

*Summary: Janice Covington and Melinda Pappas brave the world of 1940 Mediterranean to get themselves, and several Xena-era relics home to the United States.*

*This is a Janice Covington/Melinda Pappas ALT/UBER story.*

*Content Disclaimers:*

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*ALT - This means that the story will contain scenes of intimacy between consenting adults who also happen to both be female. If for reasons of age, location or personal belief you are not permitted to read this story, then please move on to another work.*

*TIMELINE - Basically just after "The Xena Scrolls" episode ended.*

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# GOING HOME

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## Chapter 1

Janice was late, and she knew it. Dusting the rain from her jacket, she pulled it off and handed it to some stuffed Greek shirt in black bow tie and coattails standing in the restaurant doorway.

"Your hat..." The battered gray fedora came off to reveal a tumble of honey blonde hair. It apparently surprised the maitre'd since he stuttered, "Si--, ma'am. Miss?"

Flashing him a broad smile with tight lips and raising her light eyebrows over mirthful green eyes, Janice flipped the hat at him. "I'm joining someone," she said. "Tall, brunette. Young woman. Pappas?"

The maitre'd studied her for a long silent judgmental moment. Janice Covington could practically hear his mind screaming indignantly. She knew that she and Melinda were unlikely to know one another by most standards. Melinda's American South breeding clashed visibly with Janice's preferably rougher appearance.

"Does Miss Pappas know you're coming?"

Janice eyed him with shock at the underlying officious tone. Now he'd gone too far. She

reached for his lapels with both hands.

"Janice." The voice was quiet, her name rolling off the speaker's tongue with a gentle lilt.

The blonde dropped the man's lapels and turned to face Melinda. She easily lost her focus in the stormy blue eyes boring into her own green ones. "Hi."

"It must not have gone well at the Historical Ministry." The brunette said quietly. "Come on." She stepped back, smiling at the stunned maitre'd and gestured for Janice to walk with her.

"Strange Americans," the host muttered. Melinda's broad long-fingered hand splayed over her lower back kept Janice walking rather than turning around and making him eat his starched lapel.

They passed several tables of diners and then Melinda's guiding hand turned them up a short set of steps to a raised area of tables to the left of the restaurant's stage.

The brunette said nothing and Janice, in the silence, began to suspect she might become the recipient of a display of the Southerner's full-blown anger. To forestall it, she held out the woman's chair, gesturing for her to sit first. Janice winced then, when, instead of a thank you, Melinda silently picked up her water goblet and watched over the rim as Janice took her own seat opposite.

The blue eyes had gone to a vaguely steel color. So Janice swallowed and apologized. "I'm sorry I'm late." The look she was receiving did not change. Janice bristled. "No. He looked at me as if I was some sort of *growth*, Melinda Pappas."

"You didn't have to *grab* him, Janice." There was tension in the Southerner's voice but Janice heard a note of acquiescence too.

So she unbent a notch. "OK. You're right. I didn't exactly have my best foot forward either."

"You came directly from the Ministry then?"

Janice took a deep breath and decided the initial pique of her companion was finally past. "Paperwork should be outlawed."

"What could be so paperwork intense about a couple of glyphs, a handful of scrolls and a couple of drawings?" Melinda lifted her glass of water again and drank a bit.

Janice's reply went on hold as a waiter approached them. "Are you ready to order something, ma'am'selles?"

"Not yet," Janice replied. Melinda nodded her agreement. The waiter departed quickly. Janice returned her gaze to Melinda's face and admitted, "He... um... saw the chakram pieces in my bag."

"Janice!" Melinda sighed. "I told you to leave those behind. Are we going to be able to take that out of the country or not?" She scanned the dish descriptions quietly waiting for the response.

"Yes."

Melinda lowered the glass. Blue eyes narrowed suspiciously. Janice realized she had not been casual enough when Melinda added dryly, "Legally?"

"He wants fifty thousand lira to turn the other way."

Melinda whistled low, the action drawing water into her lungs choking her.

Janice stood and circled to firmly pat the brunette's back. Finally Melinda collected herself and looked around at the other patrons before catching Janice's hand and demanding in a rough whisper, "What do we do now?"

The blonde settled back into the seat directly to Melinda's right. "You're going back to the hotel."

"What are you going to do?" Her tone suggested that she already suspected the answer.

"It's not theirs," Janice pointed out, keeping her voice even and reasonable, avoiding Melinda's incisive gaze.

"How do you propose we get out of the country?"

"That's why I was late."

Melinda rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. The waiter took that moment to walk up a second time. "Madames ready?"

Janice gladly looked away from Melinda's face and replied, "Cuonamas and soup for me."

"Soup and salad, please." Melinda's smile was forced, but the waiter just nodded, collected their menus, nodded and walked away.

