toward the gates.

They gained speed as soon as they hit the dirt road beyond the villa and a trail of dust plumed their descent down the mountain. The road swerved and curved and the wind whipped at their hair and hummed in their ears. The little engine buzzed along full of happy self-importance. Win hung on to Benny’s waist peeping over her shoulder at the dry earth road opening up ahead. Olive greens and dusty ochre flashed past on either side, and she grinned like a maniac. They were on an adventure.

For nearly half an hour, they scooted down winding back roads, no more than dirt tracks skirting farmland and olive groves, until they hit a paved section that gradually widened. It weaved down to a wild and windswept beach, much more raw and rugged than the sunbathing stretch of sand at Villa Eros.

“Where is this?” Win called over the moped engine as they slowed down to a crawl. With an occasional little poot, they freewheeled all the way down to the sandy shoreline.

“This is ancient Issta.”

Win looked around her. All she could see was a wide expanse of beach with rolling breakers, a vast change from the still and sheltered waters on the other side of the island. The coastline petered up into grassy sand hills that were eventually swallowed by green fields.

“What’s ancient Issta?”

“A great and mighty city.”

“Where is it?” They swung onto a smaller track that skirted behind the dunes and buzzed along it, playing hide and seek with the sea. The rumble of surf and the clack of wave-washed stones sounded curiously restful. There was not another soul in sight; they had the entire beach to themselves. Here the breeze blew full on from the sea, fresh and clean. They pattered past little sea shacks with nets strung out on posts, and brightly painted

overturned rowboats waiting to be righted and pushed down to the tide. “Are there ruins under us?”

“Nope. It’s not under us. It’s out there.” Benny nodded toward the waves. “Issta used to be a trading port and a supply depot for Alexander the Great. His fleet would stop for supplies on its way to Persia. Then a massive earthquake slid the entire city into the Aegean in 337 BC, killing everyone. Enormous whirlpools dragged ships miles out at sea down to the bottom. Pliny wrote about it years later.”

“Good grief.”

“It’s about half a mile out. You can dive on it. There are special excursions.”

“Wow. Have you been? What does it look like?”

Benny shrugged. They were chugging up to what looked like a small taverna cum tacky souvenir shop. “Just a pile of old rocks and seaweed. It’s a jumble. You can make out some walls and stuff, but besides that there’s not really much to look at.”

“Has it been excavated? Or whatever you do to underwater ruins.”

“Sometime in the sixties they mapped it all out. It’s not protected. Not like the Helike site, for instance. Here we are.” Benny came to a stop before the taverna and waited as Win stiffly dismounted, before she lifted the Honda up on its stand.

“It’s a bar, right?” Win asked looking at the garish murals that covered its outer walls, pictures of a watery paradise with divers floating above it like big ugly birds. To her eyes, it resembled an attack by Harpies on a populous of fish and ugly statues. A tatty tourist trap for those who came for the diving excursions, yet somehow it was linked to Benny’s secret. Win was excited now. Whatever Benny wanted to share was even better than an ancient city washed into the sea, though Win would have settled for a dive on weed encrusted Issta as a special enough treat.

“Bar and restaurant. It’s owned by my friend Dimitri. He’ll be watering his vegetable plot back home now before he takes his nap. Come on. We need to go around to the back.” She led the

way around the side of the taverna through a lopsided gate made out of wooden pallets and into a dusty yard. “Ignore the goat. She won’t come near you unless you look like you’ve got food.”

“I thought goats ate everything. Benny!” Win grabbed Benny’s arm as the goat began to sidle over with a beardy leer, warily eyeing her bag with calculating elliptical pupils. Benny waved a lazy arm at the beast. It spun on a haughty heel and slunk off.

“Your beaded Escada’s safe.” Benny laughed and moved on, slowly allowing Win to remain clinging to her arm, just in case she needed support over the rough ground or more guarding from marauding ruminants.

“It’s a fake. As if I’d bring a real Escada beach bag to the beach.” Win scoffed.

“Oh. Where would you take it then?”

“To work, of course,” Win answered as if Benny were half insane to even think a designer beach bag should be used as advertised. It was a title, not a job description. Was this the same woman who once decried “no label, not able” for every damn thing she bought?

Another pallet gate led them out of the yard and opened onto a grassy meadow, still green despite the summer drought. On the far side a burbling river ran down to the sea and beyond that a little copse of cedar. The area was lush due to the river water. Benny led her across the field toward it. They crested a knoll and the ground began to roll away down to the water’s edge.

“Take my hand. This bit’s tricky.” Benny supported her down the grassy slope that unexpectedly turned into roughly hewn, mossy stone steps. These soon became cracked, semi-submerged limestone ledges that nursed a horseshoe depression and formed a man-made pool of sorts, about ten feet wide and three feet deep. Water from the stream spilled into and eventually swirled out of this hollow in a slow, sluggish flow.

Above, a tree top canopy filtered the afternoon sunlight through its branches, breaking the breeze down to swaying

whispers laden with the heavy scent of cedar. The entire pool was washed in muted greens and soft shadow. The quiet murmur of moving water and lilting birdsong caressed the air. It was the most magical place Win could ever imagine.

“What is this place?” she breathed. “It’s beautiful.”

On one side it was protected by a crumbling wall of enormous broken block work. Shelter was provided on the other side by the grassy slope they had just climbed down.

“It’s a small section of the original city. Probably part of a fountain built into a courtyard or public square. The rest of it was lost. See, over there through the trees. Columns.”

Win peered into the copse of trees across the river and could just make out three stumpy stone trunks of differing heights. Covered in vines and mosses, they blended in perfectly with their living neighbors.

“Wow. This place is magical, Benny.”

Benny smiled and looked around. “Yeah. It’s not *pretty* beautiful...more, tranquil beautiful. It makes you feel good on the inside.” She nodded approval at her own words. “There’s a lot of folklore about the pool and its powers.”

“What do you do? Drink it?” Win looked dubiously at the river water, imagining all the microscopic creatures just waiting to take up residence in her small intestine. She’d been joking about her immunity to beriberi earlier. She didn’t really want to test out her inoculations.

“No, silly. You bathe in it. It’s toasty warm. The sun shines through the trees into this hollow nearly all day long, and the depression is shallow. As new water washes in it stays at a nice temperature and never overheats or stagnates. It’s like lying in a bath.” Benny dropped her shorts and stepped out of them without further ado.

“Oh.” Win looked away from the long, bronzed legs and glanced nervously toward the hillock they’d just traversed. “Are we allowed to? Won’t somebody come?” Was Benny going to strip completely?

“No. Only the locals know about this. They don’t share the good stuff. There’s a ton of other stone walls and columns scattered here and there for the holidaymakers to clamber over. This little dunking hole is on Dimitri’s land and it’s just for us. Come on, put on your swimsuit.”

“What about my bandage? Can I get it wet?”

“That’s why we packed a fresh one. I’ll wrap your foot when you get out.”

Win was relieved to note Benny had no intention of removing her T-shirt, content to immerse herself in just her top and panties. “And your friend doesn’t mind us using it?”

“No. The taverna’s closed for siesta, and Dimitri won’t care. We’ll buy wine off him later when he opens. He does nice seafood, too. All caught out in the bay and delivered by the local fishermen.” She grinned as she lowered herself into the water with a deep, satisfying sigh. “Come on. Get in.”

Win hesitated. She could see through the translucent fabric of Benny’s T-shirt that she was braless, and she was unsure about sharing such an intimate space with her half naked ex. Then, feeling silly about her hesitation, she turned her back and shyly peeled off her own shorts and underwear. Quickly, she slipped her one-piece swimsuit up over her legs. She pulled her arms out of her sleeves, letting the shirt hang around her neck in an act of decorum, before she tugged the rest of her swimsuit up over her chest. Satisfied she was decent, she dumped her clothes in a heap beside Benny’s.

When she turned back to the pool, Benny lay grinning up at her and she felt her face redden at her sudden bout of prudishness. This was the woman she had accused of blowing on her nipples only that morning. An ex-girlfriend who had seen her naked a million times over *and* who had adored her body even when Win herself was displeased with it. Though, somehow, with Benny her hang-ups hadn’t seemed to matter so much. Now here she was awkwardly hiding her body from her. The same body Benny

had once eroticized and worshipped in a thousand ways that still made Win blush at the memories.

After they split up it was as if life itself depended on Win providing herself with the figure she thought she wanted. Not the one Benny had touched and loved. She supposed looking back, she believed it would make her happy, take the pain and misery away, and bring her better things. Different things. And it had.

Carefully, she stepped down onto a submerged ledge. The water lapping her ankles was blissfully warm. She sighed with delight. Benny's grin widened and she reached up a hand to help Win down the last step to sit on the ledge beside her.

"Oh, it's like the hot tub of the gods." Win moaned again and shifted into a more comfortable position. The water lapped over her chest to just under her chin. "This is absolutely wonderful."

"I knew you'd like it." Benny's voice was full of satisfaction and pride. "This is my *favorite* special place."

"What's the folklore about it? You said the locals had stories."

"Ah. If infertile couples come here and make love the woman is blessed with a baby."

Win smiled at the eddying waters. "Well, if I ever want to get knocked up, this place is top of the list."

"Who knows what the future might bring?" Benny joked back limply. She was uncomfortable when Win talked of her future, even light-heartedly. It was a vast blank canvas to Benny and she wanted to graffiti her name all over it. Benny wanted to be there bang in the middle of the picture, part of the portrait for the career changes and house sales and baby making. But Benny didn't even know if Win would still be here or gone by tomorrow, and the thought filled her with anxiety.

CHAPTER TEN

So, you have other special places dotted all over the island?” Win relaxed beside Benny, the dappled sunlight and slow burble of the river soothing her.

“Umhm. Several. If you were hanging around longer I could maybe show you...” Benny hoped Win would declare her intentions for the upcoming week. Instead she merely sighed and wiggled her toes playfully, rippling the surface of the water.

“If you were staying on, that is.” Benny persisted. Still no answer. Win just smiled as she stared dreamily at the blue sky. Benny poked at some passing riverweed, her face scrunched in thought. She knew Win had deliberately shut down on the subject of her immediate plans. She hated it when Win withheld. Benny wanted to know everything that was going on with her. Now she wasn’t sure where to take the conversation next. There were so many things she wanted to know. For instance, what had Win been up to since she’d last seen her... apart from selling her house, changing jobs, and getting snared by two-timing pop stars.

“You’ve been keeping fit?” She grabbed at the most obvious thing.

“Yes. Finally. I joined a gym and made sure I went. And I improved my diet with lots of fish and fruit and vegetables.”

“You look very healthy. You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“A little too fast. You must have noticed the stretch marks

across my belly and thighs the other day on the beach. Like little silver lines under the tan?"

"No, no." Benny shook her head vehemently. "I didn't notice. I wasn't looking."

"What do you mean you weren't looking? I worked my ass off for this body and you're not even going to sneak a sly peek?"

Benny's face burned. "Well, maybe a little. I didn't notice anything except that you were lovely." Her words were genuine and she could see Win accepting them with a slight smile of pleasure. *But you were always adorable. Love isn't measured by scales.*

"I still have a little belly fat I just can't shift," Win admitted. "Amira says I need liposuction."

"What? Don't you dare. There's nothing wrong—"

"Ay, Benny. You in the pool?" a gravelly voice hollered across the field from the direction of the taverna.

"Yassoo, Dimitri," Benny answered in Greek, and pulled herself out of the water. Win looked up startled. "It's only Dimitri," Benny assured her. "He's come back to open the taverna for the evening."

"Is he coming over?" Win drew her knees up to her chest and looked anxiously at Benny who stood dripping water.

"No. I'll go over and see him."

"You can't go in your knickers." Win was aghast.

Benny chuckled and tugged on her shorts. "Dimitri must be a hundred and two. Not that he doesn't appreciate the female form, but in a different way from an ogling young man. Plus Mrs. Dimitri will be feeding her goat and he's terrified of her, though he'd never admit it." Without another word she splashed up the grassy slope back the way they had come.

"Benny?" Win sat bolt upright in the water feeling very abandoned.

"I'm going to fetch us some wine. Sit tight. I'll be back in a minute."

True to her word, in no time at all Benny returned with two tumblers and a carafe of cool white wine. “Dimitri has great wine. He makes it himself. Try this.” She held out a glass. “Totally organic, and no hangover. Guaranteed.”

Win had to agree. It was fresh and pleasant with a crisp bite. “This feels so decadent, drinking wine in a secret pool of the ancients.”

“Well, more like a secret laundry tub of the ancients. This was probably a public wash fountain. By the way, Dimitri insists on making us dinner. He says his cousin is bringing in a fresh catch later and he’ll cook for us.”

“Wow. What type of fish?”

Benny shrugged. “Whatever the sea provides we’ll eat it. Simple as that. No throwing away something because it looks ugly or it’s not meaty enough. It all goes into the cook pot here.”

They settled back into the late afternoon heat, relaxing in the soft current of water, wine glasses beading in their hands.

“Tell me about the island myth, the one where Eros blessed it.”

“How did you hear about that?” Benny asked, surprised.

“Ioanna mentioned it.”

“Okay.” Benny let water trickle through her fingers as she gathered her thoughts. “It’s part of the bigger story about Eros and Psyche.” Seeing Win shake her head in ignorance, she backtracked a little. “Aphrodite was jealous of Psyche’s beauty so she sent Eros to shoot her with a lead barb fletched with owl feathers. This type of arrow turned humans into fools for love. They fell in love stupidly and wasted their lives away pining for what they couldn’t have.”

“There are still a lot of those arrows flying about.”

Benny cleared her throat, wondering if the comment was aimed at her or had some relevance to Win’s own life. “Anyway, it all went wrong because Eros actually fell in love with Psyche and became her secret lover, except he only visited her at night so she couldn’t see who he was—”

“That’s weird. Why fall for a beautiful woman and then only meet in the dark when he can’t see her?”

“Exactly, but I have a theory.” Benny grew excited. “I think the clue is her name, Psyche. I think Eros fell in love with her personality, her intellect, and not her famed beauty. He loved her for her mind, for herself. Remember he belonged in Aphrodite’s realm, full of frolicking around and loads of sex, and the vanity of youth, yadda, yadda. So maybe this Psyche gal was a wonderful breath of fresh air?”

“Interesting theory. Go on.”

“Anyway, Psyche was curious and peeped at him by candlelight one night. She realized he was the God of Love and knew he’d been lying to her. Then the dripping candle wax burned Eros and he woke up and ran away.”

“Typical. Run away. No one ever tries to talk it over.”

Benny’s concentration was broken. Was she being accused of the same thing? Win had thrown her out on her ear when her cheating had come to light. There had been a lot of fighting but very little talking. Benny’s ass had hit the pavement in double quick time.

Win looked over questioningly, waiting for the story to continue. “So? What happened next, and where does the island come in?”

“Psyche still loved him despite his lies, but Aphrodite wouldn’t let her see him unless she did all these terrible tasks. And one of the terrible tasks was coming to this island—”

“Were you here? Did you handle her booking?”

“Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“It’s more like a long running series than a story. Stops and starts all over the place.”

“That’s because you keep interrupting.” Benny glared and cleared her throat pointedly. “There was a magical pool on the island that had a massive serpent sleeping in its depths. And if a person looked into the water they would become so mesmerized

with their own reflection they never noticed the serpent until it leapt out and swallowed them whole.”

Win looked at the water nervously. “Are you telling me there are snakes in the river?”

“Some swim. But they generally avoid humans.”

“How can you be sure? Are they poisonous?”

“There are no snakes here poisonous enough to kill a human. They only eat insects and small mammals, so you’re safe enough. You haven’t lost that much weight.”

“You’re so funny. Are you going to tell the story or not? Was it this pool?”

“No. I told you, this is a laundry tub. It was a *magic* pool. Probably never even existed. It is a myth, remember?” Benny snorted at the idea they were actually seated in Psyche’s pool. “Anyway, although she was beautiful, Psyche was also smart. She was more interested in what was going on than in her own reflected beauty. Immediately she saw the serpent lying at the bottom of the pool and started asking it questions. It swam to the surface amazed she had even seen it. Psyche quickly realized the snake was Vanity, and began to flatter it and caress its scales until she’d totally charmed it.”

“Smart girl.”

“Yes, she was a clever little thing. But the true nature of the serpent was to devour and Psyche knew it would eventually try to eat her. So as it slowly coiled around her she kept petting its tail telling it how beautiful its colors were. And when it reared back to swallow her whole she reached up her hands and fed the tail into its jaws. The serpent was so greedy it didn’t realize at first that it was swallowing its own tail. Psyche slid out of its coils and ran away leaving the serpent devouring itself forever and ever, and that’s why the sign for eternity is a snake eating its tail in a never-ending circle.” Benny finished by drawing a circle in the air with much aplomb.

Win frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Okay, so it’s only one of the stories about the snake ring of eternity. But it’s the best one.”

Win shook her head. “I don’t get it. Was the task to outsmart the serpent or to prove she wasn’t vain? And where does Eros fit into it?”

Benny frowned now. “I don’t know. Eros blessed the island because Psyche survived and was finally reunited with him. That’s how I was told it.” Benny didn’t think much about such things.

“So were her tasks all about overcoming flawed human nature or just proving she was worthy of love? Love being Eros, of course.” Win obviously did think a lot about such things. And in great depth, too.

“I don’t know. It’s just a story.” Benny shifted. It was just a silly myth stamped on the back of postcards. Trust Win to want to critique it.

“Maybe it means both? That flawed humans deserve love, too.” Win was still fascinated with the badly told story. Benny wished she had the answers for her, but she didn’t. How to be worthy of love was still a big mystery to her.

Win continued her pondering. “Or perhaps it means true love is seeing each other’s flaws and—”

“I’m sorry.” The words shot out of her without reference or context. Win looked over perplexed.

“Why? It’s been a lovely day and the story wasn’t *that* bad. I know that you can’t tell stories or jokes for love nor money. I lived with you for years, remember? And you didn’t get one punch line right in all—”

“I’m sorry I left you.” The words continued to tumble out. Win frowned realizing she had somehow slithered down that grassy slope into a serious conversation.

