

XIV. A FREE WOMAN

Helena had just reached her twenty ninth year. She had accomplished more in a few years than most designers have in a lifetime. A series of national awards. An impressive client list. She owed it to her English education. She had not relaxed in the least in her pursuit. As a reward, she had arranged to redesign the company logo. She chose to feature a representation of Bessborough Gardens. The image of a goddess was suspended above the decoration. Stephanie created the image.

It had been half a year since her last vacation. She had been steadily laboring. She had put her time with Tony completely out of her mind. But she still had an attraction for Corfu. She wanted to return to the island and live the same grace that she had once experienced there. It was October and the heat continued to hang around. She just wanted to avoid any storms.

Her flight had a connection in Barcelona. She was worn out by the time that she arrived at the hotel. It was early afternoon. She put on her suit and headed fore her spot on the beach. She found a lawn chair and settled down in the shade. She had brought a book with her. A mystery about art forgery. She settled down to read. She's been relaxing on the verge of dozing off. Then she heard a noise. She thought it was a flock of geese.

"You ask her."

"What?"

"No, you do it."

"We were admiring you from afar. We decided that you were the most beautiful girl on this beach."

"Maybe she doesn't even speak English."

She first looked around and then she smiled an enormous smile.

"I feel very flattered boys, as there doesn't seem to be any other women on this beach."

"We thought that you looked like a goddess."

"Are you American?"

She had an elated look on her face, "Am I obvious?"

"Not, really. My name is Tom." Tom seemed like the most confident of the group. They weren't much older than twenty years old.

"Which one of us are you going to choose?"

"How about all three?" joked Ridley.

"I don't want to start another Trojan War," Helena tried to be diplomatic.

"The Trojan War was between the Turks and the Greeks," Sam forcefully reminded her.

"We're English."

"I stand corrected. I should have said another War of the Roses."

The three boys looked at each other and smiled. They found her engaging. Tom again proved the most assertive.

"Are you going to choose?"

Helena tried to humor them, "What am I choosing you for?"

"You know. For your man."

"Why did you come her if you weren't looking for a man?" Sam asked like a trained jurist.

“I was told that this beach was the most desolate on the island. I thought it was a place to get away.”

Ridley chuckled, “They call this make out sands. Guys brings their dates down her for you know..” He hung his head down in a sort of false modesty.

“Is that what you three are doing?” She had another quick response ready, but she was actually thinking about how Tony had even tricked her down in Corfu.

They gave her a strange look.

She continued to tease them., “I’ve already had some problems with an English boy here already. You boys haven’t seen the local police have you.”

They all looked sheepish. Tom came forward to accept the guilt.

“We really are sorry if we bothered you. You really struck as something special.”

“A Greek goddess.”

“We already told her that, Ridley.”

“Shut up, Sam”

Helena broke in, “No need to get possessive. We can share.”

“You don’t mean a foursome.”

Sam was embarrassed when he realized that he had spoken out of turn.

“No, I mean that we can be friends. You boys are mature enough to be friends.”

“Sure we are, “ said Thomas in his most grown up way.

“Well, my friends, I am a little thirsty. Maybe one of you could get me a drink.”

They all screamed out together.

“I’ll get it.” Ridley accepted the task of being the waiter. He came back about fifteen minutes later with some cold beer.

Helena again took the lead, “I was thinking of something more festive.” She didn’t want to hurt Ridley’s feelings, “But this will do.”

The boys sat on the sand around her. She felt that they were her audience of a lecture on love. Each one was staring at her. She found the attention refreshing.

“It’s not often that I’m surrounded by such handsome admirers.”

Sam asked, “Do you mean us?”

“I actually meant the sand crabs. But you’ll do as pleasant stand-ins.”

Tom sat up to appear more mature. Helena smiled when he dribbled beer on his chin.

“I could wipe that off for you.”

Ridley exaggerated the humor, “ I’m sure that you could.”

The boys were kicking around a soccer ball. She went back to her reading. Their flattery brought the life back to her face.

