



Athens Ambuscade

KRISTEN JOY WILKS

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Dedication

To Sarah (aka Daizy).

We met before we were born.

You have been my best friend all these years.

Playing Barbies, Pound Puppies, and germ attack.

Finally getting a kitten, Old Time Photos, and falling in
love.

You are a true friend, an awesome Mom, and a devoted cat lover. I can't believe you spent 40 hours marking all the errors in my first manuscript. Thank you so much for all that you've taught me and all that you are.

This one is for you, and Bill and Wilson too. Gotta love those orange tabbies. How a slim and beautiful pet owner can have cats of such impressive girth will always be a mystery.

1

Ya-Yá's Dead Cat

I smoothed the wrinkles from my list and scowled at the final mortifying task. Preserving the remains of deceased felines wasn't exactly my spiritual gift. In fact, the display of animal carcasses goes against all of my training.

What in the world had Ya-Yá been thinking? I took a sip of my frappé, leaned back against the rickety *kafeneía* chair, and let the brilliant Mediterranean sun warm my face. Sour orange and lemon trees, as well as the occasional acacia, shaded the bustling street where I ate. If I closed my eyes and breathed deep draughts of the salt and citrus wind, would the world make sense again when I opened them?

I had spent five years saving so I could have one more summer in Athens with Ya-Yá. Greece was my second country, a mother to me. Stepping off the plane in Athens made my heart beat stronger. Walking these streets was like being swept into the hearty embrace of a loved one. Only this time, Athens was without the woman who had made the city live and sing for me.

My grandmother's sudden brain aneurism left me with an incredibly odd list in her delicate script and no Ya-Yá to tease about it. If she were here, I would raise a questioning brow and point out every outlandish feature on the jasmine-scented page. Ya-Yá usually

wrote from her old wicker chair in the garden. If she had penned a summer letter I could always tell by simply closing my eyes and breathing in the lingering fragrance.

If she were here, Ya-Yá would shake her head, pick some mint from the window box, and make me a cup of tea to soothe my frazzled nerves. Then she would push the plate of *kourabiedes* closer and explain why her new tree house absolutely had to be painted orange.

But I'd missed her by a month. When I'd stepped off the plane in Athens, my Grandma, my Ya-Yá, was buried and gone.

Ya-Yá's lawyer wasn't certain whether the list was a collection of requirements for the new home owner (that would be me, Jacqueline Mallory Gianakos) or a misplaced to-do list. But it was found with her Will and was now a legally binding document.

I'd sped through the first five items.

Sell my porcelain rooster collection and give the proceeds to Agneta so that she can get that purple awning she has always wanted for her shop.

Build a tasteful wooden tree house in the Cypress tree out front and paint it orange.

Clean the gutters.

Dust and box up everything in the attic. Personally deliver the boxes to the youth hostel next to uncle Etor's gravesite.

Bake a watermelon pie and invite the pre-school fútbol team over to enjoy it.

But now Ya-Yá's sixth and final task loomed before me.

I had a bachelor's degree in fashion merchandising, a five-year stint as a bridal design

intern specializing in silk ribbon embroidery, and was the only employee in the history of Pricilla's Precious Boutique who had ever received Pricilla's nod of approval for my attire on one hundred and five consecutive work days. None of these accomplishments had prepared me for the last item on Ya-Yá's list.

Have Chrysanthemum stuffed. Let the taxidermist know she weighed 32 pounds at the time of her demise. Find and use the coupon from that nice boy on TV. Look in the third drawer of the vanity dresser, or the cookie jar, or maybe behind the kitchen clock, or in my sock drawer all the way at the back. If no one can find it, have the neighbor boy check in the attic with all those cat food receipts.

Chrysanthemum was not my favorite feline. She had been an obese white Persian with a palate like the queen of France and all the forbearance of Genghis Kahn. Ya-Yá's neighbor owned Petunia, Chrysanthemum's identical sister. A British professor had taken home the third white female from that litter, so thankfully that particular animal had not lived close enough to torture me.

The problem? Chrysanthemum liked to be petted on the head and between the shoulder blades. Petunia wanted to be stroked down the back from about mid-spine all the way down her enormous fluffy tail. If I petted Petunia on the head or shoulders, she would hiss and strike out with her claws. Even worse, if I petted Chrysanthemum on the back or tail, she would growl low in her chest, whip around, and sink her fangs into my hand. Instances of mistaken identity gave me a loathing for anything white and fluffy, even coconut cake and s'mores.

