

1. ONE NIGHT IN CORFU

My taxi pulled up outside the bistro just as night had begun to settle over the Mediterranean. I gave my name to the waiter and told him the party that was expecting me. He led me through the labyrinth of winding tables until I spotted Spiridon seated at a table with two beautiful women.

"Mr. Michael Knox."

The waiter bowed slightly as he announced my arrival.

"Michael!"

Spiridon was positively ebullient this evening. He half-stood in his seat and his handshake turned into an awkward bear hug as he threw his arms about me, chuckling.

"Ladies, I would like you to meet the finest archaeologist in all of the British Isles...a man I would go so far as to call perhaps the second finest archaeologist in the whole wide world...Professor Michael Knox."

The two women laughed politely at Spiridon's vanity. Evidently, my colleague had started drinking early this evening.

"Kara Petrie."

The strikingly beautiful woman I had the good fortune to sit next to extended her hand. I took it and kissed it. Dark eyes highlighted a face of a smooth olive complexion. It was impossible to guess her precise heritage from her features or her accent. I felt a pang of disappointment as my gaze fell upon her wedding ring. I took in her eyes with a sweeping glance and saw they promised nothing in return. I feared the night was to prove as disappointing as I had expected.

I turned to the equally pretty woman seated opposite her.

"And you must be..."

"Mrs. Spiridon Simos!" My friend beamed.

The beautiful woman glanced at him for a moment; I felt sure I detected a slight annoyance in her look.

"Miss Greba Eltham," she said as she extended her hand to me, "...for a few more hours at least."

I kissed her hand and told her how nice it was to finally meet the woman who had managed to take Spiridon's mind off our excavation. I was aware that this was to be her second marriage, her first husband having passed away a few years ago. I found it somehow distasteful that she had chosen to revert to her maiden name.

I settled into my seat next to the charming Mrs. Petrie.

"Spiridon was just telling us that you will be leading the dig in Luxor while he and Greba are enjoying their honeymoon in the Ionian Islands," she said. "Do you really think that you may have uncovered another Theban Necropolis?"

I exchanged a quick glance with Spiridon.

"Steady on, old boy," he said. "I didn't disclose any sensitive information."

I smiled politely and turned my attention back to Kara. I knew very well that the University would have been beside themselves had they known Spiridon had said even that much. Athens' relations with Cairo at the moment were strained at best without his dropping hints about our project to the wife of a distinguished Cairo physician...particularly considering that she and her husband were old friends with the foremost Egyptologist alive today, a man who would sell his very soul to have possessed the knowledge Spiridon had stumbled upon through sheer good fortune.

"Are you married, Professor Knox?"

I noticed that her voice held a delightful musical lilt.

"Heavens, no," I chuckled. "I have enough sense to know better than that."

There was a pregnant pause and I was immediately conscious of my blunder. My mind raced to think of something pithy to say to amuse the women and salvage the moment.

"Perhaps you've not met the right woman then."

Her eyes smoldered as she spoke. I pictured losing myself in them as she disappeared beneath me.

"Oh, there's no shortage of right women. That's just the problem. Women are not so different from the entrées on this menu. You might fancy one dish more than any of the others tonight, but what about

tomorrow? Imagine having to choose just the same entree to enjoy every night for the rest of your life. That's my argument against monogamy. It is in violation of basic human nature and all known laws of logic and yet men willingly defy their nature and logic time and again."

I had made this argument many times before. If my delivery was just right, I would have salvaged the evening and possibly more if the stars were with me. I continued after what I hoped sounded convincingly like a reflective pause.

"Still, most men and women in this world are happy to do just that, you three included and all blessings to you for it. As for myself, I'm afraid I love women too much to limit myself to just one...although I'm always willing to be proven wrong. Maybe one day I'll find that one special girl who makes me want to defy logic and deny my own stubborn nature, but until then, I'll keep right on choosing the tastiest morsel at hand every time."

I opened my menu and reached forward and squeezed Kara's hand where it rested on the seat next to mine, confident that we were out of Spiridon and Greba's line of vision. At worst, she would be offended by my boldness, but would say nothing of the matter so as not to embarrass the happy couple across from us. At best...I hadn't time to finish that particularly pleasant thought when her voice cut through the air like a knife.

