

A Cave for Women
by John P. Nordin

"He's not a has-been, Jack, he's a never-was." He turned from his amused contempt for the clumsy tourist, scanned the bustle of the Paris street and sipped his coffee. But his name wasn't Jack, he didn't have any coffee, and he wasn't in Paris. He was lying on the floor of his tiny third-floor flat at the middle of a grimy industrial street, his head an inch from the grimy track of the sliding door to the narrow balcony.

He thought about last night in the dingy club in the basement room and the woman that had come gliding up to him, asking him for a cigarette, a transparent maneuver from an experienced, high-class hooker. Except there'd not been a woman and he hadn't been in a club. He'd gone to the basement of Costas' auto parts store to retrieve a package he was delivering to a customer out on the northern fringe of Athens.

A truck, its muffler full of holes, roared up his street. He was in the industrial district that hugged the shore west of Athens. On a clear day he could look across the water to the island of Salamis. There had been a famous naval battle there in 480 BC, some Persians, running in retreat must have beached their ships someplace close to where he lived. The joke was that the battle had been 2,500 years ago, but they hadn't gotten around to cleaning things up yet. His street of haphazard shops, dingy store fronts none painted in years, signs falling apart, windows dirty or cracked, broken cars and scooters everywhere, was where he could afford to live.

How his life had fallen apart was a mystery to him. He'd had advantages. He'd come from a stable home, he'd gone to college, got his degree in Mechanical Engineering, got a decent job after graduation. There'd been a failed marriage; a marriage that failed after seven years of silence and distance, one they had both ended with no more drama than taking out the trash. No kids with lives to rip apart, thank god. He'd been laid off from his job, was that when it started to go wrong? But he'd gotten a decent severance package and his friends had all handled it as a lark and found new work, he'd taken

longer to do that. He'd turned down one job offer that wasn't all that desirable then grabbed at another when his money was about to run out.

There'd been several short term jobs, each seemingly more tenuous than the last, each just lasting long enough to pay off the debt from being unemployed after the last one ended. There'd been another run at a good company with a good salary and he'd made a mistake: he'd put as much money as he could into his retirement funds, worried he'd fallen behind. Later when he needed it to live he'd had to pay the tax penalty for taking it out early. Less a mistake than a good decision that went bad.

There'd been a broken leg from a car accident, that had put him off work for a while. It wasn't in any way his fault, he'd been a passenger and the other driver ran a red light, but the time off meant someone else got a promotion and when he came back to work there was a new boss who didn't know him and they didn't get along.

And so he'd quit that job confident he could find another—and then he couldn't. Something was always off, they'd always hired someone else, or the job closed or something. No one wants to be associated with a man on a losing streak and his friends stopped calling, and his energy declined, and employers don't like that, and soon he had to tap his retirement accounts and then he had to face moving out of his modest apartment into an even more modest one, except now, he couldn't get approved to rent because his credit was not the best.

And so one day he packed up the few things he'd been keeping at the one remaining friend's house, promised to stay in touch, his friend's relief at seeing him go barely disguised. He'd already sold off enough of his few possessions to fit everything into the smallest of storage lockers, paid the fee six months in advance, drove to the dealer and completed the sale of his car, and took the bus to the airport.

He'd visited Greece once before with his wife, they'd had one of the few joyful times of their marriage there, and so he went back. It took him two days, and one night wandering the city and sleeping where he could, to find this run down, tiny, noisy and insecure place to live in a part of Athens no tourist would go to and no tourist agent would publicize.

He figured that he had enough money to exist for a year before his retirement savings were gone. And then? And then he would die, he thought.

But he hadn't died. He'd been there 18 months now. He'd picked up the odd job here and there from the local businesses, always cash, always unreported. He didn't speak fluent Greek but he was learning. The local owners spoke English, but not close to fluently and so he was of use sometimes to explain a contract to them. Sometimes he drove for them. Sometimes, he was the middle man, the cut-out, in a deal that was dishonest only in that the two parties were dodging taxes and it was useful to have a foreigner around as the potential fall guy if it went bad.

He'd overstayed the time his entry permit allowed, but no one was looking for him. He'd let the locker back in the US go, there wasn't anything in there that really held good memories. He was homeless in all but name, a man without any country. And he couldn't understand how it had happened to him.

Chapter 2

He'd decided he needed to die. His plan was to walk until he died. He was a walker, he had nothing else to do, and it was cheaper than drinking. He had to watch his funds day by day, metering out his Euros one at a time, carefully counting what he could still deduct from his tiny remaining savings, what he could earn from his collection of day jobs. So he walked instead of taking the bus or, even less likely, a taxi. He'd always thought he'd end his life when his money ran out.