Alone again, Janice eased her gaze back to Melinda's face. "There's a boat headed for Morocco at daybreak." She reached for the taller woman's hand and threaded their fingers together. "It's the only way," she added.

"How much is the boat?" Melinda fought for calm in the direct gaze of those green earnest eyes.

"We're going to work our passage," Janice replied quietly.

Melinda's voice dropped an entire octave. "How?"

"Galley." The brunette groaned something inaudible and dropped her head to the tabletop, closing her eyes. "It's better than the boiler room."

Melinda frowned but nodded. "Guess I better plan some menus." She had a thought. "Does the captain know we'll be fugitives?"

"I was desperate, Mel, but I'm not stupid."

"You better hope the Greek navy doesn't decide to check his manifest and crew then before we hit international waters."

Janice lifted her water goblet and took a fortifying swallow. "So... it's all right?"

"Next time, *I'll* go to the Ministry."

Green and blue eyes met, held and the women shared rueful smiles.

Melinda shook her head, allowing a light chuckle to escape. "I guess I should be grateful you, or I did not have to sleep with anybody to do this."

Janice's blonde eyebrow lifted in surprise. "I can't believe you actually just said that."

The taller woman's cheeks pinked. Lifting her glass, she swallowed some drink for a long steadying moment. "Guess you're rubbing off on me."

## Chapter 2

Janice closed the restaurant door behind Melinda, after helping the brunette to the curb with a hand. The moon was already high and the streetlamps were the only other lighting.

The blonde watched her companion for a long moment walking away down the street, caught by the way the light played across the dark and light features. Tucking her hands in her pockets, she made longer strides and quickly caught up.

Out of the corner of her eye, Melinda watched the lighting play across the shorter woman's face. Despite Janice's late arrival and decidedly bad news regarding their discoveries, Melinda had a really hard time remaining upset.

It had nothing to do with seeing Janice's reasoning and everything to do with the seafoam green eyes now lifting to meet hers.

Then Janice tilted her head slightly. Melinda realized she had a funny expression on her face when Janice asked, "Hey, where'd you go? You okay, Mel?"

Snapping herself out of her reverie, Melinda nodded. "Yes." Janice tapped her hat brim and

turned away, stuffing her hands in her jacket pockets. "Janice?"

The blonde stopped on the sidewalk but didn't turn. "Yes?"

"Be careful." Janice nodded, her jaw tight. Melinda closed the few steps separating them and encouraged green eyes up to meet her gaze. "Maybe we should just leave it and go home."

"No, it's family property. I wasn't careful. It's my job to get it back."

Melinda decided to toss the gauntlet. "Well, since it's my family property, I should go with you."

"That's crazy, Mel," Janice predictably retorted. "I've got to sneak it there as it is."

"Still..."

Janice's jaw set mutinously. "Why are you doing this?"

"We're partners, Janice Covington. And partners do things together."

"For crying out loud!" Janice found Melinda's hand clapped over her mouth at the outburst. Assailed with the brunette's subtle daisies scent, she was stunned into silence. When the hand came away she pitched her voice lower. "Then pack us up. Mel, I'm serious. You can't come. I'll meet you at the dock at daybreak."

Mel fought against the urge but found her hand drifting over Janice's cheek. "You're not invincible, Janice." She pulled the blonde against her for a hug and whispered in the ear close to her lips. "Be careful." Her lips brushed the other woman's cheek as she pulled back.

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks pink and Janice's green eyes were wide, swallowing Melinda whole.

Thoughts skittering wildly, Janice felt her eyes well with tears. "Don't leave without me, Melinda Pappas."

"I'll be packing," the brunette replied. She remained on the hotel steps and watched Janice walk quickly into the night.

Janice approached the street where she had visited earlier to discuss the site relics with the Greek Minister of Antiquities. The gray stone building about two-thirds the way along the block, stood imposingly behind a stone wall, topped with barbed wire.

She could just see the top of the patrolling perimeter guard's head. The building was several dozen meters inside the wall. A covered walk led from the entry guard station up to the front doors.

The guard now working the desk was different from the young soldier who had let her in to see the minister that afternoon. She remained out of sight however, since a figure alone at this hour would invite suspicion.

Moving carefully in the shadows Janice worked her way around to the alley, identifying the guard circulating in the back gardens. The high wall here ended just below the level of the third floor windows. She spotted a tree leaning close to the wall and watched patiently until the guard moved out of sight.

Brushing her hands clean on her jacket, Janice slipped on her digging gloves and settled her fingers into several grooves in the crumbling mortar. Here I go, she thought, beginning the forty foot climb.

Hand over hand she pulled herself up, then found toeholds and the progress she made increased dramatically.

Reaching out with a long stretch, she finally felt her hand slide over the top of the wall. Grim-faced, Janice pulled her body up and laid flat against the top stones. The tree's branches were just an arm's length above her head.

