

AN APOLLO SERIES NOVEL

PASSAGE
at
DELPHI

A. K. PATCH

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Delphi, Greece

PRESENT DAY

A sudden tempest arose, assaulting night-shrouded Mount Parnassus. Lightning flashed above an obscure slope. The rock cleaved, revealing an entryway lost to the ages.

A perfect male figure emerged.

Apollo, the god of farseeing prophecies, shut his eyes and thrust his arms skyward.

The celebration was short-lived. He attempted to concentrate his thoughts upon lives brightened with choruses and dance, but unwelcome visions ruled him instead.

In AD 1687, a Venetian cannonade rocked Athens, blasting Pentelic marble from the heights of the Acropolis. The splintered columns of the Parthenon, ancient wonder and venerated symbol of Western culture, rich with the worshipped memories of an age like no other, lay scattered upon the sacred hill.

His insides quaked with the memory of this desecration. This disaster happened so long ago, and still he could not bear to dwell upon it because they all took a vow not to interfere.

Regret can be an ugly companion in eternity.

Now, in the modern age, new and more ominous threats emerged, not limited to the Parthenon.

The future of free societies hung on a knife's edge. Disturbing visions assailed him. He gripped his forehead with his fingertips because only he knew how, and when, America would fall.

With his fist, he struck the stone wall surrounding the stairway landing. Shards of rock flew. Abruptly, Apollo vaulted to the surface, past a fractured column of dark marble. A transparent dome of swirling blue light encased him. Torrential rain pelted this protective sheath, but unable to penetrate, it shot away in iridescent ricochets.

Tightening a golden band around his head, Apollo ensured that his waves of blond hair were in place, except for a curl purposely falling across the right side of his forehead. Twin bronze medallions lay on his chest, suspended by leather cords tied loosely around his neck. The figure of a kneeling archer was embossed on both surfaces with rays of a sun spreading out from the center.

Apollo waved a medallion over the opening. The ground filled in from the sides of the sloping hollow, leaving the fractured marble column slightly exposed. He bounded down the steeply terraced hillside wearing a white tunic, carrying a silver bow slung across his torso, with a quiver of arrows over his back. The sight of fallen temples, along a serpentine path, the renowned Sacred Way, filled him with both pride and regret.

Descending to a paved roadway beside the Archaeological Museum, he turned back to face the storm-blurred ruins. Beams of light radiating from his eyes illuminated the sentinels of an era thought forgotten.

But now, that was no longer true. He would bring Delphi and its timeless wisdom back to life. However, mysterious Pythia, the Oracle, would have to wait for her restoration over the crack in the rock where the vision-causing vapors had seeped in ancient times.

"Gods and goddesses, now that you are gone and I alone must carry out this quest, I will no longer honor our vows to leave history untouched," he declared.

Apollo turned off his protective blue dome. Rain drenched his pristine tunic, leaving his long curl limp and dripping. "Only your spirit survives with mine, sister Tyche, you troublesome goddess of the unpredictable."

With arms raised, he gloried in the vigor of the storm, absorbing nature's onslaught as an initiation into the realm where mortals dwelled, and in which he must now inconveniently operate. "Tyche," he shouted, "leave me alone to bring order back to these mortals, or must I battle you, too?"

A transparent image of the goddess appeared. Apollo drew an arrow from his quiver and notched it while staring at her dour expression. "You threaten everything I love with blind fortune, with your simple throws of the dice," he cried out. Her figure, undistorted by the elements, did not respond. Vexed, Apollo shot an arrow straight at the goddess's heart. The projectile sailed through her without effect, struck a stone embankment, and clattered to the ground. "I alone must defeat you and all the uncertainty you create," he declared as the goddess disappeared. "I must succeed so that hope in the years ahead may have a home."

Visions of future destruction commanded him again. He saw only eyes of the multitudes endlessly enslaved, and those whose eyes only bore vacancy. The suffering didn't limit itself to populaces. Beasts, tame and wild, grasses and forest were lost too when lands of such bounty became . . . unlivable. Apollo locked his lips together as if to seal the agony amassed inside him. He could rant, shake his fist at the senselessness, even slay all his enemies in a moment, but the certainty of what would occur in the near future overwhelmed him.