"In the meantime, you conduct yourself like a frightened little boy fleeing from commitment lest you be forced to grow up. You must dread the many nights you spend alone, Professor Knox."

I felt my face redden as Spiridon snorted in amusement and Greba laughed out loud at Kara's churlish rebuke.

"Happily, there are not many of them, Mrs. Petrie," I snapped.

She smiled, seemingly pleased with herself.

"Yet the inevitable nights of solitude must ring with the hollowness of failure as you sadly realize that with each passing year, the number of lonely nights is doomed to grow until one day you find yourself having crossed the..."

She wriggled her fingers in irritation, trying to think of the phrase in English.

"He will find himself having crossed the Rubicon," my friend interjected, "the dread point of no return."

Yes, thank you for that, Spiridon, I thought as the three of them chuckled at my expense.

"Forgive us for teasing you so, Professor Knox," Kara patted my hand like a mother would a petulant child, "but it is only fair play for us dreary old married people to return the favor."

"Nonsense," Spiridon roared to the obvious irritation of the couple at the next table. "I've been telling Michael the same thing for years. He never listens, but one day, I'll have the pleasure of telling him..."

"I told you so!" Greba joined in with her fiancé and the three of them cackled gleefully.

I couldn't believe I was pissing away my evening while these boors ribbed me with all the subtlety of a church bell at evensong. Why did Spiridon have to ask me to be his Best Man in the first place, and why was I fool enough to accept?

The waiter took our orders for dinner. Barely aware of the passage of time, I sat and drank and hardly touched my *pastitsada* when the waiter brought it while the three of them chatted aimlessly. A dreadfully long hour crept by interminably. Our plates had just been cleared when my beautiful, if dull, dining companion stifled a yawn and rose from her seat.

"I think I had best turn in for the night. I'm exhausted from our voyage and tomorrow will be a very busy day for us all. If you will forgive me, I think I will grab a taxi back to the hotel. I would like to get a good night's sleep before it is very late."

I forced myself to smile when, in truth, I was irritated with Spiridon for not delaying his wedding date until after we had completed the dig. His decision had placed an undue burden upon my shoulders. I would be hard-pressed to drive the team to finish the excavation on schedule while he was off gallivanting in the islands with his bride. I would then have to swallow my pride yet again and let Corfu's favorite son take the lion's share of the praise from the University once we returned to Athens.

I watched Kara as she rose and said good night to us. She made a point of avoiding making eye contact with me. Such a beautiful woman and such a shame, I thought, as I watched her hips lightly sway as she made her way to the exit. Another fifteen minutes dragged painfully by with more trite conversation until Spiridon finally managed to rouse himself.

"Yes, why don't we turn in for the night?"

He casually stretched an arm around Greba's shoulder.

"Spiridon, no, we will do things properly. One more night apart and then...no more waiting."

He started to argue, but she covered his mouth with the tips of her fingers and then leaned forward to kiss him.

God, what did she see in that drunken sod apart from his looks, his charm, his wealth, his reputation?

The taxi ride back to the hotel was diverting enough. I kept my eyes off my sickeningly affectionate companions and on the narrow cobblestone streets that our driver skillfully navigated. The view of the promenade along the Bay of Garitsa was breathtaking as we left the Liston, the name given to the esplanade with its many bistros and restaurants, behind.

We must have made quite an unlikely trio as we stepped into the lobby of the Theotokis Hotel. Their gaiety quickly vanished when Kara rushed to greet us upon our entry. Her face had drained of its wonderful color. A look of dread marred her perfect features.

"What is it, Kara? What has happened?" Greba gasped.

I grabbed Kara's elbow to steady her as she started to swoon.

"I received a telegram. It's Dr. Petrie...he's disappeared. There was no sign of forced entry, but he wouldn't just go off in the middle of the night. I'm sorry, both of you, truly I am, but I have to return to Cairo as soon as possible."

"Good Lord," I murmured, "some local trouble of some sort, what?"

Greba shook her head and reached out a hand to hold Kara.

"No, darling, I absolutely forbid it. If you return to Cairo now, you will be placing yourself in worse danger. You know very well what this is likely all about. It is a small miracle that you are with us at all. You must wire Sir Denis. He will know how best to handle the situation."

A look of pained indecision swept across that beautiful ashen face before she sighed resignedly. "I suppose you're right, Greba. It is the only sensible course of action under the circumstances."