“You didn’t leave me. I threw you out.” She decided to take the blunt route through this. Her unease grew. She didn’t want this conversation; it was three years too late, and if Benny chose to remember the details in some sort of self-gratifying soft focus,

Win did not. These were still razor sharp memories to her, still capable of cutting.

“No, I mean I’m sorry I’m not still with you. That’s what I mean. I wish I’d fought harder to stay.”

“Hon, you could have super-glued the door and it would have made no difference. You were still going through it.” Win still clung on to hardnosed reality. Benny had cheated. Benny had to see it as it was.

“No, I don’t mean...what I mean.” Benny floundered. She fought with feelings and grappled with words, and as usual ended up floored by the superior tag team. “I was an asshole. I went out and got high, and drunk, but I never meant to—”

“We know how this story ends, Benny. You did that *every* weekend, and eventually you went a step too far and woke up in someone else’s bed. Our so-called friends couldn’t wait to tell me.”

“No, not that bit.”

Win’s eyebrows shot up but she remained silent wondering where the hell Benny was going with this bizarre little blip in their relaxing afternoon. “What bit then? For me that’s the only bit.”

“The bit where I was too stupid to realize you’re the one. That there will only ever be you, that it was never any other way. The bit where I should have talked and talked and told you I was nothing without you. The bit where you forgave me. The bit where we never broke up.”

Win stared in amazement. She had not expected that. Had not seen it coming. She knew Benny had been stupidly competitive about her relationship with Amira, but had put it down to Benny’s overstuffed ego. A sort of jealousy that Win’s life hadn’t fallen apart on her exit. The fact that it had, and Win had worked hard to save herself was not Benny’s to know. Win was careful with her heart now. If only there was a gym for trimming down the excess on that particular organ, she’d have signed up instantly.

She opened her mouth to reply but had no answer. She sucked

in air and tried again. She had no immediate response to Benny's preposterous babble. And suddenly it didn't matter that she had no answer because Benny's mouth covered hers and raised an entirely new set of questions. Benny simply leaned in and cupped her lips around Win's, sinking them both into a moist, twilight world of softest satin and head-spinning heat.

Win started as if stung but didn't pull away, so Benny wrapped her arms around her and held tight. The touch of her lips rent time, pulling Benny back to where she belonged, swamping her with memories of love and happiness. Nothing had changed. The years between then and now, London and this island, everything melted away. There was only warmth and taste, heart and feeling. Win suffused her, overwhelmed her, and totally defeated her. There was no point without this. She was hollow, she had no center, no core, no root, nor kernel without this connection. Her heart cracked open and the truth she was so scared of flooded out. She had existed soulless these last years. She was windblown and empty without Win's love. Nothing she could do in life would ever fill this void. Only the woman in her arms could do that. So, desperately she threw her heart into the kiss like a gambler throws his last dollar. With a gentle tremble the lips under hers molded to the contours of her mouth. Her lower lip was compressed and yielded to Win's soft demand, and suddenly Benny was being kissed back. Not recklessly, not lustily. Rather she was sampled, tested...remembered.

Win savored her own memories through the kiss. The texture of Benny's lips was so familiar, the pressure, the heat. Her mouth fit so well and felt so good. The velvety inner flesh of her plump lower lip, the crooked tooth, the sly fat tongue, once so well known, now well remembered. It flooded Win with longing, but not the immediate, lustful kind. Rather, Win felt loss and sadness, and a futile wish for the past, a past where the old heartache between them had never existed, where kisses like this went on forever. She broke away to save herself. The sensations were too intense, too loaded.

“Benny.” She fixed her gaze on the pulse leaping in Benny’s throat. She couldn’t bring herself to look into her eyes. “I don’t want to do this.”

Benny’s throat contracted in a tight swallow. “I just wanted you to know. How sorry I am, how stupid I was. What you mean to me.”

“Benny, I don’t want to talk about it either.” Now she did look up into eyes darkened with pain. She felt it too, rolling through her in big, sluggish waves, oily and black. Her old sadness saturated every pore, glutinous and asphyxiating. “Benny, let’s just say this was our kiss goodbye. We never had a proper goodbye before. We fought and then you were gone. Maybe this is the time for us to really let go, to finally leave the hurt behind?”

Dumbly, Benny nodded at her words and reluctantly let her go, slipping back to her poolside ledge. Her face was pale under her tan, and her eyes were wide and dark. She was shaken. Win reached out and placed a hand on her forearm. “Are you all right?”

Again Benny nodded. “Yeah. It was a goodbye thing. I suppose I needed closure.” Her voice was choked and she clearly lied, but Win allowed her that. Maybe she had lied too, but this was not the time or place for self-examination.

“Shall we dry off and go see if dinner is ready? We could walk along the shore. This beach has a lovely sunset.” Benny surged to her feet cascading water, all awkward energy, anxious that she had ruined the day and determined to rescue it and put her gaffe as far as possible behind them. And she wanted to move away from her special place before her heartache and embarrassment polluted it forever. She’d had enough. The kiss had shattered her and the story had saddened her, and she wasn’t sure why.

Unlike her own heartfelt confession, the myth had a happy ending of sorts. Even the evil serpent hadn’t died. It was really nothing more than a romantic quest, a tale of Psyche winning her lover back against the odds in an age where love was governed by carelessness, and cruelty, and coldhearted whimsy. But Benny

couldn't really explain to Win how the story affected her, or how she saw the irony of it in her life, especially now that Win had stepped back into it. Part of Benny had believed it was meant to happen. That fate had pushed Win in her direction for a reason. Part of Benny was ashamed she had hoped for reconciliation, but being here at the pool had made her brave enough to try. As far as Benny was concerned, the myth stank. It was hard to be worthy of love and impossible to win it back after you'd destroyed it. *Might as well fix a broken egg.*

She wasn't even sure who she epitomized—Eros falling in love with the sum of all Psyche's parts, or Psyche demanding her right to love. Most probably the stupid snake eating itself up.

They were both out of the pool now, drying off, tugging on clothes. It was time to move away from the magic of the place. It had not worked for them.

Benny felt flat. She was being foolish with her emotions. Win had a new life, and Benny's time with her was over. If she'd any sense at all she'd spend these last few days renewing a friendship, not trying to woo back an old lover. She mentally shook herself. *It was just a kiss. Just a goodbye kiss.* The wine was making her maudlin.

"Let me re-bandage your foot." She grabbed the tube of ointment and looked back over her shoulder to see Win, part turned away, peeling off her swimsuit. It bunched at her waist and the smooth curve of the side of her breast shone alabaster against her tan. Win had always been shy of exposing her body. She still was it seemed. For all her healthy living and fitness regime, did she still feel fat and vulnerable on the inside? Benny's heart lurched for her. Her whole being lurched, as if the ground had moved under her feet. Center of balance lost, off tilt, she spun in the air as coordinated as a rag doll impaled on a shaft of lead, bloodied owl feathers matted in her open chest wound. She was lost, and had lost, in every possible way.



“This is the best calamari I have ever tasted in my entire life,” Win proclaimed with immense satisfaction. Benny beamed. Dimitri beamed even more so, and winked at her over Win’s head.

“Have some more sardines.” Benny pushed at a platter, pleased Win was enjoying the dinner so much. A stroll along the beach in the glowing sunset and a light conversation about a book they had both read had relaxed and rescued them from any earlier awkwardness. The day had slowly slid into a companionable evening dinner at Dimitri’s.

“I have more for you.” Dimitri set a dish of cuttlefish with spinach on the table before them, followed by clams in garlic. His dark eyes gleamed like wicked little raisins in his creased face. Win groaned with pure greed and the discomfort of an overstuffed stomach.

“Does he ever stop delivering food? What size of a catch was it?”

Benny laughed. “Enjoy it. This is all in your honor.”

“Oh? I’m honored now?” Win grinned at her over the candle that bathed their little veranda table in soft light. They had the best table looking out over the moonlit sands toward the silver sea. In the distance, the lights from a passing cruise ship twinkled happily. Holidaymakers occupied nearby tables, mostly couples, and there was a gentle hum of happy conversation over the traditional Nissiotika folk music Dimitri favored.

“It’s always been my honor to know you, Win,” Benny murmured into her wine glass. They were both well fed and fuzzy with good wine and the pleasing surroundings. “I’ll order a taxi to take us home. Dimitri’s cousin has a cab. I can collect my bike tomorrow.” She couldn’t drive after all this wine, and a cab ride home would be much more comfortable.

“The same cousin who caught the fish?”

“No. That was Thanasos, this is another one, Manolis. Nearly everyone on the island is some sort of cousin to Dimitri.”

It wasn’t that late. They could have sat for another hour or so,

but Benny was finding it harder and harder to fight the romantic atmosphere that wrapped around them. The food insinuated it; the wine demanded it, the music, candlelight, perfumed night air—everything was suffused with romance. Sea and stars winked saucily, the couples surrounding them pumped out pheromones. It was choking Benny; she was a sponge soaking it all up. Nothing had changed for her this afternoon. Love hadn't kissed her goodbye and packed its bags leaving her with a refreshingly empty heart. Win could call that kiss anything she wanted, but for Benny it was not a goodbye. Unfortunately, it wasn't a welcome back either.

Now the wine was making it impossible to stay focused on what this meal was really about—the end of a pleasant day with a lovely woman. A woman who used to love her but didn't anymore. Benny was lucky Win even wanted to be a friend. That should be enough.

But it isn't...and it never will be. So what are you going to do about it? a tiny voice whispered in her head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It's been a good day," Benny told the darkness in the back of the cab. Taking all things into account, it had been. Their cab swung lazily around the hairpin mountain roads on its way to Villa Eros. Outside, the stars shone huge and silver in the blue-black sky. A crescent moon smiled at her, suspended over the distant island of Khios.

"I've had a great time. Thank you for showing me the pool, Benny. It has been a lovely day," Win said sleepily, her head rested against the seat back, rolling gently with the motion of the cab. Her eyes were closed and she had a tired, yet satisfied smile on her lips. Benny stared at them. She wanted so much to kiss Win again, softly and gently, as a thank you for a lasting memory that would comfort her long after Win left the island. Instead, she looked out the open window and tried to identify the star patterns she'd been taught all those years ago by the woman sitting at her side. The woman whose sleepy head now rolled onto Benny's shoulder. Benny looked down. Win was out for the count, slouched against Benny's left arm, her head leaning on her shoulder. Carefully, Benny moved her arm until Win was tucked underneath snug and secure. Sighing contentedly, Benny rested her cheek on Win's soft hair. It smelled subtly of cedar breezes and surf...and oranges, the underlying aroma of her shampoo.

More content than she could remember being for years,

Benny shut her eyes and let her mind drift away on scented dreams. Remembering when she could have held Win like this at any time on any night, not realizing how fleeting a luxury it would be. This was nothing more than a stolen moment, but Benny reveled in its quiet intimacy. Tonight at least, the gods of love were kind.

“Hey, Benny. We’re here.” Tires crunched on the gravel as they drew up at the rear of the villa. Benny jerked awake, bemused she had dozed off. Beside her Win awoke and drowsily gauged her whereabouts with one sleepy eye before pulling away to sit up straight. In the cab’s low lighting Benny settled the fare and noted the high flush on Win’s cheeks. Her eyes still sparkled with wine and good living. Her little catnap hadn’t awarded her one ounce of sobriety. She looked mussed and wonderfully delicious, and Benny wanted to take her to bed and muss her up some more. *You’re too full of wine and silly thoughts.*

“I’ll walk you to your room,” she said as they watched the taillights disappear out the villa gates.

“Why didn’t you grab a lift home?” Win turned away and Benny followed, surprised there had been no protest at her offer.

“I’d rather walk back along the beach. It’s a beautiful night and I wanted to think.”

“Think about what?” They were outside Win’s suite waiting as she rummaged around the bottom of her beach bag for the key.

“About today. About you.”

Win glanced up, key in hand. “Me? What about me?” she asked guardedly.

Benny looked at the upturned face, the sleepy, smoke-smudged eyes, and the smattering of freckles across tanned cheeks and brow. She gently tucked a wisp of Win’s tousled hair behind her ear.

“Everything about you.” Unbidden sadness laced her words. “Just good things,” she tried to reassure her.

“Oh.” Win looked relieved they were not slipping into

another weighty heart to heart. “It’s been a lovely day, Benny. I loved finding out about ancient Issta. Thank you so much.” She pushed her key in the lock, and turning her head slightly, smiled. “Goodbye.”

Benny hesitated and then risked it. “We always kiss goodbye.” Her words hung between them heavy and ripe. “It’s our latest thing.”

Win’s surprised eyes locked with hers. Benny held her gaze, fearful even a blink would break the spell she had inadvertently woven. She felt she was about to burst, the heat inside her head and body was expanding. She was burning up inside with embarrassment at her brazenness, but part of her was thrilled, too.

“About earlier...” Win was talking fast and flustered, turning her head away to gather her thoughts. Benny tried to concentrate, too. It seemed Win wanted to clear the air, the hot, dry, choking air that hung between them like a dusty African sirocco. “Look, I know we had a lovely day. It was nice to catch up with each other for a few hours. But...” She took a deep breath and looked Benny straight in the eye. “I can’t kiss you ever again.”

“You didn’t kiss me. I kissed you.”

“Oh, well... We’ve got to stop.” Win tried to assert herself.

“Oh, well, I don’t want to,” Benny mimicked back with equal assertion.

“But we’ve got to.”

“You can.” Benny was firm on this. Her strength and confidence were flooding back. She knew she was right. She knew it with every fiber of her body. “But I won’t, and I can’t. And I want to. Right now, in fact.” She pulled Win into her arms. “Goodbye, Win.” And she covered the mouth already half opened in protest with her own.

There was no dreamy, existential nonsense with this kiss. Benny had poured her regret and longing into their earlier embrace. This kiss was a last chance to light the fuse and run for the bedcovers. This kiss was armed and dangerous, locked and

loaded, and had a target. And the target was Winifred Martin, heart, body, and soul.

Win squeaked and Benny moaned at the same time. Their tongues collided, and slid, and melted. Benny ran her hands all over Win's back, kneading the firmness, pressing her closer, craving every inch of contact. Her mouth was welded to the soft lips under hers. She could feel Win's body relax and knew the kiss was winning, beating them both into submission. Then Win's hands were buried in her hair, and small whimpering noises gurgled deliciously in her throat. Using every trick in the book, Benny slid her lips around to the spot just under Win's ear that, if she remembered correctly... "Oh God, yes..." would dissolve her into a puddle of bliss. A puddle Benny could bathe in, drown in, lap up like a cat. Benny remembered these things well.

They fell against the closed door and Win reached behind to scramble unsuccessfully for the key. Then Benny's lips recollected another pleasure spot along Win's collarbone and began to nuzzle there until Win's knees buckled.

"The door..." she breathed in Benny's ear.

"Don't worry. I got you." Benny was practically holding her upright. One slip and they'd both be prone on the floor, which was exactly what Win's body wanted to do. Her head, however, was trying to suck in some sanity.

"I mean we need to open the door not stand out here leaning on it." Win tried hard to focus in a small moment of respite while Benny nibbled a part of her that wasn't connected to her stupidity gland.

Benny groped for the key and twisted it viciously. The door swung open and they staggered through into the lounge, spinning for the bedroom, weaving around couches, dancing past tables and chairs, sliding on marble tiles, tripping over fringed rugs. A lamp toppled over and rolled on the table, cushions tumbled from a couch, but the dance went on into the bedroom where they reeled onto the bed landing in a breathless flurry.

Win tugged at Benny's hair forcing her to break her suck hold on her neck.

"Ah, ah," Benny whined even as her fingers struggled with the small pearl buttons of Win's top.

"This is fucking crazy," Win whispered furtively.

"No, this is making love crazy." Benny bit an ear lobe. *Like it always was between us. You're my fuse and you blow me apart.* The buttons finally popped and she cupped the breasts spilling brimful into her greedy hands. She rolled Win over so she lay snug between her thighs. It was the only place in the world she wanted to be. Peeling away the last vestiges of clothing, she quickly bared all of Win. Benny's own clothes had dropped at her feet as they wended their way to bed through the lounge. She had torn them off every stumbling step of the way.

Slowly burning a trail with the tip of her tongue down Win's throat and chest, she captured a pink tip peeking out between her fingers. It might as well have been dusted with opiates; the rush of pure pleasure to her brain was so forceful, so hard. Win's moans became louder and she clawed at Benny's back and shoulders. Benny wanted the scratches, wanted to be marked as this woman's lover. Win had always been a scratcher...and a screamer, crying out Benny's name in orgasm with a wailing hint of reproach at being made to lose her cool so completely. Then she would lay flabbergasted and breathless in the mass of tangled sheets that had once been their pristine bed, dismayed such noises had come from her. Benny loved the post-orgasmic Win and was working hard to bring her back. Win could rake Benny to ribbons tonight for all she cared. Benny was in heaven. She was floating like an angel on clouds of—

"Hello?" A curious yet cautious call came from the lounge.

Win froze, her head lifting from the bedcover. "What was that?" she whispered. Benny snuffled into her breast not giving much of a damn about anything.

"Listen." Win flicked Benny's ear hard.

“Ouch.” Benny sat up holding her stinging ear.

“Hello?” The tremulous call came again.

“It’s Eleni,” Benny informed Win dourly.

“Did you lock the door?” Win whispered furiously. Benny shrugged. There was a door? Win rose from the bed and struggled into her robe. “Idiot.”

“Hey, you were there, too. It’s your door.”

“Shut up. I don’t want anyone to know you’re here.”

With a glare that would silence a Vatican choir, Win opened the bedroom door a crack and slid out into the lounge. Sitting naked in the darkened bedroom, Benny strained to eavesdrop. What did Eleni want at this time of night?

“Hi, Eleni. Is something wrong?” She could hear Win clearly.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Martin. Your door wasn’t closed properly and when I knocked it swung right open. I was just checking everything was okay.” Eleni sounded apologetic.