Dropping to his knees, Apollo scratched the earth, gathered the rubble into his hands, and dumped it onto his head. He dug the dirt and leaves, stones and twigs into his scalp, causing ichor, his life's blood, to flow. He let it run down his cheeks as if it could cleanse him of his pain, maybe of their collective guilt. He must manage this alteration of the future without his fellow gods. Enemies waited to foil his mission, even those he labored to save, might jeopardize his success.

How can I get them to understand and act?

He wailed aloud, drowning out the tempest.

Even gods have tears.

After a time, he stood.

Heroes must step up. It has always been so. They will be handpicked ones; capable, knowledgeable, but can they survive the crucible? After all, for the lessons to stick, heroes should do the work of the gods.

It was time to carry out his plan. He shut his eyes and slowed his breathing until the throbbing in his temples subsided.

The storm washed clean the wounds and the debris from his bleeding head. He felt purified, reborn, and ready to endure what was to come.

Now I must act before the Book of Histories, the long-hidden record of the advances and disasters of mortals, from the first settlements to now, can no longer be altered for the better. I must act before the future...becomes a permanent reality.

Wavy blue filaments sprouted from his twin medallions. The dome reformed and enclosed him. It levitated briefly before gaining altitude, reaching the heavens, and then rocketing, like a shooting star, westward to America.



San Diego, California

PRESENT DAY

As she neared the end of a PowerPoint presentation on the Greco-Persian Wars in a San Diego State University lecture room, Professor Lauren Fletcher concluded that few of the young men in her audience heard a word she said.

Tired of turning back and forth toward the screen, Lauren walked out from behind the podium. Her light olive skin blended her mother's Greek heritage and her father's blond Scandinavian stock. Full lips, alluring curves, and a nose that hinted at her Mediterranean ancestry tipped the genetic balance to the warmer south. She swept aside a tumble of honey-colored hair while pacing before the front row. Digging into the muscles of her neck with her fingers, she continued lecturing, providing background on the main city-states of Athens and Sparta and their impossible stand against the vast slave empire of the Persian King Xerxes. Her husband, history professor Zackary Fletcher, should be giving his lecture.

How had she let Zack talk her into this?

Pointing at a map depicting the mountainous terrain of the Greek homeland, Lauren heard snickering and turned quickly. She realized that fraternity brothers filled the five rows closest to her.

From the corner of her eye, Lauren saw them leaning in, poking each

other, a kind of slack-jawed awe on their faces that she'd seen before. Several snapped photos of her on their cell phones.

This can't be. Here, in a university classroom?

She suddenly wished she'd made a trip to the dry cleaners and wasn't left wearing this tight-fitting, light blue business suit. Her cream-colored Steve Madden shoes matched the outfit, but even with low heels the garment accentuated her long athletic lines and well-developed calves. Worse still, she had dabbed on J'adore, her favorite perfume, a little too liberally.

Silently cursing the frat brothers' lack of respect, Lauren decided to change tactics. She was no rookie lecturer, although it had also been a long time since she left her senior and graduate students in ancient languages to teach undergraduate history.

"I'd like you all to pay attention and turn off your cell phones, since I'm sure Professor Fletcher will include this information on your final next week," she said, her tone authoritative.

Retreating to the podium, she switched to what she hoped would be more distracting material. "Who can tell me about the differences between how the Persians and Greek formations armed themselves, and the effect that had on the war?"

"The Greeks fought with bronze armor and shields in compact formations," a female student said, "while the Persians were more light infantry and horsemen, shooting arrows."

"That's right. The Greeks mostly fought each other in small, pitched battles. Their armored spearmen, called hoplite in ancient Greek, concentrated themselves into dense rows to create the phalanx, an almost impenetrable formation developed over generations of warfare between isolated city-states."

Meanwhile, the frat brothers sitting up front had created their own phalanx of voyeurs. Lauren kept her body behind the podium, using it like one of the Greek bowl-shaped *hoplon* shields displayed on the screen.

She moved on. "From 490 to 479 BC the Greeks that didn't surrender to the Persians decided to put away unending differences

to make a stand for their independence.”