It had run out three times already. The first time, he thought he would walk until he died. He walked 23 miles. He thought it should be, would be like falling asleep. You are in bed, you're awake, and then suddenly, you're asleep but you have no memory of the moment of falling asleep. So, he'd walk. He'd walk and walk and walk, and there would be a moment when his body would collapse and he would die but he'd have no anticipation of when it would happen and no memory of dying.

Twenty three miles, he'd gone, out from the end of the bus line, out along one street after another, one road after the other, not a Euro in his pocket, the last used on the bus fare.

He did collapse but he didn't die and some locals found him and one drove him back to the end of another bus line and one gave him bus fare and the next morning he woke up to find he had a day job and enough pay to last three days.

The second time he had cheated. He'd walked 17 miles in a different direction, collapsed at a taverna, but had kept enough money for the bus trip back. The third time he'd walked in a big circle, all 26 miles, like a marathon, ending at his house.

So maybe he didn't really want to die. But he certainly had no dream of a future, no plan.

He'd sit in the cheapest of coffee places with some of those he worked with and he'd see a woman getting out of a car, impressive in black leather, but no one could see her but him. He'd be walking and see some thugs beating a woman, robbing a tourist, he'd save them and in gratitude ... but his dream dissolved usually before he could even invent something material they would do out of gratitude.

He used to imagine drinks with some woman that led to energetic sex, sweaty bodies giving and taking pleasure on his bed but it had been a while since he'd even imagined that. Now he could only imagine seeing a desirable woman; he lacked the energy to even imagine having intimacy with one.

He had achieved the nirvana that supposedly was the goal of his harried friends: he lived in the moment, without past or future, without plans or hope.

Except that every Sunday he set aside the cash he could spend that week and put whatever else remained back in the locked box, back in the corner of the bedroom and then ignored it. For ten minutes every week he had a plan and a future and for ten more minutes once a month he paid the rent but that was it. The rest of the time had no forward or backward. He just was.

Except that the money was gone.

Chapter 3

When he did his calculation this Sunday he had just enough for the week ahead and there was nothing to put back in the lock box. Nothing. So by next Sunday pm he would be totally out of money. He had no credit cards, those had gone a long time ago. The economy was bad, the institutions of the European Union were squeezing Greece demanding that the sins of the politicians be paid for by the unemployment and hunger of ordinary people. Businesses were closing, people disappearing from his street, more and more windows cracked, fewer and fewer lights on in the evening. Dark stories were swirling around the papers: this guy had shot himself when his pension was cut, that person down the street had jumped off the roof, this other person had gone to live in the hills.

And he would be out of money by Sunday. Oh, yes, he knew he had some food in the apartment, he could live a few days past Sunday. Maybe there'd be a job. The rent wasn't due for nearly three weeks. But the times were getting worse and his jobs were fewer and farther between.

It had never occurred to him before now that he could steal. It had never occurred to him that he could beg. He was an American, he looked American, no Greek could take him for a Greek. He could try picking pockets, he could try begging for money from the tourists, he could try coming up with a story about a stolen wallet and needing taxi fare to the U.S. Embassy.

On Wednesday he even walked into Syntagma Square, the heart of Athens, to see about begging. He stood there open mouthed at the swirl of tourists, loud and richly decked in cameras, bags, backpacks, hats and more bags. It almost hurt his eyes, the wealth, the careless wealth. He found a Euro coin on the street, such a thing meant nothing to whoever dropped it, but it was another few hours of time for him before he hit zero.

He was absolutely convinced that when he did hit zero his life would end like a parking meter that had run out of time. He would just stop existing, he would have expired, his account gone. He wandered into one of the many chapels that were scattered about the city. He dropped a small coin in the collection box and took a candle to light it. The candle would burn out and die. No one grieved for a

candle that had no more wax to burn. No one would grieve him. He sat in a pew, not exactly praying, not exactly not praying either.

He used to ask, "what should I do?" or "how can I survive?" but he no longer asked those questions as there had never been an answer.

He walked east up the main street until he was close to the American Embassy. He looked at it for a while, then decided that he had another day or two, and turned and went back to his apartment, arriving at dusk.

On Friday, he could delay no longer. He put on fresh clothes and shortly after dawn caught the first of several busses to get back to the Embassy. He would have walked, but there was no point in saving money now.

