

Praise for **PLAGUE** by Julie Anderson

The first Cassandra Fortune Mystery

If it's excitement and mystery you're after, try the bang up to date and very topical 'Plague'.

Time and Leisure magazine.

Gritty and gripping. Carefully blending mystery and intrigue, power, scandal, money, sex and corruption.

The Yorkshire Times

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Mike Naworynsky, former Deputy Sarjeant at Arms, Palace of Westminster.

Few fictional scandals involving Parliament would surprise anyone these days, but 'Plague' offers a humdinger.

Literary Review

A fascinating and authoritative insider view of modern power politics that is all too frighteningly prescient

V.B. Grey, author of Tell Me How It Ends

A tense parliamentary thriller with the sour tang of authenticity.

Annemarie Neary, author of The Orphans

The story gripped me right to the end. Very accurate description of Westminster and how easy it is to get lost!

Lord Collins of Highbury

Pacey, suspenseful and richly detailed, 'Plague' is utterly compelling. If you're unlucky enough to put it down, you cannot wait to return.

Clapham Society

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ORACLE

Julie Anderson

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

“Agamemnon”, Aeschylus

C O N T E N T S

Delphi

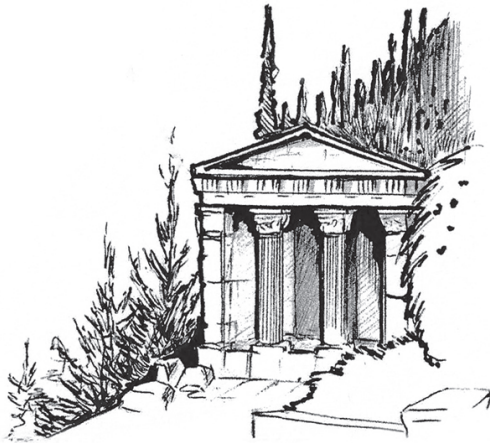
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Delphi



P R O L O G U E



There was a certain look, a tilt of the head, a glint in the eye... he could always tell. He hadn't quite caught her name, but she was something at Delphi Museum, to do with the temple complex. Slim and stylish, she seemed to be in her mid-twenties, with large, brown eyes and creamy skin. The russet red highlights in her long brown hair caught the late autumn sunlight.

Maybe this trip wouldn't turn out to be so bad after all. Delphi might be in the back of beyond, but it could have its compensations, there was nothing to stop a little enjoyment. If he could get rid of his colleagues once things were sorted out, he would see what she had in mind.

'Did you come up from Athens?' she asked, her lips parted slightly.

'Yes, just arrived.' He was looking down at her. 'The scenery is beautiful, so dramatic, very different from the dust and grime of the big city.'

'Oh, Athens has other attractions. So much more interesting, so much more *fun* than a quiet little place like Delphi.'

'Do you know it?'

'Not as well as I'd like to,' she said, one eyebrow raised. 'I get away when I can, on the occasional long weekend, for the shopping and the nightlife. I do a little translating on the side, it pays well.'

'I'm staying—'

'I know.'

'Why don't you come over for a drink later? You can tell me all about your trips to Athens, the nightlife.'

'I'd like that.'

Her eyes fixed on his own as he looked her up and down. Her crooked smile revealed small, even teeth. Yes, he hadn't misread the signs, she was definitely interested.

It was no surprise to him. He had authority, glamour even, to a small-town girl with a bit of education like her. Aware of his own good looks he knew that women found him attractive, especially young women. She was younger than he was, but so what?

'I'll see you later then,' she said.

'I'm looking forward to it.'

And he was.

M O N D A Y



◇ ONE

Cassandra Fortune jolted awake.

The soft leather seat and the powerful purr of the engine had lulled her into a doze, but now the engine had stopped. Through the tinted windows she saw a forecourt beneath a floodlit concrete canopy, but dark, moving shapes obscured the light. People. They were surrounding the car and pressing up against the glass. There was a pounding on the roof above her head.

What? What's the hell's going on?

With an oath the driver shoved his door open, allowing in a rush of icy air, accompanied by the sound of shouts and yells. Seconds later her rear door was opened.

Cassie slung her satchel and handbag over her shoulder and began to climb out of the car, clutching her laptop case close to her chest. She placed her palm against the heavy door, anxious that it wouldn't be forced closed and trap a leg or an arm, but the driver held it open long enough to pull her out into the mass of bodies. It slammed shut behind her. Together, they struggled through the chanting mob in the direction of the brightly lit glass entrance doors.

The glow from the building was the only light to be seen. Beyond the forecourt was absolute blackness. High on the slopes of Mount Parnassus the European Cultural Centre nestled snugly in the middle of its own illumination, glistening in the surrounding darkness. Now it was under siege.

