

A NAME TO REMEMBER

by

Eleanor Whitney Nelson

“That’s creepy looking.”

Vera set down her paintbrush and looked up at the frumpy woman leaning over her shoulder. “That’s my style. I take what’s natural and twist it a little.”

“It must work. You’re getting quite a reputation.”

The woman seemed familiar, Vera thought: straight brown hair cut just below the ears, glasses, average height, a few pounds overweight—but that might just be the baggy clothes. She’d be reasonably attractive if she ditched the glasses and worked on her hair and outfit. Now why couldn’t she remember names or faces—especially names to go with the faces? Sam always told her to make a connection—Carol the barrel, if the woman was fat; hairy Harry; grim Jim. . . . She got the idea but never applied it.

Last night. That’s it, Vera remembered. They’d been at adjacent tables for dinner at Tzivaeri Tavern, the best place to eat on the small Greek island of Chios. They’d exchanged pleasantries. Pleasantries—how archaic—but then she was becoming archaic. She smoothed her carefully layered silver hair. The woman was from Philadelphia, traveling alone. No tours for her, she said, but she did get lonely at times. Funny the way people exchanged confidences with strangers.

Lonely. Vera knew what the woman meant. She missed Sam. Whether he missed her was another matter. He had his frailties, something she had learned to ignore in thirty-three years of marriage. His current weakness was—what was her name? Sweetie? Sugar? Another silly young thing. Well, as long as she was out of the picture by the time she got home, she could overlook it.

Yes, she was lonely. She and Sam always traveled together; but this time—she pursed her lips—this time was different. She looked at the series of photos pinned along the edge of her canvas and her eyes glazed over. Last night’s party was hanging on. She’d had fun at Tzivaeri, mingling with the locals and the Brits, Aussies and Americans off their private yachts; but she’d consumed way too much ouzo. Now the glare off the water by the dock where she had set up her easel made her head throb. Enough painting for today.

“I was surprised to see you here,” the woman said. “I thought you mainly did California seascapes.”

Vera gave her a sharp look. “You know my work? I have a local reputation, but that’s about it.”

“I saw your show in San Jose last year when I was visiting friends.”

“Umm. I’m doing a series of pictures from this area to go along with a paper my husband’s written. He’s a historian at Stanford and has done a study on the Chios Massacre.”

“He’s not here?”

“No, he finished his research last year. My collection was an afterthought, so I came by myself.” She wasn’t about to tell this perfect stranger the whole story. Guilty or not guilty Sam

was persona non grata in the eyes of the local constabulary. Abruptly changing the subject, she asked, "Have you been up to the monastery and museum?"

"Not much else to see."

"I'm sure you saw the cabinets full of skulls."

"Who could forget them?" The woman gave an exaggerated shiver. "What's the story? I'm not much for guidebooks. I tried to listen in on one of the tours but couldn't hear the guide's explanation."

Airhead, Vera thought. "In 1822," she said, "some of the Greek inhabitants revolted against the Ottomans who controlled the island. Twenty thousand Greeks were slaughtered. The skulls are meant to be a reminder."

"Hard to imagine, it's so peaceful now. You said your husband's writing a paper . . . hasn't the massacre been well studied already?"

"Yes, but he came on some new information. During the insurrection many people hid in caves, hoping to ride out the madness, but most starved to death. Through some obscure entry, Sam learned about the location of a cave in the hills above the monastery which no one knew about." Vera wiped her brush on a rag and placed it in her case. "Last year he went into the mountains and after days of searching and digging found the entrance which had been covered by rocks. It was filled with bones and personal belongings . . . quite a find. Most of the known caves were looted years ago."

"What happened to all the stuff . . . the bones?"

"The Greek government had archeologists catalogue everything."

Of course, Vera thought to herself, Sam neglected to tell the authorities one little detail—he had hidden a cache of gold jewelry in one of the skulls.

"The archeologists packed everything in boxes and left Sam and the donkey handler to load them onto six donkeys. They wanted the artifacts for a special exhibit at the museum. The boxes got there eventually, but . . ." Vera paused. She had to get her thinking straight.