Eagerness warred with caution as she rolled to her side and scanned down inside the garden

to locate the guard. He was just rounding the corner moving out of view when Janice heard a commotion in the distant street.

She had to bite her lip from gasping in surprise as a previously hidden guard leaped from the nearby wall walk landing on the ground with a thud and running toward the noise.

*Wow*, she thought, *that was close*. If the guard hadn't moved, Janice would have jumped right through his watch area and been instantly spotted.

Now she moved into the tree, sliding along branches carefully toward the central trunk. Edging her way around the massive trunk she estimated the distance to the third story ledge under a window cracked slightly open. There was no light inside.

The minister's office she remembered from her visit earlier. Taking a deep steadying breath, Janice then launched herself toward the window hearing the creak of the branch and feeling it sway as she levered her weight off.

Her stomach sank to her knees then bolted to her throat as her fingers closed over the ledge. Abruptly she slammed against the building. Collecting her wits she pulled herself into the open window.

Slithering to the floor, Janice rolled over and sat up to take in her surroundings. "Yep, this is the place," she murmured, noticing the same family portrait on the desk. She searched the darkness for the shelf where she had seen Minister Dinali set the bag of confiscated artifacts.

The bag was gone, but she spotted some of the artifacts now laid out with a few rudimentary notes under them.

Lifting the first of three scrolls, Janice scanned the note underneath and chuckled. Only the basics were written:

Scroll found Macedonian site 453 (1 of 3)

Author: G.P. (conjecture)

Subject Xena (questionable subject)

Dating: circa 58-50 B.C.

Full translation: Not yet available (seek assistance of Dr. Melvin Pappas, UNC, United States)

The last made Janice chuckle again. "I had the same thought, Dinali. But I bet I'm happier with the alternate who arrived than you would be." She crumpled up the pieces of paper, and collected the scrolls.

She tucked them inside her coat pockets. "Where'd you put the chakram pieces?" she mused in a whisper.

Turning, the archaeologist spied a strangely tilted pile of papers. Sliding them aside she found the matched halves of Xena's weapon.

Melinda had been so mad when she first found out that Janice had grabbed them before pushing her toward the falling door as they escaped Ares's Cave. It had taken some fast talking on Janice's part to convince the brunette that the pieces were best kept as far away from the cave as possible anyway. Otherwise, she suspected Melinda might have ordered them reburied at the exploded site.

As she ran an admiring hand over the hatched pattern and the small inlaid gemstones, the same sense of wonder stole over Janice again. The solid metal object also was considerably lighter than it ought to be. She ran a finger along its edge. Certainly it was sharper than anything else the time period had produced.

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Dinali must have held it though, Janice realized, feeling a residual warmth in one half of the weapon as she transferred it to her inside pocket.

Checking that all the items were secure, Janice returned to the window and peered down. Shaking his head and chuckling to himself about some strange woman, the guard was resuming his usual rounds.

A breeze touched her face. Turning into it she glanced toward the tree she had used to cross over earlier. It looked a lot farther than before.

Footsteps resounded slowly in the corridor beyond the office door. No time remaining, Janice stepped out onto the window ledge hugging the building's shadow from the overhanging tree. Identifying a relatively level branch directly out in front of her, Janice sprang toward it. The feeling of freefall seemed to last an eternity longer than the original trip. Just as she was afraid she would hit the ground, Janice felt the branch slam into her stomach, its rough bark scratching painfully. She steadied herself and rolled forward over the branch, waiting breathless moments for the tree to stop shaking.

And for her heart to start beating again. Earnestly she searched the ground, making sure she knew the whereabouts of the patrolling guard. He rounded the corner of the building and moved on out of sight.

Cautiously Janice moved through the tree toward the wall.

A light materialized below and to Janice's right. The blonde froze, not daring to breathe. She pinned herself to the level branch, hiding her small frame.

Finally the light was extinguished. A few cautionary moments of waiting, then Janice moved forward again, creeping along the thick branch. Employing sheer strength, she lowered herself slowly to the top of the wall, flattening herself against the top.

She lowered a leg over the outside and began to work her way down the maze of handholds.

A strong hand grasped her ankle, freezing Janice's breath in her chest. She let go hold of the wall and fell back, landing hard on the packed dirt of the alley. Her eyes shut in the shockwaves of pain radiating through her body.

She felt, and fought, hands grabbing for her shoulders and arms. Finally a hoarsely whispered voice intervened, stilling her. "Hold still! You might have hurt something."

"Mel?" Janice took a deep breath and then pushed away the brunette's hands as she opened her eyes finding the inquisitive blue eyes of her taller companion only a few inches above her. "I'm all right," she said, rolling gingerly to her side, pulling in her knees to stretch her back muscles gently. Then she sat up. "Come on. We've got to get out of here."