“No. No. You were doing your job. I didn’t realize it wasn’t locked. Thank you.” Win sounded breathless and flustered. She couldn’t tell a lie to save her life. Benny knew this of old and was pleased Win was able to usher Eleni away without any out and out fibbing.

“Ms. Kakos was looking for you earlier,” Eleni said.

“Oh. You don’t know what it was about?”

“Not really. But she was looking all over for Benny, too.”

Benny’s ears pricked up at this. *Oh, so I’m plain old Benny, but Ioanna is “Ms. Kakos.” I see how it is.*

“Well, perhaps I’ll see her in the morning. Good night, Eleni.”

“I’ll tell her you’re back safely in case she was worried. Good night, Ms. Martin.”

The door clicked shut and Benny emerged from the bedroom at once. Win stood facing the door as if expecting Eleni to burst back in and catch them red-handed. Benny placed her hands on Win’s shoulders, pulling her back to rest against her chest.

“That was close,” Win murmured, mostly to herself. She seemed to be sobering to the enormity of her indiscretions. Benny had to prevent this. She ducked her head and kissed the nape of Win’s neck as she gently slid the silk robe from her shoulders to pool at their feet. Benny had just remembered another hot spot. She dropped to her knees and kissed the swell just above Win’s bottom before it dipped into the curve of her back.

Win moaned, “Cheater,” as Benny began to nip, her hands massaging Win’s trembling legs from ankles to hips. Then one hand snaked up through her moist thighs to tease and tickle the damp folds of her sex while the other traced small circles on her belly, lightly caressing the navel and the crown of trimmed curls below. Delicately, she followed the soft contours with a satin touch until Win was rolling under the massaging pressure of her fingertips.

Win’s dubious balance was vanishing fast. She held on to the bedroom doorframe as Benny knelt behind her in fervent worship. The fingers stroking her belly were hypnotic and delicious, but the fingers teasing her sex stole all her attention. All her resolve to end this imprudence melted as she spread her legs wider and allowed Benny the full access her fingers were begging for. Kisses and tiny nips peppered her buttocks and lower back as Benny skillfully entered her, and with the simple movements Win liked, Benny began to make love to her.

In seconds Win’s legs couldn’t hold her anymore and Benny carefully guided her to the floor beside her. Tenderly she held her, kissing the small rounded belly with its deep navel. Adoring the chubbiness Amira had advised to be surgically removed. *The woman’s a barbarian.*

“I love this bit. It was made for kisses. See how my lips fit?” she murmured. “I love all of you.” Win rolled on Benny’s fingers, crying helplessly at the ceiling as Benny covered her with kisses of adoration and rolled along with her.

“I forgot how wet you get. How could I forget that?” She marveled quietly over Win’s body. Her lips drifting across soft

skin, savoring a taste she once thought was lost forever. Now her tongue tingled along all the little stretch marks Win had been so self-conscious about earlier. Benny adored each and every one.

“You’re so beautiful. You’ve always been gorgeous to me.” Benny kissed her again, until her own head swam and her heart sank deeper and deeper in the warm waters of love.

Win came quickly with a beautiful cresting of her hips. Pulsing warm and wet around Benny’s fingers. Squeezing as her whole body tightened like a spring. Benny cradled her in her arms as they lay curled and breathless, Win’s head tucked in under Benny’s chin.

“I can’t believe we did that.” She panted into Benny’s throat, embarrassed at her most vocal surrender.

“I’m glad we did. There’s still a connection between us, Win. We need to talk. We can’t leave it like this.”

“I can’t even think, never mind talk. I’m...I’m...” Win was beyond words. The whole day had spiraled away from her. Her world and all the structures she had so carefully put in place had melted under her feet; she might as well have been living on an ice floe for the last three years. *That’s Benny for you. How could you forget what being with her is like? She’s a flash fire consuming everything she wants.*

“Can I stay with you tonight? I just want to hold you,” Benny whispered in her ear. “Please.” Her breath tickled Win’s earlobe, and the little hairs all over her body rose as one in a vote of agreement. *I’m doomed. Where can you hide from a flash fire?*

A quiet knock on the door made them jerk out of their afterglow.

“Win?” Ioanna called softly. “Are you there?”

“Pretend you’re sleeping,” Benny muttered looking around for her clothes. They were everywhere.

“The lights are on.” Win scrabbled to her feet.

“Win. Are you all right? Did I hear you shout?”

“Shit.” Win pulled her robe up over her shoulders. “Coming.”

she called, knotting the sash around her waist in a double knot. “What are you doing?” Benny was on her feet too, throwing her T-shirt over her head and snatching up her shorts from the floor.

“She knows I’m here. I can’t lie.”

“Yes, you can. Try.”

“Go wait in the bedroom.” Win tugged at her sash with an angry jerk and moved to the door. With one leg in her shorts and the other out, Benny hopped for the balcony instead. She slunk into the shadows and adjusted her clothing as Win greeted Ioanna.

“I heard you cry out from way down the corridor. Are you hurting? Is your foot okay?” Ioanna breezed straight into the room.

“My foot’s fine,” Win answered and immediately tried to change the subject aware that Ioanna was watching her suspiciously. Her hair was a mess, the room in disarray with toppled lamps and cushions and kicked over rugs. Thankfully, all Benny’s clothing was gone, but various items of Win’s were strewn around the place making her look like an utter slob. She knew her face was scarlet and sweaty and her eyes were wide with guilt. *Why do I suck at deception? It would be so handy to fib once in a while. Just small, snow-white fibs?*

“Eleni said you were looking for me earlier?” she asked. *Stick to the facts and you might just get away with this. Remember, you’re a lawyer...okay, a copyright lawyer, but you can face up with the best of them!*

“Yes. I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“I was in Issta with Benny.” *Oh, Lord. Where did that come from?*

“Aaah, she took you to Issta.” Ioanna sounded just a smidgen too smug. “That’s why I couldn’t find her either.”

Win relaxed. She had successfully refocused Ioanna onto Benny’s absence just as she had more or less planned. “Yes. We were visiting Issta all afternoon.”

“So why is her flip-flop under your couch?”

What! “She...she left it there.” *Useless, good for nothing...*

On the balcony Benny sucked her teeth in frustration. Why did Win have this compulsion to confess? Today’s events had to be kept away from Ioanna and her scathing judgment, at least until Benny was certain where she stood. She still had to have a talk with Win about “today’s events.” Benny couldn’t bear to lose her again; she had to tread carefully...Unlike Win who was clunking about like a wooly mammoth.

“Why would she leave her sandals under your couch?” She listened to Ioanna turning the screw.

“Sandal. There’s only one.” Win limply tried some avoidance tactics. She was pitiful. That was it! The situation had to be saved before Win caved like a mining disaster. Benny was going in. But not from the balcony. She had to make her entrance part of their alibi. She flung her legs over the railing just in time to hear Win pathetically bleat, “I know what you’re thinking...Where’s the other one? I’ve been wondering that myself.”

“Oh, dear God.” Benny bolted through the flowers to the nearest side entrance and streaked down the hallway to Win’s suite. She could hear Ioanna’s voice floating along the corridor.

“Have you been drinking?”

“A little. Benny took me to dinner at Dimitri’s.”

Shut up, Win. She’ll cross-examine the stuffing out of you.

“Dimitri’s is a very romantic setting, don’t you think?” Ioanna was on a truffle hunt now. She’d picked up the scent and there was no stopping her. “And the old pool? Did Benny take you there, too?”

“Yes. Yes. We sat in it and drank wine.” Guilt pulsed out of every word.

“It’s a local love grotto. Did you know that?”

Benny increased her pace her ears straining for Win’s reply.

“It’s not like she kissed me.”

Benny staggered. Had Win just told a lie?

“Uh huh.” Ioanna’s skeptical murmur was barely uttered before Win snapped like a pretzel.

“She did, she did.”

“I think I forgot my flip-flops.” Benny burst onto the scene and stanchied Win’s witless hand wringing. Win looked at her in amazement. As far as she was concerned Benny was secreted in her bedroom, not breezing along the corridor as if nothing awful was happening.

“There’s one under the couch. Where the other’s at is apparently a mystery,” Ioanna intoned dryly and gave Benny’s bare feet a long, hard stare. Nothing about this mystified her. “And for the third time, why is it under the couch at all?”

“I was...trying to kill a spider and forgot it.”

“My.” Undeterred, Ioanna concentrated on the weakest link. “Was it a big spider, Win? Was that why I heard you scream out so loudly? Were you scared of the nasty spider?”

“I...I wet myself.” Win blinked. Benny approved. Win wasn’t lying, but then she wasn’t answering the question either. It seemed Win could be as tricky as any lawyer when she really needed to.

“Look, what are you doing here? Is something wrong?” Benny asked Ioanna, steering the conversation onto what she hoped was a safer topic. It wasn’t.

“I’ve been looking for you all afternoon. Amira’s been on the phone a hundred times,” Ioanna declared, getting to the business that had brought her here at this time of night.

“Is she all right?” Win cleared her throat and tried to focus on this new situation. Benny stepped back and watched, riveted to every emotion flitting across Win’s face. She was confounded that the specter of Amira had popped up so soon after she and Win had made love.

“Her plane had to turn around and return to Athens. There was a safety alert. Some emergency light came on. The captain decided to turn back and land.” Ioanna gushed out the exciting

news now that she had been distracted from the flip-flop incident.

“God, Amira is an anxious flyer as it is without that happening.” Win looked very worried. Benny tried to look concerned, too.

“Apparently, it was all very dramatic. Fire engines with lights and sirens followed them along the tarmac.” Ioanna’s hands waved about. “Though everything was okay, it was just safety procedure.”

“Poor Amira.” Win gasped. Benny tsked in a sympathetic sort of way.

“She wants you to go to Athens immediately and be with her. She sounded *terribly* shaken,” Ioanna continued.

“Oh no,” Win cried out for the traumatized Amira.

“Oh no!” Benny spluttered in angry disbelief.

Momentarily silenced, both Win and Ioanna stared at her. It was obvious her consternation was completely different from theirs.

“I mean, she has to get on that plane *right now* and go to America. Not let the fear beat her. That’s what I mean.” From the hardened looks, Benny knew she hadn’t convinced either of them. “Like falling off a bike...” she finished lamely.

“Like falling off the cliff of shame,” Ioanna scolded her.

“I’d better call her. I don’t think there are any ferry sailings at this time of night.”

“Tell me if you want a taxi. I’ll help with anything you need,” Ioanna said.

“Me too,” Benny called after her, but the door to the bedroom was already swinging closed. Benny moved to push it open and follow, but Ioanna grabbed her by the arm and led her away.

“Give her a few minutes alone. I want to talk to you anyway.”



They went to the deserted kitchen and Ioanna flicked on the kettle to make tea before turning to face Benny. Leaning back on the counter, she folded her arms and looked at her squarely.

“What happened today?”

“Nothing. We went swimming and then had dinner.”

“She says you kissed her.”

“It was a goodnight sort of kiss.”

“I see your face. It was a good morning sort of kiss. The sort of kiss you hope will last the whole night through.”

Benny said nothing, scanning the kitchen for an exit but not really wanting to go until she knew what Win’s plans were. She was stuck here with a snoopy Ioanna until she found out exactly what was going on with Win and Amira, who now seemed as flightless as a dodo but unfortunately not as extinct.

“Are you competing for her?” Ioanna asked baldly. Benny started. She hadn’t thought of it like that.

“No.” *She’s always been mine.*

“Then what the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t know, and you don’t need to know either.”

“I need to know if I have to scrape you up off my marble floor after she leaves. Look at you. You’re a mess.”

Benny looked down at her crumpled T-shirt, grass stained shorts, and bare feet. Ioanna sighed in exasperation and moved to hug her.

“Not your clothes...you, my idiot friend. I would say that you have lost your heart, except I suspect Win Martin always held it. So I will settle for your wits. You have lost your wits over her.” Benny let her head fall onto Ioanna’s shoulder and stood there mutely as her hair was stroked. “What am I to do with you, Benedikte? How will you stop her from leaving? Torpedo the ferry?”

“She might stay,” Benny mumbled into Ioanna’s shoulder.

“You’ll ruin us yet.” Ioanna sighed softly.

Approaching footsteps pulled them apart. With a soft knock, the door slowly swung open. Win entered looking very tired.

“There you are,” she spoke softly. “I just wanted to ask if you could arrange a cab to get me to the ferry port early tomorrow morning.”

Ioanna nodded. Benny sagged in defeat.

“I’ve organized for Amira to return here. She’s too frazzled to go on to New York right now. Even with me as a hand holder. I’m afraid there’s been a bit of a media circus around all this, and she’s trying to hide from the press. They’re camped outside her hotel in Athens, and she’s frantic enough as it is. I want her back here and calmed down before she even considers another flight. I hope that’s okay with you guys?”

Ioanna looked thrilled at this dramatic twist. Benny sagged even more, as if all the marrow had drained out of her bones leaving her hollow and brittle. Ioanna turned to her with bright, excited eyes.

“Imagine, Benny. We are to become a refuge for a famous lesbian musician in her hour of need. We’ll need a plan to smuggle her over. She can’t take the ferry. She will be followed every step of the way. You can ask your sailing friends for help, perhaps?”

Benny nodded mutely, not really taking it all in.

“It would be great if you could do that, Benny,” Win said softly. She knew she was asking a lot, but she needed all the help she could get.

“Good. Benny will organize it. We will smuggle Amira onto the island and the press will never know.” Ioanna clapped her hands delighted at the intrigue. “Fantastic.”

“Super,” Benny murmured. She looked over at Win and noted the exhaustion etched on her face. Win did not seem overly enthused at the return of her needy lover. She seemed tired and drained and looked as if she had too much on her mind already.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ioanna returned to her cabin with a cup of herbal tea, buzzing that her little hotel was now a haven for distressed lesbian superstars. Win started to head back to her room and Benny shifted fast to walk along with her.

Patiently, she paced step for step beside her, waiting for Win to refer back to their night together. She didn't. She seemed distracted with this latest news about Amira. Benny was bursting. This was so much more important than Amira nearly plummeting to her death, this was about them making love. And anyway, an ego like Amira's would bounce even from thirty thousand feet.

"Benny." Win turned on to the terrace rather than continue on to her room. "We have to talk."

The air was warm and a million stars twinkled in a velvety sky. The breezes whispered through the garden and beyond, dancing through the vines that rippled all the way down to the inky Aegean. The scent of bougainvillea and jasmine hung heavy in the air, the thick, sweet perfume saturating Benny's lungs until her head swam with it.

"Yes. Let's talk."

"Amira's coming back tomorrow—"

"And we made love."

"What?"

"We made love, Win."

“Mm, yes. Yes, we did.” Win’s face reflected some inner struggle. With a cleansing breath, she continued, “Amira is bound to be followed by the paparazzi and—”

“Will you tell her?”

“She’ll have a good idea.” Win frowned at the interruption. “The paparazzi have become a fact of life.”

“Not that. About us.” Benny was impatient now. She wanted to know where she stood. Where they all stood.

“I think for the moment we should put it behind us, Benny,” Win said carefully. “We *will* talk about it, but for the moment I’d rather we dealt with...” Benny’s ears heard Win wittering on trying to negate the evening they’d shared, but her head was in a million other places, twisting and turning and trying to figure out how to play her advantage before Amira reappeared and ruined everything. She was near to panic. “...think you can help with that?”

“Huh?” Benny realized she’d been asked a question.

“Do you think you could arrange for Amira to be discreetly brought back here? The press will be watching her every move.”

Benny blinked. Win was asking her to sneak Amira Bakri, her love rival, back to the island and into Win’s loving arms. She blinked again. Win was insane. “I’ll do everything in my power.”

Win’s shoulders relaxed as if Atlas himself had come along to ease her load. She placed a warm hand on Benny’s forearm. The muscles twitched under her fingertips.

“Thank you, Benny. It means a lot to me.”

“I know.” She managed to squeeze the words past her misery.



The next morning Ioanna pounced as soon as Benny set foot in the hotel.

“Look at the Athens paper. It’s a top story on page seven.

‘Araby’s star crash lands.’” Amira’s smiling face was all over the printed page. Benny snorted.

“Page seven is hardly news. That’s right beside the obituaries, isn’t it? Maybe they’re trying to tell her something.”

Ioanna gasped before swatting at Benny. “May the gods forgive you. So what are your plans to get Amira out of Athens and back here?” She was so anxious for news she actually poured Benny a coffee rather than ushering her out of the office as she usually did. Bemused, Benny accepted the tepid coffee and decided to sit for a moment before starting her daily chores. She had been up early planning Amira’s journey with yacht charter companies and, of course, Dimitri. Nothing happened on the island without his input.

“Dimitri’s cousin Thanasos has a good sized boat. He’ll bring her in at the fishing port. He’ll meet her at a rendezvous point at sea where Amira will transfer from a chartered yacht onto his fishing smack.”

Ioanna frowned. “You’re putting her on a fishing boat? Why not bring her all the way here on the yacht?”

“I had it ‘leaked’ that her private yacht was sailing for Mykonos. The press will fly on ahead to get there before her and hopefully miss the switch at sea. The yacht will continue on and arrive as expected, except with no B-celebrity aviophobe onboard.”

“But they could backtrack and find her. Bribe the crew to tell them where she went?”

Benny shrugged, disinterested in the whole brouhaha. What was the point of being a media star if you didn’t like publicity? “The crew will only know she was collected by another vessel. They won’t know where she is sailing to. It’s the best I could come up with in a few hours. Given more time I’d have built her a bunker and sealed her in it.”

Ioanna snorted and lost herself in the morning mail. Benny finished her coffee and left the office, the villa, and what felt like the only part of her life that made sense. Perhaps she should go

on beach litter patrol and lie with her head in the tide until she either cleared her thoughts or drowned.



Win was awakened by Amira's phone calls, which began early and continued more or less all morning. It was with relief she finally found an excuse to leave her room and run off on an errand. She artfully managed to forget her cell phone. She needed a break from Amira's demands. She also needed time to reflect quietly on the events of last night, to carefully distill her feelings and be certain of her choices.