The afternoon began to fade. She packed up her things and went back to the room. The sands were still hot. She let her feet become buried in them. It filled her with an intense warmth. It burned from the inside. This was why she had come here. She sought purification in the island’s fire. By the time she reached the hotel, she was hungry. She meant to make this an early night.

At a restaurant, she settled for her habitual glass of wine.

“We can bring you the bottle.”

“No, that will be fine. I’m already pretty tired.

She heartily ate a mushroom dish. She had spent most of the day trying to finish her novel. But she had also played for a while in the waves. The sea air made her feel naturally tired..

After dinner, she took a walk. Young people were lost in the night time revelry. They passed her by and she kept moving. They seemed to deflect off her as they went on their way. She hardly noticed them although she was taking it all in. She felt incredibly peaceful.

The next day her friends again visited the beach. They waved to her, but they didn't approach. They were already playing with their ball. The sun had been kind to their bodies. Each sported a golden tan. With their bare chests and moving bodies, they made an appealing sight. She would have to forgo such delights.

Helena wished that she had brought another book. She had almost finished hers. She needed something to preoccupy her while she sat there.

The boys had found some locals. Now they were in a real game. At first the Englishmen showed their flair for the game. They had real finesse and passed well. But the Greek lads were much more aggressive. The three boys had met their match.

After the game, they came back to talk to Helena.

“Were you watching us play?”

“I noticed you.”

Ridley interrogated her, “Was that all? I saw you staring at us. It's not often that you see such a lovely sight as three handsome English lads almost naked.”

She dodged his question, “I wasn't staring. There's just this incredible glare. It makes it hard to see.”

Sam stated his case, “It didn't bother us. We could still see the ball.”

Helena had an answer, “That's why the locals kicked your ass.”

“That isn't what happened.”

“Really, I distinctly saw them score goal after goal again you.”

Tom was defensive, “They knew the contours of the beach better.”

Ridley noticed that her bookmark was near the end of the book, “What are you going to do when you're finished?”

“Take a swim.”

“Why don't you take one now?”

“Why not!” she replied. She took off her beach robe and started to head towards the beach. She caught the gazes of all three of them.

“Who's staring now, boys.”

Sam spoke up, “It's just that...”

Ridley joined in, “You've got a great...”

“You've got a great figure,” Thomas bailed them out. “Do you work out?”

“Yeah. But nothing too extensive. I'm looking for tone. But I don't want to add too much mass.” Her reply almost seemed too technical. Thomas smiled directly at her.

The gentle waves rolled over their bodies. They were like dolphins frolicking in the mist. They rode the waters. They dove down resurfaced. They circled each other. It appeared to be a game of tag, but they were just enjoying the company of each other

The lively swim made her want some lunch.

“Can we come along?”

“Sure.”

Everyone was drinking at lunch. The boys started to get a little boisterous. Helena took it all in stride. But it seemed to disturb the calm of their time had the beach. She had spent her social capital and she wanted to return to her room.

“You guys have been great.”

Ridley took the brunt of her apparent criticism, “Sorry, if we’re a little drunk. We don’t usually drink in the afternoon.”

The vacation allowed them to take some leeway on their usual habits. Helena excused herself and headed back to her room. She showered off the sand and the sea from her body. She was tired from their games of the morning. The lunchtime drinks also made her drowsy. She collapsed on her bed and woke up when it was already dark.

On her way out, she stopped by the desk, “Can I get something to eat somewhere?”

“You’ll have no problem. It’s still very early.”

She realized that she hadn’t really slept that long. The boys had promised to take her to the cliffs tomorrow. She wondered if they were off looking for girls more their age. She found it all very charming. But she realized that she was a little jealous.

She loved the beach. It was fantastic coming here. But there was something a little ugly about the night life. Everyone just seemed to oversexed. They were all lost in this terrible anonymity. The sex was almost a contest. They would all wake up a little lost by its cost. Groups of men would almost knock her off the street. Then they would shout vulgar things at her. The vacation atmosphere made them think that they had a right to see her in a demeaning way.