"So you got it?" Melinda reached over and picked up a small lantern she had been carrying.

"I reclaimed the whole find," Janice confirmed. Standing shakily she ran a quick hand through her hair before picking up and replacing her fedora. "Come on. You can read me a bedtime story," she jested quietly, pulling one of the scrolls free and showing it to Melinda before she tucked it away once more.

She then noted Melinda's attire. An Italian styled overcoat belted loosely over a demure tan skirt and gray turtleneck sweater. The woman didn't look like she had planned to join a thieving expedition.

Then Janice remembered what Mel had been wearing the first day they met on the Ares's Cave dig. Her suspicions flared. "Mel, what brought you out here?" the blonde asked pointedly.

"Evening stroll," the brunette answered. "Nice cool night for it, you know." Melinda's eyes,

almost colorless in the vague light, remained steady on the blonde's face.

Janice looked around as they emerged on the adjacent street. She threaded her arm through Melinda's and looked up into quiet, knowing blue eyes. Her own green ones twinkled with soundless laughter.

### Chapter 3

Something had cramped her arm. Trying to move it to a better position woke Melinda groggily. Blue eyes sought to separate forms from shadows.

The first thing she realized was that she had fallen asleep on the worn lounge in the hotel's main room. The lumpy cushions had settled into odd bumps that pressed into her lower back painfully. Her right arm hung half off the deep cushion. It was her left arm that was pinned.

She turned and identified Janice, head and shoulders across Melinda's left forearm. The blonde's face was wedged against the brunette's stomach, and her right hand rested against Mel's left thigh.

It would have been positively indecent had both of them not been completely clothed, though Melinda had convinced Janice to take off the filthy leather jacket before they had settled intending to read some scrolls to remain awake so they didn't miss their boat.

The thought of the boat made Melinda sit up quickly, and that dislodged the sleeping blonde, causing her to stir.

"Mel?"

Melinda bit her lip and took a deep steadying breath, surprised by the flood of warmth that tired voice murmuring her name elicited. "Janice." She lifted her free left hand and brushed at the blonde's cheek. "We have to go." She looked at the window, and even through the dust she could see the beginnings of the sunrise. "It's already dawn," she confided.

Janice pushed herself onto her hands, releasing Melinda's right arm from under her body. As the brunette moved, the blonde cast green eyes up the pale white shirt, to the open collar and strong chin, finally up to meet worried blue eyes. "Good morning," she murmured, then moved her hands away, sitting back as she settled her feet to the floor. "Guess we fell asleep."

Nodding, Melinda turned away and settled her own feet on the floor, rubbing her temples as she worked toward full wakefulness. She noticed the scroll that had slipped from her hand to the floor. "I thought reading these would keep us awake."

Dusting her fingers through her hair and reordering it, Janice stood, looking around the room. "Well it was only an hour or two." She looked over to the bags they had packed before settling on the couch to wait. "We'll get something once we're aboard," Janice said, pulling her jacket from the arm of the chair where it had been draped.

Mel stood and arranged her hair with quick precision, unpinning the dark mass and settling the turtle shell clasp back into place. Janice went to the wash basin and splashed the cold water still remaining in the bottom against her face, using a small towel next to the bowl to dry. She passed it to Melinda as the brunette walked up.

"Thanks." Their hands brushed lightly as the exchange occurred. Blue and green gazes drifted together and Janice smiled. "Thanks for coming after me last night."

The Southerner shrugged. "It worked out." She tugged out the wrinkles from her dark blue pants and cream-colored cotton blouse.

Janice held back on the chuckle that bubbled up at the taller woman's nonchalance and just nodded. She watched Melinda splash her face and then nodded toward the bags. "Let's go."

Each woman grabbed her one piece of large luggage, then Janice slung her trail pack over one shoulder. Melinda was adjusting her purse strap when Janice suggested, "You probably ought to just drop it inside the other. You won't need it and it'll be safer."

Melinda nodded, agreeing and quickly unlatched her luggage, settling the bag inside on the clothes. Closing it once again, Melinda announced, "Ready."

Quickly and quietly the two women walked down the steps to the entrance. Janice set the room key, and forty lira on the desk. Melinda reached for a piece of paper to write their room number, until Janice's hand closed over her wrist. "What?"

"The ministry might trace us here. It's better to just to disappear, Mel." She settled her fedora on her head, tugging the brim into shape.

"But that's dishonest," the brunette replied. "We're paying for the room," Janice replied. "We're just not putting anything in writing. The manager will figure it out."

Melinda frowned. "I don't like it." Her sense of order and law was being tested and that made her uncomfortable. "Janice, maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"It's too late now, Mel. The stuff is ours, and we're leaving with it."

"I remember objecting last night."

Understanding her friend's disagreement, Janice could only nod. "And I did it anyway. Yes, I know." She pointed out though, "You didn't have to distract the guards."

