

Dear Friends and Readers:

*Here is a Sneak Preview of my eighteenth novel, which is scheduled for release in December, 2008. You may ask yourselves, why does it begin on Chapter Eight? The answer is simple; I'm a tease—and I also wished the Sneak Preview to start in the present day. (The first seven chapters cover 522 B.C. and 1942-1945 A.D., and I didn't want you to think it was an entirely historical novel—though that section is my personal favorite part of the novel.) You'll just have to read the entire novel and see for yourself! If you wish, you can **pre-order it now**.*

GREEK WINDS OF FURY

A Novel of Romantic Suspense

Judith Gould

[CHAPTER EIGHT]

New York City

“There. The alarms are set, the awnings retracted, the windows shuttered, the doors locked, and now for the security gate—” Mara dramatically let the steel accordion crash down in front of the double glass doors of the Jan Kofski Galleries before locking it “—and whoo-ee!” She spun around. “Just imagine, guys, five entire weeks of vacation!”

Mara used the word “guys” in the broadest unisex sense, in that it included two males and four females.

Good-byes were said, “Have a great time!” called about, and they went their separate ways. Jörg mounting his ten-speed titanium bike to pedal his way to Park Slope. Phil, openly gay and ever on the prowl, heading to the nearest Islanders bus stop, overnight bag in hand. Rena braving the heat and hoofing it down to the East Village. And Gita stepping out into traffic to hail a cab to the Lower Fifth Avenue loft that came with her marriage to one of Wall Street’s bright young coyotes.

That left Mara and Miranda. Best friends as well as colleagues, they lingered in front of the gallery, reluctant to part. July’s heat spared no one in Manhattan, not even in the privileged, tree-lined stretch of world class shopping that is Madison Avenue in the Sixties, and both yearned for air-conditioned comfort. Even so, they found it difficult to say farewell, although it was for only five weeks.

“Dammit! I wish you’d sprung for the Hamptons share,” grumped Mara mournfully. “We could have had so much fun. What am I going to do there without you?”

Miranda laughed. "I would only get in the way. Just think! You'll be surrounded by armies of testosterone-exuding, eligible young males with high-paying jobs."

"And an army of estrogen-loaded competition," Mara added darkly. "Let's face it, Miranda. Neither of us is getting any younger, and every year there's a new crop of size-two bimbos snaring the cream of the crop. And there I am, in my tankini, trying to hide those ten pounds I can never seem to shed. Nothing seems to work. Atkins, South Beach, vegan . . ."

"Pizza, Yoo-Hoos, Snickers . . ."

"Oh, do shut up," Mara retorted good-naturedly. "I've got to have *some* vices. Look at Phil. Ever notice what *he* eats?"

Miranda laughed. "I try not to think about it," she said slyly. "Besides, he's a gym bunny. And you hate exercise."

"Tell me about it. Still, I ask you. Is there any justice in the world?"

"There will be," Miranda assured her confidently, "once you hook up with Mr. Right."

Mara snorted. "I wish you'd tell that to Mommy Dearest. I bet you anything that when I get home, there'll be a message from her on my answering machine."

"You should have told her you'd be long gone by now."

Mara pulled a face. "I did. But it won't have made any difference."

Poor Mara, Miranda thought. She's my age, thirty-two, and although she fled the nest when she went to college, she was still badgered by a mother who, when she wasn't playing mah-jong down in Boca, called long-distance to see how her daughter's love life was coming along.

And although Mara did score more than her share of the occasional one-night stands, Miranda didn't need to be told that wasn't exactly the kind of information that would warm the cockles of her Jewish mother's heart.

Mara said, "Well, if we stand out here much longer, I think I'm positively going to wilt. I've got to get indoors and turn up the AC. This heat is killing me."

And so they hugged on the sidewalk and promised to keep in touch before heading in opposite directions to their respective homes.

"I'll phone!" Mara called over her shoulder.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere!" Miranda returned, as yet unaware that fate had other plans in store. They threw air kisses, waggled fingertips, and Mara turned a corner and was lost to sight.