When Chrysanthemum passed on three years ago,

I had breathed a private sigh of relief. But apparently, Chrysanthemum was capable of tormenting me even from the grave. The corpulent cat remained safely preserved in Ya-Yá's frozen storage unit.

With the exception of the local felines, Ya-Yá's house had been my childhood sanctuary. Despite the financial burden and the ridiculous nature of her to-do list, I would do whatever it took to keep her home from being claimed by the bank.

But I am not gifted in taxidermy. Pricilla spent a fair amount of sweat and blood (at least she would have, if she were capable of something as vulgar as sweating) in my training. She had taken a details-conscious college grad and singlehandedly turned her into a details-obsessed wedding professional.

From twenty feet away, I can spot the single flower in the ring bearer's boutonniere that will clash with the cummerbund of the back-up piano player. I am able to transform a heap of silk ribbon into a garden of roses, ferns, and daisies stitched across twenty-five yards of satin. But turning off my superpowers is difficult.

Through necessity, I have learned to keep my fingernails long and stylish and never wear hunter orange, puce, or chartreuse to work. Tackiness is the unforgiveable sin at Pricilla's Precious Boutique.

A stuffed cat was anathema to all that I had strived to become.

But it was either stuff Chrysanthemum or lose Ya-Yá's house, and the coupon expired in two days. The dreaded preservation needed to be immediate.

A handsome Greek waiter approached with my lunch. I'd ordered a lamb kabob drenched in yoghurt and served on fresh pitta bread. I looked down at my

plate then back up at the waiter.

“Um...Evzen?”

“Yes, Miss Gianakos.”

“I ordered the lamb kabob drenched in yoghurt.”

“Yes?”

I smiled at Evzen, hoping the blush on my cheeks wasn't as bad as it felt. Why was I the only one who noticed all of these important details? “I believe that my kabob has been drizzled in yoghurt rather than drenched. Look.”

Evzen peered over my shoulder and slipped a folded piece of paper under my plate. “I think you are right, Miss Gianakos. That is most definitely drizzled.”

Why was he making this so impossible? “I wanted mine drenched...please.”

Evzen grinned. “And so it is. My mother has recently added the drizzle of yoghurt for aesthetic purposes. The kabob is drenched before and during the cooking process. She just thought it looked pretty. The change was not meant to alarm you.” Evzen swept back to the kitchen.

I attempted to hide my flushed features by opening the slip of paper beneath my plate. Evzen had been part of every summer I'd spent with Ya-Yá. The son of a neighbor, the one who owned Petunia, we'd spent countless hours playing soccer at the park, hunting for buried treasure in the rocks below the Acropolis, and having tea and baklava with his pet tortoise under Ya-Yá's juniper bushes. He'd recently moved back to Athens when his father had a stroke. I looked at the sentence scrawled across the paper.

Don't get lost in the details, Jacqueline. You might miss life.

He'd scribbled his phone number beneath that bit

of helpful advice. If only Evzen had been a dental surgeon, I would have snapped up his offer. But my true love would be a dental surgeon according to an incredibly detailed study I'd completed in my final semester of college.

I sighed. Evzen's non-dental-surgeon-status had reminded me of the least likely occupation possible for my future spouse and the reason I sat at the *kafeneía* in the first place. I took a bite of my yoghurt drenched and drizzled kabob and zipped a silent prayer heavenward.

Thank You for the food, Lord. It is delicious...but don't You think I could have lived my entire life without eating lunch with a taxidermist? How can I grieve when I'm worried sick over getting Chrysanthemum stuffed? And my coupon expires in two days. I could use a little help, Lord. OK, a lot of help. I spent the last of my savings on flying this guy over here. Would You please make sure he doesn't get lost, or call me Ma'am, or arrive in flannel? As always, I bow to Your sovereign will, Lord. Amen.

The sound of boots crossing the pavement in front of the *kafeneía* made me raise my eyes. The footsteps stopped.

A man in faded jeans, a cartoon T-shirt, and a red plaid flannel leaned against the lamppost and grinned at me.

The taxidermist had come.

2

The Taxidermist

Our eyes met, but the man I was most likely to strangle with a fresh loaf of bread on our first date (according to that aforementioned survey) did not venture closer. How on earth could he stand to wear flannel under the sweltering Athens sun? Instead of approaching, he pulled a folded piece of paper from his back pocket and snapped it open with exaggerated precision. He ran one finger down the page, paused, and looked up. After giving a silent nod, he moved his finger down the page an inch or so and then looked up again. He nodded and went back to the page.