Cassie felt someone grab at her upper arm and yank her sideways. She yelped and pulled back, gripping the precious laptop even tighter. In the confusion she couldn't see who had hold of her, there were too many people crushed together, faces straining. A shouted order sounded harsh above the din and the grip on her arm slackened. Now the movement of the crowd changed direction, carrying them forwards. The driver battled his way, swearing and shoving, to one side, dragging Cassie in his wake, but the attention of the crowd had shifted and no one bothered them further. They stood beside a concrete pillar and watched.

The besiegers reached the glass doors, which shook at their pounding, but didn't open. A knot of people formed, creating a battering ram to try and gain entry. Within, Cassie could see other people,

youngsters dressed in jeans and camouflage jackets, struggling with uniformed Centre staff. Protesters. More instructions rang out as a large man in combat fatigues strode forward. Older than many in the crowd, a leonine mane of unruly brown hair framed a strong, bearded face. He wore a determined, if sardonic expression as Cassie watched him. She knew a man in charge when she saw one.

With a hiss the glass doors suddenly slid open and jeering protesters spilled into the high-ceilinged hall. Those already inside were clinging, limpet-like, to whatever they could grasp, wooden banisters or brightly upholstered furniture. Men, some in Centre uniforms, some in kitchen whites, were trying to drag them towards the doors to eject them into the night. High-pitched screams of protest sounded as fingers were prised loose, chairs screeched, sliding across the floor tiles, all the sounds amplified by the rough stone walls. Slipping into the reception, Cassie ducked behind her half-raised arm, fearing that missiles would soon start to fly.

The protesters seemed to take heart as their reinforcements arrived, but the blare of a police siren caused anxious looks, dismaying them all. A battered police car drew up beneath the canopy on the forecourt, its flashing lights fracturing the darkness. Those demonstrators still hovering outside decamped at speed into the surrounding shrubbery.

From the car a heavy-set man in his late forties, his dark hair streaked with grey, stalked into reception. He wore a protective police gilet and carried a wooden baton. Two black-suited men with walkie-talkies strapped to their belts ran around the side of the building to join him.

Security detail. Is the Minister here early?

More men wearing kitchen whites arrived to help the Centre security staff haul protesters away. They took much greater care than the two ministerial security men, who were far less gentle. Cassie winced as one of them brought an elbow down sharply on fingers which clutched a wooden sofa arm, causing their owner to shriek in pain as she was pulled away.

Increased numbers and the mounting violence persuaded some of the protesters to leave, while others were ejected. Cassie and her driver scurried to one side as the last of them, a young man with dreadlocks, was pulled to the doors and thrust out into the night. A black-suited security

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man slapped his hands together as the policeman questioned the man behind the reception desk.

Exasperated, Cassie looked at her driver for help. She spoke several European languages, but Greek wasn't one of them and she was unaccustomed to not understanding.

'He asks if that is all of them?' the driver explained.

The clerk, suit neat and hair unruffled, replied in the affirmative, but added something Cassie couldn't understand. She frowned.

'The leader seems to have gone missing,' the driver translated. 'They're going to do a sweep search.'

The policeman man pointed at two of the kitchen staff, giving orders.

'They are to help him search the ground floor. He,' the driver pointed to the desk clerk, 'is to lock the doors and see that no protesters get back in.'

As the first security man set off up the stairs, Cassie and her driver picked their way between overturned chairs toward the desk.

'May I help you?' The desk clerk's voice was absurdly bland.

'My name is Cassandra Fortune. I'm here for the public administration conference. I'm afraid I'm late, my suitcase didn't arrive in Athens and I missed the conference coach.'

Her voice didn't convey the rising panic she'd felt at the airport when she realised what had happened and that she had no way of getting to Delphi on time. Encountering the protest was nothing in comparison to her fear of failure on her first mission for David Hurst, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Many anxious calls to her secretary back in London had resulted, to her immense relief, in the arrival of the dark grey ambassadorial Rolls Royce at the arrivals bay, a stately thoroughbred among the tooting local yellow taxis.

'Ah, yes.' The man consulted his console. 'Welcome, Ms Fortune, we have been expecting you.' He reached below the desk and handed her an old-fashioned key on a large metal fob marked 17. 'First floor, upstairs and turn right.' He gestured towards the foot of the staircase then turned to the pigeonholes behind the desk. 'You have a message.'

He handed her an envelope.

'Also we have managed to find a room for your driver. It wasn't easy, the guesthouse is fully booked for the conference.'

A torrent of Greek between the two men followed. Cassie waited, foot tapping.

'I'll go park the car,' the driver said to Cassie, pocketing his room key. 'You need me?'