Almost instantly, Miranda's footsteps dragged and her mood plunged. It had nothing to do with the oppressive heat and humidity. It was the prospect of facing nearly five weeks off and having nothing planned and nowhere to go. The Jan Kofski Galleries, one of the most respected purveyors of rare antiquities from ancient times, traditionally closed for the entire month of August, as did the best restaurants and snootiest shops. Everyone who could afford to leave town did so, even if it was only for week-ends. Except for working stiffs, people who couldn't afford to escape to the country, tourists and tourist-reliant businesses, Manhattan went into a kind of suspended animation. The city wouldn't switch back into high gear until the beginning of September, and then it was invariably with a turbo-charged vengeance.

Miranda duly trudged north on Madison until she reached Seventy-Second Street, then headed West toward Fifth Avenue and Central Park. Even though she kept to the shady sides of the streets, she was soon wilting from the heat and humidity. She considered catching the crosstown bus, and then switching to the M10 uptown, along Central Park West, but seeing the sweating clusters waiting for an air-conditioned bus—and imagining trying to find a seat amidst some of Manhattan's sweatiest—held little appeal.

The subway held even less. The heat in the stations would be hellacious, and she'd have to switch trains and God alone knew how long she'd be trapped underground. A taxi might have been a providential alternative, but she had to watch her pennies. Besides, she'd ridden in one too many air-conditioned cabs whose plexiglass divider between driver and passenger let scant cool air into the tipper's section. Also, it was shift-changing time, and finding an available taxi would take a miracle. How Gita always managed to find one was a mystery Miranda had yet to solve.

Miranda loathed mysteries. She was one of those people who always had to know the answers.

Waiting to cross Fifth Avenue, she felt vindicated. Fleets of yellow cabs were migrating downtown, OFF-DUTY signs inevitably lit.

So she traversed Central Park on foot and fooled herself into thinking it was a cool and pleasant alternative. The effect of all that green, she supposed. The route she'd picked was a sun-dappled lane with mature trees that was free of cars and lined with green park benches. It more or less followed the north shore of the lake that lay parallel to Central Park West from about Seventy-Second to Eightieth Streets. She paused to watch some rowers in the boats that could be rented from the

Boathouse, and didn't envy them. It was too hot and muggy. Unfortunately, the walk also gave her ample opportunity for reflection. She was facing five weeks of nothing. Five entire weeks of staying home in her 350-square-foot studio with a window air conditioner that wheezed asthmatically and her cat. Seen in that light, it seemed more like a prison sentence rather than a vacation. Or, if she wanted to be optimistic, she could always pretend she was on probation, and brave the heat to see a movie or visit a museum.

She had to face reality. Being stuck in the city in summer, when her friends were off cavorting somewhere cool, glam, or terribly in, was no holiday.

Too late, she wished she'd listened to Mara and sprung for that share in the Hamptons.

And then there was Harry. She thought of him now.

Harry.

Harris Milford Palmer III, her fiancé whose ring adorned her finger.

Harry, from whom she had reluctantly accepted the ring and the proposal, but to whom she knew she could never actually commit.

Harry, the hedge fund manager who worked twelve- to fourteen-hour days and was constantly flying here, there, and everywhere to woo, snare, and mother his clients.

Harry, who wouldn't take no for an answer, and was out of town more often than not.

Harry, whose Yale drinking buddies she couldn't stand, and whose parents' seaside mansion in Maine she secretly referred to as the WASP's Nest.

An elderly man coming from the opposite direction leered at her, smacked his lips noisily, rasped "Yum-yum!" and actually licked his lips.

Resolutely tucking her chin down into her chest, Miranda pretended to ignore him, quickened her pace, and revised her previous thoughts.

It was just as well that she hadn't let herself get snared into the Hamptons share. She'd done that one year and, as the saying went, once was more than enough. Put eight co-ed singles into one house at any given time, add the neighboring houses rented out similarly, and between the elevated testosterone and estrogen levels, the non-stop sophomoric partying, and being all but physically dragged into the dunes, she'd fled back to the city. Losing the small fortune, nonre-

fundable, of course, that she'd plunked down for a seasonal share seemed a small price to pay for peace and quiet. Well, considering Manhattan, relative peace and quiet at any rate.