Another blush heated my cheeks.

I knew what he was reading.

Let's just say I had become concerned that after spending my last penny to fly this man to Greece, my Montana taxidermist might be unable to find me. What if he glanced around the *kafeneía*, didn't see me, and gave up? What if he shrugged, clapped a worn cowboy hat back onto his head, and rode off into the sunset? I had witnessed just such a scene in an old western at the open air cinema with Ya-Yá. With two days left until my taxidermy coupon expired, I could not risk such an occurrence. So, I had sent Shane Elliott a list.

Dear Mr. Elliott,

Thank you for answering my request favorably. I will meet you at Kolina's Kafeneia at noon on June 4th. To avoid any confusion, you will be able to recognize me using this short identification list.

I have long, dark hair, tan skin, and brown eyes.

I will be wearing a grass-green, sleeveless maxi dress with a 3" beaded belt and a scoop neckline.

I will wear flat sandals of mahogany-colored leather and mother-of-pearl toe and fingernail polish.

My necklace and earrings are constructed of green glass beads made by a group of industrious widows in Guatemala.

I will tie my hair back with a yellow silk scarf that has pieces of green glass and cream eyelet lace stitched in a geometrically pleasing design along two of the edges.

My eyeliner for the day will be "Evening Moss," and I will use these three eye shadows: "Sunlit Mist," "Glistening Fawn," and "Enchanted Prune." My mascara is brown/black, and my lipstick is "Summer Sunset" covered in a thin layer of "Berry Bedazzle" lip gloss.

Finally, Greece is hot in June. Please do not bring any items constructed of flannel.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Mallory Gianakos

Although I might have inherited my love of detailed list construction from Ya-Yá, I saw no need for Shane Elliott to stand there smirking while he checked each item off the crisp sheet of paper. The list had fulfilled its function, the man had managed to find me, end of story. No smirking required.

Finally, Mr. Elliott appeared to reach the end of his list. Instead of approaching my table and making introductions, he squinted and peered at me from

several different angles. Then he removed his red ball cap and marched toward me, hat in hand. "Excuse me. Are you by any chance Miss Jack Gianakos?"

"No, I am not." Well, at least he hadn't called me ma'am.

"Strange deal, then. I was sure your eye shadow was "Glistening Fawn." My mistake, I suppose. Would you kindly direct me to the young lady in green who is wearing "Glistening Fawn?" Then, I'll be on my way."

"Mr. Elliott, if you are looking for Jacqueline Gianakos, then you have found her." I indicated the chair next to me, hoping he would choose to let go of his ridiculous farce.

He grinned, shook my hand, and took the seat beside me. "Just call me Shane." He set a slender leather case on the table and opened the clasps. "No one ever shortens your name, I take it?"

"No, but even if they did, don't you think they would shorten it to Jackie?"

He pulled out a black portfolio, set it on the table between us, and snapped the case closed. "No. You don't look like a Jackie."

"Neither do I look like a Jack."

"It's definitely there. Somewhere in the sweep of hair over your shoulder and the tilt of your nose when you're irritated. But you've hidden it, Jacqueline. I am sorry to say, but you have buried your inner Jack."

I tapped my fingernails against the table top, trying not to direct violent, un-Christian thoughts toward my Ya-Yá's favorite taxidermist. His show had only run one season, but when she'd won that 20% off coupon, Shane Elliott had won her heart. Now I was stuck with him.

I closed my eyes and thought of kittens frolicking

with butterflies under a rainbow. All the good and fluffy things God had made. Those things that did not critique my name or wear flannel. When I opened them, Shane had spread a 12X12 photo book out on the table.

"Here are a few examples of my work. I stuff everything from teacup poodles to Tibetan mastiffs and always guarantee the job. But my specialty is what I like to call 'Resurrection Cases'."

Dear Lord, I really, really can't handle this today. Or any day. Feel free to step in with an earthquake or rampaging boars at any time.

There were "before" and "after" photos of a collection of badly mangled pets. Little notes were scribbled beneath the "before" pictures. "Smashed by SUV," "Run-in with bobcat," and "tried to swim home."

I snapped the book shut. It took three tries, but after breathing into an empty water glass in lieu of a brown paper bag, I managed to comment upon his examples. "Beautiful," I choked out.