'I don't think so, thank you, unless...' she turned to the man behind the desk. 'I've lost my luggage and need to buy things, something casual and warm to wear.' She indicated her formal suit and mackintosh. 'Will the shops be open in Delphi?'

'No, madam. It's much too late. The town will be closed now.'

'I thought it might be.' She spoke to the driver. 'No, I don't need you any more tonight, though it would be good to go into Delphi tomorrow morning. Thank you for all your help out there.'

'It's my pleasure.' The man gave a crooked smile. 'Good night, Ms Cassandra.'

Cassie climbed the staircase, which was made of the same glossy red wood as the smart modern reception furniture. A solitary security man scowled as he passed her on his way down, his search for the missing protest leader evidently fruitless. Room seventeen was along the corridor on the right.

Tossing her laptop and handbag on to the bed, Cassie ripped open the envelope. The message was from her secretary, Siobhan, saying that Cassie's bag had never made the flight. She had arranged for it to be flown to Athens and forwarded to Delphi as soon as possible. Cassie thought about phoning her, it was about eight o'clock in London, but the lack of bars on her mobile showed that she didn't have a signal. She sighed. It was being in the mountains. She didn't want to speak over a public line, so she'd try and make contact tomorrow from different places around the Centre.

She removed her laptop from its case, added a European adaptor to her charger and plugged it into a wall socket. Her hotel-type room held a bed, bedside tables, a wooden unit of drawers and cupboards and a wall-hung TV. A fan of glossy brochures lay on the desk next to her laptop.

She picked one of them up. It was about the Centre, she recognised the lobby from the photograph on the cover, though the image looked a great deal neater than the real thing currently did. Built in the late 1970s, at a time of forward-looking optimism, the Centre was a showcase of a new and civilised Greece, she read. This was after the military dictatorship

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had been toppled and its generals put on trial for crimes against their own people, before Cassie had been born, but she'd seem grainy TV images of the trials. The age of the authoritarian strongman was over; Greece was ruled by law, it had joined the European Union. The Centre was a symbol of the new democracy, a promise to the younger generation, many of whom had suffered for their opposition to the government.

What would those young people downstairs say to that?

She sighed and dismissed the thought, massaging her upper arm where it had been grabbed. A bruise was already forming. She riffled through the other booklets; there was one on the nearby Temple of Apollo, a guide to the Delphi Museum and a map of Delphi town. She'd take a look at them tomorrow.

Within minutes she was standing under the jet of hot water. It was only afterwards, wrapped in a bath towel, that she remembered that she didn't have a hairbrush or comb.

Damn.

Working her fingers through her tangled hair she wondered if the night manager could find something for her. The guesthouse wasn't a hotel, it was accommodation attaching to the Centre, but it might have something, a vanity set, maybe. Perhaps he could also rustle up a sandwich – the kitchen staff was still here, she'd seen some of them – and she hadn't eaten since lunchtime. It wasn't quite ten o'clock. She picked up the bedroom telephone.

No reply. Perhaps he was dealing with another guest. She gave it ten minutes and tried again. The phone rang but no one picked it up.

I'll have to wait until breakfast.

She switched on the hair dryer, then switched it off as she heard a noise. Her neighbours had arrived in the next room, a man and woman, talking in low voices. She heard gentle laughter. The walls of this place were certainly thin. She returned to drying her hair.

Tomorrow morning she would go into Delphi to buy clothing and other necessities. The conference would be opened in the afternoon by Theo Sidaris, Greece's Finance Minister. He was the reason why she was here. She had to make a good impression.

Cassie still couldn't quite believe that this was for real, the international jet-setting on behalf of the Prime Minister. It was a long way from her previous post overseeing minor procurement projects.

Her smile of satisfaction faded as she picked up and sniffed the blouse she'd travelled in.

Ugh.

But she had to wear it tomorrow morning; she had no choice.

Her hair dry, Cassie placed her little bottle of sleeping tablets on the bedside table, along with the diazepam.

She was very tired, even though for her body clock it was still early. Her nap in the car aside, sleep had been hard to come by after the end of her last assignment and she was still weary with a deep exhaustion. She'd helped solve a criminal investigation, which had wide ramifications in government. In doing so she had aided the rise of David Hurst to become Prime Minister and attracted his notice and his confidence. Now she was a member of a small group of people who Hurst trusted to do his personal bidding. It was an odd collection, ex-intelligence agents, fast-tracked PAs and Cassie supposed, herself, until recently a disgraced civil servant.

Halfway up a mountain and far from London, she'd surely be able to get a good eight hours sleep. She climbed into bed and switched off the light.

◆ TWO

Cassie breathed deeply and let her muscles relax.

Her room was in complete darkness, there was no ambient moon or starlight peeping through the gap between the floor length curtains. She closed her eyes and consciously began to set aside the cares of the day: the loss of her luggage, her anger and anxiety at missing the coach and then arriving at the Centre into the middle of a demonstration.