No, that hormone-intensive beach bunny singles scene was not for her. Besides, unlike Mara, Miranda didn't have an overbearing mother in Boca who constantly called, demanding to know when she was getting married, or what man was in her life at any given moment.

That was the one advantage, she supposed, of not having parents to harass her. Miranda had been in her senior year at Berkeley at the time both her parents had died in an automobile crash. It was one of those senseless accidents that could have been avoided had the driver of the other vehicle not been D.U.I. Losing a loving Mom and Dad had been the single worst blow she'd ever suffered. Being an only child, she had no siblings to share her grief with, or to draw strength from. For that matter, she had no other family to speak of. Her father, a second-generation Greek-American, who had been raised in the Orthodox Church, was an only child, and her mother had escaped the clutches of a Midwestern cult of radical Christian fundamentalists, the women of which never cut their hair, and the members of which, male and female alike, were expected to speak in tongues and handle poisonous snakes.

She couldn't blame her mother for bolting; if anyone dangled so much as a harmless garter snake in front of her, Miranda's shoes would have left skid marks on the pavement. Guaranteed.

But due to marrying outside their faiths, both her parents had been cruelly disowned by their respective families.

Subsequently Miranda grew up without having any kind of religion drummed into her. She didn't attend church services or Sunday school. There were no prayers before meals. She never had the opportunity to meet her disapproving grandparents on either the maternal or paternal sides, and to this day had no idea whether they were dead or alive.

Nor did she care. Her parents had been the gentlest and most loving of creatures. Having been so close to them, she never felt any desire to make contact with those who had so unfairly cast them out.

Even today, eleven years after her parents' untimely deaths, the void they left in Miranda's life was with her always. She had yet to meet a family as close-knit as the three of them had been. Not a day went by that she didn't think of the happy threesome they had once made.

Psychologists might explain the lack of religion in the Kalli house-

hold as being directly responsible for Miranda's choices for higher education. Actually, it was Berkeley's archeology department that cinched it, since she decided to major in archeology and minor in comparative religion.

Her interest in religions was purely academic. Because even the most primitive cultures worshiped some deity or other, religion went hand-in-hand with the study of cultures and peoples, beginning with the goddess of fertility, or the Earth Mother, the study of religion tied in directly with her fascination with archeology. Miranda never once forgot that it was religion that ruled the daily lives of the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, who left behind tombs and treasures. Likewise, the most ancient Greeks worshiped their featureless Cycladic idols, and later fashioned marble gods and goddesses in their own image, no matter how idealized.

Perhaps the imagined psychologists really would have been onto something; if so, it was strictly subliminal and buried deeply in Miranda's subconscious.

The truth was, even when she was a little girl, from the moment she first laid eyes on pictures of the Parthenon, the Pyramids, and the Sphinx, she was hooked. And once hooked, there was no going back. Other kids her age were fascinated by dinosaurs, but Miranda's head was already deep into ancient civilizations. So enchanted was she by the very idea of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon that she conjured mile-high mental images of what, she later realized, were some outrageous follies worthy of Cecil B. DeMille.

But once ignited, a childhood fascination, especially one encouraged by one's parents, could shine the guiding light along the path to one's future.

Fast forward some fourteen or fifteen years. As the sole inheritor of her parents' estate, she managed to use her inheritance to complete her first four years of schooling, and then she furthered her education by getting a masters degree in archeology and doing course work in comparative religion.

But where did a masters degree in archeology leave one? Neither here nor there; at best, in a kind of scholastic limbo.

So, ever practical, Miranda Kalli took stock of what was left of her inheritance. Since she was frugal—she could pinch the proverbial penny till it bled, and fixed everything from loose shoe soles to plumbing leaks to broken taillights on a car with duct tape—she decided that if she was very, very careful she had just enough funds left for further

studies, and could thus earn that magical degree that might lead to Great Things. Or at least open the right doors.