Think of Ya-Yá, Jacqueline. Think of her house and what it means. You can survive this. Do not let Chrysanthemum posthumously destroy Ya-Yá's final gift.

I'd spent eight childhood summers visiting my Ya-Yá in Athens. The very best memories I had were made within the pale stucco walls of her home. The first trip was the summer my parents almost got divorced. I was ten when they put me on the plane to Greece and managed to patch things up between them. But it had been a long, cold year leading up to the marital mend, and Ya-Yá was a balm upon my nervous little heart.

That summer we dragged an old child's wagon through Monastiraki Square and the Laiki market at

least once a week. It always took both of us to haul the wagon back, heaped high with fruit and second hand books. It was an arduous quest to search through the stacks for something in English. Even if the day went by without an English language novel for me, there was always some treasure. A Greek picture book or something so fascinating that Ya-Yá would be willing to translate in her head and read aloud.

My favorite place in the world was the window seat in Ya-Yá's front room. It was covered with old quilts and worn pillows and caught the afternoon light just right. Those afternoons in the window seat sipping an icy frappé and flipping through the pages of a dog-eared book from the market restored my aching heart.

Ya-Yá's home was one of the last solitary buildings on her street. Most of the old houses in downtown Athens had been replaced by apartment buildings or turned into shops.

Because of a lack of space, if someone wanted to build a new house, they would just build on top of someone else's. But Ya-Yá had no local family to build above her, and so her house had stood firm against the tide of progress. She even had a small, cluttered garden where a twisty cypress tree stood tall behind the cast iron fence among a few fragrant citrus trees.

It was an incredibly valuable bit of property, using up that much space for a simple, run-down home. The bank had been quick to point out the wisdom of selling. The property would fall to them if I did not fulfill every task specified in the Will.

I gulped and attempted further speech. As long as I didn't look at his photo album, I was pretty sure I could accomplish a few sentences. "Mr. Elliot, why don't you get your lunch to go, and we can head

straight to Ya-Yá's cold storage unit to pick up Chrysanthemum."

There, that wasn't so bad. Although, the use of "cold storage unit" and "Chrysanthemum" in the same sentence sent gooseflesh creeping across my skin. Ugh!

Shane Elliott was insufferable, but I absolutely had to fulfill my grandmother's last wishes. If Chrysanthemum must be stuffed and placed upon the mantel in two days' time, then I would see it done.

3

Chrysanthemum On Ice

It took a fair bit of searching the day before, but I had finally located Ya-Yá's storage receipt for Chrysanthemum. It was in her cookie jar along with half a batch of semi-petrified *Kourabiedes* or Greek butter cookies and a handful of individually wrapped peppermints.

Receipt in hand, Shane and I took a taxi to Athens Professional Freezing Services.

The last time I'd ridden in a taxi in Athens, I'd been a teenager and immune to the stark terror that gripped me as we zipped through the narrow, crowded streets. Only compact cars crammed the roads, but they made up for their lack in size with an obstreperous flare of daring and speed.

Shane seemed oblivious to our peril.

An awkward silence hung over us for some minutes. We were traveling to retrieve a frozen cat after all. Could there be any quest more awkward than that?

Shane took in the scenery with intent scrutiny.

Strange, I couldn't imagine the bustling, Mediterranean metropolis charming a Montana man. I'd heard they were all about wide open spaces, vast herds of leaping antelope, and fending off bears in the

dead of night with only a bowie knife and a toothbrush. Maybe it was just the fascination of coming out of a place he understood and leaping into something totally new.

Athens was impressive with its vast blue sky, salt-scented Mediterranean beaches, and the leafy shadows of orange and lemon trees cooling each bustling street. But my city was also crowded, polluted, and incredibly hot.

I had expected Shane to note Athens's every deficiency and none of her charms.

Finally, Shane turned away from the window and held my gaze. "Something confounds me, Miss Jack."

"It's Jacqueline. And I'm not surprised."

His mouth tipped in a lopsided grin, and I did notice that his eyes were a pleasant shade of blue. Along with his light brown hair and the touch of stubble along his jaw, Shane had a certain amount of appeal. But he was not the dental surgeon I was destined for.

I'd spent three months in college helping a friend with a project for her psychology major. She made an all-inclusive testing system to find one's perfect match.

I was waiting for Mr. Right. He would be a dental surgeon with a passion for financing foreign missions, and a love of Bonsai gardening. Neither Evzen nor Shane fit the bill. I was only twenty-seven. I could be patient and await the Bonsai gardening dental surgeon that God would surely bring my way.