Another woman in the back row raised her hand. “The Greeks fought to keep themselves from being enslaved, yet they had their own slaves. Isn’t that hypocritical?”

Lauren grinned. She had succeeded in reeling most of the students back into the lecture, but sitting just aside from the others a fresh-faced frat brother with a cleft chin and highlighted brown hair, still damp from a possible morning surf made eye contact with her. Then he pursed his lips. She avoided his unyielding stare.

“You’re right,” Lauren said. “It is a bit of a paradox, but many ancient Greeks thought that if a man couldn’t maintain his freedom, he deserved to be a slave. Let’s not forget the status of women then, either. Even an enlightened city-state like Athens kept their women behind closed doors, in back rooms, relegating them to caring for children and overseeing the household slaves. Think for a moment how life would be for those women. What were their dreams? What would they talk about?”

The obnoxious surfer blurted out in a feigned female voice, “I’m tired of milking the goats. I’m going to join a Dionysian cult and do the wild thing.”

Laughter erupted. Even Lauren joined in.

“Okay, you get the point though.” Lauren’s smile remained. “Our culture owes a lot to those ancient Greeks for preserving freedom in its infancy, for beginning the conversion from a world of mysticism and magic into one that studied nature with a logical mind. Think about it: in about 200 BC the Greek mathematician Eratosthenes figured out the circumference of the earth by comparing elevation angles of the sun in two different cities.”

The surfer couldn’t hold himself back. “Still, Professor Fletcher, women say they want these great careers, but don’t they have trouble balancing professional lives and their prime biological motivation? What they *want* is to have children and take care of them. Maybe the Greeks had it right in that respect, also.”

“That comment is just too simplistic, even Paleolithic,” Lauren countered. Shouts of support came from the female students. “All

people should have the right to decide their own destinies. The Greeks gave us that idea of self-determination, free thought, and speech.” She paused, but not enough to let the surfer interrupt her. “I submit to you that free societies are held together best by a populace that voluntarily restrains those freedoms for the good of all. That’s where civility and manners come in. All must contribute to the betterment of society by their efforts.”

She looked directly at the surfer, but the young man didn’t waver. “Come on, Professor, you can’t change biology. That’s a kind of destiny all by itself. A chick can carry a career for so long, but inside she just wants to nest. In other cultures, that’s still the way it is.”

The frat brothers pumped their fists and cheered. One asked another where this guy was all semester and if they could get him to join their house. Arguments started between different rows of students.

“That’s enough,” Laura said, the pitch and tone of her voice rising. “Let’s get back on track. It’s a good discussion for another day. Now, can anyone tell me what happened to the Athenians and their concept of democracy? Consider the beacon of enlightenment that ancient Athens and the Greeks presented to their world and ours, the energy, valor, and devotion to personal independence—the Golden Age.”

She paced before the podium. “The tragedy that haunts many of us still is that their society fell apart so fast. Why did their Golden Age fail? Think of the violence, arrogance, corruption, wars, and the loss of democratic ideals to feed the power of a few . . . a cautionary tale for all civilizations, when you think about it.” She turned her palms upright. “Why do you think it failed?”

Just when a student raised her hand to answer, her classmates stood and headed for the doors. Time was up.

“The material you still need to cover for the final concerns the Persian Wars—the other Professor Fletcher’s absolute favorite subject, by the way. His lecture on Monday will be about the Battle of Thermopylae.”

The students shouted their approval.

“Concentrate on King Xerxes, pronounced ‘Khshayarsha’ in ancient Persian, along with his top general, Mardonius, and King Leonidas from

the Greek city-state of Sparta.” She paused. “Let me give you a little hint: focus on their different approaches to the Persian Wars and how their troops followed their leadership.”

“Cool,” the surfer boy said as he milled with the students on the way out. “And didn’t those Spartan babes run around naked, for the taking?”

More hooting followed as the students left.

Lauren bent down to shut down the laptop.

“Anything I can help you with?” The surfer stood behind her. She smelled the brine of dried saltwater on him. Lauren stood up and turned her head to see an ever-growing smile. “I’m good, thanks,” she said.

“Were you ever a model?” He dropped his voice to a more mature tone. “The pictures on the back of your book do you no justice.”