The gods were with her. During her course work, her doctoral committee chairman was none other than one Waldemar P. Hirsch, PhD, one of the world's most respected, most experienced, and most published archeologists in the field of Archaic and Classical Hellenic Culture.

Thus, over the next four years, she duly finished her course work, her writtens and orals, and had her dissertation idea accepted—"Physical Depictions of the Mother Dia in Early Cycladic Society."

Finally, after eight years on campus, it was time for the oral defense of her dissertation.

Her timing couldn't have been better. Professor Hirsch, itching to get back to the Aegean sites on which he worked summers, was about to retire and devote himself to his digs full-time. Her dissertation defense was held a mere two weeks before his departure.

Talk about finishing in the nick of time.

Although she now cringed at the fatuous title of her dissertation, she was also secretly pleased that it had been published and was still actually in circulation, studied by archeology students in universities the world over.

I have Professor Hirsch to thank for that, she thought gratefully. Without his wise counsel and guidance, I might never have completed my PhD.

And another thing for which she silently thanked him almost daily: it was Professor Hirsch's contact with Jan Kofski, owner of the Madison Avenue gallery of that name, that had gotten Miranda her job in New York City.

Having become as close as anyone to being the kindly uncle she never had, Professor Hirsch still corresponded with her with irregular regularity—a letter out of the blue every now and then.

Now, exiting the park above Eighty-Sixth Street, Miranda crossed Central Park West and moseyed uptown a few more blocks in the shadows of those grandiose pre-war apartment palaces. From her shoulder bag, her cell phone emitted an electronic rendition of Beethoven's *Fifth*.

Digging it out, she flipped it open and checked the caller ID. Probably Mara already, she thought.

Nope. Wrong.

Harry.

Harris Milford Palmer III, who juggled his off-hours to share her bed between his frenzied Hedge Fund managing.

Harry, who expected her to be ready, willing, and able whenever *his* schedule permitted.

Harry, who insisted upon calling her Mandy, a diminutive she'd told him over and over she despised.

Harry, who forever harassed her about setting a date for their wedding.

Harry, who would start off with, "Mandy, Mother thinks that now June's past . . ."

Annoyed and sweaty by her trek home, she snapped the phone shut and stuffed it back inside her bag. Right now, she just wasn't in the mood to deal with him. Later, perhaps.

Heading over to Columbus Avenue and her local D'Agostino's, she luxuriated in air-conditioned chill, purchasing a container of cottage cheese, a jar of artichoke hearts in olive oil, and a 6-ounce container of plain yoghurt for herself, as well as two cans of Fancy Feast for Mago.

Cats, she reflected, made the ultimate roommates. They didn't get drunk, didn't smoke, didn't hang out with unbearable Yalies, and didn't mind it if you were gone all day, so long as they had their litter box and their vittles.

And above all, cats didn't call her on the spur of the moment and expect her to jump with joy—or through hoops.

Hauling her plastic D'Ag bag, she trotted on up Columbus to Mago's veterinary clinic. You couldn't miss it. The storefront was of frosted white glass. It was printed all over with black paw prints of various sizes. The frosted glass door was emblazoned with gold letters outlined in black:

The Healthy Pet

Beneath it was the legend:

"The Small Animal Hospital That Cares"

And under that, in discreet letters:

Martin Gatsby, DVM
Donna Wang, DACVS

An air conditioner thrummed above the door, dripping a continuous stream of water onto the sidewalk, promising cool air inside.

When Miranda entered she almost purred with pleasure at the chill. There were several customers sitting in the waiting room. A man's schnauzer tugged at the leash and growled at the intrusion. A couple's small furry mutt wagged furiously, then rolled on his back, all four paws in the air, expecting a belly rub. A grim-faced woman with a lethargic cat in a carrier sat off to the far side, as far from the dogs as possible.

