

ARIADNE: CHAPTER ONE

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One



ARIADNE APHRODITE ABRAHAM

Ariadne rolled her shoulders and tried not to scowl. The gentle harp music playing in the background was starting to get on her nerves. Rather than relax her it was starting to rile her. Well to be fair, that and the fact this had to be without a doubt the most boring party she had ever attended, despite the impressive layout of food and an unending supply of good quality wine. She rested her hip against the side of the long table and sighed. The lack of life was particularly worrisome given that it was her sister's engagement party.

Ariadne glanced over at her sister, Amaryllis, and her face was transformed by a fond smile. She was truly and incredibly happy for the two of them. It was obvious they were desperately in love. It just worried her that the gulf between their two families was so wide. Putting an eccentric label on her family was a gross understatement and calling Martin's family boring was, quite frankly, being kind. Unfortunately, his family had organised the engagement party, which brought her thoughts back to how deadly boring it was.

They had spin doctored the announcement that they were organising the party on the basis of financial capacity—the Templetons were rolling in money, whereas Ariadne's age-

ing, hippie parents were not—although Ariadne was sure that the decision was actually based on their doubt regarding her mother's capacity to organise a tasteful, elegant gathering, which as far as Ariadne was concerned, may have been a fair call. Having said that, had her mother organised it, the party would have been nothing like this.

A small smile passed across Ariadne's face as Amaryllis leaned into Martin, turning his face to her for a quick kiss. The whole manoeuvre was completed before Martin had registered what was happening and the expression of shock on his face was amusing. Amaryllis met Ariadne's eye across the party and winked. Ariadne's face split into a huge grin in response. They were both aware that Martin intensely disliked public displays of affection. Martin was also aware that Amaryllis was overly fond of spontaneous displays of affection. Ariadne sipped her wine, not for the first time wondering about the suitability of polar opposites for a long and happy marriage.

Zac stood at a distance against a side wall and surveyed the scene. He had long since lost interest in the party. It was yet another boring Templeton affair and he had been present at countless numbers of them over the years. At least Martin's fiancée seemed to have a little life and zest about her. Zac was contemplating on running a book to see how long it took for Martin's parents to suck the life out of her. They tended to have that effect on people.

His gaze flicked over to the couple that he assumed were the parents of Martin's fiancée. They were certainly different. In terms of dress, they stood out like sore thumbs in their flowing, natural fabrics amidst the sea of grey and black formal wear. They were also much more animated than the rest of the gathering and were laughing with each other and enjoying

themselves, which he gave them credit for, being no small feat in this stultifying environment.

His attention moved to the woman in the blue velvet dress. He hadn't worked out where she fitted in yet, but it was one hell of a dress: fitted, stopping mid-thigh and cut across from shoulder to shoulder, leaving her collar bones showing, making the perfect backdrop for the blue velvet choker sporting what he assumed was a decent sized, blue topaz. The dress emphasised her lithe body, whilst the topaz in the hollow of her throat highlighted her alabaster skin.

He watched as her attention moved to the happy couple and a small smile passed across her face. Seconds later, the bride-to-be winked at her, she grinned back and he had some answer as to her connection to Martin's fiancée. From what he had seen of her family so far, it would also explain why she looked as bored as he felt.

Lost in her thoughts as she was, Ariadne hadn't noticed the guy who appeared beside her until he spoke, proffering his hand.

'Zaccheus Zebedee Zillman.'

Startled, her hand flinched and she checked to make sure that she hadn't slopped wine over the side of her glass and down the front of her velvet gown, before turning to him and raising one eyebrow in disbelief. She adopted a haughty tone in her response and did her best to look down her nose at him, albeit a difficult task, given that he was slightly taller than she.

'Sure you are. So which of them put you up to it?'

Zac looked at her blankly. Ariadne gave him points for his acting skills, but it didn't decrease her pissed off factor any and she placed her wine glass on the table, crossed her arms in front of her chest and levelled him with what she hoped was her best don't mess with me look.

‘Look, I’ve got no idea who you are or who put you up to this, but I’ve heard all the jokes before, okay?’

She paused for a second her irritation mounting.

‘Let me see, “If you’re triple A, you must be super top quality”, or maybe “AA, do they get you to chair their meetings?” How about, “Abraham was the father of many, how about you and I get together and make me the father of many?”’

She levelled him with a look that she hoped would fell a tree before continuing her barrage.

‘The more intelligent ones have a go at, “Ariadne is the leader of lost people, and I’d be lost without you,” or “Aphrodite is the goddess of love and beauty and baby did they get that right with you!”’

Her eyes were just about spitting fire at this stage.

‘So pretty much there is no joke that you could make that I haven’t already heard, although introducing yourself with an imaginative, fake name was at least a little original.’

By the end of her tirade Ariadne was looking fit to be tied and whilst Zac had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, she had intrigued and amused him. Even though he was sure he wasn’t doing himself any favours he started to chuckle.