Refreshed by the sea air, she wandered along the beach watching the surf bubble mischievously between her toes. There was hardly any tide in the Aegean so the contours of the beach stayed constant. Back home the English coast was always in a state of flux. Here the steady tide table gave a sense of timelessness to the shore and Win liked this constancy, of always knowing where she stood with nature and the elements. It seemed so much more...civilized.

She had a destination for this solitary walk though she'd have preferred to jog. Unfortunately, her foot was still a little too tender to pound on, though it was a relief to be out of bandages and well on the mend. Besides, the walk would give her the time she needed to prepare herself for this particular meeting.

Following Ioanna's directions she kept to the water's edge until she came to the big black rock shaped like a seated cat. To the right she could make out an overgrown path disappearing through straggly bushes of sea buckthorn. Ioanna had told her to follow it and she couldn't go wrong. Sure enough, several hundred yards later the earthen path twisted one last time and Win found herself standing before Benny's house.

She stood and looked in surprise. Never would she have imagined this as a home for Benny, not in a million years. It

looked like a house a child would draw, a square white box with four symmetrical windows and a door in the middle. Built in whitewashed stone with a red terracotta roof and turquoise shutters, it shone in the sun like a little gem. A small porch provided enough shade for two cane chairs and a small table out front. Several orange trees dotted what passed for a yard before the hillside shrubbery took over and the landscape rolled away down to the beach.

Win smiled, feeling as if she had stumbled onto a huge and happy secret. So this was Benny's home, an old run down press house renovated into something so unlike anything the Benny she used to know would ever live in. Yet absolutely perfect for the Benny she had come to know these last few days.

"Win?" The surprised call came from an open bedroom window. Win looked up to see Benny smiling down at her. She moved away only to emerge from the open front door seconds later. "Hey. What brings you here? Come into the shade. Would you like a drink? I have iced tea." She sounded flustered yet delighted and Win felt a surge of, what? Happiness? Pleasure at seeing her, too?

"I'd love some." With Benny fussing around her, Win took a wicker seat under the shade of the porch, enjoying the light sea breeze and the tinkle of wind chimes. Benny was back in moments with two tall glasses. They settled side by side sipping their drinks and looking out at the horizon line just visible over the dried out grass and wiry brush.

"In the spring this is all a maze of wild flowers," Benny volunteered out of the blue. She indicated the shrubs. "And the butterflies come. And birds. Lots of birds."

"It's beautiful here, Benny. I can even hear the sea. You have a gorgeous home."

"Let me show you around." Benny was on her feet eager to show off. Win followed her into the small house, smiling quietly at Benny's enthusiasm.

The hallway held a plain wooden staircase. On either side, a kitchen and a living room opened up. The living space was cozy with two overstuffed armchairs and a barrel woodstove. The stone walls were painted white and lined with bookshelves, paintings, and artifacts from Benny's various travels. It had a warm, welcoming feel, and Win could imagine how pleasant it would be to simply sit here in the winter evenings reading a book, sipping the local wine, or simply watching the sunset through the west facing window. Benny watched her closely as if anxious for approval. Win found this curious but nevertheless gave it unconditionally.

"It's perfect, Benny. So cozy and cheerful." A flicker of emotion passed over Benny's face, one Win found hard to read, but it left her with a residue of sadness. She couldn't understand if the feeling had come from within or if she'd empathized with the hooded look in Benny's eyes. They used to share such a strong sense of home. No matter how far their travels took them, coming back to their own home was always the best bit.

"Upstairs there's only a bedroom and an office." Again Benny led the way. "It really is a two up two down house."

Her bedroom was cool and Spartan. A simple wrought iron bed was dressed in crisp white sheets with a bright blue throw, prim and almost virginal in its Mother Mary colors. But Win knew firsthand that Benny could reduce this little altar of neatly folded edges and tucked in corners to a smoldering pit of hellfire in mere minutes. She caught herself wondering who had shared it over the years then dragged her mind away to purer thoughts. It was far too dangerous to dwell on Benny's love life, and the accompanying pang of jealousy was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. She decided Benny's bedroom was calm and orderly and gave nothing away about its occupant.

In contrast, Benny's office seemed much more personal. Here a comfy chair sat facing an uninterrupted sea view. It was obviously a room for sitting in and contemplating much bigger issues than purely work oriented. The desk and computer were

tucked away against the back wall. Books, magazines, and music CDs were scattered everywhere. It was homier and much more lived in than the bedroom. This was where real rest and relaxation occurred.

“I sit here at night and watch the cruise ships pass by. The moonlight on the waves is beautiful.”

It sounded lovely, but to sit here night after night had a lonely quality, too. A sort of melancholia Win didn’t want to linger too long on. “What else do you do here besides spy on luxury liners?” She tried to move away from the feeling.

“Oh. We’re toying with the idea of opening another hotel. I’ve started research and some finance projections for the Cyclades Islands. It’s still very up in the air. Ioanna is reviewing the figures.”

“Wow, that must be exciting. You’re a genuine hotelier, Benny. I never saw that coming.”

Benny shrugged. “I didn’t either. It’s harder work than I expected but I love it. It’s great to live and learn in a place like this.”

“I’m sure it is. Mm, Benny, where’s the loo?”

Benny grinned. “The large outhouse around the back. I’ll meet you on the porch.”

The outhouse was really an enormous wet room and utility combo. Again, Win couldn’t help but marvel at the simplicity Benny had chosen to live in. Everything was solid and functional. Modern and capable, but blended in perfectly with the rustic fabric of the building and the surroundings. Her entire life was well placed and obviously worked for her. Win was pleased to see how Benny had evolved since they had gone their separate ways, but it also made her reevaluate her own choices, and she was beginning to find some of them lacking.

“This isn’t an entirely social call.” Win settled back into her seat. “I wanted to ask you another favor. In fact, I’m sort of embarrassed, but could you delay Amira’s evacuation until tomorrow morning?”

“Tomorrow? Why?”

“Mm.” Win’s embarrassment was total. “She’s got this interview with a national radio station. They heard that she was in Athens and wanted to talk to her. This was the only day they could do it. Is that okay with your arrangements?”

Benny was flabbergasted. “It will have to be, won’t it? What happened to ‘I’m a celebrity. Sneak me out of here’? One whiff of a microphone and she does a complete U-turn on her publicity embargo?”

Win shifted awkwardly. “I know it’s not what we thought, but could you help out? Please? Our PR people want her to milk this fear of flying thing for the public sympathy angle. Especially while Araby’s on the rise in America.”

Benny glowered. She really wanted to tell Amira to go and stuff her head in a blender and see if she got any public sympathy. Why couldn’t her PR people bail her out of Athens? Why did Win have to worry about all this rubbish? One look at Win’s consternation and Benny was torn by her promise to help out and her wish to let Amira get ground to a pulp in the cogs of her own publicity machine.

“Okay.” Her clipped answer said it all. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. “Gimme a minute to call Dimitri and see what he can pull.” Phone to her ear, she fixed Win with a steady stare. “But she’s paying for all of this. It’ll cost extra to change everything around. I had yachts chartered, and Thanasos has lost a day’s fishing.”

Win merely nodded. Money was not a problem for Amira and the Araby finance team. It was more how to handle the publicity of Amira’s hysterical freakout at the airport. That was the truly mortifying part. The plane had been in no danger whatsoever, but Amira had made such a scene in the VIP lounge on landing that half the world knew she was now skulking in Athens and not parading around New York, where she was supposed to be. Perversely, this made her even more intriguing to the music press. After this interview, if Amira had any wit she’d leap on the next flight out and head off as planned. Best to strike the American

market while the irony was hot. She had obviously recovered from her fright if she could face the media today. Why wasn't someone from Araby's PR out here holding Amira's hand? It wasn't Win's job, though it was clear Amira was happy for Win to do it anyway.

If she was honest about it, Win was as sick of the whole nonsense as Benny seemed to be. At the end of the day, the music business was all tinsel and glittering lights, and professionals like Win played the game for the presents under the tree. Except that Win was tired of the thoughtless empty gifts given with hollow sentiment. In fact, the whole experience had now burned out for her. She was a contract lawyer, not a nursemaid. She had to talk to Amira about this. Tell her she was tired and didn't want to travel on to New York. She looked across at Benny. She had a lot of things to tell Amira.

Benny finished her call, pleased she was able to make the amendments. Inside, she had panicked Win would go to Athens if Amira couldn't get to her. She wasn't ready for Win to leave yet. The very thought sucked the air clean out of her lungs leaving her feeling weak. Weak with self-disgust. She was so out on a limb with her feelings for Win. And now it seemed Win's house call hadn't been for their very necessary talk after all, or even for a friendly visit. As usual, the center of Win's thoughts and actions had been Amira Bakri.

"All done. Your girlfriend will be delivered tomorrow." She couldn't resist the little dig. Win hadn't been Amira's girlfriend last night and she had better remember that.

Win ignored the juvenile jibe. "Thank you."

She looked like she was about get up and leave. Benny was fit to burst; Win couldn't go without talking about what had happened. She just couldn't. Why wouldn't she talk about it?

"How the hell did you end up with a selfish cow like her?" she blurted out, unheeding her internal alarm bells.

"Seems to be the type I go for." Win was immediately on the defensive.

Benny had the grace to blush, but not shut up. “Well, if that’s what you think then you outdid yourself with my substitute.”

“She’s not your substitute. She’s just a girlfriend. You were so goddamn special it took a long line to replace you.”

“What?” Benny was sure she’d misheard.

“I’ve been seeing other people since the moment you left. What do you think I did, join a convent with a gym? The sisters of perpetual chastity and Jazzercise?”

“What?” Benny was reeling. Win hadn’t been very experienced when Benny had met up with her. In fact, Benny had been Win’s second lover, the first one being a waste of space in Benny’s opinion. As far as she was concerned Win had *all* her lessons in love from Benny 101. What did she mean long line? What did she mean other people? What did she mean?

“What?” she repeated, just to clarify her stupidity.

“I mean I’ve had other lovers since we split up. I’m sure you’ve had, too.” She thought of the bedroom upstairs with its twisted iron and cool sheets. Benny goggled, her face a mixture of shock, disbelief, and total outrage.

“Like who? Who? More kazoo suckers like Bakri?” Anger buzzed in every word. Had Win been whoring through her clientele list of minor celebrities? Was that her idea of living? Of healing?

Win bristled; she could have as many lovers as she wanted. Benny had no input into her life anymore. Better she minded her own love life and leave Win’s alone. And then the truth hit like a splash of cold water—Benny had not been sexually active since they broke up. Benny had poured all her energy into this place. She had built a home and a business; she was yet to rebuild herself.

Win’s pomposity deflated slightly. Who was she to judge Benny? Hadn’t she taken a stab at everything she thought she wanted and nothing had turned out as expected? Careers, lovers, new apartments, nothing was as good as promised. Nothing

outshone the happiness of her old life. It threw all Win's reinvention into pale shadow. Even her fancy slim line figure bore stretch marks from the past. But that didn't mean she had gotten things wrong. It meant she had moved on and she had tried hard. So how dare Benny look at her like that? *She* had been the one to judge and condemn. *She* had done nothing but torture and sabotage Win's holiday with Amira since they'd arrived. *How freakin' balanced and evolved is that? She's a lunatic.*

"Sandra Bishop." She casually rubbed salt into Benny's new wound with an old familiar name, uncertain where this sudden urge to torture in return came from.

"She's the cow who broke us up." Benny was livid. "You slept with that bitch? Jesus!"

"It was ages after, and she told me the truth, which was more than you were going to do."

"She did not tell you the truth. I did! I passed out with whoever that girl was. I never did anything with her or to her. I was so out of it I didn't even know I'd collapsed in someone else's bed. Sandra Bishop didn't know squat about what happened, but she just couldn't wait to tell you, could she? She couldn't wait to split us up."

"Who cares who told me? Or what you did or didn't do. We've been over it more times than there are grains of sand on this beach! The problem was that you were so fucked up that you ended up in bed with a stranger anyway. That's what hurt. That you even got *that* far. *That* was the betrayal, not what you did or didn't do. We've been over this a million times!"

"And I said I was sorry a million times! I begged you on my belly, but you still threw me out, and that leprous Bishop bitch wasted no time in weaseling her way into your bed—"

"There was no weaseling. It was years later and it was my decision."

"So, how many of these 'decisions' have you made over the last three years?" Benny spat out, not at all mollified.

“It’s unladylike to count,” Win replied primly, secretly enjoying Benny’s torment. It felt good to deal it out for once. “Nine...”

“Nine.” Benny bellowed.

“...teen.”

“Nineteen,” she squeaked.

“And really, Benny, it’s none of your business.”

“Does that nineteen include me?”

Win reddened. Benny saw the hairline crack in Win’s façade and leapt at it with a pickax.

“Am I one of your notches? Am I? Last night was just a typical Saturday night for you then?” Benny forced home her point. “Because if it was, then the tables are well and truly turned between us. I’m a different person now, Win. The kind of person you wanted once upon a time. Not the fool that I was—”

“Don’t you dare lecture me, you sanctimonious freak. You’ve been a madwoman from the moment I stepped foot on this island. I have no idea what your plans are, but leave me out of them,” Win snapped. “I do not need you in my life.”

That stung. Benny had the answer to the question that plagued her since Win had walked into Villa Eros. Win didn’t need her. She honestly thought she was going to cry, and that made her lash out in anger.

“You sure needed me in *something* last night. And I’m not in your life, I’m just orbiting. The minute Amira Bakri snaps her fingers you push me away.” Benny’s voice was rising but she didn’t care.

“You are exactly where you’re meant to be. You are an ex, and your orbit should be about as close as Pluto’s.” Win flared back at her. “You’re the one who doesn’t know her place, always trying to sneak under my defenses. And why? What do you want to prove, that you’re better than Amira? Amira doesn’t matter. She’s not my partner, not someone spec—” She stopped herself. Benny had been everything Amira was not all those years ago before her orbital trajectory catapulted her into the great unknown.

Benny sat and quietly digested all this. She was confused. If Amira meant so little then why was Win all bent out of shape trying to get her back to the island? And if lovers were in abundance then what did that make last night? Just another adventure? Benny couldn't bear it if it hadn't been special for Win, too. She knew she was foolish to hope Win would reconsider her relationship with Amira after what had happened. But she did hope. It was impossible to accept their lovemaking was not as mind-blowing for Win as it had been for her. Win had blasted Benny's small world to smithereens. Parts of it were still spinning in the air around her, sharp as shrapnel.

Win rose to her feet.

"Stay." Benny reached out, but Win had moved away. *Forever. Right here, with the flowers and the butterflies and the warm winds. You'll love the sea and the mountains. You'll love the home I've made, and in time you'll love me again. Stay.*

"I don't want to bicker anymore. It's been three years, Benny. We've gone in different directions. I don't want you blaming me for who I am today."

"I'm not. I won't." *I love you for who you are today.*

Win moved a few more paces to underline her intention to go.

"Win." She turned at Benny's call. "What was last night to you?" Barefaced desperation at last made Benny ask her question. She wanted no more confusion. She needed to know.

Win hesitated. "Last night was a history lesson we both needed, Benny. I learned we still fit together well and I remembered we had some great times. Some really great times. When we worked, we worked well. But I came away knowing we are both very different people now." She knew she sounded a little too well rehearsed, but then she had been practicing this speech all the way over as she walked along the water's edge. And like the Aegean tides, Win realized she liked constancy, knowing where she was, feeling safe in the world and in herself, and that Benny had never and could never give her that. She

had tried and she had ended up breaking Win's heart and home apart.

"So what you're saying is we're compatible, we had fun, and we've changed from the people we used to be. The people who hurt each other." Benny was not going to let her go. Not for the mushy, incomprehensible, stupid reasons Win had just spouted. As far as Benny was concerned there was still hope. "I mean if we hadn't changed we'd still be bad for each other, right?" She slapped her knees and stood up confidently. "That's exactly what I thought, too. Well done us." And Benny knew where there was hope, dreams flourished.

"You're at it again. Stop twisting things." Win was dismayed at Benny's blatant ignoring of her heartfelt, poignant, well-rehearsed speech.

"Nothing to twist. You were plain as day." And where dreams flourished plans were laid. Benny wandered into her house calling over her shoulder, "Thank you for your honesty. It was great to chat, feel free to visit anytime. Now, I need to get ready for afternoon shift, but I'm on bar duty for cocktail hour. Why don't you drop by and I'll rattle you up an Orgasm? I'll do you a great one."

And with a cheery wave she closed the door on Win's flabbergasted face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Win stomped back along the tide line, now not so much constant and dependable as rigid and intractable. *She deliberately misunderstood. Deliberately twisted and convoluted every word I said. She's impossible, and she better not think she can pervert this situation. I should never have kissed her. Look at what happened. She's as slippery as a snake.*

Win couldn't believe she had stood there like a slack-jawed yokel while Benny wrangled her way out of what she simply refused to hear. *I'm going to have to go over this with her later. Amira's coming back tomorrow and she'll be in a state about God knows what. I need Benny to back off. I need to think about what I really want to say to Amira.*

Win knew she needed a long talk with Amira. She didn't want to continue on to New York or wherever else Amira's wandering star took her. Win was not compelled to follow, and while she knew this would in no way affect their working relationship, she wanted to let Amira down gently. Open relationship or not, Amira was made of glass, which in some ways was good, as her self-serving nature had always been transparent. But her ego was also very fragile and Win would have to be careful how she let her down.

For Win the merry-go-round was slowing to a stop. She wanted off. Last night with Benny had opened her eyes to a lot of

things lurking under the surface of her consciousness. It wasn't so much an old wound had reopened as an old box of bittersweet memories. Win was swamped with feelings and thoughts she had suppressed or tried to forget for a long, long time. Letting Amira go was the easy part. It cleared some room in her head for thinking about Benny.

Once again Benny had proven herself a catalyst, but Win was unsure what the outcome of all this internal reflection would be. She was by no means certain being back in Benny's arms was a good thing. It felt far too good for it to be healthy.