Mitzi Neuman manned the front desk. She was wearing a yellow smock dotted with smiling cats and dogs and her usual toothy, friendly smile. "Hi, Miranda," she greeted cheerfully. "I have your month's supply of Magoo's meds ready. Enough insulin and syringes to last you till September." She reached below the counter and placed a plastic bag on the counter. Its surface was printed with the same black paw prints as the frosted glass window. "How's the big feller doing?"

Miranda smiled ruefully and handed over her MasterCard. "Driving me bankrupt, as usual."

Mitzi barked a laugh as she slid the plastic through the little machine and typed in a code. "Hey—love doesn't come cheap."

"You telling *me*?"

"Going anywhere this month?" Mitzi asked as she waited for the authorization to go through. "It's gonna be one heck of a hot month."

"Nah, I'm staying put," Miranda said. "You know me. Can't stay away from the baking asphalt, the aromas of rotting garbage, gasoline fumes. Smog."

Mitzi brayed laughter. "You're too much." The credit card machine chattered, Miranda scrawled her John Hancock on the receipt, tucked the credit card into her shoulder bag and swung the plastic shopping bag off the counter. "See you next month."

"You have a good one," Mitzi said.

"Yeah. You too, Mitzi."

"And look on the bright side, Miranda. You never know what might happen."

"Yeah, I might even win the lottery," Miranda called over her shoulder.

"Hey—don't knock it. You never know."

Leaving the air-conditioned comfort zone, Miranda was back outside in the blast furnace heat and trudged on to her apartment.

Home for Miranda was a Ninety-Fifth Street walk-up. A brownstone on a charming tree-lined block, it had, a century earlier, been an

elegant single family dwelling. Since then, a series of real estate-savvy landlords had broken it up into ever smaller and smaller units until there were twenty studio apartments, four to a floor.

You couldn't break it up much further unless you got rid of the tiny bathrooms and turned the whole place into a flophouse.

Which, if it happened, wouldn't have surprised Miranda, already a jaded Manhattanite, one little bit. Not with the way the real estate market in the city kept skyrocketing.

Using one of a handful of keys on her key ring, she unlocked the outer front door and let herself into the vestibule. Dutifully she checked her mailbox. It was crammed full of the usual—junk mail and bills. These she stuffed into the plastic D'Ag bag and unlocked the inner front door.

Four flights of steep airless stairs loomed. She trudged up the metal-edged linoleum slowly. Passing 2E on the second floor landing, she heard a floorboard creak, followed by a click as her landlady peered out of her peephole.

Miranda couldn't help but smile. Eva Shapiro—the tenants called her "Evil Shapiro"—didn't have a clue that anyone was wise to her spying. As always, Miranda was tempted to waggle her fingers in greeting, but stifled the impulse and followed building tradition, pretending not to notice.

Three more flights. She could swear the air got thinner the higher she climbed. Finally, feeling she'd conquered Everest, she set down her shopping bags, caught her breath, and proceeded to unlock the two deadbolts and the snap-lock.

The instant she opened the brown steel door, there was Magoo. Making catbird-like yeowing noises and rubbing himself against the doorjamb, tail straight up in the air, he eeled himself around her shins.

"Hey there, big fella," she said, leaning down and stroking two fingers along the back of his neck.

More unpleasant yeowing greeted her. Magoo, an 18-pound Maine Coon, didn't seem to understand that cats were supposed to purr. On the other hand, he had giant green eyes that Miranda swore made him look like Marlene Dietrich. His favorite position was to sit in sphinx-like splendor on a corner of her bed, and every now and then throw her some unexpected affection. He was higher maintenance than a green plant—especially since he'd developed diabetes—but then a plant didn't lick her hand with a rough tongue, pad around with dignity, or cough up hairballs.

“Ma-goo-oo!” she chided as he ignored the open apartment door and rubbed himself against the wooden banister spindles, poking his head forward to stare straight down the stairwell before finally obeying and making a stately entrance.

She was just about to shut the door when she heard lock tumblers turning noisily from the apartment next door. Her neighbor, Ron, was a performance artist who appeared Off-Off Broadway under the name, “Lotta Puss.” Unless it was a Wednesday or a Saturday—matinee days when the Bridge-and-Tunnel crowd filled Manhattan’s theaters he didn’t have to keep 9 to 5 hours like a lot of the city’s working stiff.