Although, God was a little behind schedule. My prayer chart/life plan clearly stated that I was supposed to meet him two years ago. Perhaps I should have spent more prayer hours discussing specific time frames? I tore my attention away from the dental

professional of my dreams and back to the taxidermist of my nightmares.

“What...confounds you, Mr. Elliott?”

“Why go to all the trouble of flying a Montana boy across two oceans to come and stuff your cat? Aren't there any taxidermists in Greece? Or did you just flip through a U.S. phone book and like the sound of my name?”

Argh, that flirty smile again. But there really was no way to make my explanation sound even remotely sane, so I simply plunged ahead. “Chrysanthemum was my Ya-Yá's, my grandmother's, cat and she had a coupon.”

“Hmmm...but the cost of my plane ticket has surely negated any savings. You must have really wanted me to fly over here, Miss Jack.”

“It's Jacqueline, and yes, I know. I am losing a terrible amount of money. But...” This was ridiculous. I sighed and handed him my Ya-Yá's list.

Shane took the paper and spread it out against the back of the seat. His grin widened as he read.

“She died unexpectedly, and this was found with her Will,” I said. “Her lawyer doesn't know if she meant it to be, but since it was in the same envelope, this list is now part of the document. The bank reads it as a collection of requirements that I must fulfill before I can inherit Ya-Yá's house. I spent every summer with her when I was a girl. There is no other place in the world like Ya-Yá's home. I can't let the bank take it.”

I looked up, bracing myself for that teasing smile.

Instead, Shane met my eyes and simply nodded. “I understand,” he said. “My grandfather loved the sea.”

For a moment I thought that was all he was going to say.

Shane sat silently beside me in the cab, looking out the window as the city blurred past. Then he startled me by picking up the conversation, softly, as though the memories might evaporate if spoken with too much force. "Grandpa learned how to drive a boat before he ever sat behind the wheel of a car and lied about his age to join the navy." Shane flashed me that quick, crooked smile. "I grew up on tall tales about the ocean. When someone is precious to you, sometimes you soak up a bit of who they are."

OK, so perhaps Shane wasn't the flannel-wearing ogre I had imagined. I yanked my gaze away from his profile as he grew silent, staring out the window as though waiting to catch a glimpse of his grandfather sailing on the bright Mediterranean ocean. But his new non-ogre status did not make Shane a dental surgeon.

The taxi rolled to a stop outside a long row of storage units.

Shane exited his door. He walked around and opened mine before I had a chance to process all that he had said. He was right though.

The love and attention Ya-Yá lavished on me every summer had seeped in and changed me. Her house was a symbol of all that.

Shane offered me his hand. "Well, Miss Jack. Let's go find your cat."

"It's Jacqueline." I took his hand and let him help me from the car. Hey, there's no use getting all grubby scrambling out of vehicles if someone's offered to help. Right?

The manager of the storage units glanced at my receipt and walked us along a long line of garage-style doors to unit twenty-three.

"This can't be right. She wouldn't need all this

space for one cat.”

“It was a fat cat, right? Big fluffy Persian?” The manager replied in Greek.

After eight summers of listening to Ya-Yá muttering in the kitchen, I could understand him. I just couldn’t speak the language very well. He was right. Chrysanthemum had been quite obese in her prime. While there were too many starving animals on the streets of Athens, Chrysanthemum had never been one of them. Nonetheless, she was not so large that she needed an entire storage unit.

“Not this fat.” I replied in English.

The manager winked at Shane when he rolled up the metal door. The name “Adras” was stitched across his breast pocket. A cool blast of air chilled the sweat from my face and sent a shiver across my skin. The storage unit had been divided up into row after row of refrigerated drawers. Like a safety deposit vault at a bank...or a morgue.

“Most people want more space. They have a small business, need to store extra merchandise. So we sell the whole unit. But a few just need a spot for their extra freezer jam, whole wheat baking supplies, or the remains of their pet. We have this unit for that.”

Shane saw me shiver and held out his flannel. “Are you cold?”

“Not that cold.”

He smiled and slipped the flannel back on. I couldn’t help but take note of how his tan, muscular arms and broad back stretched the thin cotton of his t-shirt. *Focus, girl. The cat. Go get that cat.* I snapped around and followed Adras to one of the drawers in the back.

He glanced down at my receipt and unlocked