Shaking her head, and realizing the blonde's point, Melinda said, "You would have been caught otherwise."

Janice nodded and she lifted her chin, drawing their gazes even. Earnestly she said, "I'll try not to skirt things too often, Mel, but... I'm still my father's daughter." There it was, no apologies, just accept her.

Melinda realized the offer was akin to Janice putting her head on the chopping block. And trusting Melinda not to use the axe. "Are you telling me you *like* going around the law?" The brunette knew she couldn't willingly hurt Janice, but their friendship wasn't all that long-lived. Someone had to put the trust forward first.

"No." Janice pointed out as they stepped onto the front stoop and closed the building's door. She grasped Melinda's hand once in a reassuring squeeze. "I'm telling you I know how."

Taking a deep breath and silently conceding the point, Melinda trailed Janice toward the water district. The sun's early rays danced across the back of the blonde's head, bringing out the woman's reddish highlights. She tried to take the words as a salve to her conscience and just hoped they could leave the country without Janice having to skirt the law again.

## Chapter 4

The cobblestone street clicked quietly under the women's shoes as they moved toward the wharves. The distant dulled sounds of masts and rigging and the odd steam engine moving in the fog filled the quiet morning with signs of activity that prevented the absolute feeling of aloneness that began to pervade the thoughts of both the brunette and blonde.

Janice rounded the corner of a warehouse first, stopping suddenly and putting out a hand to bring Melinda to a halt as well. "Wait." Her voice was the barest of whispers.

Setting down her bag to give her shoulder a rest, Mel leaned close to Janice's back and

peered beyond into the dispersed light of the street lamps illuminating the dock ahead. "What is it?" she whispered back. She took a deep breath and caught the scent of Janice's hair.

"Those aren't dockhands," Janice realized. Discreetly she pointed out one or two of the closest figures moving through the fog. The men wore tight-fitting dark-gray uniforms, buttoned staidly up the front, with high starched collars and the sounds of military-shined boots echoed on the wood walk.

Melinda put a hand on Janice's shoulder and stepped backward pulling the blonde out of sight around the corner with her. "Ministry police," she confirmed.

Janice's expression pinched as she tried to think of another way out to their ship. Melinda however came up with an idea first.

"Janice, Give me your hat." Green eyes shot up to her face and she gestured. "And the jacket."

"You can't go out there, Mel," the archaeologist protested quietly though she took off both the hat and the jacket as asked. She shivered slightly against the cool breeze coming off the water.

Melinda slipped her own hat off her head and untied the cream-colored scarf from around it. Bending down, she quickly opened her suitcase, and then tugged Janice's to do the same. Rearranging the contents Mel pulled out a thicker shirt. It was one of Janice's lumberjack shirts she had liked wearing on cold mornings at the dig. She passed it up to the blonde. "Put this on," she said, stuffing the leather jacket and fedora inside their bags before standing.

Janice quickly buttoned on the shirt and was running her fingers through her hair to pull it out of the collar when Melinda stepped up and started wrapping the scarf around Janice's hair. "What's this for?"

"Disguise." Melinda looked down into green eyes and smiled. "They're looking for a blonde woman in a leather jacket and a beat up--"

"Hey!" Janice protested the maligning of her favorite piece of attire. With a smile, Melinda shook her head and finished tying off the scarf, which effectively concealed all of the blonde's golden curls. "The fedora was too recognizable," she finished simply. "Now you're not."

Jan ran a curious hand over her scarfed head and nodded. "Guess you're right." She pointed to Melinda. "What about you?"

"I was wearing the overcoat last night," Mel pointed out. "Now," she added. "I'm not."

Janice's smile broadened suddenly, lighting up her face and warning Melinda a split second before strong hands clasped hers and pulled the startled brunette into a hug. "Quick thinking, Mel."

The soft voice praising her, sent skitters up and down Melinda's spine for a long enjoyable moment. "Thanks," she whispered back, hugging the smaller woman and hiding her smile in the scarf. "Let's go."

"Slip 42," Janice pointed out as they moved quietly with their luggage down to the wooden planked piers. They had to pause several times as Ministry police and other authorities strode through the area questioning the dockhands busy loading cargo holds of the smaller ships and dinghies for the trips out to the larger ships moored near the mouth of the harbor.

In slip 42, as they stepped out from behind a pile of rope and steam engine parts boxed and stacked a person high, Melinda and Janice stepped down to the dinghy moored there. A ragtag collection of men moved around the bottom of the boat, between fore and aft, securing the supplies and settling themselves for the task of rowing out to their boat.

Melinda whispered, "What's the boat's name?"

"The Lob Lolly. Captain Bristol."

"British?" Janice nodded. Melinda frowned a long moment, but then turned to the men as they began to take note of the women's presence. "We're shipping out with the Lob Lolly. New cooks," she said distinctly, wiping any trace of her Southern accent carefully from her voice, a fairly easy task for a woman who spoke eight languages and could translate and read six more.