"But what?"

"The packs were much wider than the animals and in one particularly narrow spot the pack on the last donkey bumped against the cliff wall. The donkey fell forward onto the handler and they both went over the side."

"You mean they were . . . ?"

"Killed? Yes. Sam was last in line and saw it all. He scrambled down to the bottom of the cliff, but there was nothing he could do."

"How awful."

"It was awful. Sam reported the incident to the police and they threw him in jail. They didn't believe him."

"Why not?"

"They said no handler walks in front of his donkey. Handlers always follow so they can keep the animals moving by tapping them with switches. And what made it worse, Sam said the handler *had* been following the donkey but went ahead to move some rocks off the trail. The authorities just sniggered. No one moves rocks for donkeys. They accused Sam of killing the man."

"Why?" The frumpy woman's eyes widened.

"The police implied that Sam had stolen some of the artifacts and the handler had discovered what he'd done. They searched Sam and his stuff and scoured the area, but they never

found anything. Nothing was missing from the inventory. After a couple weeks they let him go, telling him to leave the country and never come back.”

“Poor Sam. Lucky he’d gathered enough information for his paper.”

A good story, Vera thought, but of course, that wasn’t the way it had happened. She placed the painting against a concrete bench and started folding her easel. She remembered Sam’s account. Only the donkey had fallen off the cliff. The handler, who had been walking behind it, scrambled down the rocks with Sam trailing behind him. The pack had burst open and the skull containing the jewelry had shattered. Sam found the handler stuffing the contents into his pockets. As Sam approached, the man attacked him with a rock. Sam deflected his arm, grabbed the rock and smashed him in the head, killing him. Then Sam gathered the jewelry and put it in a small sack which he hid under a boulder. Before he left, he photographed the area from every angle.

Now, Vera thought, it was her job to retrieve the jewelry. She could have said no but—

“So, is that where it happened?” the woman asked, pointing at the canvas.

“No,” Vera said. “Just typical countryside—rubble and scattered trees at the base of the limestone cliffs where the caves are located. Tomorrow I’m going up to the site of the accident. Sam gave me lots of photos and told me how to get there, so I think I can find it. The donkey’s remains should still be there. I’ll do some sketches and take a few more photographs, then finish the painting down here. My easel’s way too heavy to tote and it’s more pleasant working on the dock. I love the sea breeze and watching the yachts in the harbor.” Vera snapped a bungee cord around the easel.

“I’m surprised the Greeks let you in if they kicked Sam out.”

“Apparently no one made the connection. I never took Sam’s name when we got married.” She grinned and shrugged.

“You wouldn’t like some company tomorrow, would you?” the woman asked.

“I thought you were leaving on the ferry in the morning.”

“I’m flexible.”

“Actually, I’d prefer to be on my own to get a feeling of the place.”

“It doesn’t seem safe for you to be up there by yourself. I’ll stay out of your way.”

Vera folded her cleaning rag, laid it across her paint tubes and snapped the box shut. This woman was becoming a nuisance. She was too insistent. Vera knew she’d blabbed too much and gotten the woman intrigued. Had she slipped up and said something she shouldn’t have—something incriminating? How could she look for the jewelry with this busybody hovering about? But she didn’t want to make a fuss. That would look suspicious. Best to let her come along and deal with it tomorrow. Doggone it, what *was* her name? She couldn’t ask now, it would be too embarrassing after all this time.

Next morning, after paying for the taxi ride to the Monastery, Vera grasped her grungy blue backpack, which was plastered with decals from every trip she’d ever taken, and swung it onto her back. Letting her companion carry her sketchpad, she set off up the trail toward the cave just as the sun peaked over the ridgeline.

“Do you always paint so early in the day?” the woman asked.

“I want to capture the morning shadows—more dramatic than midday.”

“How far do we have to go?”

“About a mile.”

“With this footing that’s like ten.”

Vera held up a sheet of paper with photographs of the trail taped to it. “We want to look for a ledge that looks like that.” She pointed to one of the pictures. “Speak of the devil . . . over there. Now we veer off the trail toward the cliff. We should see what’s left of the donkey in a few hundred feet. Of course they removed the handler’s body.”