Lauren nervously reached for the thumb drive and secured it in her attaché, saying, “I have to be going.”

She grabbed her purse, slung it over her shoulder, and pressed the laptop and attaché over her chest like a shield. The student blocked her way. She altered course, accidentally bumping him with her shoulder. Again he tried to obstruct her exit.

A full-toothed grin emerged on his face. “You know, Professor, I’m not buying your notion about women wanting a career over family,” he said. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you would give teaching up, tenure and all, if you could just pop out that one bambino.”

“If you did any reading, you’d know that women have always been capable of so much more and you don’t know anything about me. I’ll thank you to get out of my way.” She delivered her comments with the bite of rising anger, hoping he would back down. She looked in his eyes.

“Writing those books isn’t really all that satisfying, is it?” he asked, winking.

Lauren reached to push the door open, but he grasped the handle.

“Maybe you could use a massage to help ease the tension in your neck.” His smile clenched into a sneer. “And I bet that laid-back professor husband of yours isn’t really working it like he should.”

Rage reddened her face. “I’ve had enough of you.”

"Thought we were having an intellectual discussion here, Professor. You know, free speech and all—women's rights."

Lauren pushed him backward. "What's your name? Professor Fletcher is going to know about this."

She tried to squeeze through the barely open door. *Why is this happening to me?*

"Let me carry the laptop for you." He yanked the edge of the computer down, grinning again.

"Get your hands off that!"

"Not really interested in the computer," he shot back, releasing the laptop and reaching for Lauren's lapel. "You just don't get it, do you? The purpose of life isn't achievement, or even survival. That's all secondary."

"Son of a bitch . . . let me go!"

"As I see it, Professor, the purpose of life is to progenerate the species," he said, grabbing her shoulders, his face nuzzling hers. "You're not doing your part, and your time is running out."

Lauren gulped.

The surfer locked his eyes on hers. "You want a child so bad? I can help you right now."

The door beside them jolted open. One of the frat brothers barged in and saw the professor and student embrace. "Oh, sorry man . . . I just left my notebook . . ."

"Get him away from me!" Lauren cried out.

The frat brother reached for the surfer's T-shirt. The surfer boy released Lauren and drew his fist back, aiming for her protector's jaw. He ducked just as the surfer's fist flew past him, hard and fast . . . and crashed into the door.

The surfer yelped.

Lauren twisted and lurched through the doorway and smacked a wall with her shoulder.

The frat boy got his hands on the wiry, full-chested surfer and grappled with him. The surfer raised his arms and dropped to the floor, breaking the frat brother's hold.

The tormentor rolled, jumped up, and bolted for the stairwell. The

frat brother raced out the door to follow him and yelled to students mingling down the hallway, "Someone get campus security!"

Lauren finally took a breath.

A few minutes later, a heavysset campus security officer came toward her, talking into his hand radio. She let out a long breath and told him what happened.

"Sometimes, Professor Fletcher, we get kids on campus that aren't students. You ever see this guy before?"

"I don't know. This is my husband's class and I was subbing. If you'll excuse me, I'm late for a meeting."

"I'm glad you're alright and I've got all the information down. I was here earlier and saw a man with a weird-looking curl on one side of his head watching your classroom. He held some sort of big coin and waved it in front of the door window, but he left when I walked over to check him out. Let me know where you're lecturing, and I'll stick around your class for a few weeks."

"Thanks. I'll get you a list of times and locations."

After reaching her red Prius, Lauren glanced around for the surfer before putting her lecture materials onto the backseat. She texted her friend to tell her she'd be late and drove the mile to D. Z. Akins restaurant. She circled the tiny parking lot until a space opened up.

Lauren dropped into the booth where her friend waited. "Sorry, I got held up by trouble in my classroom." She shared the details.

Roberta James, a diminutive, wiry professor of African-American studies, gave her an incredulous look. "I can't believe it, Lauren. Are you okay?"

"Took a few minutes, but I am now."

"I would've smacked him on the head with my laptop."

"Campus security didn't think he was a student. Maybe if I knew that I would have reacted differently. I did my best to talk him down, but . . . Do I need a bodyguard just to go to my lectures?"

