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THEY DID NOT reach the island until nearly dusk, when torches lit the way for the Stephanides and the Diva to walk across the gangway and settle into the gleaming forty-foot-long Gar Wood for transfer to shore while the remaining guests were dressing on board Artemis for dinner at the vast white villa stretching across the curved crest of Stephanas.

The Diva spoke her first words to the Gardners in the two days they had spent since embarking at Cannes. "It is good that we shall not constantly be surrounded by that crowd for at least a little while," she said to Liz. "It is just too trying."

"I would have thought you were so accustomed to the madding crowd of your admirers that you would barely notice it any more, Madame Alanskaya," Jack said, momentarily engaging her eyes.

"Never, never," said the Diva with a disapproving shake of her firm chin. "It is always impossible. On the stage, I stop at nothing to give them what they want, which is simply all of me, without reservation. But when I am not performing for them, I want my privacy. I demand my privacy. I want to be left alone." Her tone left no room to wonder if she could even admit the possibility that another "incomparable" of another era had coined the *cri*.

But that exchange, so far as the Gardners were concerned, took care of the small talk with the Diva for the evening. The three were driven up to the villa in an open Lagonda and escorted to their suites as the last glow of sunset sank beneath the distant mainland ridge tops.

Jack and Liz found their clothes awaiting them, unpacked and hung by attendants who had somehow managed to pass them en route up the hill. They walked back out and strolled around the terraces that surrounded the villa as the pink light faded into starlit night sky. Together they had visited more palatial homes than they could remember. But none was more superbly perched than the Stephanides'.

"Which would you say was more apt here. Liz? The line about the very rich being different from you and me or boats beating against the current?"

"The Gatsby closer," she said. "Hemingway squeezed the juice out of the first one for me."

She reached her arms way up around his neck to pull him down for a kiss before they finished the circuit. She felt a flicker of passion in his smiling lips. Then they found the French doors to their own sitting room and plowed into the showering and dressing drill.

Jack had only made one turn around the terrace before Liz, who really was never far behind his all-out sprint when it came to getting ready, finished applying the last touches to her hair and a drop of fragrance behind each ear. With a final glance in the mirror, she joined him under the early evening skies. They strolled hand in hand until they reached the main reception room. They entered from stage left while the early arrivals were ogling the antiquities placed and lighted with theatrical effect around the interior.

All of the guests were being offered the ritual Beluga and Crystal or a cocktail. Most of them were still standing, leaning over or looking up to examine the spectacular sculpture spaced around the chamber in an inner cordon, delineated by Corinthian columns. Each piece, Cycladic to Hellenic to Classic, had been meticulously restored, carefully lit to eliminate shadows and highlight the subtleties of its lines and modeling, every piece on a par with the finest works in the National Archaeological.

Stephanidis entered last, his wife on his left arm and the Diva on his right, the ladies resplendent in less than knee-length Paris couture and Lalaounias or Leonidas gold; he himself elegant in black tie, gold studs and links made of dulled Alexandrine coins. He quickly welcomed his guests with a brief word and smiles for each, and then nodded to the head steward to begin ushering everyone into the dining room, where a piano bar trio played them to their appointed seats at two tables, one presided over by each of the hosts.

All of the couples were separated, and after a long day at sea, even the most polished conversationalists were less than sparkling through the *canapés*, mainland kid and Aegean sea bass with appropriate local wines, smoothly served in little more than an hour.

Over the fruit and d'Yquem, Stephanidis rose to explain that he knew they were all undoubtedly ready for an early night and a good sleep, but he welcomed any of his honored guests who might enjoy a game of cards, a few drinks or a smoke, to stay for after dinner diversions. He went on to explain that the stewards would be passing about to ask them which games, if any, the guests might care to play (and, discretely, for what stakes) or if they preferred to be shown to their rooms.

Then Stephanidis saluted his guests, wished everyone a good evening, and escorted his wife and the Diva back to their accommodations in his wing of the villa.

The Gardners took a turn around the terrace, and to Liz's surprise, Jack said he wasn't ready to call it a night just yet and thought he might play a few hands of cards if she didn't have any objection to being alone in their suite for a while.

Liz, keeping her tone modulated, but clearly registering the unfamiliar nature of his comment, waited a few seconds before asking him how long it had been since he had "played a few hands of cards."