“Yo, Cinderella,” he said, lounging against his doorjamb and fanning himself with an oversized cardboard DHL Express envelope.

Miranda glanced over at him and winked. “Hey, Lots. How’s tricks?”

“Don’t ask,” he said with a dramatic sigh.

Ron was in his late twenties, spent mornings keeping buff in the gym, ran marathons, and carried around roughly zero percent body fat. With his fashionably shaved head, black designer tee shirts that showed off his athletic, perfectly proportioned physique to advantage, and his handsome face with its ready smile, he was more than merely attractive. Unfortunately for members of the opposite sex, he was also one hundred percent gay and comfortable with it. In other words, he was the perfect friend when a girl needed a shoulder to cry on or a presentable escort for gallery openings or parties, but hopeless when it came to anything beyond platonic friendship.

Considering her doomed past romances, and her present engagement to Harry, Miranda easily preferred friendship over a good lay. Too many of the straight men she’d met since coming to the city had turned out to be shits. Total shits.

“I *was* hoping that DHL man would be a hunk,” Ron mused somewhat dreamily.

“Which DHL man?” she returned.

“The one who brought this.” He stopped fanning himself with the envelope long enough to hold it up. “I heard your doorbell ring. You know how thin these walls are—”

She grinned knowingly. “Ah. So that explains why I heard you playing *Intruder and Victim* so clearly Sunday night.”

“Oh, *him*.” Ron flapped the envelope dismissively. “Total dud.”

She tilted her head and eyed him slyly. “Didn’t sound that way from next door.”

“That’s because of distortion.” Ron always had a quick retort for any comment, something she’d always envied in him. “At any rate, hearing your doorbell, and knowing you were at work, I went over to the intercom. ‘Package for a Ms. Miranda Kalli,’ a deep macho voice said. So I said, ‘Come on up and I’ll sign for it.’ I was in the middle of testing some new makeup, so I towed it off in a jiffy, flung off the stocking mask I wear under my wig—”

“Ah. One of which your so-called ‘Intruder’ wore on Sunday?” she teased.

Ron sniffed. “You know I have tons of them,” he said loftily. “For theatrical purposes.”

Her reply, an evil grin, spoke louder than words.

“Besides which,” said Ron with dignity, “Sunday’s trick wore his own wooly balaclava. So *there*.”

Her grin widened.

“Oh, will you stop?” he said with feigned exasperation. “To get back to the DHL guy, I answered the door . . .”

“. . . and?”

“And nothing.” Ron scowled. “I was hoping, you know, he’d be like some of those cute UPS guys? Wearing those brown short-shorts in summer?”

“Yes?”

“Well, this guy turned out to be a perfect ugh. Probably a breeder from Jersey. Shoulda kept on my makeup. Anyway.” With a flourish, Ron handed over the envelope.

Miranda accepted it and frowned. She hadn’t been expecting a package. But there it was: her name and address and the usual tracking numbers and requisite bar codes. She had to squint to read the return address, the print was so small:

Albatross
Waterfront
Pythagorion 83103
Samos, Greece

Miranda’s brow furrowed as she murmured: “Albatross? What the devil is Albatross?”

“A bird, or a chain around your neck?” Ron suggested helpfully.

She cast him an evil eye. “Fuh-nee,” she said, and pulled the tab across the top of the cardboard mailer.

Inside it were two legal sized envelopes. She reached for one. It

wasn't sealed; the flap was simply tucked inside the opening. It contained a folded sheet of paper and a color photograph.

She studied the photograph first.

She recognized the man instantly. It was none other than her favorite professor at Berkeley, Dr. Waldemar Hirsch. He was tan as a nut, and wore a loose, long-sleeved shirt of thin white cotton. Seated at a table, he was grinning proudly, one arm draped around the shoulders of a middle-aged, bronze-haired woman with a kindly face and a shy smile. Overhead, a pergola dripped vines and grapes.

