

The Island

Artur did not want to wake up, but his gut demanded it. Opening his eyes, he saw a white wall half a meter from his face. He had a vague notion that decorating it with vomit wouldn't be a good idea. 'Where is the toilet?' he managed, not sure whom he was asking.

A sleepy female voice answered dismissively, 'On the left.'

Considering his condition, Artur rose with incredible speed and agility and, holding his hand over his mouth, he lunged toward the door. No part of him wasn't suffering. Switching between praying to the porcelain god and the traditional sitting pose, he purged his body from the excesses of the night before. Exhausted from this exercise, Artur stood at the sink, washed his hands and face, and used his finger as a toothbrush.

Having somewhat improved his sense of self, he returned to the bedroom to find out about more about the woman who belonged to the voice. 'My God, you're beautiful,' he murmured, sitting down beside the mystery woman who now lay stretched across the bed. Of course she must have told him her name, but he rarely remembered women's names, even with a clear head.

'Stop. We were at it all night...' The stunning blonde turned her back to him, avoiding his caresses, and covered her naked shoulders with the top sheet. 'Let me sleep!'

'All night?' Artur's eyes widened as he tried to recall the events of previous evening.

'We left the club, we flew here, and then we fucked until you lost consciousness', she muttered. 'But I want to sleep now.'

Artur stood, puzzled. He was reluctant to keep his hands to himself, even in his weakened state. 'It seems some files have been deleted from my memory banks. What day is today? And what town is this?'

'It's Sunday. And this is an island,' came the drowsy words.

'What? How did we get to an island?'

'Liali, in the territorial waters of Greece. I did tell you...'

'Right, now I remember!' Artur's mind was a total blank, but he had begun to think—a Greek island would be as far from Amsterdam as London is from Iceland! 'How can we be in Greece? We were in Amsterdam!'

'We were in Amsterdam and now we are on Liali.' The visually perfect ten sounded petulant. 'We both wanted to escape, so here we are—on my private island.'

Artur remembered flying from London to Amsterdam with his friends, how they had settled into their hotel and started their evening in the nearest 'coffee shop'. Alex had said they had to try the Magic Kush, but he had chosen Sativa White. Their next stop was the *Cugarfactory* club, where they all made it successfully through face control.

'Your friends were too high,' said the ten. 'You were the only decent looking one.'

'Right,' fragments of memory were beginning to emerge. 'You picked me up. What happened after that?'

'Nothing special. We talked, had some drinks, danced a little. When I said I wanted to go, you said you were going with me. I told you I was going to an island, and you said you would follow me to the ends of the earth! And here we are.'

'But darling, I have to get to Schiphol airport.' Artur's gut was making itself known again. 'I have a flight to London. I have work tomorrow.'

'What work?' She sat up and looked at him. 'You said you own a shipping company, you live off of dividends, and you would love to spend a month on the island with me!'

'A month? On an island?' Surprise was evident in Artur's voice.

'Is there a problem?' And anger was rising in hers.

'No problem. But I need to go... I have some things to take care of,' Artur's mental capacity was returning thanks to the stress. He remembered now, clearly enough, the blond Madame telling him she owned an aviation company, and his pride conjuring up a shipping company.

'Do you really own a shipping company? Where is it registered? What is the name and the registration number? Show me your business cards. Or was that a lie?'

'Lie?' Artur scoffed. 'You insult me! My company is Stockcargo Shipping. Registered in London. I don't bring business cards on holiday.' The shipping company belonged to one of his clients at the bank where he worked as a

corporate account manager. He knew all about them and their cargo, but there was no need to go into that, his interrogator had calmed down.

'Well I've never heard of it, but let's assume you're telling the truth.'

Hoping to capitalise on this note of trust, Artur tried again, 'Darling! You are exquisite, but a month is too long for me. How can I get to the nearest airport?'

'The landing strip for my Cessna is in the meadow behind the house. But Tassos will only return at the end of the month', her reply made Artur's gut speak to him again. She answered his next question before he could ask it: 'Tassos pilots my private jet.'

'Can't you ask him to come sooner?'

'How? My island has no telephone and no mobile coverage. Tassos and I agree when he is to return and he will return in a month.'

Artur's mind raced desperately for a solution. 'E-mail him!' She destroyed his hopes with a look. 'Do you have a boat?' She laughed out loud. 'The mainland is 50 km away!'

'Is there really no way I can send a message to let people know where I am?' Missing a month of work with no explanation meant he could kiss that job goodbye. And would Emma welcome him home, the prodigal husband? His gut ached.

'Last night you said there was nothing tying you down and you were ready to travel to the ends of the earth with me. Was that another lie?' Her tone was rough.

'Darling! Of course not.' He was stalling for time, trying to regain his bearings.

'I am not your darling!' What was he feeling now? 'Do you even remember my name?'