‘Introducing myself normally elicits a response, bit hard not to with a name like Zaccheus Zebedee Zillman, and I will admit that I do play on my unusual name a little with the ladies, but I have to say I have never been received quite like that.’

He paused for a second, trying to rein in his laughter before he continued.

‘In all honesty I have absolutely no idea what any of that was about, but they sound like some pretty funny stories, so if you’d like to elaborate...’

Zac finished with one eyebrow raised in question. Whatever response Ariadne was going to make was cut off by the arrival of Martin.

‘Have you two been introduced?’

Zac decided to reply, given that Ariadne still seemed to be fuming.

'We were just getting around to that.'

Martin beamed at the two of them, in that overly happy way of someone contentedly paired up and hoping to pair others up as well.

'In that case, let me do the honours. Ariadne Abraham, may I present my second cousin Zaccheus Zillman. Zac, Ariadne is Amaryllis's sister and therefore soon to be my sister-in-law.'

Martin paused for a second, not sure how to interpret the odd look on Ariadne's face and not liking to deal with messy situations of any description if he didn't have to, decided to beat a hasty retreat.

'I'll leave the two of you to get acquainted.'

With his last words, Martin disappeared into the crowd to mingle a little more, leaving alone an even more amused Zac, and a mortified Ariadne. They both started to speak at the same moment.

'Look, I'm really...'

'My apologies...'

Zac's grin grew even bigger as they both stopped. Ariadne's frown increased if anything, which unfortunately seemed to add to Zac's amusement and it was he who spoke.

'By all means you go first.'

Ariadne drew in a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself before she spoke.

'Look I'm sorry, okay. I jumped to conclusions about your intentions before giving you a chance. It's just I've had a LOT of experience with being the butt of jokes about my name. Bit hard not to with a name like Ariadne Aphrodite Abraham, which is not your fault, I do realise. Again, I'm sorry.'

Zac had the grace to not look as though he was gloating, which earned him a few points as far as Ariadne was concerned. That didn't stop her from wishing the ground would open up and swallow her. She had just effectively insulted one of Martin's family, which would only add fuel to the fire that her family were a bunch of hippies with no class. She didn't care on that point for herself, but she did think it was a

little unfair to her parents, whose priorities were certainly different from Martin's family, but that didn't necessarily mean that they had been raised badly, or that their priorities were wrong.

'Apology accepted. I've also spent my life on the receiving end of an unending line of jokes about my name, although none of them seem quite as amusing as the ones you just ran through. Care to fill me in?'

Ariadne picked up her wine glass, her voice coming out a little more snooty than she intended when she replied.

'I'd prefer not to if you don't mind.'

She was prevented from saying anything more by the arrival of Granny Maude, glass in one hand and cigarette in the other. Ariadne's first thought was that Martin's parents would have a fit at her smoking inside the marquee. Maude looked Zac up and down before bringing her eyes to his.

'You look like you know how to make a woman purr. This party's as dull as dishwater. If you want to step outside and liven things up a bit, you let me know.'

Granny Maude didn't wait for a response but sashayed off in the direction of the bar. Ariadne nearly choked on the sip of wine she'd taken; the look on Zac's face was priceless. He raised an eyebrow at Ariadne.

'Your relation or mine? Please let it not be one of mine, given that she just propositioned me and she has to be ninety not out.'

Recovered, Ariadne tried to suppress a grin as she looked at him over the rim of her wine glass.

'One of mine. My grandmother actually. Alcohol tends to loosen her tongue more than a little. And you're five years out—she's actually ninety-five.'

Zac fought against the smile threatening to take over.

'That hasn't helped much.'

Mortified by her own behaviour, as well as that of her grandmother, Ariadne decided the best thing to do in the

circumstances would be to get as far away as possible, and quickly.

'I think I, and my family, have done enough damage here for one evening. It was lovely to meet more of Martin's family. I'm just going to go over and speak to my mother for a moment, if you'll excuse me.'

Ariadne couldn't miss the brief flash of disappointment on Zac's face before it became expressionless.

'It was a pleasure to meet you Ariadne. I look forward to seeing you again.'

Ariadne gave a small, stilted smile in acknowledgement before moving away in the direction of her mother. It was a shame that she'd stuffed that up so fantastically. Zac was serious eye candy and a prolonged conversation with him, had they started off on the right footing, would probably have been enjoyable. At the very least, it had broken the tedium of this wretched party. In all honesty, she agreed with her grandmother on that count, it was as dull as dishwater and whilst she wasn't going to repeat her grandmother's offer to Zac, she could definitely understand where Granny Maude was coming from.

Not that she agreed with her grandmother's methods mind you. There was never a dull moment with Granny Maude around. She seemed to have decided that with old age came the right to say and do whatever she liked. When Ariadne reached her mother she downed the contents of her wine glass and decided it was time to quietly exit. Sleeping held more allure. She did mention to her mother before she left that she may want to steer Granny Maude clear of the bar.