First things first. It was only manners to talk to Amira as soon as possible. Then, once she was safely on her way to New York, Win would sit down with Benny. What she would say then, she had no idea. Just because her time with Amira was ending didn't mean a new relationship with someone else was beginning, especially not with Benny. Win was very stern with herself about this. Having sex with Benny had at least proven she was no longer committed to Amira and her lifestyle. Win needed space and time alone, of that she was sure. Being with Benny had resurrected a sweetness from their past, but it *was* the past and she had to remember that.

By the time Win reached the villa she was resolved to grab Benny before Amira arrived and ask her to stay away. She didn't want Benny's freakish rivalry to overshadow her farewells to Amira.



"If you've come for your free cocktail, the bar's shut." Benny looked up from drying her glasses and grinned. She'd had a good night. All the reasons she loved being in this business had come flooding back. Her guests were happy; the atmosphere had been light and laughter laden. Everyone seemed to be smiling and dancing and in love. Villa Eros had that effect.

It was late now and the terrace was empty. Benny had sent

the bar staff home in a fit of generosity and was locking up alone when Win appeared.

“I don’t want a drink.” Win shifted uncomfortably. She had meant to come down from her room sooner but had succumbed to sleep after a hot day on the beach swimming and sunbathing. It was sheer determination to get this conversation over with before Amira’s return that had made her drop by the bar. Now Benny was amiably grinning at her as if she was a regular at the local watering hole.

“Tell you what, come in here while I pull the shutters down and I’ll get you a Metaxa as a nightcap. Okay?” Without further ado, she slammed the shutters, startling Win with the loud clatter. Perturbed, but lured by her weakness for the Greek liqueur of brandy, wine, and secret spices, Win hopped off her stool and came into the enclosed back bar. Benny was already pouring them both a drink.

“Here.” She carefully handed over a full shot glass. “Seven stars, this one’s a special bottle.”

“I’ve only ever had five stars before. What are we celebrating?”

“To Villa Eros the second. Ioanna has looked over my figures and we’re going ahead with a second hotel.”

“Congratulations.” They saluted each other and sipped. Win murmured her appreciation for the spicy drink. “Where exactly?”

“Probably the Cyclades Islands. We’ll need to begin searching for a suitable location, but that’s the fun part.”

“It’s great news, Benny. I’m glad for you both.” They finished their drinks.

“Another?” Benny held up the bottle, but Win shook her head.

“No. I wanted to talk to you about Amira.”

“Oh.” Benny’s voice went flat, her light-heartedness immediately subdued. “She’s changed her mind again? Wants to arrive in a hot air balloon advertising air travel pills?” Worry

surfaced that Win was going to leave after all, go to Athens and hook up with Amira for a direct flight out. Benny seemed to do nothing but balance on that precipice every minute of the day, worried if she so much as sneezed she would topple over into it and lose Win forever. Once she boarded that plane for New York, Benny knew she would never see her again and it choked her. These were the moments that mattered and she hadn't a clue what to do with them. She flipped off the bar lights and secured the shutters, keeping busy, keeping moving to try to disguise her annoyance that once again Amira had popped up and destroyed a happy moment.

"I wanted to ask you to please..." Win was unsure how to proceed, and to top it all Benny was trying to usher her out the bar door. This conversation had been so much easier to plan in her room. She gave a deep sigh and plowed on. "Amira and I... we need time alone. Okay. So, please? No crazy nonsense with fire alarms and stinky sunscreen, or anything else. Please, Benny. Just give us room to—"

"The fire alarm was in the rules and the sunscreen was Ioanna's idea." Benny stabbed buttons into the keypad by the door.

"Please, Benny."

"Are you afraid I'll tell her we were together last night, is that it?" Benny turned on her.

Win stiffened. That was not it. But it was close. She was going to tell Amira herself. It shouldn't be an issue; heaven knew Amira had seen tons of other people over the few months they'd been dating. Win wanted to say goodbye, but with Benny well out of the way. Benny had a habit of making things go crazy for Win and she was not taking any chances with this particular scenario.

"Benny, you don't understand what's going on."

"So it's one rule for you and another for me? You want me to stay away and shut up about your unfaithfulness? The very thing you dumped me over."

“You’re making an ass of yourself. You know nothing about my relationship with Amira, and in no way is it the same as ours. That was another time and place.”

“No. It’s right here, right now.” Benny was adamant. No way was she going to let Win brush it all aside because her glamorous girlfriend was coming back. “You can’t just waltz in—”

“Shut up. Just shut up, you bloody fool.” And suddenly Win’s hands were in her hair pulling her head down. And Win’s mouth covered hers and stopped her nonsense. And Win kissed her until she floated off the ground, and her heart pounded to get out and smother Win with love, and her ears rang with joy. They rang; they really rang.

“What the hell is that?” Win tore her mouth away.

“Shit. The warning light.” Benny lunged for the burglar alarm with its flashing light and pre-alert shrill. She had not completed punching in the code as she locked up. The fight with Win had distracted her. The kiss from Win had paralyzed all thought. They were a split second away from triggering a full alarm. Her fingers fumbled for the abort code. She misdialed. She tried again all with only seconds to spare and—

It went off, with a loud clanging.

Win covered her ears and backed out of the bar into the lounge. “You and your damn alarms. Why don’t you put a bell around your neck and be done with it?” She was flustered and very, very annoyed. Reality had arrived like a bucket of cold water. “What the hell was I thinking? Jesus. This island makes me behave like an idiot. Can’t you turn that bloody thing off?” Her annoyance turned to anger.

Voices could be heard in the foyer. Benny began to move in that direction. The alarm override panel was wired into the back office. She turned to tell Win it would be okay, but she was already headed for the other exit, hurrying away, her arms wrapped around herself protectively, her shoulders in a miserable hunch.

“Which sector is it?” she heard Eleni call to a colleague.

“It’s here. In the bar. I’m on it,” Benny called back. At least she could get this mishap under control. She had no idea what to do about anything else.



“Win?” Benny knocked softly on her bedroom door. There was no answer. The villa was once again calm, the alarm quickly dealt with. She waited a few seconds looking anxiously at the crack underneath the door to see if a light came on. It didn’t. Glancing up and down the corridor, she wondered if she should knock again. She so wanted to be on the other side. Deciding it was too risky and that Win had already gone to bed, Benny slid away, tense with worry, feeling alone and confused.



“Do you want to destroy me? Drive me to an early grave? Is that it? Is that it?” Ioanna waved her arms about as if swarming bees were on the attack. Benny recoiled. Her head was thumping and she knew she looked like shit. She hadn’t slept a wink with all last night’s events swirling in her head until she ended up with a brain like soup. She leaned against the wall of the small back office feeling she could slide down it at any minute with sheer exhaustion.

“You will ruin us, Benny. Ruin us, do you hear me?”

“Ugh.” She managed to squeeze out over her coffee cup rim. She watched Ioanna’s latest theatrics; the woman always had them on the verge of ruin. *Greeks and ruins, how the hell did I end up with both?*

“Don’t ugh me. You know what I mean. The alarm. That’s what.” Ioanna screeched. Benny closed her eyes and shuddered. When were the painkillers going to kick in? What did they put in them these days? Why weren’t they hysteria proof?

“It was an alarm. So what? It was doing its job. When Eleni and I checked the bar area it was all okay,” Benny mumbled, deciding to slip away and hide in a nice cool linen closet and count sheets and pillowcases all day long. “Probably a moth hit the sensor or something.”

“A moth? A moth?”

Again Benny winced and began to sidle toward the door. Why did Ioanna have to repeat every goddamned word she said in such a high pitched tone of condescension?

“How about my business partner having sex in the bar? Does *that* ring any alarm bells, Ms. Fiske, heh? Heh?”

Benny froze mid sidle.

“What?” The word came out strangled and squeaky.

Ioanna triumphantly slapped a switch and her PC monitor jumped into life with CCTV footage of the bar area. There in fuzzy monochrome, but detailed enough to recognize the players, stood Benny and Win, kissing as if their lives depended on it, like CPR victims. Touching each other like life depended on it, too. Win had Benny’s shirt clawed halfway up her back while Benny had her hands full of Win’s backside. Benny was shocked. It hadn’t seemed so carnal when she was in the middle of that kiss, had it? She could only recall the heady bliss, the thumping heartbeat. She squinted at the screen. What were her hands doing now? Oh my God. She knew damn fine what her hands were doing and she couldn’t blame them one bit. Benny chilled to the bone and blushed hot enough for her eyebrows to feel singed. How could she forget the CCTV? Hadn’t she been the one who set it up to auto-e-mail the office account when any illicit movement was detected? There would be a backup disc somewhere, too. How had she forgotten this? What the hell was wrong with her head these days?

“Oh, my God.” Win’s cry yanked Benny out of her own little trauma and straight into another one. She spun around to face Win frozen with shock in the doorway, her eyes glued to the monitor.

“You bastard.” She swung her gaze to Benny, full of with fury. “You filmed it. Is this your next sabotage, to blackmail me?”

“Blackmail? I didn’t know we were being filmed.”

“How could you not know? You made your money out of surveillance software, you sleazy son of a bitch,” Win bellowed.

Ioanna settled back, arms folded contentedly. “I know you two will ruin me,” she muttered, relishing the unfolding drama.

“What? Are you saying I did this on purpose? Why the hell would I do something like that?” Benny was overheating with righteous indignation.

“Because you are a crazy, sneaky freak.”

“I am *not* sneaky.”

“Oh yes, you are. You have been one sneaky bitch since I arrived.”

Benny waved an angry finger at the monitor where Win was squirming around like a horny eel. “Who’s the one hanging on to my head like it’s made of money? You’re not exactly hating it, are you?”

Trapped by her inability to lie, Win’s face flamed and she spun on her heel. “Kiss my ass” was the best *bon mot* she could come up with at such short notice, and she burst back out the door.

“And it wouldn’t be the first time.” Benny’s equally suspect rejoinder floated after her.

The door slammed and a short silence ensued.

“Well, that went smooth.” Ioanna added her opinion after a moment. “You two have so much history you need a museum to house it all.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“You could open to the public free on Sundays.”

“This is not funny.”

“Give school tours. It would be educational.”

“Shut up.”

“The security surveillance could be part of the exhibit.”

“Oh, piss off.”

“No, you piss off. I have work to do. Go and save Amira and get something right for once.” Ioanna began to organize papers signaling work had begun and her imminent ruin had once again been averted for another hour. Dismissed, Benny huffed out of the office slamming the door behind her just as loudly as Win had moments before.



“Where is she?”

The accusatory tone burst into her daydreams and brought Benny down to earth with a bump. She pushed the straw Panama out of her eyes and squinted up from the hammock. Outlined against the bright cloudless sky, Win glared down at her, arms akimbo and face stern, clearly in no mood for any of Benny’s fly moves. Behind her, mirroring her antagonistic stance, Ioanna didn’t look in the mood for any nonsense either. Benny sighed. She knew this moment would come.

“I take it you mean Amira.” She played for time.

“Who else are we waiting on?” Win snapped.

“Jesus?”

“Where the hell is she, you moron?”

“She’s over there.” Benny pointed vaguely at a distant blob on the horizon.

“She’s on Khios?” Ioanna asked, surprised.

“Actually, she’s about thirty miles beyond that. Khios is in the way. Change of plan. The yacht was followed.” Benny tapped the handheld radio lying on the hammock beside her, showing she was on top of things.

“The paparazzi followed her yacht?” Win looked worried at this news.

“Yup. So it’s Plan B and she’s on her way to Izmir. No one expects her to go there,” Benny concluded smugly. Ioanna and Win looked on aghast.

“Hey.” Benny was obstinate, and a little unsettled by their silence. Silence did not bode well with these two. “I had to make a snap decision. It was the best I could do in the circumstances. It’s not like we even had a Plan B. I had to make that up on the spot.”

“You sent her to another island?” Win was having problems understanding what Benny was telling her.

“No,” Ioanna piped up, dismayed. “She sent her to another country. Izmir’s in Turkey.”

“You sent her to Turkey.” Win spluttered in disbelief. “Turkey.”

“On a fishing boat?” Ioanna looked equally appalled.

“She’ll love it. She can write a cross cultural song about it.” Benny tried to sound upbeat, but it came out laced with dismissive indifference.

“I’m going to kill you and spend the rest of my life in a Greek women’s prison. But it will be worth it. Just to have the pleasure of putting my hands around your skinny neck and throttling the living daylights out of you.” Win entered the white light stage of anger almost instantaneously, not bothering with a slow build up at all. “I might have known you’d screw it up, you underhanded, devious—”

Benny struggled out of her hammock, all dismissive indifference evaporated, deciding it was best to die on her feet, or better yet, to run away on them. Win had gone chalk white, her eyes as pewter as a stormy sky. Ioanna had a hand on her shoulder, as if that would pacify her, or even manage to hold her back should she decide to lunge. Benny shifted back a few steps, keeping the flimsy hammock between them, and edged a little closer to the terrace steps.

“Win,” Ioanna spoke carefully, as one would to someone perched on a high ledge. “I’m sure it wasn’t deliberate. Stupid, yes. But not deliberately vindictive.” She shot Benny a hard look. Benny straightened under the glare. It had never been her intention

to send Amira to another country, but when the opportunity presented itself...but then no one needed to know that.

“Thanasos radioed. He thought they were being followed and wanted an alternative course. I thought heading for Turkey would throw the paparazzi off the scent. And I have another charter yacht waiting there to bring her directly here. It’s a sort of roundabout trip, but it’s the best I could do at the last minute.” She waggled her radio. “I can always tell him to turn around and come straight here and to hell with the consequences?” She raised her eyebrows trying to look reasonable.

“Do that.” Ioanna made the decision. “Get her back here. We’ll deal with the press if and when we need to.” Taking Win by the arm she briskly led her off the terrace and away from Benny. “Come, my dear. A nice glass of cold wine will settle you. You can kill her later. After the season has ended and she has ruined us all.” With one last hard stare over her shoulder she led Win away.



“You’ll feel calmer now.” Despite her reassuring words Ioanna looked alarmed as Win chugged down her glass of wine in less than two gulps. “Well, you soon will.”

She refilled the glass and Win took another huge gulp before forcing herself to slow down.

“I have never felt so much like getting smashed in the afternoon,” she declared. “I could strangle her.” Win wrapped her fingers around an imaginary Benny-neck and shook forcibly for several seconds. Ioanna hid a smile.

“Familiar as I am with the sentiment, especially after these last few days, you have to calm down, Win. When Amira *finally* arrives she will be frazzled to a crisp. It’s best you don’t meet her in a state of apoplexy. In fact, it might be best if you don’t mention Benny’s little scenic detour at all.”

“Oh, you better believe it. I’m not going to let her name cross my lips. Amira will go mad.” She managed to sip her wine this time. “I need to hire a car to go collect her whenever she does arrive. I’m guessing it will be some time this evening. Can you help me with a local rental agency, Ioanna?”

“Of course I will. And I agree, the less you mention Benny the better. I don’t think Amira will be quite so complacent about her ‘love rival’ as she was before. It won’t be quite so amusing now, will it?”

“I know. It’s going to be hard enough to tell her how things have changed,” she murmured mostly to herself.

“Changed? As in between you and Benny? That kiss in the bar was only the tip of the red-hot iceberg, wasn’t it? I know what you two have been up to.” Ioanna laughed as Win started in surprise. “Oh, yes, you didn’t fool me for one minute with that squash the spider routine.” She giggled as Win flushed hotly, then sobering up asked, “What does it all mean, Win? Where are you going from here? You know she still has feelings for you. Benny would be very open about that.”

Win nodded. “Yes. She has been very honest.”

“And what about you?” Ioanna pressed gently.

“I’m trying to be honest too, Ioanna. But I’ve got to start that process with Amira. I need to talk to her about this before I even approach Benny.”

“But you will talk to her before she bursts all over my hotel?”

“I’ll try to talk some sense into her. After Amira gets back I guarantee things will be a lot more peaceable round here.”

“I will make you shake on that, Winifred Martin.” Ioanna held out her hand. Win took it.

“I solemnly swear, Ms. Kakos, that things can only get better.”



“Are you sure you’re all right? I’m so, so sorry, baby.” Win fussed over a decidedly off color Amira as she wobbled along the pier, her legs still adjusting to dry land.

“Thirteen hours at sea in a smelly little boat. What the hell were you thinking?”

Win felt suitably chagrined. “It wasn’t my idea. And no one knew it was going to take so long after you left the yacht. If you hadn’t been followed you’d have arrived ages ago.”

“Followed? We were the only fools out there. Thanasos, me, and a hundred stinking fish flapping all over the deck.”

“Oh.” Win decided to say no more. Her suspicions against Benny heightened even further.

“If it wasn’t your stupid idea, whose was it?” Amira allowed herself to be lead away from the bustling pier to the car Win hired to collect her. They were at the fishing harbor on the other side of the island, much more private than the main port.

“Oh no.” Amira’s head jerked in sudden realization. “You wouldn’t. You didn’t. Please, don’t tell me you let that Swedish fruit loop organize this torture. Don’t tell me you let the woman who sees *me* as the obstacle between you and happy-ever-after send me to sea in a leaky old bucket? Are you mad?”

Win knew she looked shame-faced. “It was the only way to get you onto the island with no press coverage. They think you’re on your way to Mykonos.” She tried to make it all sound rational, but with hindsight it may not have been the best idea to get Benny involved. “Let’s get you back to the villa and into a nice hot bath.”

The lure worked. Amira strode ahead, irritation pulsing out of every step. She slid into the car with a thankful sigh leaving Win to haul along her copious luggage.



“Where’s that disc?” Benny rummaged through Ioanna’s desk.

“What disc?” Ioanna stood frowning at her carefully organized In and Out trays now in an unruly heap.

“The CCTV back up disc.” Benny’s hands flew over papers and disemboweled drawers.

“Get away from there, you’re like a pig rooting for truffles. Look at the mess.” Ioanna swooped to try to save her workspace. “It’s in the top left hand drawer. I was going to tape over it.”