She unfolded the accompanying letter, recognizing the inimitable hieroglyphic-like penmanship of a man who does not waste time.

My dearest Miranda,

I have always been lax when it comes to correspondence, because there is always so much to do. As the enclosed photo obviously shows, I have finally remarried. Eleni is a fine woman, my age, also widowed, with two grown sons. She owns a restaurant here on Samos named Albatross, which has acquired quite the reputation for its seafood.

Of course, you are well aware that I never write without a reason. I well realize that Jan Kofski closes for the entire month of August, and I could use an extra hand on an exciting dig here on Samos. I've procured special permission from the Ministry of Culture for you to join us . . .

Miranda felt the world tilt, then stop turning. She hardly dared breathe. Her hands were shaking, and she had to consciously still them. She was in a daze, a kind of dream-state. For a moment, the possibility of the most dazzling summer of her life lit up her imagination.

An archeological dig! In the Aegean, that wine-dark sea of the ancients, no less!

Her spirits soared into orbit, then plunged as abruptly as Icarus after he flew too close to the sun. It was all she could do to blink back tears of disappointment.

Damn! she thought. *Oh, fucking damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!* She hadn't budgeted for an overseas trip. In fact, her credit cards were all but maxed out.

Suddenly dispirited, she could feel the world once again revolve on its axis, and desultorily continued to read:

. . . If you fly to Athens, you can take the bus to Rafina, and catch the overnight ferry which shall bring you here. (Sorry, the local flights are all overbooked this time of year.) Unfortunately, I can't offer more than room and board; the facilities at the site are adequate, if a bit primitive. I do hope you haven't made other plans, my dear, and accept my apologies for such short notice, but there have been . . . well, to put it mildly, some rather peculiar goings on. I can't go into details now. Hope to tell you all in person and see you soon.

Yours ever so fondly,
Wald

She must have worn a strange expression, for Ron had adopted a robotic tone, repeating: "Earth to Miranda. Earth to Miranda . . ."

Earth . . . ?

Her cheeks were quivering and it was difficult to concentrate. She could hear the robotic voice repeating, "Houston, we have a problem." Ron's constant theatrics. Couldn't he shut up! Disappointment possessed her; it was all she could do not to weep.

It was then that the second envelope slipped out of the mailer, distracting her by falling at her feet. The flap of the envelope had come undone, scattering its contents. She looked down and drew a deep breath.

What?

A mirage, surely, manufactured by her mind. She shook her head and blinked. Shut her eyes. Then opened them again.

She could scarce believe what she was seeing. Surely she was dreaming. It had to be her imagination starting to run away with her.

But no. Staring up at her from the stained linoleum of the landing was the unmistakable green and white of a "paper" airline ticket, several stiff, computer-printed copies stapled together. And there was another, thinner ticket, also stapled together and made out in her name. A ferry ticket from Rafina to Samos.

Wide-eyed and not daring to breathe, she slowly stooped down and gathered them up and held them against her breast. "Oh, Ron!" she whispered.

"Taking a trip, sweetie?" Ron asked archly. "Lemme see where you're going." He snatched the airline ticket from her hands and perused it closely. A grin crossed his lips. "Better get a move on, Cinderella, else you're gonna miss the ball."

She frowned. “Why? What do you mean?”

He pointed at the ticket. “See? The flight’s this afternoon at four-thirty. On Olympic.”

“What!” Her mouth gaped in astonishment. “This afternoon? You mean *today*?”

“Yep. Today.”

“Holy Hannah Yarby!” She glanced at her watch in panic. “But there’s no time—”

“There’s just time. So, girl? I suggest you stuff some clothes into a carry-all super-quick and get moving. You know how long it takes to get out to JFK.”

And suddenly she was laughing and crying at the same time, and Ron was picking her up and whirling her effortlessly around and around, and through tears of joy she managed, “Ron? I just picked up a month’s worth of insulin from the vet’s. Would you would you mind terribly if I asked you to look after Magoo?”