"I've never heard about attacks on staff before. It's just so bizarre. The students I see are well-mannered young adults. Were those students in the class possessed or something? This just doesn't happen on campus."

"I had this creepy feeling during the lecture, even before I was attacked. Some of the male students were taking pictures of me, and apparently there was a suspicious-looking guy outside my lecture room." Lauren withdrew a dill pickle from the appetizer jar and took a bite. The sour taste made her face scrunch. "Love these things. Anyway, I took martial arts when I was in high school. Maybe I should get back into it."

"Well, I'm glad you're alright," Roberta said as a waitress delivered menus. "But if anyone takes another picture of you like that in class, remember cell phones make a wonderfully poetic crunch when you step on them."

Lauren snickered. The waitress waited. Lauren said, "Turkey Reuben with a bowl of mushroom barley soup."

Roberta pursed her lips. "Hmmm, I'll have the same." The waitress left with the orders. "How's Zack?"

"He's pretty much over the surgery."

"Never got his wisdom teeth out when he was a kid, huh?"

"No. One started swelling. Then the socket bled for a while after it was out and got infected. He fell behind on his work, other professors were out sick, and he asked me to sub."

"Any luck with the . . . getting pregnant?"

Lauren sighed. "Not yet. My fertility specialist said to give it a little more time. Then there's the fact that Zack isn't up to being a father yet."

"You'd really have some beautiful children. When is that man going to understand what *you* want?"

"When we spent all that time in Greece together, I really loved his easygoing manner. Even when something went wrong with supplies or schedules, he never got too upset like the others did. He would set a goal and do his best to reach it. We hit it off in all the important ways and our careers are linked perfectly. We both love ancient history, especially the Greek period. We know we'll always have that connection, that partnership, no matter what. We're kind of the same person in that way."

Roberta said with a concerned look, "But interests change, life takes alternate paths."

You're right. My perspective has changed and he's still stuck in newlywed, carefree mode."

"And?"

"I'm starting to wonder where I fit in the pecking order." Lauren blinked. "He promised to skip the digs and stay home this summer. If I don't get pregnant, we'll start with the in vitro staff at the UCSD Regional Fertility Center. Maybe it'll get better. I'm sure I can get him to understand and change his ways."

Roberta raised her eyebrows. "Change him? Many a girlfriend has crashed on the rocks of that strategy. Guide perhaps. The male ego and the drive to succeed at all costs are not easily altered. Just remember," Roberta said, "you're the diamond of the department and it took a long time to get where you are now professionally, too. Don't get obsessed with one over the other. It's all a bit of razzle-dazzle sometimes, but I think you can handle both challenges of family and career. A lot of women do."

Lauren shifted in her seat. "I need him to grow with me. He has to be my partner in this, too." She stared at a fork sitting evenly placed on her napkin, but the penetrating, disturbed accusations and attack of the surfer boy captured her thoughts. She bit into the pickle again, wondering if she had become too cavalier with her desires since she was tenured in her department and could be brushing off Zack's need to be tenured in his. What and who really should be *her* priority?

Roberta's cell phone drowned out the crunch. "Lord in heaven," she said. "Thought I put that thing on vibrate."

Lauren listened to Roberta's one-sided conversation. It was clear that lunch was over.

"I'm sorry, Lauren. Eldred didn't tell me there's a parent-teacher conference today. Since the divorce, I don't know how I teach and get everything done, but I do."

Lauren's stomach squirmed. *Divorce, children, harried schedule, this morning's lecture; maybe I just picked out too big a pickle.* "You're

incredible,” she said, shifting in her seat. “I can’t imagine how you make it all work. Let me know if I can take Eldred to the beach this summer.”

“Thanks.” Roberta summoned the waitress and asked for her lunch to go. Returning her attention to Lauren, she said, “I’ll call to reschedule lunch. We need to have some dedicated girl time. Support each other.” Roberta tapped keys on her phone with her thumbs. “You can do it all, Lauren, but don’t let anyone convince you it’s easy. It’s a hard-fought balance and some days, you just don’t win. Balance, Lauren. It will keep you sane.”

Again, the surfer boy’s mocking grin flashed before Lauren’s eyes.