Benny ripped open the drawer and snatched up the CD in its paper cover. “I want to hold on to it.”

“Why? It’s hardly quality porn.”

“And you would know.”

Ioanna sniffed and looked unrepentant. “You have a nerve trying to make me feel guilty about *your* bad porn. What are you going to do with it? Nothing good, I’m sure.”

“It’s leverage. As long as I have this Win will have to talk to me about what’s on it. Now that Ms. Tambouriny is back, Win will be fussing all over her and I’ll not get a minute of her time.”

“And what does that tell you?”

“It tells me I need leverage.” Benny waved the disc triumphantly as she flew out of the office.

“It tells me nothing good will come of this,” Ioanna called after her.



Amira and Win had just entered when Benny emerged into the foyer. She hesitated to see what her greeting would be like.

“Back in one piece, eh?” She tested the waters. It was the best she could do by way of welcome. Personally, she couldn’t have cared less if Amira had floated all the way to Australia.

Amira ignored her as she swept past. Win threw her a look of pure blame and snorted angrily. It secretly delighted Benny the cruise had not been a roaring success. In her opinion Amira should have grabbed the next plane and kept on flying—right out of Win’s life.

As they passed, Benny sniffed loudly, her nose wrinkled. Fish? The air held a decidedly fishy funk. *Ah, Thanasos has returned from the briny with a big blowfish onboard.*

She watched the couple disappear down the corridor to their suite. Behind her Eleni stood at reception gawping at the unexpected return of her hero. Benny strolled over and lolled on the counter.

“Eleni, have the chef prepare something special for Ms. Bakri’s return and send it to her room with our compliments. Something she’d really love...Like sushi.” With a contented smile Benny headed off to her chores.

“Boss?” Her long strides taking her away from the foyer, she barely registered Eleni’s call. “Boss? You forgot your CD.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The paparazzi are on the island,” Ioanna announced matter-of-factly. Benny looked up from her inventory. They were in a stone storehouse tucked away at the rear of the villa that served as a cool room for all their fresh produce. The Wednesday delivery had just arrived and Benny was content to hide away and sort out the stock.

“How do you know?”

“Because they’re camped outside the villa gates. It’s the first time we’ve ever had to close them. Good thing they’re not just ornamental.”

“How the hell did they know to come here?”

Ioanna shrugged in resignation. “They figured it out somehow. Now we’re under siege. It’s bedlam out there.”

“Throw them what they want.” Benny dismissed the whole circus and went back to counting crates of fruit.

“If she leaves now, Win will go with her,” Ioanna pointed out. Benny’s head snapped up. “Thought that might catch your attention. I need to talk to Amira and Win. See if they have any ideas how to defuse this situation before our guests leave en masse.”

She turned to head back to the villa. Without a word Benny chucked her papers on a crate of oranges and followed hard on her heels.



“I suppose you think the sushi stunt was clever.” Now that they were face to face and Amira had a restful night’s sleep, she was in no mood to entertain Benny in any way whatsoever.

Benny decided not to answer; she needed to work with Amira over this paparazzi thing, not fight. Well, not yet. Besides, Benny did think the sushi stunt was clever.

“So, about these paparazzi guys...what are you going to do?” She got straight to the point.

“What do you mean what am *I* going to do? I’m not the one who tipped them off.”

“Tipped them off?”

“Yes. How do you think they got here? I sure as hell didn’t tell them. There has to be a leak on your side,” Amira snapped. “Probably your brains.”

“Hey, nobody on this island knows who you are, never mind gives a damn about some jumped up—”

“Let’s all calm down, shall we?” Ioanna interrupted the escalating argument. She had called Amira and Win into her office to discuss the unwelcome visitors at the gates. The other guests were nervous about trying to pass them on their way in and out of the villa and complaints had arisen. Benny’s assistance at this meeting had not been asked for, but she invited herself along anyway.

“Somebody gave a damn enough to call the press, and I think it was you. You’ve been hounding me since the moment I arrived. You want me off this island!” Amira thrust an accusing finger at Benny.

“Yeah, like that’s why I went to extremes organizing your return.” Benny was pissed off at the all around lack of gratitude for her efforts. She had to endure Amira on this island. It was the only way she could be certain Win would remain here. “Have you any idea how difficult it is to hide a big mouth like y—”

“You sent me to Turkey in a leaky deathtrap. You planned to murder me!”

“I was trying to keep these guys from *my* door, but oh no, you just had to drag them all the way here with you. If you’d only gone to Izmir like I—”

“Izmir? Izmir? What the fuck was I going to do in Izmir?”

“Dunno. Open a harem maybe?”

“You are completely certifiable.”

“Me? *You’re* the one freaked by flying. *You’re* the one who needs her hand held at the airport gift shop.”

“And there we have the real problem—who is holding my hand? You are plagued with jealousy because I am Winifred’s lover.”

“Hah. You and eighteen others.”

“Hey. That was private information. Do you mind?” Win interjected swiftly. She still had to have the “conversation” with Amira, whose nerves hadn’t quite settled enough to hear what Win wanted to tell her. The last thing Win wanted was Benny in the mix.

“Ioanna, Benny?” The small voice was drowned out by all the shouting, but Win heard it.

“Yes, Eleni. What is it?” she asked gently on seeing the young girl’s troubled face.

“I think I know how the press got here.”

That shut everyone up. All eyes now turned to Eleni. She swallowed hard and went even paler.

“The CD Ms. Bakri gave me? The one with Araby’s pre-release on it? I put it on eBay.”

“You what?” Amira looked horrified.

“You are ruined,” Ioanna told her.

“It comes out in downloadable format tomorrow, so no real harm done.” Win leapt to Eleni’s defense. This was her area. She knew all the facts and figures, and Eleni had done no real damage with her bootleg copy. It was madness for Amira to have given it away so freely anyway.

“Benny told me to auction it on eBay and retire. But I got a ton of e-mails and texts asking where I got it, and I think they figured out Amira was here,” Eleni blurted out her sad confession.

“Typical.” Amira threw Benny a hard look. “She’s behind everything that goes wrong around here.”

“Really, really ruined,” Ioanna helpfully repeated.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to make some money to buy a scooter.” Eleni was almost in tears.

“It’s okay. No harm was done.” Win consoled her with an arm around Eleni’s thin shoulders. “Nothing is ruined. I promise.”

“And someone bought it, Eleni? For actual money?” Benny was incredulous.

Eleni nodded glumly. “I mailed it off yesterday to a Greek address. But I just got a call from the buyer. He says he’s outside and has a question.”

“You sold it to the paparazzi?” Ioanna was horrified. “We are *all* destroyed. They will never leave now. It is like Troy.”

“No, we’re not.” Win gave Eleni another reassuring squeeze. “Araby’s press room will sort this all out. What does the guy want, Eleni?”

“He wanted to know if I had more like this and said he’d pay double?” Eleni looked confused at this.

“You mean he wants more than the acoustic version?” Amira asked. Eleni shrugged. She had really no idea.

“Well, just ignore him, Eleni. We’ll have him for bootlegging if he’s not careful. But thank you for telling us. It was very brave of you.” Win let her go. With relief at her clearer conscience, Eleni sidled off, leaving them to return to their bickering.

“So.” Amira swung back to Benny. “You told that young girl to sell my gift. You are despicable.”

“A homemade CD of your warbling, big deal.”

Tired of the never-ending drama, Win quietly left the office, only to find Eleni still loitering outside.

“It’s going to be okay. Honest.” Win reassured her again.

“It’s the press at the gates, Ms. Martin. Maria and I are

worried about passing them to go home. We only have bicycles and the men will try to stop us and get us to talk. It was hard enough to get in this morning, and now there are even more of them. And the man I sold the disc to is out there, too.”

“Why this is ridiculous. I have a hired car. Go collect Maria and I’ll drive you both home. Ioanna and Benny will just have to organize a taxi to bring staff in and out from tomorrow onward. Damn press, they’re like ants. They get everywhere.”



“Hey, Winifred Martin? Are you Winifred Martin?”

Win had dropped Maria off at her parent’s farm first, then driven on into Valleri to take Eleni home. A traffic jam kept them waiting at a side junction when a young man approached and called through the open driver side window. Win looked over only to be blinded by a camera flash inches from her face.

“Hey, how rude.”

“Are you Winifred Martin?” he asked again.

“No comment.” Win decided to play safe with the age-old brush off. This guy had to be press and for some reason had homed in on her.

“You’ve plenty to say in the CD.” He came back well prepared.

“I beg your pardon?” Win realized she’d fallen into his trap when he smiled slimily at her.

“The disc of you in the bar with the other blonde. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Win’s blood ran cold. The CCTV footage? What the hell? Was he talking about the CCTV footage? *Lie, lie, lie for your life.*

“I’m not exactly sure what you mean?” *Okay half lie, start small.*

“Two blondes in the bar, hot lesbian action. Is that part of a longer movie? Because you’re Amira Bakri’s girlfriend, aren’t

you? Did you used to act in porn—” More flashes exploded in her face. Eleni slunk further down in the passenger seat and looked on wide-eyed.

“No, I didn’t. That was not porn. How dare you.” Win was aghast. “No comment,” she added as an afterthought.

“Who was the other blonde?”

“What? Look, it’s none of your business. For the last time, no comment.”

“Does Bakri know?”

“No comment. Leave her out of this.”

“Is the blonde your secret lover?”

“No com—she is *not* a secret lover! She’s my ex.” *Oh Lord, I’m no good at this no comment thing.*

“Does Bakri know you’re back with your ex?”

“Yes! No! She’s not—Look, no comment! Leave me alone.” More flashes.

“So you’re having an affair behind Bakri’s back?”

“What? It’s not an affair. Benny’s an ex—”

“Who’s Benny?”

“Oh, Jesus.” The traffic finally began to move, and with one last miserable, “No comment,” Win stepped on the gas and shot forward in panicked flight.

“Eleni.” Win glanced over at the young girl as soon as they were a safe distance away. “This disc? What exactly did you sell on eBay? What did it look like?”



“Where’s the CCTV disc?” Win bit out. Benny and Ioanna looked up from the table they shared on the restaurant terrace.

“It’s...it’s...” Benny frowned. Where was it? It had been ages since she’d last seen the disc.

“You took it out of the office. You said it would make Win talk to you. Looks like your plan worked,” Ioanna pointed out.

Win’s face was like thunder. “Bring it to my suite immediately

please.” And she stalked off, leaving her perplexed hosts to watch after her.

It took Benny nearly twenty minutes to finally unearth the disc near the music player behind the reception. It was buried under magazines, mixed in with the music CDs they played on the terraces. As much as she was relieved to find it, Benny was surprised and unsettled she had set it down and forgotten it in the first place, though she could remember the exact moment she’d done it, chatting to Eleni about sushi. Her trick didn’t seem so clever now.

Benny set off for the Aphrodite suite with more than a little trepidation. What was wrong with Win that she seemed so angry? Benny wished she could have talked to her in private and found out what was up. But Amira was back, and just as Benny had feared, Win had withdrawn from her and now was downright moody.

“Put it on.” Win nodded at the media center the moment Benny appeared through the door. Benny shifted awkwardly. Ioanna was already there, in the front row as usual, sticking her unwanted nose into everything she could. It was Amira sitting sulkily beside her that made Benny uncomfortable. Ioanna knew the contents of the CD. Amira would have a fit. This disc showed Win as the initiator of their kissing. Why did Win want to show Amira that so publicly? What was her game?

“Are you sure?”

“Just do it,” Win snapped. She was livid about something. Benny hoped it wasn’t anything to do with her.

“Okay.” She slid the disc into the machine and punched a few buttons. The TV screen flickered into life but stayed a vibrant blue rather than change into the fuzzy monochrome of Benny and Win behind the bar. Then the music began...“Is that a tambourine?” Benny was mystified.

And then the singing. “*Aegean eyes, so many lies have turned you blue...*”

“What the hell *is* this?”

Amira sat upright. "That's my song?"

"What does this mean?" Ioanna asked Win directly.

"It means Eleni may have sold 'Aegean Eyes,' but she mailed off the CCTV disc by mistake." Win flumped down onto the couch in despair. "You are the curse of my life, Benedikte Fiske." She cradled her head in her hands. "The press have it. One of those guys out there bought the disc from Eleni and found he had the bonus track of a lifetime."

The floor under their feet lurched lazily, and for one dizzy moment Win thought she was swooning straight onto it. The rippling movement stopped as soon as it started.

"What the hell was that?" They were all startled.

"An aftershock. There was a big earthquake in Turkey early this morning. Tremors will happen on and off for several hours," Ioanna informed them calmly.

"And you were going to send me to Turkey," Amira spat out at Benny narrow-eyed.

"Hey, it's not like I knew there was going to be an earthquake. Anyway, it was hundreds of miles inland. I'd never have gotten you there in time," Benny answered sourly. Amira was really pissing her off.

"Are we safe?" Win sounded troubled.

"Yes. I made sure the villa was rebuilt with anti-seismic materials. We're totally safe." Benny reassured her.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Amira ejected the CD from the player. "What's on the other disc? The one you're talking about?" she asked. Silence greeted her words. Then Win confessed.

"Benny and I were kissing in an area monitored by CCTV cameras."

"Ew." Amira's nose wrinkled in disgust. "Really, Win. With her?"

"Yes, with me. And we were hot!" Benny was stung at Amira's inference.

Amira stilled for an instant, and then whipped round to Win.

“How hot? Don’t you dare tell me I’m going to be smeared all over the papers by something you’ve done with this chump?”

“Well, it depends. See, the press seem to think you’ve been sort of...two-timed...perhaps?”

“Two-timed? You mean they assume my girlfriend is slobbering all over an imbecile behind my back?” Amira looked outraged. “Win, you know that can’t happen, right? You know that sort of publicity can’t get out. I’m damned if I worked my ass off to be publicly ridiculed over someone like *her*.” She jabbed a finger at Benny. “You’ve got to sort this out.”

“Yes, Amira, I agree. We need to get your PR guys onto this. What you need is an immediate high profile love interest in New York. Someone like Melanie Mikes, for instance. That will grab press attention.” Win was all business. “I’ll wait here a few days then slip back to London and by then it will be yesterday’s news.”

“Melanie Mikes? I liked her last movie.” Amira thought this over, not batting an eyelash about dropping Win from her American trip. “She was very good in the supporting role.”

“She’s very popular at the moment, *and* she’s bisexual. Also she’s managed by the same agency as Araby, so it should be peachy to set up some ‘dates.’”

“Yes. Melanie Mikes would be perfect. Great idea, Win. Can you organize something?”

“I’ll get on the phone immediately with London, let them know what’s happening here and when you’ll arrive in New York.” Win nodded, amused that Amira assumed someone else would manage the components of her life. But then that’s what Win’s company did for Araby. Win was just the contractual lawyer, one of many people in the chain that bound the stars to big business. Though these last few days it felt more like a chain gang.

“And you’re okay with this?” Amira asked as an afterthought. “Not going to America.”

Win nodded happily. “Yes. It’s just damage control. We’ll

catch up with each other later back in London.” It seemed like the sensible thing to say. It was actually a relief to pass Amira and her energy-sucking lifestyle back into the hands of the Araby publicity machine. All that remained was finding her a companion for the flight, and she was sure that could be easily managed from this end.

Win was more than a little surprised it had ended so abruptly, and in this way. In fact, she was unsure if Amira even realized Win was gallantly bowing out of their relationship, but it was better they were acting on Amira’s decisions rather than her own request. All in all it was a strange turn of events, but it gave Win the result she had been wanting for the past few days. It felt as if a massive burden had been—

“How dare you toss her aside like that? She’s not an old shoe you know.” Benny flared up, full of indignation.

“It’s okay, Benny.” Win rushed to interject. What on earth was Benny on about now?

“It is not okay. It is far from okay.”

“Will you please shut up? You really are an idiot.”

Benny blinked as Win glared at her and Ioanna elbowed her far from discreetly in the ribs. What had she missed? Amira had just been incredibly hurtful and dismissive of Win, and if she wouldn’t stand up for herself then Benny would. Who cared what the public thought about the singer? Why should Win go through all this humiliation just to save Amira’s ugly face?

“Amira.” Ioanna struggled up off the sofa. “I have some wonderful news and some not so wonderful news for you. I need to visit my cousin in Chicago so I can travel with you as far as New York.”

Amira looked surprised but not upset at the thought of sharing a flight with the more capable owner of Villa Eros. “Oh? And what’s the not so wonderful news?” she asked carefully.

“You are paying.” Ioanna gave her a big engaging smile that was returned almost immediately.

“It will be my pleasure. But we must go soon. I don’t like this aftershock thing. It’s too dangerous.”

The sigh Win released almost lifted her off her feet. She suddenly felt lighter, as if a world of anxiety had floated off her shoulders leaving her with zero gravity and maximum happiness. All her remaining responsibilities toward Amira just went pop thanks to Ioanna’s opportunism. Ioanna’s sly wink told Win she was well aware she had bagged a free first class flight to America *and* helped out her new friend. Win winked back with wholehearted approval. Things were getting better and better.

“You can’t go to Chicago. I need you here. Who’s going to help me run the villa?” Benny complained. What was going on here? Everything was moving too fast. Benny felt as if a page of her script was missing, the plot had moved well beyond her.

“Benny, shut up.” Win and Ioanna answered her in unison.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

So that's it then?" Benny caught up with Win in the gardens.

Win had skipped out on Amira and Ioanna leaving them to their travel plans before she was sucked into organizing that, too. She needed to clear her head. The day's events had galloped away with her, but she was pleased with the unexpected outcome. Amira had more or less dumped her, but there certainly were no hard feelings. Win knew she could continue to work with Araby if she chose and was happy to have the option. She enjoyed her job and was good at it, and her company would have other exciting projects lined up for her if she felt like a change. To be honest, Win didn't care either way. She had maintained her friendship with Amira and had gained her freedom. It had turned out well for her. Now Benny suddenly appeared, nipping at her heels. So much for clearing her head with a solitary walk.