Too many of the young girls tolerated this treatment. It made the men seem more virile. She couldn’t take this punishing. She hoped her boys wouldn’t act like that. She headed back to her room.

She had been to the cliffs before when she packed a lunch with Tony, but this was going to be different.

Sam explained it to her, “We’re going up there to dive.”

Ridley interrupted, “Sam looks down at the water, but he never has the courage to really go off.”

When they got up there, Tom explained, “You have to time the wave just right. You dive before it rolls in. You catch it just as it fills the narrow channel. If you go to late, it will pull back on you and your will crash down on the rocks.”

“It sounds pleasant,” she demurred.

“You have to try it,” Ridley challenged her.

“No, I’ll pass. I’ll sit here and eat the cheese and crackers. Sam can keep me company.”

Sam felt honored, but he didn’t want to seem like the odd boy out.

“I’m going to do it today.”

“Sure, you are Sam.”

He took a drink of wine in the hope that it would encourage him. It only made him feel more cowardly. “I’ve got a future back in London.”

“So you do, mate” Only Ridley would rub it in so deep.

Ridley was completely daring. He also needed to show off. Once the dive was attempted, it took a while to work your way back up to the cliff. Sam and Helena watched and marveled.

“That really is something.”

“I want to try.”

“Really, Helena?”

“No. I’ll stick to the wine. It’s earth-shaking enough for me at the moment.”

Thomas made it up first. The sun had dried off the water from his body. But it still glistened. “Helena, you need to do it at least once.”

“I’m going to pass this time. I’ll try other dangerous pursuits.”

“Like what?” Thomas asked. He looked right into her eyes. She blushed and turned away.

After a few dive, everyone went for the wine. She enjoyed their silliness. It helped fill her afternoon.

“Helena, you’re not going to abandon us tonight. These girls here really have nothing special.”

“That isn’t what you said last night, Ridley.” Sam was making up for not trying to dive.

“What happens at night, stays in the night.”

“What does that mean?”

Ridley gave a pose to impress Helena. She noticed and then looked away.

“See your technique doesn’t work with mature women.”

Tom just listened.

“Thomas, have you been enjoying the island?” Helena brought him back into the conversation.

“I’ve got a girl back home. I’m just not sure how I feel about all of this?”

“I was asking more about the locale not the wild life.”

They all laughed.

The wine had made all of them a little happy. Helena had a slight buzz that she wanted to sleep off.

“Don’t forget about us!” Sam screamed as they headed off.

Helena made sure that she didn’t sleep that long this evening. When she got up from her nap, she spent extra time primping. She looked at herself in the mirror and wondered if she was too old for the boys. She meant nothing by it, so she didn’t need to worry.

She was again feeling young with the three of them. But she didn’t want to give in to that feeling. She had put all the nonsense with Tony in the past, but she didn’t want to fall for the same appeals again. All of the boys had attractive bodies. In the right moment, any one of them could seduce her. But that was not her intention.

All her life she had held back. She almost shivered from that fear. Even when she let down her guard, she felt this guilt. Tony’s manipulations only added to that feeling. She thought that she was free with him. She had only been a prisoner of her own desires.

She didn’t want to fret about old mistakes. It wasn’t as if her body bore any marks from her past encounters. She ran her finger along her smooth skin. She still had the same figure that she had when she was eighteen. Sure, there was a mature voluptuousness in her curves. But she

was still lithe and elegant. If only she could let men worship her.

She felt that she was ultimately prey to her own vanity. She was always afraid that a man would take something away from her that she couldn't get back.

The night air had none of that chill that was so familiar in London. That had restrained her before. Her dress flowed off of the curves of her body. It added to her sense of liberty. She had broken free of the restraints.

Now she was a sensualist. She had come here to experience the delights. In her last trip, she was recovering from the disaster with Tony. This time there was no such encumbrance. The body could completely let go.

As she walked through the streets, heads turned to watch her go by. She moved with such confidence that no one dared utter an obscene comment. They all realized that she was different. They treated her presence with reverence.

The boys were already jolly by the time she made it to the dinner table.

"What took you so long?"