Why was he going to the Embassy? He felt that at least he could clean up some loose ends, leave some information behind, so people might know who to call when his body was found, for he was convinced beyond any doubt that when he opened his money box on Sunday and found it empty that he would die exactly at that instant.

He approached the Embassy, presented his passport, was admitted to the line for Consular Services and waited. He felt oddly at peace, he wasn't sure if he'd be arrested, fined or something else, but whatever happened, it would be the long feared end, it would be here and not something to speculate as to how it would be.

He got to the clerk, explained his situation. He'd entered Greece legally, but had been here long after the expiration of his tourist entry permit. Before he had even finished talking the clerk interrupted him, told him that he was violating Greek laws, not American ones, the Embassy could not advise him on Greek laws and please step aside for the next person. He tried to protest, tried to explain that he had a different purpose, but the clerk had no category to put him in, there was no procedure for "person about to die who wants to leave a note behind."

He left the Embassy stunned, adrift, lost in a way he'd not been before. It was silly, contradictory, for him now to feel that he had no idea what to do, wasn't that how he'd felt for months? But somehow

this was worse, the Embassy had been a plan. He'd spent more than his budget on busses this week, all he could do was walk home again, something that took hours. He had done a lot of walking over the 18 months he'd been in Greece, but seldom did such long walks two days in a row. He was in considerable pain by the time he limped home to his apartment.

The Embassy had been hope, a chance to do one last positive, responsible thing, and it was gone now. Of course, he could have gone to a Greek police station, but after all these months of avoiding the police, this he was reluctant to do. The Greek police were disorganized, and the likelihood that they would notify anyone in the United States for him was non-existent.

He slept late on Saturday and never left his apartment. He did some cleaning up, threw out some food that would soon go bad, took out the trash, dusted. He wanted it all to be clean for whoever found it. He was even more convinced that on Sunday afternoon when he opened his money box and saw it empty that he would die, instantly, calmly, without fuss.

Sunday morning, he walked out of his apartment, down a few blocks to a church and attended the service. He could never decide if he believed or not but he wanted to do something, just something.

After service he went around to some of the local spots, maybe to say goodbye, maybe just to see if there was a job, but he knew there wouldn't be any. And it was Sunday, many places were closed, he had trapped himself, he should have spent the past week actively searching for work or things to sell or something. But he was beyond actions to save his life.

Sunday afternoon. He sat on the floor of his bedroom and looked at the box, unopened. He had a dilemma. He still had four Euros in coins in his pocket. Sometimes when he had been ahead of his budget he had skipped the Sunday opening and calculation, waiting till Monday or Tuesday to spin things out.

What could he do with four Euros? He went to his kitchen and ate what little food he had left. He ate so slowly, and apparently spaced out, because it was late in the afternoon when he realized that he still hadn't opened his money box. But he had the four Euros. Now he began to think that until he was totally out of money, opening the box would not kill him. It was a paralyzing fear, for if he opened the

box while he still had the Euros, it might curse the entire process and prevent it from killing him if he opened it again later. He'd need to be totally, absolutely out of money, not a cent, no hidden reserves, nothing in pants pockets or under the couch.

Again he was on the floor, looking at the box. And again he didn't open it. Again he must of stayed there for a long time because it had become dark. He drank a glass of the tap water with its iron tang. Four Euros.

And eventually, he fell asleep.

He had really walked a long distance two days running and he was exhausted from lack of food. He slept late into Monday morning. Down the block from his apartment was a gyro place, he could get one for 3.75. That and a small tip would take care of his remaining cash. He got up, now a little light-headed and slowly and painfully walked down to the stand, got his gyro, took it back to his apartment and slowly ate it. Now there was nothing to stop him, as he'd left the last of his loose change as a tip and all his money was gone.

Shortly after he finished his gyro there was a knock at the door.

Chapter 4

He stared dumbfounded at his door. He should ignore it, but he couldn't stop the natural reaction of getting up, and answering it. Standing there was a spectacularly beautiful woman, long curved jet-black hair, tightly tailored jacket over a very low cut dark purple t-shirt above a very short skirt that revealed very toned legs in 4 inch heels.

"Yes."

"Kevin Paulson?"

"Yes."

"Oh good, can I come in, I was told you could help me with an errand."

People who needed his services never came to him, they went to a business in the area. None of them were likely to give out his name because that would cut them out of a share of the profits. This wasn't making sense.

By now she had sort of elbowed her way into the apartment and he got a look at her legs in action and her swaying hips.