"What's 'it then'?" Win questioned back, not slowing her pace. Benny easily kept abreast of her.

"You're gonna let her treat you like that? Like some sort of lint on her jacket."

"Benny, it wasn't a brush off. It was a good common sense decision in the world Amira moves in. And why are you so strung out on it? You warned me about being easily replaced from the get go. You were right. You should be happy."

“I knew from the get go that you were too good for her. That she was a waste of time.” This was Benny’s way of saying yes, she had desperately wanted them parted, but not at Win’s expense. Win was not meant to be hurt. Now Benny felt a terrible guilt that maybe Win wanted to be with Amira and she had ruined it. In her simple half formulated plan Benny had imagined Win falling back in love with her and staying here on the island with Benny, where she so obviously belonged. It now seemed an incredibly selfish thing to wish for.

“She didn’t waste a moment of my time. I had fun, which was what we were all about. And now my time is my own again and that is exactly the way I want it.”

Benny digested this as they strolled along. “I didn’t plan for it, you know,” she said quietly. “The disc switch, I mean. It never occurred to me that would happen. I kept the CD so you would have to talk to me about the kiss, and the other night.”

Win stopped and turned to face Benny. “I wanted to talk about that, too. But not before I had spoken to Amira. That would have been the mature, correct thing to do. But as usual, everything went pear shaped simply because you and your machinations got involved somewhere, somehow.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“You don’t have to, Benny. The universe does it all for you.” The ground beneath their feet lurched making Win grab fearfully at Benny. “Bloody hell. See what I mean? Even the island is on your side.”

Benny grabbed her by the arm and the tremor stopped as abruptly as it started. “Don’t be daft. It’s the aftershocks. They’ll continue for a few more hours and then fade out.” Win went to move away but Benny held on to her. “So, you don’t seem too upset about Amira leaving?”

“No. It’s for the best. It’s what I wanted but not necessarily the way I planned it.”

“You planned it? What do you mean you planned it?”

“It hardly matters now. You managed to stuff it all up in a

blink.” Win started walking again. “I already told you I wanted time alone with Amira when she returned. I needed to talk to her. Tell her that I’d slept with you.”

“You were going to tell her?” This news excited Benny. “Tell her about us?”

“Of course I was. It’s only manners. Amira and I always had an open relationship. We could be with other people, but we always let the other know when we had.”

Benny was shocked. Winifred Martin in an open relationship? Her loyal, shy, true blue Win a polyamorist? Over Benny’s dead body. “That’s disgusting.”

“It is not. It’s totally fitting for the way I live my life.”

“You were going to string me along while still seeing Bakri? No way. Let me tell you right here and now—” She was rudely interrupted by Win’s guffaw.

“What makes you so sure I was ever going to be with you again? I just wanted Amira to know I’d slept with you and that I didn’t want to go to New York.”

“What?” Benny was having trouble processing all this information. Moving from a position of knowing nothing to one of knowing everything wasn’t helping her any. She was struggling to understand what the hell was going on. “You weren’t going to see me again?” She felt hurt and very uncertain. “And you weren’t going to America?” Curiously, that bit cheered her up a little.

“No. To be truthful I’d had enough of Amira’s dramas. After three days on holiday with her I was stir crazy. It’s amazing how little you get to know a person in the city. Every time we dated we were at a function, or going out to dinner or a show. I never realized how ill-matched we were until we came away together.”

“You were going to dump her?” Benny came to an abrupt halt and Win stopped beside her, more than a little amused.

“Well, it doesn’t matter as she has effectively dumped me for a pseudo girlfriend.”

“But you wanted rid of her.” Benny’s panicked heartbeat was actually hurting her chest. Win had wanted to leave Amira after sleeping with her. Did this mean? Did it?

“Don’t think for one minute it had anything to do with you. It was a combination of things. All I wanted to do was let her down gently, but oh no, you had to send her off in a smelly fishing boat to God knows where, and get her all riled up again. I’ve spent the last day and a half calming her down, and what do you do? Engineer to sell an exposé CD on eBay. You’re unbelievable.”

“I had nothing to do with that. I was too busy sending her into the maw of an earthquake, remember?”

“Nothing would surprise me. It all worked out for the best as unbelievable as that sounds.”

“So it was for the best you kissed me in the bar?”

Win shifted awkwardly. “That was a stupid impulse.”

“Look at what your stupid impulse brought down upon us. Papparazzi, pornography,” she drew Win in closer, “earthquakes, abandoned lovers. It would have taken me days to arrange all that, but you do it with just one kiss.” And she kissed her tenderly before drawing back. “Oh, and Ioanna says we’re ruined, by the way.”

Then her mouth again covered the soft, rosy lips beneath hers. It was a kiss of pure love, of closeness and familiarity, of belonging to someone. A kiss that offered up her heart and all her hopes. Benny nuzzled Win’s plump lower lip then broke away with a gentle sigh. She was happy. Kissing Win made her happy.

Life is so simple these days. Benny knew exactly what she needed to live in blissful contentment for the rest of her life.

“Maybe Ioanna’s right. We are ruined. When I came to this island I thought my life was well organized and fulfilling. Now I’m an ex-groupie with a slight limp, a stubborn roll of belly fat, and a lunatic stalker.” Win moved out of Benny’s arms.

Life is so complex these days. Benny had no idea how to make happiness happen. She had tried everything in her small arsenal of trickery, skullduggery, and out and out pleading. She

had loved, and kissed, and seduced Win to heaven's gates and back again. She had purged Amira out of Win's life, though she now knew that was already an act in progress before she had even finalized the Izmir plan. She concluded Win could flow very deep for a woman who couldn't lie.

"I love your belly fat. And I'm not stalking you, I'm loitering for you. Waiting for you to catch up with the inevitable. We aren't ruined. We're just rebuilding our future from the foundation up."

"What future? Where did 'our future' come from?"

"It came from the goodbye kiss in the magic pool. You can't mess with Eros, Win."

"Eros? Magic? You couldn't even tell the story right. According to you that water was full of snakes and sperm. Don't get all mystical with me. I'm not some dumb ass tourist."

"No, you're not a tourist. You belong here. Can't you see it, Win? I'm not asking you to believe in stories. I'm demanding a future with you. Like it was meant to be."

"Oh, so you're *demanding* a future now."

"No. I'm asking please."

"Please?"

"Love me again."

Win's shoulders sagged. "I can't, Benny. I need this time. I really need to be alone and think about what I want because after all these years it wasn't what I thought it was. I feel as if these last three years have been more about my reaction to you leaving than living my own life. It can't be about you anymore. It has to be about me." She looked up into pleading eyes and felt her chest constrict. "Do you see what I mean? I have to be sure. I have to be safe. This can't be a repeating pattern, Benny. Neither of us deserves that."

"It isn't a repeating pattern. It's just our time again."

"Benny. I can't talk about this anymore. I need to go to bed. I'm exhausted."

Benny reached for her. "Stay with me. Sleep at my house."

You'll love it there. It's home, Win. Everything in it is home, like we used to have. Every brick, every stone, every stick of furniture has been waiting for you."

"I have a home, Benny. Just because you're not in it doesn't mean it's not home to me. You, this island, this holiday. It's all such a small slice of my life. Not even a week's worth for God's sake."

"But I love you."

"Please stop pushing me, Benny. A lot has happened. I need time to think."

There was nothing she could do. She had said it all. Benny stood back and let Win walk away.



Stargazing with slumped shoulders and hands in pockets, Benny scuffed homeward down the path to the beach. Tonight the evening chorus of cricket calls and night birds held no enchantment. Her head was full of Win and their conversation. Having Amira out of the picture wasn't the solve-all Benny had hoped for. The real problem was Benny and her skewed vision, and had been all along. Win did not return her love, nor did she feel compelled to get back together. Reconciliation had been Benny's dream alone. Now that Amira was as good as gone, Win was single again and wanted to remain that way it seemed. Nothing had altered.

Benny was halfway down the vineyard track when the big one struck. The tremor no one expected. The one that did not grow weak and fade away like all the others. This one rattled the bones of the island, digging deep into fissures, looking for weakness and fault lines. It found them.

A low rumble reverberated under the soles of her feet. She had time to look down in idle wonder before the earth under her simply slid away.

Benny landed flat on her back, the breath thumped out of

her lungs. Dust choked her; dirt filled her eyes, ears, mouth. Desperately, she scratched and scabbled at the bush and stones trying to stop her rapid sliding through the soil and shale. For several hundred yards Benny was dragged down through uprooted vines and collapsed fences. The skin on her back flayed and ripped as she clawed with feet and hands for anything solid enough to stop her descent. The whole hillside was cascading toward the sea. Benny was spun and rolled as the ground around her collapsed, destroying all before it. She began to tumble uncontrollably, terrified her bones would splinter, her head would crack against a tree or rock. That she would die here. Her fall came to a jarring halt as she was wedged tightly up against a squat, sturdy olive tree that had refused to budge in the swirling landslide around it. She clung to it with every last ounce of strength, eyes closed, teeth gritted, hanging on for dear life. Almost as soon as she'd found her safe haven the aftershock petered out and the world stood still. Benny still shook though. She shook as if the ground around her still heaved violently. Slowly, she released her grip on the gnarled olive bark. Her head and neck hurt like hell and she gagged up spit and dirt in deep retches. The air around her hung heavy with dust and caused another coughing fit. Her lungs screamed with the effort. Tears blinded her eyes and ran in thick rivulets down her face to drip off her chin.

Breathing slowly and carefully, she blinked the dirt out of her eyes, letting the tears wash it away, and tried to focus on the carnage around her. She knew exactly what had happened, but her whole body still shook with shock. No broken bones, no caved in head, she was not buried alive under a ton of debris. She'd been very, very lucky. Benny sent a silent prayer to any deity listening.

The night was eerily quiet now that the moment of violence had passed. Above, the stars shone on, cold and indifferent. The birds and crickets had either fled or died. In the dark Benny had no idea what the true damage to the hillside was. Then she heard

it—shrill yet distant. Screams and cries floating down the hillside from the villa.

Benny scrambled to her feet only to fall straight back down onto her hands and knees as the unsettled soil slid away under her weight. Cautiously, she righted herself and balanced against the tree before delicately picking a path through a pitch black and completely unfamiliar landscape. Slowly, she scratched her way uphill toward the villa, grabbing at uprooted vines for handholds, levering against rocks and splintered fencing with her feet. The path was obliterated. Nothing was where it was meant to be. Vegetation and boulders were strewn everywhere and she had to weave and crawl around them. For every forward step the earth slid her several feet backward, sending her skittering down the way she'd come. Her heart pounded. She was afraid the whole unstable hillside would collapse further on her, dragging her down and burying her.

Soon she began to crawl over large chunks of masonry from the villa's perimeter wall, all mixed up with garden shrubs and farmer vines. This panicked her. How great was the damage? She paused for breath, exhausted and aching all over. The sound of the surf far below could be heard over her panting, but the cries from above had faded away. Was that good or bad? What was happening up there? With a deep gulp of dirty air she began to climb again, worry quickening her pace. Now she was clambering over more and more pieces of recognizable stone wall. The villa's gardens had partially collapsed with the hillside's subsidence. Finally surmounting the last heap of rubble, Benny saw the outline of the villa. It had been plunged into darkness and chaos. The power lines had been torn away. Being closer she could hear there were still cries and shouts but not as panicked as before.

The only light near her came from a few scattered solar LEDs that once tastefully illuminated the flowerbeds. Now they shone in crazy zigzags over beds of rubble. Staggering to her feet, Benny used these to orientate herself. She had to find the closest entrance to the villa. Her entire body trembled, raw pain flushed

through her now that the immediate adrenaline rush had passed. She squinted at the silhouetted structure before her. It seemed the building itself had suffered little damage. Thankfully, they had rebuilt to modern standards. She breathed a sigh of relief. Now to see if the guests had been so lucky.

The cries were clearly coming from the foyer. Benny grabbed a solar garden lantern and used it to light her way as she hobbled over to the front entrance. Guests were milling around by candlelight. The earlier cries now were no more than an excited babble.

“Oh my God, Benny. Look at you.” Ioanna ran over to her. Benny stood in the doorway, a dirt encrusted, bloodied mess. “God, you’re hurt.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. What’s the damage here?”

“From what I can make out the wall collapsed down the hillside and took part of the gardens with it. The power went off, too.”

“Head count?”

“Two missing. Ah, here comes one of them now.” A woman sheepishly rejoined her friends, camera in her hand. She’d obviously been outside photographing the drama and destruction. Benny tsked angrily at this stupidity.

“Who’s the other one then?” Even as she asked, she scanned the foyer. She easily spied Amira in a small knot of sympathetic women regaling them with how terrified she had been. But Win was not one of the women with her.

“Where’s Win?” Benny asked.

“It’s Win who’s still missing,” Ioanna said quietly. “Now remember, Benny, there was no damage to the building, so she may be hiding somewhere scared stiff. I’m going back to check her room. I did a quick sweep of that wing a few minutes ago, but some of the doors are locked—” Benny didn’t wait to hear all Ioanna’s answer. Already she was striding over to Amira.

“Where’s Win? She said she was going to bed. Have you seen her?”

“No. I’ve been with Ioanna in the bar. I haven’t seen Win since—”

Benny didn’t need to hear anymore, she was loping toward Win’s room, her bruised legs and bloody bare feet making her progress painful. It was pitch black and totally silent in this part of the villa. She used her garden light to find the Aphrodite suite and rattled the door loudly.

“Win. Win? Are you in there?” No answer. Benny pounded the paneling just as Ioanna appeared with a flashlight and keys, Amira in tow behind her. “Here.”

Benny grabbed the key and threw open the door. Across the lounge the curtains flapped in the night air, the balcony doors were not so much open as swinging from their hinges. Beyond that there was nothing, the ground floor balcony had collapsed as the garden under it slid away.

The flashlight zigzagged crazily as Benny called frantically, “Win. Win?” But it was clear the rooms were empty.

“Fuck. Where is she? Win?” Benny flew to the edge of the balcony and fretfully studied the rubble piled four feet below them. This part of the garden had almost completely fallen away. Huge cracks crazed across the villa walls and the ceiling sagged threateningly. Only the solid build kept the walls upright. The balcony and balustrade, however, were gone.

“She’s not here, Benny.” Ioanna tried to calm her.

“That’s the wrap she was wearing.” Amira pointed out a shred of torn fabric threaded through the boulders below.

“Oh my, God. Win!” Benny scrambled down and immediately started clawing at the debris. “Win. Win.”

“Get out of there, Benny. It’s dangerous. If she is under all that stone you may hurt her even more.” Ioanna was shouting at her.

“Someone call rescue services.” Amira wrung her hands.

“Benny, we need to get help. We need machines.” Ioanna implored her, but Benny ignored her. She threw herself on the

rubble, scrabbling at any pieces she could lift and fling away. “Win. Win. Oh God.” Panic and fear made her claw frantically, splitting skin and nails, adding to the pain that already wracked her body. “Please, no.”

“Stop it, Benny. Stop it right now.” Ioanna tried to step down onto the broken stone, as if she could physically prevent Benny from doing any more damage to either herself or anyone unfortunate enough to be under the rubble. Amira grabbed at her arm and held her back.

“Don’t. It’s dangerous.” She turned her attention to Benny. “Come away, Benny. You can’t move all this. You need proper help.”

Benny ignored them and rolled a heavy lintel to one side. She was crazed; her hands were pulp, her arms were torn and bleeding. She refused to listen, refused to stop...until she heard Win’s voice.

“Benny?”

“Win!” Benny shrieked and fell on the tattered pieces of material at her feet. “I’m here, baby. I’m here. I’ll get you out.”

“Why are you scratching around like a chicken?”

“Hang o—” It became suddenly apparent to Benny the acoustics were all wrong. This was neither the voice nor question of a woman buried alive under a ton of rubble. She spun around on her bruised and battered knees to find Win frowning down at her.

“Oh.” Benny gawped. “Oh, thank God.” Then tears welled up and she could feel her face begin to crumple. “I thought...I thought...”

“And there lies the problem.” Win reached over and gently helped Benny to her wobbly feet. “Look at you, you’re a mess. You’re bleeding all over the place.”

“Amira said that was your wrap.” Exhaustion washed over Benny like a big black wave as relief and adrenaline fought for entrance and exit of her over-stimulated system. Big, slow tears

wandered down cheeks thick with grime. Tiredly, she tried to wipe them away with hands that felt heavy as lead. She sniffled sadly. "It was your wrap in there."

"It is my wrap, honey. But I'm not in it."

"Where were you? I called and called. You never answered." Benny sank onto a huge stone that only moments ago she had flung around like a feather. Now she perched awkwardly trying to prop herself on shaking limbs and stripped emotions. Win hunkered down beside her, wrapping an arm around her trembling shoulders.

"I went to the muster point. Like you told me to do. And guess what? I was the only one there." She smiled and brushed away a tear. "So I came back and as usual saw you acting like a lunatic."

"I thought—" Benny coughed, her throat raw.

"Hush. It's all okay. No one's hurt," Win whispered, and delivered a tiny kiss onto the tip of Benny's damp, grubby nose. "Stop crying. Everything is going to be okay."

"Do we need a doctor for her?" Ioanna called down, relief flooded her voice.

Benny shook her head.

"Come on. Let's get you home and cleaned up." Win helped her to her feet. "Then I'll decide if you need a doctor."

"I need a sleep. A big, big sleep." Benny moaned. "That's all."

"Use my cabin," Ioanna suggested. "Or a room here? It will be quiet soon."

"No. I want to go home. No doctor. Just home."

Win could see the stubborn set of the jaw and knew there was no point arguing. Especially not tonight. Benny looked exhausted. It was frightening how stressed she looked, never mind the cuts and scrapes and torn clothing. All Win wanted was to get her home and tuck her up safe and sound.

"We'll take my car and drive as far as the roads allow. Come on, you. I'm taking you home." With a steady hand she led

Benny along one of the few intact paths. “Ioanna, I’ll let you know how she does, and I’ll come back tomorrow to see the damage and help you draw up an action plan.”