Now she was here, where she had planned to be, and tomorrow she could begin her mission. All would be well. She was to make a presentation at the conference on taxation reform, although this was not her true purpose.

When she had last seen David Hurst, the Prime Minister, he'd been sitting at his desk in the private study in Number 10, a room which a lot

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of people knew existed, but very few got to visit. Even now Cassie felt a frisson, a thrill at being one of them. A big man, still physically powerful in his middle years, Hurst's hair was grey, almost tonsure-like. He'd been chewing the end of a pen.

'You're up to speed,' he'd said as he came to join her on a sofa. It hadn't been a question. 'I'd like to add my own perspective.' And he'd removed his spectacles, sliding them into his shirt pocket.

'We need to regain influence with our European neighbours, especially given forthcoming trade negotiations. Greece has the Presidency of the European Council next year and will set the agenda for those negotiations and other things. Theo Sidaris, the Greek Finance Minister, is anglophile. He went to the London School of Economics, plays cricket in his spare time, he's the man to approach. Get him on side, persuade him to visit the UK for some off-the-record conversations.'

Sidaris was regarded as the heir apparent to the current Greek Prime Minister. Cassie would be meeting him and his main economic advisor and long-time friend, Professor Diomides Matsouka, the following day.

'Tax reform is a good reason for the Minister to visit London and you will offer help in introducing the new system in Greece, though he will know that we want to talk about other things as well,' Hurst had continued. 'It's your job to get him here. Impress upon him my own special interest in his visit. You are my personal envoy, something he will be made aware of through the usual channels however much the Ambassador mightn't like it.'

Cassie hadn't expected that managing relations between Number 10 and the rest of government would be easy, but an apoplectic British Ambassador to Greece wasn't what she'd had in mind. Somehow the PM had got wind of the outburst.

'The Foreign Office is under strict orders to facilitate your trip and give you whatever support you need. I'll want to know if they don't.' The Prime Minister had stood, signalling the end of the conversation. 'Come back with good news.'

This was her mission. Get the Greek Finance Minister to London to talk to the PM.

The cost of failure? Don't think about that.

She chastised herself. She had let her thoughts run away with her when she should have been lulling herself into sleep, putting the anxieties

of the day behind her and being positive. Instead she had returned to her fear that she would fail.

Irrational.

She turned on to her other side and plumped the pillow before settling down again.

Half dozing, she could hear the people in the next room again. They seemed to be having some sort of disagreement and their voices rose. The words were Greek – indecipherable. She wouldn't be able to understand them even if she could hear them clearly, but their tone was accusatory and the anger in them unmistakable. The noise level increased.

Cassie reached out and flicked the light switch.

A domestic. All she needed at – she consulted her watch on the bedside table – eleven thirty. She was tired and she had to rise early the following day.

Bloody annoying.

She reached for her sleeping pills then stopped. She had to be awake and firing on all cylinders in eight hours; pills were not the answer. Perhaps the night manager could do something, telephone next door and ask them to desist. She lifted the telephone and dialled reception. This time he picked up.

'Yes madam,' he said calmly, as if calls to reception at eleven thirty were commonplace. 'How can I help?'

'The people in the room next to mine are shouting at each other. They seem to be having an argument,' Cassie said.

'Do you want me to come up?'

'It might be a good idea, or perhaps you could telephone the room... no, wait, they've stopped.' Cassie waited, the noise had died down. 'They've probably heard me speaking and realised how loud they are. Thank you anyway.'

'Good night, madam.'

'Good night.' Cassie replaced the phone on its cradle and settled down again. She had just switched off the light when the noise began again.

So much for getting eight hours sleep.

Cassie climbed out of bed and pounded on the wall.

'Can you keep the noise down? I'm trying to sleep in here!'

All went silent, until she heard the slamming of a door. Someone had

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left the room, were they coming to apologise or to confront her? Cassie waited, but there was no knock upon her room door.

Thump!

She jumped back as the wall shook. Someone had hit it very hard on the other side. Someone was still in that room and she had succeeded in enraging them.

Cassie took two long strides back to the phone, eyes still trained on the wall, every muscle tense. It had gone quiet, but she wasn't entirely convinced that it would stay that way. As the seconds extended into minutes and there was no further sound she began to relax and climbed back into bed.

Keep calm and carry on.

She jerked upright at another noise. It was the same door again, she realised, either the occupant of the room had left or someone else had entered. She lay back on the pillows and waited to hear more, straining for any sound.

Nothing.

After a few minutes she switched off the lights and snuggled down beneath the duvet.

T U E S D A Y



◇ THREE

A phone was ringing, growing louder.

Too early!