“Makes me feel funny.”

You’d feel a lot funnier if you knew what really happened, Vera thought. She pulled a photo out of her pocket—photo number twenty-six showed the site where the jewelry was hidden. She’d studied it a hundred times, but she had to look one more time to be sure.

Once at the base of the cliff they spread out to search for the donkey. “Over here,” the frumpy woman called.

“Well done.” Vera’s heart began to pound as she noted the location. “Thanks. Now, like we agreed—”

“I know, you want your privacy. I’ll go back and meet you at the junction with the Monastery trail in . . . How long?”

“Give me an hour or so.”

When the woman was out of sight, Vera scanned all the prominent boulders in the area, but none seemed right. She moved closer to the cliff, aligning herself with the photos. There it was!

Looking over her shoulder, she strolled over to the rock and threw her backpack on the ground. Kneeling, she scraped the dirt away around the base of the boulder. Nothing. Too much time was passing and her fingers were getting sore. Her stomach churned. What if the woman came back? Using a stick, she dug deeper. Close to panic, she felt the wood snag on something—a lumpy canvas sack. Drawing it out, she peeked inside. Yes! She scanned the hillside—no movement. Drawing her backpack close, she eased the cloth sack inside and flipped the top flap shut.

Blood rushed to her head. Vera buried her face in her hands. She inhaled deeply, slowly, until she felt her legs would support her. As she reached for her sketchpad she heard a crunch of twigs behind her. A heavy object landed on her head; a flash of light; she passed out.

When Vera came to, she was dripping sweat in the midday sun. Her hair was matted with blood and her head ached. In front of her on the ground her sketchpad lay open, smudged with dirt. Her backpack was gone.

Painfully she pulled herself up, tucked the sketchpad under her arm and stumbled over the rocks to the trail. What would Sam say? She almost felt relief that she wouldn’t have to face customs with the jewelry hidden in the false bottom of her paint box. She’d go home with a clear conscience—sort of. Greed had taken the life of the donkey handler and greed had made Sam a killer—he said self defense. What did it matter? The man was dead.

But who had attacked her? When she reached the trail, her companion was no where in sight. Was she another victim or was she the attacker? Was the cycle of greed continuing?

Back at the hotel, Vera rapped on the frumpy woman’s door, but no one answered. She enquired at the desk. No, the woman in 108 hadn’t checked out. No one had seen her. Vera placed a call to Sam, but he didn’t answer. Why wasn’t he hovering by the phone wondering if she “had it?”

She showered and changed and hobbled down the street to Tzivaeri where the evening festivities were under way.

“Hi, mate.” One of the Aussies threw his arm around Vera’s shoulder. “You look like you could use a drink.”

Vera smiled wanly at him. “That’s the understatement of the day.”

“Glass of red wine for the lady,” he called. “Where’s your friend?”

“My friend?”

“The lady who was here with you.”

“I was wondering the same thing. Maybe she left on the ferry this morning.”

“I don’t think so. I was there seeing friends off and didn’t spot her.”

Vera was too tired to think further than her own predicament and she only half-listened to the good-natured banter.

“Va-va-voom,” one of the Yanks said. “Did you see that babe on the dock this afternoon?”

“What did I miss?” the Aussie asked.

“Short blonde hair, clothes painted on, boobs out to here.” He cupped his hands in front of him. “High fashion except for the grungiest backpack I’ve ever seen.”

Vera looked up. “Backpack?”

“She must have been off that small schooner that came in this afternoon. Americans. They left a couple hours later.”

“Backpack?” Vera repeated. “What’d it look like?” .

“Blue, I think. Decals all over it.”

Vera threw her head back and laughed. “Thanks for the drinks, fellas. It’s been a long day.”

Back at the hotel she tried Sam again. Still no answer. In a flash it came to her—the name she couldn’t remember. She had it! Wham bam, it’s Honey Van Dam; send Honey for the money. Right, Sam? She’d made no connection with the frumpy woman because that persona did not exist. But Honey

<THE END>