'Of course I do, Lena!' She raised her eyebrows. 'I mean Sally...' She glared at him in disgust. 'Lisa?'

'Selene! My name is Selene!' She snapped angrily. 'I'm going to shower.' Shame—he reluctantly recognised the sensation.

Pulling the sheet around her, Selene went into the bathroom. Artur got dressed and put on his shoes. His wallet and his keys were on the floor, and he found his mobile under the bed. With a flutter of hope he ventured out into Selene's house looking for a signal. 'I'm going for a walk,' he shouted.

'Enjoy!' Artur could hear Selene moving about in the shower as he left.

Once outside, the surrounding nature confirmed he was no longer in the Netherlands. Artur had emerged from a Greek-style house coated in white plaster. The terrace before him was dotted with olive and apricot trees. There was a garden to one side, a meadow lay further on, and behind it could see a line of cypresses. Elevation could mean a signal, so he headed in that direction.

The day was warm, but not hot, and everything smelled good. The piney scent of the cypress trees was familiar in a sun-baked sort of way. He was not finding a signal, but sensed he wasn't alone. Suddenly, he saw an enormous bear through the branches. It was trotting toward him at speed, making a sound like it had

spotted a long-overdue lunch! Survival instinct kicked in and Artur's legs miraculously channeled Usain Bolt all the way back to the house. Slamming the door behind him, he looked around for something to use as a barricade.

Selene was in the kitchen, looking fresh and beautiful. The table was set with coffee and a basket of croissants. 'Is something wrong?'

'I was attacked by a bear!' Artur panted.

'That's Misha', Selene grinned and carelessly dismissing his fear with a wave of her hand. 'I forgot to mention him. Tassos saved him and brought him here from the Moscow circus. He was too old to perform and they were going to put him down, so we brought him to the island for a peaceful retirement.'

'I'm not going out there!' Artur had no intention of calming down. 'He was going to eat me!'

Selene burst into laughter. 'Misha is vegetarian. He eats only fruit and berries. Relax! Have some coffee and a croissant!'

Artur felt a glimmer of possibility. 'Croissants!? Who delivers your food? Maybe I can go back to the mainland with him.'

His eminently charming hostess sighed. 'There are no deliveries. I bring it all myself on the plane. My freezer is full of croissants and French pastries. I pop one into oven and voila—the ideal breakfast!' Artur had no stomach for breakfast.

'I don't actually own a shipping company', he confessed. 'I'll be fired if I'm not back in London in the morning.'

'Then you lied to me. Why?' Selene's silky voice sounded rough again.

'I thought you were lying, too', Artur started to explain...

'Me?' Indignation flashed across Selene's face. 'I said I own an aviation company. I wasn't lying.' She pulled a business card from her purse on the chair and threw it down on the table.

Artur admitted he hadn't taken her seriously, and had come up with his fiction about the shipping company to counter her.

'Fantastic! So what is this great job you are so afraid of losing?' She couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

Artur owned up to his actual position as accounts manager for Standard Chartered.

'And I thought I had finally found an equal, a man of achievement. But it turns out he is nothing but a bank clerk. Tell me, how much do you earn? At least sixty thousand, I hope.

'Not quite', Artur said quietly.

Selene paused. 'Alright pet, don't worry about your job! I have a managerial position opening. Sixty thousand a year plus bonuses earned. Would that satisfy?'

Artur was silent, but Selene wasn't. 'Don't you like me when you're sober?'

'No, no, you are gorgeous...' Artur stared at her endless legs, summoning the courage to tell her the bitter truth. 'It's not only my work...'

'Now you are getting on my nerves! What else is there? Is your mother on her deathbed?' Her anger was growing.

Artur hesitated, but Selene grew fierce, 'Tell me!'

'I have a wife, Emma. And two children, Sarah and Henry', the biggest confession of the day finally crossed his lips.

'My God, you are a pathological liar! How easily you abandoned your family for a pleasure trip with an unknown woman! I warned you I was going away for a month to my island!'

All he felt now was despair and humiliation. He dropped to his knees in front of the goddess Selene and begged for his life. 'Forgive me! I want to go back to London, to my wife. I want to hug my children. I will never leave them for frivolous adventure again. I beg you to think of something, please!' Prostrate, he kissed Selene's toes.

'Alright, alright. Don't break my heart. Tassos will come for you. There is one condition though—you have to dig up my garden so I can plant next month!'

'Seriously?'

'The shovel is behind the door.'

'I will dig up the whole island!' Artur took the shovel and went out with determination.

Selene laughed. 'That won't be necessary. Only where crops have been harvested.'

As soon as her pitiable guest was gone, Selene went to the wardrobe in the hall and switched off the signal blocker. She found her smartphone and sent a voice message: 'Everything is settled! You can come for the patient as scheduled, he has taken his medicine. See if the next customer has transferred the advance payment! Monaco is much more expensive than Amsterdam.'