"What business do you think I'm in?"

"Oh, I have an object to pick up at the harbor, Piraeus? I was told you could drive there and get it."

"I don't own a car."

"Oh that's no trouble we can use mine."

"Why don't you just go get the package?"

"I don't know the ins and outs of dealing with Greek officials, I was told you were good at that, it would be very helpful. And I could pay you, of course, would 50 Euros be acceptable?"

He looked at her. He'd never composed a fantasy this absurd, and in months past he'd composed some good ones involving a couple of women who looked like her.

"Who referred you to me?"

"Does it really matter? I think his name was Costas or Yourgos." She waved in the general direction of the street. "He has a little business over there."

"What brought you out this way?"

"Goodness, it sounds like you're not actually wanting to make some money. Here," she dug into the purse she had slung over one shoulder and pulled out several Euro notes, he could see that one at least was a 100 Euro note. "I do have the money."

What on earth could this be? A prank? But which of his friends could even know such a woman? She was richly dressed, her purse was expensive, her hair and makeup were perfect, just flawless, not the least overdone, a professional job. Was this a setup? Who would bother with doing that? He could be robbed on the street much more easily and besides he had nothing worth taking.

A long moment of silence had built between them. She stepped towards him and he caught a whiff of her perfume, subtle and fresh. She smiled and it was an inviting one, a smile promising more, much more. And that decided it for him.

"I'm sorry, I am not in the market for work today." He took her elbow and moved her towards the door, she didn't really resist. "I am not available." He said it with a finality, a firmness. She seemed shocked by this directness and let herself be pushed out the door. He shut it on her.

He fully expected a second knock, a scene, something. But, oddly, nothing came. He moved to the side of his front window and could see her walking back to a black Mercedes and getting in and driving off. What the hell had that been about?

Her intrusion into his quiet, silent ending to his life had disturbed his thoughts. He forgot about his plan to end ever needing plans again, forgot about his money box. He sat on his balcony for an hour looking past the clutter of roofs with their little huts, bent antennas and rusting solar water heaters. There was one little gap between two buildings where he could see the gray bulk of the island of Salamis in the distance. A low building formed the bottom of the gap and blocked him from seeing the bay between the mainland and the island. On some days he could see the mist rising from the sea, but today it was just

pollution. He looked and looked at the little opening and the featureless blank of the island behind it, willing himself to fly to it and through it and into the nothingness of the beyond.

Later he left the apartment and slowly walked to the end of the block to one of his regular tavernas, just as if it was a normal Monday, totally forgetting he had no money. The place was a little dive, looking grimly seedy to an outsider but had come to be homey and familiar to him. He settled into a wooden chair that creaked with every movement. He looked at the walls, bare except for a single calendar on one wall and a faded and dusty Greek flag on the other.

The waitress and owner approached, her husband and co-owner was the cook. And then he realized. "I'm sorry, I don't have any money. Just let me sit here for a bit." His face had reddened.

"I bring you a snack, you pay tomorrow."

But there is no tomorrow; I'll be dead then. But what could he say, he felt trapped in a way that simply running out of money and dying alone did not make him feel.

He barely noticed the three people entering the room, but as they made their way to his table he was startled to see the woman who'd knocked on his door and two men. One man was in an expensive suit and had that indefinable look of management and authority about him. The other man was the muscle, close cropped hair, wide shoulders, a permanent wary look on his face. They sat down on the creaky wooden chairs without asking.

Suit spoke first, "Mr. Paulson, we'd like a word with you." That sentence could be said as menace, as the start of a sales pitch for a product you didn't want, Suit said it evenly, even pleasantly, as if he would have left had Kevin told him to.

Kevin just gave a slight shrug and open gesture with his hands as if to say, 'go ahead.'

Suit continued, "you've met Jennifer already, and I fear we may have gotten off on the wrong foot with you."

"Who are you?"

Suit looked about and took a breath. "We apologize for the indirect approach we took to you at first, but we are with the United States Government."

"Really?"

"Yea, really." That was muscle, playing his expected clichéd role in this movie scene. He'd grunted out the words and now was glaring at Kevin.

Kevin slightly inclined his head to Muscle and slowly turned to address Suit. "You'll forgive me for wondering what could possibly have attracted this much attention to me."

Suit nodded and smiled. "Yes, I'm sure this seems totally out of the blue, but, to get right to the point, you have some unique skills that we would like to employ. And since you once worked on a CIA project, we think you might be willing to work for the government again—work quietly for the government."