“See you.” Roberta dashed away.

The waitress slid lunch in front of Lauren. Lauren wondered how she might graft some of Roberta’s steadfast toughness onto herself and be more persuasive with Zack. She wasn’t hungry anymore. “Could I get this to go with a chicken soup?”

“You, too?”

“Wait, one of those giant éclairs as well. I’ll devour it on the way home.”

“Comfort food, I take it?”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Sweetie, sometimes I need two of ’em.”

The waitress left for the kitchen and Lauren closed the pickle jar. Her insides ached. The éclair might have to wait.

God, I wish I could start this day all over again.

Professor Zackary Fletcher knew he was in Greece at a black-tie function. How he arrived there was a mystery.

He made his way to a platter of stuffed grape leaves and was just starting to munch on one when photoflashes startled him. A short, portly man dashed out of a crowded room and knocked into a reproduction of the Parthenon, dropping his wine glass onto the

marble floor. Zack watched the moment play out, as in slow motion. He lunged to save the toppling artwork while half a grape leaf, along with its lamb and rice filling, vaulted out of his mouth.

A blurry moment later, he was in a city of monuments, like Athens, he thought. People ran in the streets, shrieking and propelling him along, as if caught in a B-rated horror movie. He desperately searched for Lauren. *Why isn't she here?*

He saw a bird in the sky, a big one, a blue jay maybe, soaring ever higher as if in a rush, but suddenly it caught on fire and went into a death spin.

Then he saw an explosion and massive cloud raging above the Acropolis. The maelstrom sucked Zack in, but he could also see from outside it, as if watching from afar through a fish-eye lens. The Parthenon—much as he could tell, because his distorted view of it kept toggling back and forth between a temple on a hill and one on flat ground—had exploded and burned.

Zack jerked awake in his family room, glazed in perspiration. He wiped brown hair off his forehead and swallowed dry. He lifted his six-foot-two frame from the beige leather sectional and walked to the kitchen, still groggy. In the refrigerator he spied a lone beer, opened it, and chugged. The bad dream must have been from the pain medication for the infected tooth socket and he didn't think one beer would hurt. He poured the rest into a glass and walked back to the couch. Zack plopped himself down and put on his Chicago Cubs baseball cap.

Zack never took another drink. In a few moments, he was back in dreamland.



San Diego

PRESENT DAY

Apollo entered the Fletcher's home through an open patio door. The ocean breeze carried a jasmine fragrance, welcoming him inside. He floated with the aroma down a hallway, past a glass case stocked with artistry, athletic awards, and pictures of the woman he knew as "Golden Hair." She captured the eyes. His eyes. He stared at Lauren, contemplating how she might best advance his plans.

He left her photos to check the rest of the dwelling. One small room held an infant's crib, but it was empty, as if awaiting an occupant.

Apollo smiled. This proved Golden Hair's deep-held dream to have a child. This he could use to carry out his mission.

He entered the kitchen, listening for the quarry he had sent dreams to from outside the home. From another room he heard labored snoring. On soft soles he glided over the travertine tile floor. The hands of a clock moved silently on the wall. Peering into the living room from behind a doorjamb, Apollo saw Zack sleeping on the couch with his unsettled face turned toward him. "Traveler," he whispered. "Your name is appropriate, for you will journey as none before." Only a muted television returned the intruder's gaze.

Among the disarray of medicines and food on the tabletop, Apollo selected a conduit: cold beer in a glass. He took a metallic flask from

his pocket and dripped thick dark syrup into the beer, watched the liquid churn, change hues, and calm until the original amber color returned. "You'll need this, Traveler, and I will apologize for the level of irrationality that will come upon you," he said quietly. "You might be accused of losing your mind, impetuous, even possessed, but you will serve me."

Zack's eyelids fluttered. He stirred and murmured, as if dreaming.

"Neither of you know how deeply you will be involved. Your world is about to be upended," Apollo continued. "Enjoy the dream, Traveler. Sleep well, for it will be your last good rest."

He withdrew, but stopped under the kitchen clock to weigh its quiet work, wondering when the occupants would understand that when time no longer favors you, it should never be allowed to pass so silently. He left through the patio door, shutting it behind him.