Thomas defended her, "Ridley, it should be obvious. She's picture perfect."

Sam piped in, "Tom's looking for some tonight."

"I am not." He felt embarrassed. He didn't want her to know about his crush.

"I find his comments very refreshing. Thomas, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

She felt that she was coming into her own. His compliments made her feel excited. She could take them for what they were. She had spent so much time trying to analyze the motive of the men that she met. She just wanted to accept things tonight.

After a couple of drinks, Helena also lost herself in the merriment. After dinner they brought a bottle with them and headed back to the cliffs.

"We can watch the sunrise."

"We'll all be passed out by that time."

She blended naturally with the three of them. There was no sense of competition among the three of them. Each accepted her as an equal. As they walked up the steep roads, they all were engaged in a pushing match.

"Stop it, boys. You're too rough for Helena." Sam pretended to be her protector.

"Don't worry about me. I love it."

She did love it. The bodies bounded aimlessly off of each other and then made contact again. They were all arm in arm as they continued their trek.

"I feel tired," said Ridley.

"Too much funny water."

"It's not that Sam. I'm just plain tired."

He was. The walk was exhausting. When they reached the heights they rested. The lights twinkled down in the village. They also reflected on the water. Farther out there was this intense blackness of the sea.

It all made Helena feel welcome. At the same time, there was a little timidity that affected her. She liked this. She was in a place that her world-weariness could be put aside. She was new again.

They passed the bottle. Everyone was a little crazy. After sitting for a while, they didn't seem as tired.

“Helena, who won the prize. Which one of us do you like the best.”

Ridley had wanted to break the ice. Once he had spoken, he felt a little forward. Sam came to his defense.

“She’s still the most beautiful girl on the island.”

“And you only have eyes for me, boys. But again I’m the only girl in the group.”

Ridley was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Tom just watched the harbor.

“They’re fishing boats down there.”

The breeze blew it way right through her dress. Her skin had been warm from the daytime sun. She loved the cooling effect. Her mind felt one with her body.

She looked over at Sam, and he too had dozed off.

There was little light up here. But she could see the outlines of Tom’s face. He was staring at her. There was an uncomfortable silence.

She would not let her discomfort overcome her. She ran her fingers along his. She hooked his hand and pulled him over to her.

Their kisses were deep and passionate. There was no shame. No hesitation. She was not driven by her feelings. This seemed like the most natural thing to do. Now she was a sensualist. She took him inside of her.

She had never felt such freedom being with a man. The two of them merged. There was none of the alienated ferocity of her time with Tony. She was swimming with him in the ocean. She rose and fell in these flowing currents. Her body felt completely alive.

Thomas was a giving lover. And there was so much to give. She covered his body with her kisses. She lapped up his sweat with her tongue. In this dark night, she came to know everything about his body. There was an intense longing that they satisfied in their embrace. She felt like she had known him a long time.

She did not hesitate with him. She had no doubts. She did not try to catch herself in the love-making. She had heard him talk about another lover. But Tom held back nothing for this other girl. She gave Helena his being without reserve.

The longer that they were together, the more that she could feel herself open up to him. She cast off all the hopeless nights with other men. The sea flowed through him. Her body stretched to slowly draw him deeper and deeper inside. He was a dream.

As she looked down at him, she could see that wonderful smile. She again fell in his arms. They were together once again. Even this young man had trouble keeping pace with her. But there was none of the aggressive contest that was part of her experience with Tony. She knew how to let Thomas catch up. And he was again invigorated by her attention.

There was no place where they existed apart from each other. It was dark around them, but inside they both burned with their affection for each other.

They lived years in that night. Where he first explored her body, he came to know what drove her insane. And he could provoke these throes of passion again and again. They were becoming something else. As lovers they were so adept.

The others continued to sleep. The lovers acquired energy by continuing their pace. Neither dominated the other. Neither kept secrets in the flesh. This was about no one else. Everything was concentrated on this now together. They lived their eternity in their bodies. They were left wanting for nothing.