Cassie groaned. She groped for the phone on the bedside table to swipe the 'Off' button. The ringing stopped and she flopped down onto the bed.

Eyes open! You'll only go back to sleep.

She pushed herself up on her forearms, eyelids barely apart. Morning light filtered, mouse-grey, through the long curtains.

Clambering out of bed, she grabbed the large bath towel and shuffled to the bathroom. In the mirror she saw the smudges of tiredness underneath eyes still crusted with sleep. Her skin looked putty-like and lifeless. Not good, especially today. She had a Minister to impress. She needed to be confident and assured, not worrying about how she looked. She was the UK delegate to the 27th European Convention on Public Administration.

She slapped cold water on to her cheeks and shivered. The water was icy. She ran the tap until it warmed then filled the basin to wash. Returning to the bedroom she pulled on yesterday's clothes and dragged her fingers through her sleep-flattened hair, binding it back with a band found at the bottom of her handbag. There were cosmetics in there too, she thanked her lucky stars that she had decided to take them through airport security, not pack them in her case. At least she could make her face more presentable.

Slipping on her shoes, she pulled back the curtains.

Wow!

A huge expanse of pale blue sky filled the upper third of the window, arching over a snow-covered forest on the mountainside opposite, its shadowed slopes dropping to a valley floor so far below she couldn't see it. The valley wound away to her right, around mountain spurs and hills towards a coastal plain. In the far distance there was a smudge of a large town or city in a curve of a coastline. Beyond the promontory a glint on the low horizon was the sea, merging with the western sky still purple with night.

She was in a different world.

Cassie stepped out on to her balcony. Below lay a narrow terrace,

its trees, shrubs and steps ice-encrusted and glittering in the first rays of the sun. Above the soaring birdsong she heard the clanking of goat bells. She breathed in the sharp, clear morning air and her irritation fell away.

So magical.

But cold.

Dropping her room key into her handbag Cassie headed down to reception to see if there was any news from the Embassy in Athens about the interpreter she had been promised. The well-groomed young woman behind the desk produced a message to say that the interpreter would be arriving that morning.

'Thank you,' Cassie said. 'I'll go and get some breakfast, if you could let me know when they arrive. Oh, one more thing, my neighbours, the people in room eighteen, the room next to mine, were very noisy late last night. Could you let me know who's in that room, please?'

'I'm sorry, we can't give out personal information,' the desk clerk adopted a pained and patient expression.

'Of course.' Cassie turned away.

'Though... actually... room eighteen isn't occupied.'

'I thought the guesthouse was full?'

'It is, though the people who should have had that room didn't arrive last night. They're arriving late this morning'

'So who did I hear arguing?'

'Are you sure you did? It couldn't have been a television?'

Someone banged on my wall.

'Completely sure.'

'I - I can't explain it.' The desk clerk began to look flustered. 'Do you want to speak with the manager?'

'No, no, that won't be necessary,' Cassie said. 'The man who was on the desk last night, is he the manager?'

'Christos? I think that's who you mean,' the desk clerk answered. 'He's the night manager.'

'Thank you. I spoke with him about the noise, he'll remember. Will he be around later?'

'Yes, madame.'

'Thank you.'

Her tummy rumbling, Cassie headed for the dining room.

◊ FOUR

The dining room was laid out refectory style with an array of hot food available from a long counter. Tall glass doors and windows opened on to the terrace that Cassie had seen from her balcony. She collected a tray and helped herself to cereal, toast and coffee and looked around the room.

The type of diner varied, ranging from a group of middle-aged men in sweaters and jeans, obviously a single delegation, to young men and women who seemed to be students or staff at the Cultural Centre. Hearing American English spoken nearby, Cassie chose a table occupied by two men and a woman.

'Good morning,' she said as she unloaded the contents of her tray. 'I'm Cassie Fortune. May I join you?'

'Jim Norton,' a blond, long-faced man wearing a check shirt and jeans half stood and offered his hand, which she shook. 'My partner, Elise Forché.' He indicated the small, dark-haired woman sitting next to him.

Had she imagined it or had he stressed the word "partner"?

'*Enchanté,*' she murmured, her brown eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly as she looked Cassie up and down. Cassie acknowledged the introduction with a smile, which the woman didn't return.

'Mike Robbins,' the second man said, in a distinctive American drawl. He nodded briefly but continued to shovel up his scrambled eggs. He was a big man. 'Is there a Brit delegation?'

'No,' Cassie replied. 'Only me. Are you the US version?'

'We're not a delegation,' Norton said. 'Elise and I are from the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. We're based in Paris.'

'I'm in renewables,' Robbins added. 'Here to listen. You?'

'I'm presenting tomorrow,' Cassie said. 'Taxation reform.'