“You do that,” Ioanna called back. “But not too early. Take your time. This mess is going nowhere.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Do you want something to eat?" Win looked up as Benny shuffled in from her shower. Squeaky clean and wrapped in a huge towel with her hair dripping wet, she was now a walking mass of assorted cuts and bruises. It was just past midnight and they'd made it all the way to Benny's in the car. The hillside by the villa seemed to be the island's only victim to the last and biggest aftershock. Power would easily be restored the following day and the cleanup started.

"No. But a brandy would be good."

"Come here and let me treat those first. Then I'll get you a brandy." Win pulled her onto a kitchen chair and began to dab antiseptic on anything she could find. Each dab was greeted with a weak squawk of protest from her patient. "Hush. It has to be done. You rolled halfway down a hill, remember?"

"I only remember clawing my way back up it to save you. You were meant to be under a pile of rubble."

"I don't recall being under a pile of rubble at any time during the evening."

"Your stupid girlfriend told me you were."

"My stupid *ex*-girlfriend did no such thing. You saw a scrap of fabric and overreacted, as usual."

"Amira said you'd been wearing it. Your stupid *ex*-girlfriend is extra stupid."

“All my ex-girlfriends are.” Win sighed and capped the antiseptic bottle. “It’s my gift to lesbianism, to take the really stupid ones out of circulation for a while.” She hunted through the kitchen cupboards for the booze and poured two stiff drinks. “Where do you want to drink this? On the porch?”

“In bed.”

“Okay. Go and get tucked in and I’ll bring your brandy up.”

“With you.”

“Benny—”

“Look. I’m the hero here. All I’m asking for is a cuddle... and a little brandy.”

“You slid down a hill on your backside and grubbed around in rubble for someone who was standing right behind you. How does that make you a hero?” Grumbling, Win followed her charge upstairs to the tiny bedroom with its big iron bed. Benny immodestly dropped her towel and crawled nude into the bed lifting the covers invitingly for Win to slip in beside her. After depositing both glasses on the bedside table, Win began to undress down to her panties and bra and crept in under the cotton sheets.

Benny lay beaming at her.

“Why are you so goddamn cheerful?” The silly grin irritated an already flustered Win.

“I’m glad you didn’t get squished.”

“And I’m glad you washed all the soil out of your butt crack, but I’m not grinning like an idiot over it.”

“And I’m glad you came home with me.”

“Someone had to.” Win was brusque. “Your legs were as wobbly as spaghetti.”

“And I’m glad you came to bed with me.”

“Don’t get any funny ideas. This is part of the triage. Nothing else.”

“Stop being so snotty. I know you care.”

“I never said I didn’t care.”

Benny didn't answer. She lay there watching every flicker of emotion cross Win's face, waiting for something, uncertain exactly what, but knowing something important lay just under the surface. It was that sort of night. A magical cataclysm of a night. Wonderful, strange things could happen on a night like this.

Her patience was soon rewarded when Win murmured, "I came back to the villa because I realized you are my muster point. You always made me feel safe and loved. At least you used to... until the night you let our nice, safe world slip away." Her words were laced with sadness, not bitterness.

Benny reached out and softly brushed Win's cheek. "I'm so, so sorry. I was an immature fool." Win pushed her hand away; she wanted to speak without distractions.

"And tonight I knew exactly where to go and what to do. Except when I got there I realized if the world was going to shake apart again then I wanted to be with you." With a sad sigh she turned to face Benny. "I didn't want to be lonely anymore. I think I've somehow been alone since the moment you walked out the door."

Benny took her hand. "I never wanted to leave, but you were so hurt and angry, and I suppose it was right for us at the time. Look, it's been three years, and I've moved on and done a lot of grown up things. Built a house, started a new business, opened a hotel, all good, sensible, healthy stuff. But I never loved again, not until you walked back into my life. It took less than one minute for my heart to go right back to where I started. Where I belonged."

"My God, this is Thursday morning, isn't it?" Win said almost wailing. "I've been here exactly one week. It took you one week to totally dismantle my life."

"You mean it took a whole week for you to come to your senses." Benny had her own point of view on the past week. "So what are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? About what?"

“About me. About *my* life. I was doing swell until you swaggered into my hotel. You’re the one who started it all. Look at me. I’m black and blue. I’ve been thrown down a mountain, my business partner is running off to America with *your* ex, my beautiful gardens have slid into the sea, and you’re driving me mad. It took you seven days to do all that. *You’ve* dismantled *me*. Do the other three Horsemen know you’re missing?”

“You’re twisting things again. You forget I’ve had the holiday from hell.”

“Pffht. Between fire alarms and earthquakes all the guests are saying that.”

Win sighed in exasperation and looked away. “I hate it when you get into this dimwit mood. There’s no talking to you, and we need to talk properly, Benny.”

“I’ve been chasing you to talk to me for days, but apparently I was in a queue right behind Amira. Now I’m too exhausted to talk. Where’s that cuddle you promised?” Benny snuggled in further and waited. Win shifted a little closer and immediately Benny wrapped her arms around her dragging her close, and flung a leg over her thighs for good measure.

“Hey, snakey legs.” Win weakly protested as their legs entwined.

“Mine are longer than yours. They have to fit somewhere.”

“Well, do you have to wrap them around me?” Win fidgeted.

“I have to wrap everything around you. My arms, my legs, my life.” Benny buried her nose in Win’s neck zoning in on the special spot and nibbling it.

“Stop that. It’s cheating.” Win wriggled under the attention but didn’t pull away.

“All’s fair in love and holiday hospitality.” Benny murmured into flushed skin that smelled of peaches. Her lips brushed against a fluttering pulse and she knew by the slightest change in Win’s breathing they were about to make love. Benny closed her eyes as pure joy slowly washed through her veins filling her with the

sweetest, headiest narcotic in the world. She was so in love with this woman, always had been and always would be. If Win only allowed them the next few days of her holiday together then it would be enough. It would have to be. Benny was all out of plans and schemes and ploys. She was exhausted mentally and physically. Now, here in her heart she lived for this night alone, and refused to worry about the morning and all the uncertainty it would bring.

Win rolled decisively to face her and wrapped her arms around Benny's neck before kissing her. She was careful with the bruised face and body lying beside her. Her kisses were sweet and thorough. It was a mouth she knew well, and could kiss forever. Finally, she broke the embrace, releasing Benny's lower lip with a soft, wet pop.

"Mm, snaky tongue. Delicious," Benny murmured, a blissful smile lighting up her face.

"Mine's longer than yours. It has to fit somewhere."

"More kisses," she demanded.

"Oh, so you think you're the boss now? You must have hit your head after all." Win rolled Benny onto her back. She winced slightly but soon settled comfortably onto the mattress, interested in seeing where Win was going with this.

"You okay?" Win asked softly before kissing along Benny's throat down to her breastbone.

"Oh." Benny breathed her answer as Win's mouth closed around a nipple and gently sucked. Her tongue tip ran over the puckered flesh crimping it into a tight bud that she rolled between her teeth. Benny's senses were overloaded, her fingers buried in Win's hair as she trailed kisses from breast to breast. Her lips traced delicate patterns on the mottled, grazed flesh and she took care to kiss every scratch and gash. She worked her way down Benny's lean, rangy frame, so different from her own soft curves. Benny's stomach muscles twitched as Win's hair and tongue tip flowed across her belly and dipped playfully in her navel.

Win remembered how much she loved this body. How at

home she was with its contours, and scents, and secrets. Before, on her hotel room floor there had been no time to gather breath, never mind love Benny back, before Ioanna had come rapping on the door. Now it was all hers, lying beaten and bruised beneath her, and so in need of love and tenderness. It fluttered under her fingers and flushed as she blew across the finest white-gold hairs. It was part of her, it breathed in synch, it responded to her slightest touch. And it had changed, it was less groomed, more tanned, it had the tiniest of new wrinkles and creases for her to learn about and explore. But as a landscape it was familiar as the hills of home, and her heart had missed it. She paused to puff her warm breath on the mound of springy curls, dipping so that they tickled her nose. She giggled and poked an unerring tongue tip deep into the tangled nest. Benny trembled and her hands fell away from Win's head, leaving her unrestricted to burrow deeper. Win did with a contented croon.

Carefully, she set a rhythm that Benny's battered and aching muscles could accommodate as she dipped and delved and swam her tongue through coral sex. Benny flowed for her, her long legs wrapped around her and she whimpered softly. Her hand reached down to where Win's arms enfolded her thighs and she laced their fingers. Her rocking increased and raw power built up in the muscles of her belly and legs. Win could feel it and knew this was going to be big...and fast. She plowed on, dancing over folds and furrows, drawing in the stubby little clitoris and bathing it with the flat of her tongue. Benny lifted from the bed, froze, then with a loud, wavering cry spasmed under Win's mouth. Win was relentless, she held on tightly and with an insistent tongue kept Benny suspended on her arc of pleasure until, sweaty and gasping, she collapsed in a satisfied heap.

"Oh my God. I thought I was dying." Dazed, she gulped for air. Win crawled slowly up the prone body feeling a little guilty at attacking Benny so furiously when she was in such a weakened state. Guilt didn't keep the delighted smile off her face though. She dropped a wet kiss on Benny's lips.

“I’ll kill you tomorrow night, when you’re feeling better.”

Benny threaded the long hair through her fingers. “I can’t believe you’re here with me. I’ve wished so hard for this. I can’t believe it came true,” she said quietly.

Win snuggled inside her arms, resting a hand on a heartbeat that drummed furiously under her palm. “You’d better believe it.” She lifted her head to gaze into Benny’s face. “Better get used to it, too.”

“I love you so much, Win Martin.”

Win considered the serious eyes before her. “I’ve fallen back in love with you, too, Benedikte Fiske. I’m not sure when it started, as you’ve done nothing but pester and annoy me all week. Somehow you tricked me into loving you.”

“I did not. Your own heart tricked you. It wanted to be here with me all along.”

“I think my own heart has never stopped loving you.”

“It just got lost. Hearts do. Ours got lost and we had to go and find them. Help them out. I found mine again the minute you walked through the door.”

“I think I found mine that day at the pool. But I wasn’t ready, and I didn’t want to believe it. I had to learn to trust you all over again, Benny.”

“And do you? Because I would never, ever hurt you. I’m so sorry for the person I was in the past and how I behaved. I was naïve, and foolish. So, so foolish. But I never betrayed you, Win. I know you’ve heard it all before, but I never did. I loved you then and I love you still.”

“Hush. It’s old now, Benny. Turned to dust and blown away.”

“See, it’s a magic pool. It’s given us a new start. You have to surrender to the magic.” Benny pulled her close and kissed the soft mouth that tasted of her own intimacy. “Stay and I’ll love you with all my heart for the rest of your days.”

“I have a life in London, Benny. I can’t just walk away from everything.”

“If you go away I’ll still love you with all my heart for the rest of your days. But it will kill me. I’ll die of loneliness.”

Win sighed. “I have another week of holiday on this mad island. I think we need to spend it talking and maybe planning.”

“Planning and making love. That’s what we’ll do.” Benny sounded very satisfied.

“In the morning I’ll call the office and see what’s on the books. That’s all I can promise, Benny.”

Benny tightened her hug and smiled into golden hair that smelled of peaches and her. She had a promise. It was more than she had yesterday, and today it was her whole world.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Anyone home?"

"Here. We're around the front, Ioanna," Benny called. Ioanna had driven down the back lane to Benny's house and parked beside Win's rental car. She smiled broadly on finding Benny relaxing on the porch with a mid-morning coffee.

"You are looking much better." She sat beside her and looked out to sea. "It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?"

"It's the most beautiful morning in the world," Benny answered with a happy smile.

"Is it now? And why is that, as if I need to ask."

"She loves me again, Ioanna. She said so last night."

"She's been saying so all week. You just needed help with the interpretation."

"Don't pretend you knew it was going to turn out like this."

Ioanna shrugged. "How could it not? This is Eros's island. He looks after his own."

Benny snorted. It was typical of Ioanna to be even smugger than Benny was at the turn of events. But she was too content to care today.

"Is she going to stay?" Ioanna asked next. Benny shifted uncomfortably.

"I want her to, but I'm unsure about her job. If she can't get more time off I want to spend winter with her in London."

Ioanna nodded at this. “Good. I will be back from Chicago by then, and work on the hotel repairs will be nearing completion.”

Win came outside to join them. “Ioanna. Great to see you. Let me get you coffee.”

Comfortably, they sat in the shade watching breezes rippling through the tall grass that spilled down to the sandy shore, and the blue waters of the Aegean.

“How bad is the damage in the cold light of day?” Benny would normally have been there first thing, except waking up next to Win had made the rest of the world and its troubles fade away. And then, when Win had stirred awake they had made love all morning until hunger drove them to rise and begin the day.

“Yes,” Win asked anxiously. “We were planning on coming up earlier, but we had to...to—” She broke off, blushing at Ioanna’s smug smile and Benny’s sly grin.

“There was no need to rush. The insurance man has just left after taking all his photos and I have the builder coming in the afternoon.” Ioanna diplomatically kept to business matters.

“Is he just going to look at the broken balcony? Surely you’ll have him check the rest?” Benny was back in business mode.

“Oh, yes. He’ll go over the villa with a fine toothed comb and then report to the insurance company.”

“Maybe this would be a good time to shore up the remaining balconies. Build in more anti-seismic material. I mean the balconies were clearly lacking it,” Win said. Both Benny and Ioanna looked surprised at the suggestion.

“Actually, that is a great idea,” Benny said. “This is the time to do it. But it will take a lot more planning.” She directed her gaze to Ioanna who ignored her and concentrated solely on Win.

“I can’t oversee that. I will be in Chicago. Amira wants to go as soon as possible. She’s had some great press interest now that she has survived a plane crash *and* an earthquake.” Ioanna’s eyes gleamed wickedly.

“What?” Benny gawped. “You mean to tell me after all that’s

happened you're going to jump on a plane with that woman and leave me to do all—" But her complaints fell on deaf ears. Ioanna and Win were too busily conspiring to bother with her whining.

"If you have the original blueprints I could talk to the architect about any new ideas. For instance, I think those south facing bedroom balconies should have steps directly into the gardens." Win chimed up excitedly.

"You know I've always thought that, too," Ioanna gushed.

"That's all very well, but if you're not here to—" Once again Benny was talked over.

"What about the actual landscaping? That will be a massive job." Win was again caught up in the practicalities of the rebuild.

"I have the design plans for the original garden. They would be a good starting point. I always wanted a portico that led down to a special feature."

"Open topped? With creepers and vines growing through it?" Win had opinions about everything. Benny frowned.

"What special feature? What are you on about?" she groused.

"Yes. Leading to the spa," Ioanna announced grandly, again blindsiding Benny.

"What spa? What are you talkin—" Again she was ignored.

"Oh, yes." Win's eyes shone. "Eros's pool."

"What!" Benny snorted. "That's the stupidest—"

"Fantastic." Ioanna clapped her hands happily.

"Yes. We could work the Psyche and Eros island myth into the new garden features." Win was bubbling with excitement now.

"I can't manage all this work on my own. Are you crazy?" Benny was frustrated at all the nonsense. Ioanna and Win were encouraging each other with preposterous notions. There was a ton of work to simply rebuild the villa before the new season began, now Ioanna was going on about a complete garden

redesign? Was she mad? Then she caught Ioanna's sly wink over Win's bent head as she sketched a rough outline of her ideas onto a scrap of paper.

"Benny, you will just have to cope on your own. I *must* see my cousin. You are not the only one who is very ill, you know." Ioanna mock scolded. Win looked up, a strange expression on her face. Suddenly, Benny knew what Ioanna's angle was. She winced and rubbed her side tenderly.

"I'll just have to do my best while you're away, Ioanna." She sighed sadly. "I'm sure the doctor will give me extra strength painkillers to—"

"Oh, cut the crap." Win poked her on her good side making her jump. "I'll help out. You know I wouldn't see you stuck. And as for you," she turned her attention to a grinning Ioanna, "you are positively Machiavellian with your plotting and planning."

"Well, it's not like I have the easiest material to work with, you know." She stood as she spoke. "Now, I really have to get back. I'll leave you two to work out the details of Win's extended stay. But work them out well. I foresee several years' worth of hard labor ahead of us, here and on our new project." With a roguish twitch of her dark eyebrows, she left them to mull over this new development.

"I feel totally manipulated yet strangely excited at the same time," Win said.

"Welcome to working with Ioanna. It's like that twenty-four seven." She watched Win closely, barely daring to breathe. If Ioanna had somehow managed to lure her into a sabbatical to help restore the villa, Benny would owe her for the rest of her life, and Ioanna would remind her of it constantly.

"Can you do it?" Part of Benny already knew Win wanted to. She could see the sparkle in her eyes and knew that feverish look well. Being able to change her real life to allow it would be another matter entirely.

"We'll see," Win said quietly. "Do you really want this, Benny? It's a big step. I would have to take a year out at least."

“At least,” Benny breathed. Her whole body tingled.

“Are you ready for that?”

Benny nodded. “Are you?”

“I think...” Win looked out at the Aegean. She had gazed at it like this before, placed high on Benny’s back as they trudged up the hillside from the beach. Perplexed and full of wonder, she had scried the shining waves for answers to questions she could barely form. This time she heard her answer. It came from within. It came on the sea air, through the whispering of grasses, and in the melody of wind chimes. They spoke of enduring love and endless time, of shattered dreams and healing hearts. And they told her sometimes home was nothing more than being in the arms of someone you loved. She reached over and took Benny’s hand with its scraped knuckles and dark bruising and stroked it softly with her thumb. She looked into eyes that reflected the sea behind her and the sky above and became part of the melody on the breeze around her, singing out the same message of love and hope.

“I think...” she began again, “I think I am ready to love you again.”

About the Author

Gill McKnight moves between Ireland, England, and Greece in an eclectic mix of work, relaxation, and downright laziness. When not scribbling in a notepad or pecking away at her laptop, Gill likes sailing, DIY, pottering about the garden, and running away from wasps.

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