Even as the ardor cooled there was a gentleness in their caresses. Their touch still communicated concern. She had never been with a lover like this. They both knew that they would have to keep their time together to themselves. Still, they collapsed in each other's arms.

They all slept through the sunrise. The wine had done its job. As they walked back to the village, Sam and Ridley had no suspicions of what happened.

"You still didn't pick one of us."

"None of you could keep awake as long as I could." Helena asserted her triumph.

She looked knowingly at Thomas. The others didn't see.

She wanted to continue where she had left off. She wished that she could have taken him back to the room. She had breakfast and a quick shower and then headed back to her place on the beach. The boys had drunk too much wine to make it back that morning. She fell asleep in her chair dreaming about Tom's firm body. She could sense her nails digging deep into his flesh. They were again moving together. This time it really was a dream. She took sufficient pleasure from her rest. She had to keep her secret. She didn't want to give in to matters of the heart. She was a sensualist. She needed to take life as it came. To seek satisfaction in the moment. She took off her robe and let the sun blaze its glory upon her body. She felt completely free.

She ate dinner with the boys again. But she turned in early. Tomorrow would be an early plane. She kissed each of them on the cheek. Sam and Ridley blushed.

Thomas looked back at her, "Another time!"

There would be no Bessborough meeting. She had shed her idealistic past. The body needed to derive its pleasures from its present not from some indefinite past. She welcomed the fruits of her pagan devotion.

The night breeze cooled her room. It made her skin seem so vibrant. The sun had touched her with its renewing power. She sunk into a deep sleep.

She didn't leave Corfu with any regret. She just moved forward. When she returned to New York, Stephanie wanted to hear about her adventure.

"I met a boy. He was no more than twenty. A beautiful boy."

"Did you get his phone number this time?"

"It's not like my past. I enjoyed it for what it was."

But she had still left something of herself back on the island. It was not her passion. She just found it so free walking in the hot sands. New York seemed so confining.

At lunch, she took a walk in Central Park. It was a wet day. The rains had subsided but there were puddles everywhere. Winter would be coming soon. She wondered if she wanted to let this new self hibernate until spring.

Her body was still on the beach. She closed her eyes as the hot sun pieced every pore. She welcomed its incursion. She let it fire her body. She was a sensualist. She gave in to its touch.

She wondered if her ecstasy would only make her vulnerable in the city. She was not meant to live here anymore. What could she do? So many people had gone away and felt miserable after a fantastic vacation. Coming down from the high was the worst part.

She started painting. She had explored her creativity while she was in school. Now she felt enlivened by her craft. She had stifled something in herself all these years. She was a great designer, but it didn't really fulfill her.

She started with some small water colors. She knew friends in the gallery scene. They helped her move her work. It gave her some extra traveling money.

She saw an exhibit of Monet, and she felt her way was now clear. The wonders that she had felt in Corfu now flowed in her brush. She had accustomed herself to larger oil canvasses. It had been a struggle. But she thought back to her time on the beach. She thought about that feeling as she moved together with her boy Thomas.

Her garden sang out in her choice of colors. She had developed a sense of texture. The paints moved smoothly along the surface of the canvas. This was her ocean moving back and forth across the vegetation. She sang the union.

The Monets had been her inspiration. She took an artist's trip to Paris to study his water lilies. She even went to the south of France so she could learn the effects of light. But her work was still her own. It was all about her discovery of herself. It had seemed the most natural thing.

After a few years, she had gained the same success in the art world that she had attained with design. She could put aside one career for another.

She stood on the cliffs of a remote Mediterranean island. This was truly her secret place. The canvas encompassed the full horizon. She remained with her abstractions. Only abstract art could really capture the inner turmoil of her passions. What she gave with her paint brush, she could also give with her body. She sought that deep love that shone in her canvasses.

The two of them sat on the beach together. She was taking a rest from working. Her oils were all tucked away in her room. He looked back at her.

He wondered to himself, "Do I know you?"

The sun was white hot. It reflected off the sands with a blinding clarity. It was a wondrous day. A day full of possibilities.

She looked back at him. There would be time. There would be time.

She covered her face to protect herself against the sun. There would be time.