But the depth of her companion's changed voice sent shivers over Janice's shoulders, settling a warm feeling in the pit of her stomach. It was so reminiscent of Xena's in the Ares Cave that the blonde had an urge to check Melinda's face for signs that the ancient Greek warrior was back. But when the men below gruffly gestured for them to get in the boat, and Melinda turned to tell Janice, there was no sign of Xena in the still Southern face.

"New cooks, huh?" remarked one as Melinda stepped down behind Janice and he noticed her shoes. "Been visiting a lover, eh, ladies?"

Janice bristled and turned. Melinda's hand closed over her wrist though even as her hand closed into a fist. Keeping her voice even, the blonde said, "Careful. Cooks can make the worst kinds of enemy."

That caused a ripple of male laughter mostly at the expense of the fellow who had spoken up and a space on a midbench was cleared for them to sit. Janice watched as their bags were stowed under another bench toward the back. A longpole was retrieved. Another man cast off the ropes from the dock irons as the dinghy was pushed away.

Melinda and Janice dropped their heads and turned to look out toward their destination, as a couple of Minister police moved onto the pier they had just vacated. One shouted to the dinghy in rapid-fire Greek.

Melinda translated, her voice pressed up against Janice's ear: "Have you seen a blonde woman in a leather jacket this morning?" He gestured. "This tall?" She translated his last words.

The men around them all shook their heads. "No," one shouted back. "But next we're in port, you tell me where I can find her and I'll show her a good time." The ribald laughter filled the fog-shrouded morning as the boat drifted out into the open harbor.

Melinda looked up and spotted the Lob Lolly materializing out of the mists. Its gray iron sides looked well cared for. Some of the portholes had lights behind them, and the deck railing, about fifty feet over their heads looked sturdy. She took a deep breath and sighed, swallowing against a sudden rolling sensation in her stomach.

Janice grasped her forearm and leaned back into the brunette. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

"I forgot to take my medication this morning," Melinda confided.

"What medication?" Concerned eyes, almost translucent in the low light reflecting off the fog, held steady on Melinda's face.

"I get seasick," the brunette confided in raw silence.

Janice groaned and buried her face in her hands for a long moment, feeling the water shift under the boat as its wake and that of the moored ship collided. The men around them scurried to secure the dinghy to the side of the Lob Lolly and the clatter of the rope ladder from the deck broke the silence.

Behind her she could feel Melinda's body stiffen, no doubt steeling herself against the queasy feeling in her stomach. "And you haven't eaten anything since yesterday, have you?" Blue eyes met green and Melinda shook her head slowly. "Great."

## Chapter 5

Hand over hand, Janice moved up the ladder and finally slipped over the railing to stand on the Lob Lolly's deck. Two of the men from the boat had already carried up both her and Melinda's traveling cases. Now the blonde reached a hand back over the railing to grasp her brunette partner's.

Muscles straining in her back and legs, she was able to bring Mel over the railing. She watched Melinda straighten up and glance around the deck while she rubbed her shoulder. "Remind me not to do that again," the blonde remarked, drawing blue eyes to her face. A slow smile crept onto Melinda's queasy face and stayed there. Janice's smile broadened. Mission accomplished.

In tandem they picked up their bags and walked across the deck to a man holding a clipboard and leaning against an open hatchway. Janice brushed her hair from her face and reached out a hand. "New cooks reporting, Mr. Teneby."

A clean-shaven broad face lifted from his reading and leveled hazel eyes on both women. He looked Janice up and down and apparently recollected they had met before. Taking her hand firmly he studied her face while talking. "Covington, right? This must be your friend you mentioned." He studied the brunette who towered over the Covington woman by at least a head and leveled intelligent eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea on his face. "I'm David Teneby, First Officer."

Melinda took the offered hand, feeling the grip, which started strong, go softer against hers. She countered that by firming her own grip. His eyes widened slightly and his handshake firmed up once more. "I'm Mel Pappas." She allowed her accent only to slightly shade her words. It seemed suddenly very important to not permit this man to underestimate her or Janice.

Janice watched the lengthy greeting and intervened when she could tell Melinda was trying to remove her hand but Teneby was holding it just a fraction beyond polite. "Which way to the crew deck?"

He stepped out of the doorway and gestured inside. "This way, down two decks to the end of the corridor. Your quarters are just off the galley. Follow your noses. Our last cook left only about two hours ago." He paused a moment as Janice entered the doorway, then Melinda. "I'll walk you down."

The trio moved down hearing nothing but the metallic clang of their feet against the metal steps. When they reached the next deck down, Melinda spoke. "Was he a local just signed on for a one-time trip, Mr. Teneby?"