'Tax!' Robbins crossed his large index fingers in the universal sign against the evil eye.

Probably a small-state marketeer. Well funded. They got everywhere, even half way up Mount Parnassus.

'Did you arrive last night?' he continued. 'D'you see the half-assed protests?'

He's in renewables yet dislikes environmental protesters?

'I-'

'Why do you call them "half-assed"?' the Frenchwoman interjected. 'The young people are doing something that they believe in, exercising their right to protest, to take a principled stand.'

'Their leader is a hero of Elise's,' Jim explained. His voice dripped with sarcasm.

'*Bien sûr*, I admire someone who holds true to their beliefs, who stands up to the powerful and can't be bought,' Elise countered. 'Why shouldn't I?'

'You admire him so much that you let him into your room?' Mike Robbins snorted.

So that's why the security man couldn't find him.

Jim clamped his lips together.

'I helped him out,' the French woman said, glancing in Cassie's direction. 'What of it?'

'Just when Jim and I happened to be out for a smoke,' Mike countered, one eyebrow raised, to his compatriot's increasing discomfort.

'*Va te faire foutre!* What do you know about any of it?'

'And where were you when I came back?' Jim gave up his attempt to say nothing.

'I told you - we've gone over this already.'

She pushed back her chair and reached to pick up her mobile and leave, but Jim got to it before she did. He turned his shoulder so as to prevent her from taking it from him and tapped in a password as Cassie watched, open mouthed.

'Give that back!'

Heads were turning, people's attention attracted by the sharp voices. Cassie looked at Mike Robbins in embarrassed sympathy but he was too busy watching his fellow American with something, she thought, like glee.

'What's this?' Jim demanded. 'You've been tweeting him.'

'So?' Elise tried to grab her phone. 'Look how many followers he has. Lots of people tweet him.'

In the doorway to the dining room the young desk clerk appeared, scanning the room. She spotted Cassie and headed towards her table.

With relief, Cassie excused herself, placed her breakfast tray in the rack and moved to intercept her.

T U E S D A Y

'Ms Fortune,' the desk clerk said. 'Your interpreter is in reception.'

A woman was perched on the edge of a sofa in the lobby, fidgeting with the rings on her fingers. She looked to be of average height, not as tall as Cassie and slim to the point of being angular, with jet black hair falling in corkscrew curls to her shoulders. Her skin was alabaster pale and she had a small mole at the right-hand corner of her mouth. Attractive and well turned out, rested and ready for work. Cassie felt a surge of resentment. Right now this woman was everything that she, Cassie, was not.

Don't be silly, it's not her fault you're shattered.

'Hello, I'm Helena Gatakis, from the embassy.' The woman stood and held out a neatly manicured hand.

'Cassie Fortune, pleased to meet you.'

'You've had some bad luck in transit, I understand.'

Cassie sensed pent-up energy and tension. It had probably been impressed upon Helena Gatakis how important it was to please Cassie. Almost certainly a freelancer, as British embassies didn't take on many local permanent staff these days, Helena's future work would depend on her success now.

'Yes. Have you been to Delphi before?' She made small talk to put Helena at her ease.

'I was going to ask you that,' the interpreter smiled. 'No, I haven't. It's spectacular landscape, isn't it? I understand that we may have a trip to the Museum later today.'

'Oh, good, that'll be interesting. I didn't know about that.' Cassie noticed the flash of pleasure on the woman's face at being informative and useful. Yes, she was nervous. 'But before then I need to go into Delphi town to buy some things. As you know, my luggage went missing and I'm not sure when it will arrive.'

'It isn't far. The chauffeur can drive us there on his way back to Athens.'

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

'The ambassador wants his car back,' Helena explained, with a tentative half-smile.

Bit of a blow.

'Of course.'

It was quite something having her own driver and car, especially when the car was a Rolls Royce, but it couldn't be helped.

'We'll need to go soon, the Minister will be here by midday. I want to go through my briefing notes with you, but we can do that on the way. I'm looking for any details about Minister Sidaris and his advisor, Professor Matsouka, that my secretary hasn't already given me. I'll go and get my coat.'

'Right,' Helena said. 'I'll wait here, Ms Fortune.'

'It's Cassandra. Actually, please call me Cassie.' Cassie got to her feet.

'Cassandra, like...'

'The princess of Troy, daughter of King Priam.' Cassie wondered how many times that would arise during the trip. 'And no, I can't tell the future, as she did. I wish I could.'

Helena smiled. She was quick and intelligent, picking up on Cassie's mood. She'll do very well, Cassie thought.

'Five minutes,' she said and hurried up the stairs.

When she returned she found Helena listening to an animated discussion between the receptionist and another guesthouse employee. Cassie raised a questioning eyebrow.

'It's nothing,' the interpreter replied, flustered. 'Someone's late for work this morning.'