Great Scott, I thought to myself, *what sort of mess has Spiridon dragged us into now?* The dire urgency of the matter had certainly sobered him up. I felt bad for him. There was precious little he could say or do under the circumstances. He must have felt a right ineffective clod for having to swallow his pride and sit back while his bride-to-be took charge of some frightfully dangerous situation that we never should have been involved with in the first place. This sort of business didn't suit us. We were respectable academics...professionals, not brash muckrakers like that stubborn old fool...

"Sir Lionel Barton!"

I started as Spiridon spoke up unexpectedly. The two women turned to stare at him. A wide grin had spread across Spiridon's face.

"Forgive me, dearest, but I believe you were speaking of Sir Denis Nayland Smith just now, correct? I met Sir Denis once. He was with Sir Lionel Barton. Extraordinary men, the both of them...why, if I possess even half of their boundless energy when I am their age, I'll..."

Greba smiled patronizingly at her fiancé as she interrupted him mid-sentence. "Fortunately you don't, or I'll never have a moment's peace on our honeymoon. Now, why don't you and Michael have a drink at the bar while I talk over things with Kara?"

She leaned forward to kiss him passionlessly on the lips. "Until tomorrow, my love."

He stopped her with a firm, but gentle grip on her left elbow.

"And then...no more waiting?"

Strangely, Greba looked at me and blushed slightly before returning her gaze to Spiridon. "No more waiting. Pleasant dreams, lover."

I watched my friend stare after her as the two women approached the front desk. I couldn't help but wonder at the apparent look of sadness on Spiridon's face.

"Having second thoughts, old cock?"

A look of genuine terror crossed his countenance at my suggestion after we settled down at a corner of the bar away from the other tourists.

"What? God, no! Why should you even suggest such a thing?"

I shrugged and smiled. "Natural instinct of a committed bachelor, I suppose."

I drank down most of my rum in a single gulp and swirled what was left of the alcohol around the nearly drained glass, watching it intently before placing it next to its empty siblings on the bar. I had consumed too much and eaten too little over the past few hours, and the effects were beginning to make themselves known to my nearly empty stomach.

“I never liked Sir Lionel.”

Spiridon looked up from the pocket watch he was fumbling with as if distracted by my declaration.

“Oh, why is that? Not professional jealousy, I trust.”

I shook my head. “Nothing of the sort. You know me better than that, Spiridon. The man may have singlehandedly dominated the field of Egyptology for far more years than I care to remember, but he’s also a certifiable loony.”

Spiridon laughed. “I suppose he can be a bit eccentric.”

I shook my head, feeling decidedly cross and resolved to speak my mind. “It’s not a matter of being eccentric as much as the fact that he is out and out dangerous. You’ve seen him when he gets going. There’s no stopping him. He treads on the toes of diplomats, peers, and potentates. One of these days, someone will give that fat, bloated bastard the right proper thrashing that he so richly deserves.”

Spiridon glanced around to make sure no one had overheard me. I was uncomfortably aware that I was angry and speaking louder than was advisable, but at that particular moment, I found that I didn’t care. I was going to have my say and that was all there was to the matter.

Spiridon lowered his voice as he replied. “Steady on, old boy. No need to cause a scene. You ought not to go about saying such things. No good ever comes of such talk.”

I finished what was left of my rum and banged the glass on the counter to signal to the bartender that I desired another.

“Oh rubbish, Spiridon! I know what I’m saying and I have every right to be resentful. Sir Lionel Barton conducts himself as if he’s playing a perpetual game of Red Indians and why? Because of his terribly influential friend from British Intelligence that everyone finds so impressive. Sir bloody Denis Nayland Smith.”

Spiridon palmed my glass and waved the bartender away. “That’s quite enough for you for one night, chap. You need a good night’s sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning. Come on, off you go.”

I let him lead me away toward the lobby where I still needed to pick up my key at the front desk. As we passed by the tables on our way out of the bar, I noted a swarthy-looking man wearing a fez and dark glasses who was smiling in evident amusement at my condition. I had had quite enough of being laughed at for one night, so I stopped to give him hell, but before I could utter a word of invective, Spiridon led me away as if I were an errant schoolboy.

Somehow, it all seemed right at the time. Before morning, I would have cause to regret the looseness of my tongue.