Teneby shook his head emphatically. "Blo-- h-- Um, no. We nearly threw him off at our last port. The captain gave him his papers when we first docked."

Janice chuckled and then continued walking to the next set of steps leading down. "Next deck right?"

Teneby, who still hadn't taken his eyes from the Melinda's face, snapped out of it and nodded. "Yeah. Next level. Aft. Bottom of the steps turn around and go behind them." He stopped at the top of the steps. "Need any help, Ms. Pappas?"

"Not at all, Mr. Teneby." Melinda shook her head. Janice could see she was fighting to keep her jaw still, and the woman's usual light coloring was exacerbated by stark white around her mouth and in front of her ears as well as the bridge of her nose.

Janice turned forward in order to step down safely on the crew deck. She held the rail for a long moment as she looked down the corridor and then back up the steps. This deck was considerably less well lit. The shadows were deeper between the small mounted electric lamps set only next to the crew cabin doors. And the entire end of the corridor was dark.

She swallowed and moved back to let Melinda and Teneby step down next to her.

"This way," Teneby said helpfully. Both women followed, carrying their cases as he led them toward a cabin just beyond a wide opening. As he passed the opening, he gestured. "There's the galley. Crew eats there twice a day, either coming on, or going off, shift. Four bells and eight bells usually."

Janice could see Melinda was barely holding herself together, and just nodded. "We'll check the supplies as soon as we can put our bags away."

"Good. Captain's been looking forward to a few better meals since I told him we might have a couple of ladies doing the cooking for a while."

Nodding again, Janice pushed the handle on the door and pushed inward. She gestured Melinda inside and said, "Thanks. Tell the captain we'll have a meal for him soon." The brunette brushed past her and Janice patted her friend lightly on the back, still smiling at Teneby. "When will we be getting underway?"

"Tide's already moving," he replied. When Janice said nothing else and the silence had gone on uncomfortably long, Teneby finally nodded, and climbed back up the steps.

When he was gone from sight, Janice stepped inside the cabin. Melinda fumbled with a candle on the table. Just as the match flared and the wick ignited, Janice turned to close the door, lingering there a long moment before slowly closing it.

When she turned back, Melinda was seated stiff-armed on the furthest of the two beds. Thank God, Janice thought, thankful for the bed closer to the door as she sat down on it. Melinda winced and then closed her eyes, taking several steady deep breaths.

"Anything I can do?" Janice asked, her own voice sounding a bit thin. Melinda tried to lean over and open her bag. The movement upset her stomach's precarious balance and she sat bolt upright suddenly.

Janice watched her lean over the back of the bed and heard a metal bin being moved, just before the painful sound of the brunette losing what little she had in her stomach. Crossing to the other bed, Janice settled next to Melinda, patting the woman's shoulder gently. "Where is it?" she asked, meaning the medicine.

"With my toothbrush," Melinda replied, her voice raw and faded. Janice opened the Southerner's suitcase and sorted quickly, finding both the toothbrush and a small vial of liquid. She passed both to Melinda over the woman's still turned shoulder. "Here."

While Melinda worked herself back to a sitting position, Janice left the cabin and went in search of some water in the galley. Finding the tapped supply, she filled a large mug with the clear liquid, and quickly tasted it. Good, it was water, and not spirits, she thought. As she walked back to their quarters, she looked at the doorway again and slugged down a quick sip herself before reentering the cabin. "Found some water."

She studied her companion and remarked, "We better settle your stomach first. The galley is going to be quite a cleaning job."

"That bad?"

Janice nodded. "Here, drink this."

Melinda was relieved to be sitting up now instead of crouched over the back of the bed. "Thanks," she said, taking the mug and drinking slowly. "It'll work pretty quickly," she assured Janice. Over the rim of the mug, she watched the blonde sit on her bed, fingering the cover quietly. "Some way to start a trip, hmm?"

Janice looked up and Melinda watched the pupils contract quickly. "Oh. Um. Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the boat trip sooner."

"My fault."

"But if you hadn't been running interference for me at the Ministry office..." Janice shook her head. "If I hadn't taken the chakram with me in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"We still would've had to take a boat to get out of the country even when we left legally."

Janice gave a half-hearted chuckle and nodded, moving her hands from the cover to her lap and lacing her fingers together absently. "So, now what?"

Melinda swallowed down the last of the water from the mug and took a deep, relieved breath. "Time to check out the galley," she said resolutely. Janice stood, stretched a bit, her hands almost touching the low ceiling of the room. Her hands pulled back suddenly and she wiped her palms on her pants. "Let's get out of here," she said, with considerable relief in her voice.

## Chapter 6

It was an unmitigated disaster, Melinda thought, as she got her first look at the Lob Lolly galley. There was a preparation counter, two deep sinks with exposed pipes, a gas rangetop with six burners, over an oven large enough to cook four turkeys with all the trimmings. The gas hood, like everything else, was coated with thick layers of blackened grease.