'Not our business.'

'No,' Helena hesitated. 'It's just... they asked if I might be able to do some translating for them if she doesn't show up. Apparently she's very reliable so they're really quite taken aback and at a loss that she hasn't arrived.'

'Helena, if I may call you Helena?' Cassie didn't wait for a reply. 'You're here to assist me, that's what the Embassy sent you for, I—'

'I told them I couldn't.' Helena's cheeks were flushed pink. 'Of course.'

'Good. Now, Delphi.'

♦ FIVE

Clothing shops in Delphi were in limited supply so the car dropped Cassie and Helena outside one selling outdoors gear. Cassie bought T-shirts, socks and a waterproof jacket to wear against the cold, as well as jeans,

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a track suit and trainers. A pharmacy supplied toiletries, a hair-brush and tights. As she handed over her credit card she wondered if she could charge it all to expenses, her civil service *per diem* wouldn't cover it.

Delphi town was built on one side of a jutting ridge, its streets clinging vine-like to the steep mountain side. The fortunes of the town were closely linked with the Temple and its visitors as, she supposed, they had been for millennia. Around the other side of the ridge, along a lane branching off from the new road which circled the mountain, lay the Cultural Centre.

'It's very beautiful up here,' Cassie said. In the sharp, bright light and thin air she could see the brown leaves of the trees on the opposite side of the deep valley as if they were close enough to touch. 'Though isolated. I can't get a mobile signal.'

'The reception is very poor, especially when the weather is bad, I'm told,' Helena replied, looking at the clear blue sky. She sniffed the air. 'There are storms forecast, though it's hard to believe.'

'Who's that?' Cassie shaded her eyes the better to see a figure running on the side of Mount Parnassus above them.

'It's a woman,' Helena said, doing similarly. 'Jogging.'

Helena was right, it was a woman, though she was as tall as a tall man, fit and rangy. Her strawberry blonde hair was drawn back from a strong face, with a jaw cut clean as a knife and a high bridged nose.

Shuffling down the gradient then striding along the trail as it flattened, she leaped from rock to rock with the grace of a gazelle. She turned off before she got as far as the road, though it wasn't clear whether she was deliberately avoiding them, or following some predetermined path. They watched as she crested the brow of the mountain ridge, a long plait bouncing between her shoulder blades.

Like an Amazon. Where do I know her from?

'The Olympics,' Helena answered her thought and Cassie remembered.

Meg Taylor, winner of the ten thousand metres gold medal at the Beijing Olympics. She was Greek born but had married the successful British long jumper, Guy Taylor. Cassie remembered an iconic photograph of them celebrating in the Athlete's Village, dressed up to the nines, each wearing their gold medal. Later there'd been some scandal and divorce. Now little was heard of her.

'Is she from Delphi?'

'I don't believe so,' Helena said. Then she stepped back from the road, stretching out her hand to draw Cassie back alongside her. 'Look.'

A motorcade of black limousines was snaking its way around another arm of Parnassus along the highway. Two helmeted motorcycle outriders preceded the cortège, others followed at its rear. The head of the convoy disappeared behind a fold of the mountain, reappearing just beyond the edge of Delphi town. The large machines swept passed them, tinted windows hiding their occupants.

Cassie and Helena watched until the motorcycles and the first cars rounded the mountain spur and were lost to sight. There's my mission, Cassie thought as her eyes followed the cavalcade. Her heart began to beat faster.

Then the procession ground to a halt.

'Come on.' Shopping bags rustling, Cassie hurried up the slope at the road-side to the path which the runner had followed over the ridge.

At the top they saw why the motorcade had stopped. A large herd of goats was being driven down the mountain, bells clanging. The animals at the front had already crossed the road and were heading down to the valley, but the rest of the herd was following behind, walking and trotting across in front of the outriders and the convoy. A young boy and an older shepherd, carrying a staff, were chivvying them along.

'As ancient as the mountain,' Cassie exclaimed, smiling. 'The Homeric meets the twenty-first century.'

The goats finished crossing and with a wave of thanks, the goatherd disappeared down the mountain side. The motorcade moved on.

'I wish I'd taken a photograph,' she said as they walked back down to the road.

But who would I share it with?

The thought came to her, unbidden.

'You'll find plenty of examples of the timeless meeting the modern here,' Helena said. 'Many of my fellow citizens would say that we are only now emerging from a real-life Greek tragedy in which a lot of people suffered.'

Cassie grimaced in sympathy. The Greek debt crisis had been very hard on the ordinary Greek people, especially those like pensioners and public sector workers who, through no fault of their own, were

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dependent on a state, which no longer had the means to support them. The wealthy had placed their money abroad to avoid paying taxes, but everyone else had to bear the pain. The country was only now recovering and there was a lot of discontent at the injustice, some of which found a focus in populist and nationalist rhetoric.