He paused, giving the question some thought, and finally said, "Probably since my Ranger days. Why?"

"Because I can't remember ever seeing you play since that weekend at your parents' home in New Hampshire when we were first married, and that has to be well over twenty-five years ago. We played bridge amicably enough as I remember, and you were by far the best player, I clearly recall. But that's the last time I ever saw you touch a card or even mention doing so. I'm just wondering what brings that on, the urge."

"You're almost right, except for a few evenings on the stump in the sticks. Maybe that's what came to mind when Stephanidis made the suggestion – the benefits of distraction. In any event, it sounded like an easy way to avoid thinking, which I need a little break from, if that's all right with you."

"Sure," she said. "If it'll distract you, go for it. Just don't start making boys' night out a habit or I might have to get a little something of my own going while I can still turn a head or two."

She reached up to kiss him and turned them back toward what they assumed was the card room. They walked arm in arm, and when they reached the open door, she blew him a kiss, tossed "good luck" over her shoulder and headed back to their rooms.

As soon as Jack entered the card room, a steward hurried to greet him.

"Good evening, Governor," the attendant said. "There is a poker game at the large table you are most welcome to join if you wish, and there are three gentlemen waiting for one more player to turn up for bridge. I am certain they would be honored to have you take a hand with them."

"Thank you," Gardner said. "I'll sit in with the bridge players." He walked over to a table with two decks of 'S'-monogrammed playing cards still in their wrappers, placed at one corner. Similarly personalized score pads and pencils were

to the sides in front of three gentlemen smoking unmistakably Havana panatelas and making polite, desultory conversation.

Gardner, manners and political skills automatically in play, approached the table smiling, greeting each man by name and appropriate title, and asked if he might join them for a rubber or two. They stood to welcome him warmly and shook hands. Then, they sat down to cut high/low for partners, and for dealer. Within two minutes, they were declaring and agreeing on standard conventions rather than waiting to question bid meanings.

The nearly gaunt milord, Stafford, as he called himself, asked, "10 quid?" amiably, not finding it necessary to specify "a point."

All nodded or mumbled agreement, and the game was on. The stakes were far higher than Gardner had ever played for before, even inflation adjusted, but he noted to himself that it was only for one night and couldn't materially threaten his solvency, no matter how the cards fell.

They were all accomplished players, but Jack had no doubt after a few minutes that he was at least in their league. They played three rubbers, each once partnering the others, and when they broke at eleven-thirty, Jack was the greater of the two winners, although not quite certain he was the best player.

The Greek banker, Adalontos, suggested they simply keep the accounts running and settle before they left Cannes. Again, all agreed affably. Tired and discreetly too many sheets to the wind, they thanked each other for the pleasant game, bade their good nights and strolled off to their quarters.

Jack found Liz reading on the couch in her robe and slippers after tapping on the unlocked door to their sitting room, opening it at her musical, "Enter, if that is my handsome husband or any other likely candidate."

With a rakish grin, Jack crossed the floor to her, doffing his dinner jacket on the way. He leaned over to give her a long kiss.

“Well, how’d you do with the boys, Riverboat? Did they play fair?”

“Must have,” he said. “They didn’t take any of my money.”

“How about your dignity?”

“Wholly intact. I actually was the bigger winner of two, at stakes I might not have chosen if I really had a choice. But they didn’t settle up, more’s the pity, just let the scores run on the theory we’ll play again, somewhere, someday.”

“It’s a good thing you won, big boy, because I know if you’d lost you would have insisted on settling up then and there. But was it distracting, as you’d hoped?”

“Yes,” he said, “not nearly as entertaining as being with you, of course, but gambling does focus the mind, as Dr. Johnson aptly said about a good hanging. Especially, as Lee Trevino also said, less famously – but just as aptly – about little Mexican ‘fellas’ playing golf for big stakes with *gringos* on public courses in South Texas, ‘when you don’t have any folding money in your pocket...’”

“Oh, you do have a wonderful stock of stories for every occasion,” she said, putting both her arms around his neck.

“And where would a politician be, even an ex-politician, without a story for every occasion?”

“Anywhere he wants to be,” she said, “as long as it’s with me.