Zack sat up fast, pulse pounding, startled for a second time by the same dream of the Parthenon exploding. He felt exposed and vulnerable, again. He walked into the kitchen, searched the bedrooms, and locked the patio door. Finding nothing, he returned to the couch. He drained half the beer in one gulp, sloshing the foam around the still-open tooth socket, enjoying the palliative effect of the bubbles.

He stared at the froth as it fell away from the glass's rim, trying to shake off the unsettled feeling left by the dream. He began contemplating the phone call earlier that morning from their graduate school professor in Athens, Professor Papandreou, whom he and Lauren knew affectionately as "Professor P." He bore exciting news of a new project on Santorini, expanding the partially excavated town of Akrotiri. He said there might be great discoveries unearthed there, remains of the ancient civilization of Thera, destroyed by a volcano long ago. The career-building work would be the talk of the archaeological world. Just what Zack wanted—and needed—to help ensure his tenure at San Diego State's History Department. Lauren had tenure and was

published numerous times. He was falling behind and he needed that kind of breakthrough . . . except he'd already promised Lauren they would spend the summer at home.

He took a second swig of beer and turned on the television before preparing a snack. Needing a diversion, he picked up the controls to his World War II first- shooter video game and turned it on. He had nearly won the Battle of the Bulge when he heard the sound of a car in the driveway and he quickly shut the game down.

Lauren stumbled through the doorway, juggling a plastic takeout bag and a barely manageable heap of mail. She kicked the door closed with her foot, dropped the letters on the floor, and spotted Zack. "If you're going to let the couch swallow you live," she joked, "at least take those candy wrappers with you."

She studied the man she fell in love with, those heavy-lidded, hazel eyes that first drew her to him. His lashes were the thickest and longest she'd ever seen on a man. He used to laugh when she amused their friends by placing paper matchsticks on his lashes. They stayed in place until he blinked. His rugged handsomeness, and a jaw line just a few degrees below square caused many women to give him a second look. Strands of brown hair lay beneath the edge of his ball cap.

Zack adjusted himself comfortably along their leather sectional, the knuckles of one hand hitting the carpet. Lauren noticed the beer and stack of chocolate-dipped biscotti.

"You look more like an overindulged gorilla than a professor with work to finish," she said, wondering how he would look rotating on a spit over a fire.

She swept the wrappers into a wastebasket. "And *why* did you need to stay home today?" She held up his beer-dipped biscotto. "You have no idea what I put up with in your class today."

He looked past Lauren into the kitchen. "Zack? Hello?"

"Huh?"

"What are you doing?"

He set his beer on the table. "I woke up and thought someone was in the house. It scared the hell out of me. I looked around and didn't find

anything. Still, I had a dream about an attack on . . . it's just too horrible to think about."

Lauren chewed on her lip for a moment. "Enough of the beer when you're taking pain meds. It might be messing with your mind."

"Hey, it was the only thing in the fridge and it felt good when I swirled it around where they took the tooth out. Didn't they clean wounds with alcohol before they had antibiotics?"

Lauren rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't tell the oral surgeon in your follow-up that you're sucking down beers."

"Not to worry." He snagged her hand and kissed it. "You've been a great help, honey." Zack clicked off the television. "I did get a lot of work done earlier."

"I'm raising my substitute fees, especially if I have to teach your classes and clean up your mess every day."

"Sorry." He paused for a moment. "How were my students? I'm sure all the boys were thrilled to see my sub."

He hoisted Lauren atop him and laced his fingers through hers. "I'm not doing that ever again," she said, immediately lifting herself away from him.

"Why?"

"You'd better take attendance. Someone crashed your class today. I had to fight him off and call a security guard."

"You're kidding? Are you okay?"

"Just fine," she said in a voice that implied otherwise.

"That's never happened before . . . I'll look into it Monday."

"I brought you lunch," she said, sifting through the mail. "Chicken soup from D. Z. Akins; it's more likely to help you than the beer."

"From my favorite deli. Thanks!"

As he sat up, Zack noticed the distinctive letterhead of his brokerage house on one of the envelopes. "Any of that mail for me?"