'I understood that things are improving.'

'They are, but there are plenty of people living on the breadline, though the Minister won't say that. There are also plenty willing to exploit people's anxieties. You've read about Golden Dawn?'

The violent, ultra-nationalist and racist body, with ties deep into organised crime, Golden Dawn had been banned as a criminal organisation wrapping itself in a mantle of politics. Cassie nodded, but her thoughts were elsewhere. The tax reforms she was to talk about were a cost-cutting measure, but maybe clarity and transparency were also strong cards to play? So everyone would know the system and how it applied. An aid to social justice might be relevant and appealing to the Minister.

The idea of fairness. Also as old as time.

Her thoughts were interrupted by shouts and voices up ahead. Cassie automatically quickened her pace to see what was going on.

They rounded a curve in the lane to see the motorcade stationary once more. Protesters surrounded the cars while others stood in front of the gates to the grounds of the Centre, chanting, waving placards and fists. This was a well-organised ambush, Cassie realised, almost certainly the demonstrators from last night. What had Elise Forché called their leader, a man of conviction? It seemed he was also a man of considerable organisation. She had a sneaking respect for him.

The outriders from the back of the convoy were forcing their motorcycles between the protesters and the limousines, while black-suited security personnel climbed from their cars to help clear the way. So far the violence had been minimal.

'Is there another way in?' Cassie asked. 'That runner must have got inside somehow. If she'd gone through these gates we'd be able to see her now.'

Helena shook her head. 'If there is, I don't know of it.'

'Let's wait then,' Cassie stepped off the road towards a grove of

trees. 'Here, out of sight. We don't want our faces to be associated with anything that might embarrass later.'

The two women watched from their hiding place as the noise increased, the chants turning to yells and screams as the security people began to haul protesters away. A tall, broad-shouldered man wearing mirrored sunglasses was directing security operations; he spoke into a walkie-talkie and his shirt blazed white against deep olive skin.

'Security Chief Iraklidis,' Helena said. 'He's quite high profile.'

Cassie couldn't imagine any of the security personnel she knew being "high profile", but then, none of them was as obviously handsome as Iraklidis.

Some of his men were keeping the protesters away from the ministerial car, others were trying to clear a way to the gates. It was there that the leader of the protesters stood, booted feet firmly planted, surrounded by seated protesters.

After avoiding capture last night with a little help from Elise.

'Why are they protesting?' she asked, not understanding the chanted slogans.

Helena gave a dismissive shrug. 'The environment.'

'Climate change, or something more specific?'

'This is probably about the big US fossil fuel companies. They're on the prowl, wanting to sink testing wells for fracking.'

'But Greece is an earthquake zone, the whole region is.'

'Madness, isn't it?' Helena said. 'But after the financial crisis Greece couldn't afford to be choosy about its international partners. Repayment of the national debt is the priority. It makes for some unusual alliances. That's why Sidaris, as Finance Minister, is a focus for these protests.'

Cassie's thoughts shot back to Mike Robbins, the American she'd met a breakfast that morning. Now she understood why he was there: he also wanted to catch the eye, or ear, of the finance minister, to urge the case for renewable energy.

People were hurrying towards the gate from inside the Centre. A siren sounded and Cassie turned to see the approach of the police car she had seen the night before. She wondered if the same burly policeman was inside, a small place like Delphi wouldn't have many police. His life wouldn't be easy while this conference was on.

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'We won't be waiting long now,' Helena said. 'The leader will be arrested and the others dispersed.'

The gates were opened and staff began to help the security men move the protesters away. The same policeman forced his way through to the protest leader, handcuffed him and, with the help of a couple of the security men, led him to the police car. The motorcade resumed its course. The remaining protesters retreated to either side of the road still waving their placards but shouting with less enthusiasm now that their leader was arrested and their blockade ended.

The two women made their way back to the dirt lane where despondent groups of protesters were now making their way back to the main road, dragging their placards behind them. They all looked young, in their twenties at most. Two security men stood at the gates, watching them leave and taking photographs.

'What will happen to the leader of the protest?' Cassie asked, thinking of Elise's comments at breakfast.

Helena shrugged. 'He'll probably be charged with a public order offence and will spend the next few days in Delphi jail, at least as long as the conference lasts. After that, who knows? If he's well-known he might be made an example of. I wouldn't be surprised if he's been arrested plenty of times before.'

Environmental protests at a public administration conference. A disgraced Olympic gold medallist. And, no matter how much she tried to focus her thoughts on her mission, bubbling away at the back of her mind was last night's row in the unoccupied room next to her own.

This was shaping up to be quite a conference and she hadn't even met the Minister yet.