Kevin was at first puzzled by the CIA reference. He'd never worked for them, did they just have the wrong person? But then he had an glimmering of what absurd mistake they'd made.

"So, you know who I am, but let me make sure I know who you are: what was my CIA project?"

Suit nodded again, he was making a decent effort to be friendly. "Yes, that's smart of you. I'm referring to that year you worked at Development Research Planners in Lima, Ohio. The satellite data analysis project."

It's was Kevin's turn to nod. He was about to blurt out that he'd been a research associate, had never touched a classified document on that project and had just been doing a literature search for papers in the open literature on remote sensing. It had been a job unrelated to his degree but a friend of a friend had got him the nine month job when he really needed it and it had been pleasant enough work.

But the CIA wasn't supposed to know that he'd been on the project since he had no security clearance (and in fact had never done or seen anything needing one). The one day a CIA officer had come to the company to confer with the project managers he'd been told to make himself scarce, work on something else, and not even talk to the project managers. He'd hid by a window that faced the entrance when the CIA rep was due and saw a middle-aged man with a white mustache carrying a big leather bag walk by.

How had the CIA known about his work on the project? Maybe someone talked or some billing statement had his hours on it. Whatever.

"I've not done anything with remote sensing after that."

"We know, our proposal for you doesn't involve that it is your other skills and circumstance that we care about."

"And that is?"

"First, you seem to be in good shape and this project will involve a lot of walking, hiking really." How had they known he was a walker? Had they been following him? For how long?

"Secondly, you are off the grid. Totally, utterly off the grid. I congratulate you, these days it is quite unusual, almost impossible to be so invisible, at least for an American with a college education. We can use that."

He sat there for a moment. "I need some sort of confirmation that you are with the U.S. government."

Suit pulled out a business card. "Yes. You know the number of the American Embassy?" Receiving Kevin's nod, he continued. "Call the main number, ask for extension 2765. When it picks up, tell them you are doing a verification check on two names. He pushed his card across. It said Scott Pinket, 3rd cultural attaché, U.S. Embassy, Athens. The woman also had pulled out a card. Jennifer Abbott, special advisor to the cultural attaché, U.S. Embassy, Athens. There was no chance they were part of the regular diplomatic service, the job titles were a cover.

"You can use my phone."

"I'll use the taverna's phone." Kevin took the cards and got up. As he approached the counter where the phone was, the waitress came over and whispered to him. "You in trouble Mr. Kevin? I called Aristides and Prokopios, they will be here soon, don't worry." He could only express his thanks. Those two had never been very friendly to him, the outsider, the *xenios*. But the arrival of three even more outside outsiders had suddenly made him one of the family.

He called the number, asked for the extension, gave the names, and received a curt "valid" for each one. Well, that was something.

He came back to the table and put the cards down. "Well, it seems you are who you say you are. What do you want with me?"

"Mr. Paulson, I'll not waste your time with small talk. We want you to be a courier. In this digital age, everyone is online, communication is online. And privacy is a joke, even encrypted communication with your bank, to say nothing of your email, it's all being monitored by someone. By the NSA, by the DIA, by the CIA, who knows—and by the Chinese, by the Russians, and worst of all, by Google, Apple, and a couple of other media companies.

"Sometimes we need something transmitted with no record kept of it. It could be documents, it could be instructions, it could be cash, but usually not. It won't be a full time job, but it could be interesting, travel around Greece, travel to neighboring countries. Of course, those trips outside Greece will have to involve some procedures to not leave traces. But we'll come to that eventually."

He stopped, looked at Kevin. "Are you interested?"

Kevin knew he should express hesitation and death was still attractive to him. Should he ask more questions, ask about the pay? But he was never one to be indirect or coy, he was an engineer. Perhaps that sort of honesty and transparency was part of why he so often lost in human competitions.

"Yes, I'm interested."

"Good. But I stress to you that you must not alter your habits, you must stay as far off the grid as you have been doing."

"I appreciate that, but the three of you coming here, that has sort of blown my cover in this neighborhood." He'd noticed Aristides and Prokopios slipping into seats on the far wall. So help him, Aristides was carrying a club.

"Actually, I suspect we've raised your standing in the neighborhood. Why don't you tell people that we're European representatives of a company you used to work for, that you're being considered for a position, but, in a few days, mind you, you can say you got turned down.