Lauren swiveled her head, the look in her eyes pinning him to the couch. "Are these confirmations from your broker? I can't believe you were buying stocks while taking narcotics. Your brain must have more leaks than a showerhead."

"Hey, as long as I'm supporting the pharmaceutical companies . . ." He knew he was so busted.

"You never learn."

"Sometimes you have to take a chance. The market is going up across the board."

"Some people take too many chances." Lauren thrust out a hip and continued flipping junk mail like Frisbees into the trash can. "It's time for us to start a new set of priorities. I'm pulling in the reins on you."

Recalling what triggered his anxious wake up, he scanned the front yard through their bay window, assuring himself his earlier concerns of a break-in were groundless. "You know I'll always have to do field work."

"The only field work I want you to do this summer, sweetheart, is on me." Lauren lifted her chin. "I'm tired of catering to all your delays. You promised we were going to concentrate on starting a family . . . *this* summer."

"But it's time for me to produce something big." He hesitated for a moment. "If you're going to get pregnant, why does it matter if we're here or someplace else, honey? I have a great idea for summer vacation, if you'll just listen to me."

"No." She said it with hands on hips. "I want a child. It's time. I need you with me on this."

"That's a lot of pressure."

Zack gazed outside the window. He rolled his tongue inside his mouth, exploring the cavern left by the extraction. "Other guys have told me it's not so easy to deliver on command," he said. "Shouldn't baby-making be something that's done, you know, in a more relaxed state?"

Her eyebrows elevated into her forehead. "It's not a job. Look, Zack, you have to grow with me. Our lives can't be all about our careers."

"I'm only saying that we can still go somewhere and just let things happen naturally. If you get pregnant, we can fly back here and I'll arrange to have the ice cream truck stop by everyday."

"This isn't funny. I'm serious. I want *us* to get pregnant, not just me."

Zack's shoulders slumped. He closed his eyes. Silence began to stretch between them.

Lauren folded her arms. "Are you listening?"

He covered his eyes with his hands. Their ongoing arguments about having children sucked the life out of him. How could he get Lauren on board for Greece? Whatever happened to their marriage being a democracy, two people choosing their future together? More and more, as she intensified the pressure to have children, their household democracy seemed to be as endangered as it was nationwide in the government—with all hell about to break loose, an anarchy and chaos within their walls that would rip the fabric of their love apart. The whole thing wound him up. He pulled Lauren into his arms. "Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to go away, just for a month or so, like a second honeymoon." He practically sang the words into her ear, his voice tender, melodious.

She blinked rapidly. "Where to exactly?"

"Greece . . . Santorini."

"If we go there, I know where all your attentions will be, and they won't be on me." Her voice was measured.

"You told me once it's the place you felt the most at ease in the whole world. Who knows? Maybe we'll discover temples devoted to fertility goddesses?"

Zack gently massaged her neck. He forged ahead, probing her defenses. "We could visit Professor P in Athens. Thank him in person for arranging our positions at State; two unknowns from Northwestern."

She shifted to back out of his embrace, but it felt good to be held. "You're not making me feel guilty."

"I guarantee that whenever your little calculations tell you the time is right, I'll be ready."

"You'd really like to go, wouldn't you?" She kissed his cheek, a light little peck that barely made contact.

Zack grinned, victory at hand. "Grilled octopus, Mavrotragano red wine, sunsets . . ."

She abruptly braced her lower belly with her hand and jolted to the bathroom. After fifteen minutes she returned and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Your face looks white," he said, concerned.

“It’s just not working.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” He stood up and wrapped her in his arms.

Lauren looked away. “Now we have to wait another month. We have to think seriously about what’s important here, Zack.”

She headed for their master bedroom.

Zack stared blankly at his beer, as if it could somehow conjure up a ruse to convince Lauren to go to Greece. Opportunities like the dig in Santorini were rare, and his clock was ticking in the department for tenure. How was he going to juggle all these problems at once? He massaged his forehead. He had to stop thinking about the whole mess for just a while. Since Lauren would probably nap, he turned the video game back on.

At least here he could easily save the world.

He took another sip of beer and let the foam run over the back of his mouth. Amazement blossomed on his face. The tooth hole had completely healed over.