"And, we propose to pay you 500 Euros a week as a retainer to keep you on call and to ask that you not be working for anyone else, not take a regular job, not change your habits or living. It's not a princely sum, but it will always be in cash, with no receipts or government records or taxes, so that will help. And here is your first weeks' pay." Pinket indicated a hand reaching below the table. Kevin stuck his hand out, they met in the middle, and some notes transferred hands. Kevin put them in his pocket without looking at them. No one else would have seen the transfer.

"But there is an issue, my entry permit has long since expired, I'm not here legally anymore."

"Well, you'd be surprised how many people are in that category and the Greeks don't really look for them unless something comes up, but you're right that is a potential distraction we don't want. Come to the embassy tomorrow, go to councilor services and present this card." He handed back his card to Kevin but now he had written the word "Jackson" above his own name. Kevin pocketed the card.

"They'll take care of that problem."

"Isn't that a Greek government function?"

"It is, but we cooperate with the Greeks on security matters and you'll find that despite their public image, there is a very serious part of the Greek police. Amazing what getting paid regularly and well and having modern equipment and access to good intelligence does for their motivation. We'll take care of you.

"And then, while you are there, if you could manage to be there at 2pm Jennifer will meet with you and go over some preparation for your first trip." He quickly looked around. "We've probably stayed here long enough." They made to leave.

But Muscle, who'd never given Kevin a card, spoke up. "Mr. Paulson, I just have to ask. We're all very impressed that you turned Jennifer down, her technique slipping? She had bad breath? Too fat?"

Kevin noted Jennifer's discomfort at this, and at the startling transformation in Muscle's attitude to him.

He was silent for a second, ran his eyes across the three of them before turning back to Muscle. He spoke evenly. "In the history of the universe, how often does a woman like that throw herself at

someone in my situation? No," he shook his head, "if you want to entrap a loser you need to send a less impressive woman."

He saw Muscle's appreciative gaze back at him. He didn't see either that Pitken had a thoughtful look or that Jennifer sat up just a bit taller.

Pitken broke the silence. He held Kevin's eyes. "Earlier today we were trying to entrap a loser. Now we are glad to have recruited a highly desirable asset." He slowly extended his hand. Kevin took it. The three got up and left.

In the car driving back to the Embassy the three of them were encouraged. Jennifer had noticed Kevin's lean physique, his easy walk when he went to the phone, and she appreciated the compliment he'd paid her, and was actually relieved she had so easily gotten out of a very uncomfortable and insulting role that she'd been assigned to play.

Muscle, his name was Derek Bruce, was also impressed. He'd given that little challenge of the "yea, really" deliberately, wanted to gage Paulson's reaction. He'd noted that Paulson had neither cringed nor blustered, hadn't apologized, but hadn't escalated the conflict either. He'd given respect back to Derek. It wasn't much to go on, but it was a better reaction than most. He never guessed that Paulson's response was as much based on a belief he was going to die in hours as anything else.

Pitken was also positive. He hadn't planned on giving Paulson any money right then, he'd normally have seen if he would show up at the Embassy. But Paulson's obvious poverty, his clothes and shoes were about to fall apart, with his directness and sense to ask for a check on their identities, as well as the good tradecraft of not using Pitken's phone, that was all very encouraging.

"Where are you going to send him first?"

"A local trip at first, just so he gets the procedures down. Then, I think Hydra, to our monitoring station there at the monastery. We really need to send them updated ciphers."

"I notice you didn't tell him what happened to the last two couriers."

"No, but neither of them was so far off the grid as Paulson, and I think neither of them had the common sense he appears to have. I think this will likely work out better. But, I have no intention of sending him to Delphi or to Brindisi on his first few trips. We'll work into it."

"You really want him coming to the Embassy?" This was from Jennifer.

"One more time shouldn't be that big a risk. You'll be his handler as we discussed and meet someplace outside the Embassy after you get him set up. As long as he doesn't make the mistakes the others made ..." he shrugged.

He turned around in his seat to look at Jennifer riding in the back. "I know you weren't very happy about how we did our initial approach to him. But I think it worked out well. He obviously found you attractive but could still think. He wasn't blinded by your dazzle. We're damn lucky he came to the Embassy and the clerk noted his name."

She nodded. She was still fuming inside. She'd sought out the job of handler of agents, it seemed a promotion, a position of responsibility. But there'd been a dark side to it: the constant assumption that her "feminine wiles" would keep male agents in line. Even in complimenting her, Pitken was still assuming her job was to be bait to clueless males. But Kevin had impressed her, he hadn't been rattled by their meeting. Maybe it would work out.