Even Janice, who had just been in to fetch the mug and water for Melinda a moment before, was appalled. "What in Hell blew up in here?" she exclaimed, picking up the top cup in a stacked pile of food-encrusted dishes. The entire pile, standing almost as tall as her, teetered next to the first of the double sinks.

She turned to find out Melinda's reaction only to see the brunette's back as she exited to the corridor. Following, Janice saw her enter their quarters. A moment passed in silence, then several scuffling noises could be heard.

Just as Janice was about to step out of the galley, Melinda emerged, pulling on one of her shirts backward and rolling up the sleeves.

She tossed another at Janice who caught it smoothly. "Smocks?" she guessed.

Melinda's blue eyes twinkled with her smile. "Roll them up. We've got work to do."

Janice slipped on the shirt with arms too long and the bottom hanging to her knees.

"Reminds me of wearing Dad's shirts for art class when I was a kid," she chuckled, reentering the kitchen with Melinda on her heels, pulling her hair back into a low clasp.

Mel studied the green-eyed woman who started filling the dish sink with water lathering from a small bottle she'd found dropped in a mug on the back splashboard. She watched a lock of hair fall forward over Janice's shoulder. "Bet you were a cute kid," she said, just as she caught up the blonde's hair and pulled it into a low ponytail with a soft gray linen she had in her pocket.

Janice turned her head in Mel's hands and the brunette found herself steadily gazing into darkening turquoise eyes. "Thanks," followed by a tremulous smile caught the Southerner off guard. She ran a gentle hand down the blonde's shoulder and took a step back. "So.. dishes first I think. Pots and pans so we can get the counter clear."

"Wash or dry?" Janice asked.

"Do we have any towels?"

The blonde spotted a closed drawer. It was the only one in the whole room closed, so she made a wild guess and opened it. Inside rested a stack of folded towels. She pulled one out and waved it at Melinda. "Look," she chuckled. "Never been used."

"At least not by their last cook."

Janice shook her head. "Now I know what Teneby jumped at the offer. I'm surprised no one died of poisoning."

Melinda monitored the water level in the sink and dropped a pot in with a splash. "Actually we don't know that's the case."

The two women gave in to shared laughter as their hands dove to the daunting work of cleaning up before the first meal.

Melinda forgot all about her stomach, even as she and Janice had to shift their stances. The boat's movements sent shudders through the deck. Slowly though the layers of food and grime gave way to a functional kitchen. Supplies were identified and most of the pots and dishes cleaned. The larger pots and pans were washed, dried and hung up on hooks over the cooking area. They played a game of "guess what this was" as they washed the caked food off the dishes, and scooped congealed mess out of mugs.

There was a low toned bell heard, which clanged four times. "Food!" Janice and Melinda exclaimed together. Melinda had just begun identifying what was in the icebox.

"There isn't much," she confessed as Janice pulled down a box of dry milk. A seafaring vessel carried little that required refrigeration, the cost of keeping things cold daunting to most pockets in this day and age, but she found and ticked off, "Hard bread. A case of grits--" she stuck her finger in it and shook her head. "Never mind. That's ready to caulk leaks in the hull," she commented, then continued, "There's also oranges."

"No time to squeeze juice," Janice determined, hearing the first of the men's rapid steps on the gangway steps. Melinda reached into another cupboard and brought down a box of dry flake cereal. "All right. Cereal and oranges it is."

Melinda set down the cereal boxes and fetched the bowls from the drying rack.

The first wave of men tumbled into the doorway of the galley. She took a deep breath, smiled at the first man and handed him a bowl, which he held out to Janice for filling. Then he grabbed two oranges and took to the benches and narrow tables, sliding all the way down and to the back of the space. Others followed, commenting occasionally on their clean bowls but largely interested in simply grabbing food and sitting down to devour it.

The second wave of men finally noticed their servers.

"Hey, Mick. Lookee here." Melinda found herself the subject of scrutiny by a brawny balding man with brown eyes who stood only to her shoulder. "What's yer name, little lady?"

A narrow-faced, tall man with a shock of red hair, stepped up. *Mick*, Mel guessed. "I'm Melinda and this is Janice," she said quickly before he could speak. "We're the new cooks."

Melinda stepped back as Mick took a bowl from her hands and put his right hand on his compatriot's shoulder. "C'mon, Donegal. I'm hungry."

"Bet ye are that," Donegal replied with a laugh.

Melinda studied Mick. Younger than most of the other, apparently he was the 'ladies man' on board. Another rough voice drew her attention.

"Where's the meat. Hot stuff?"

Janice stepped in and raised a hand to presumably tell the sailor where he could take that comment. But Melinda put a hand on her friend's arm, silently forcing it back down. She turned to the man and answered him, choosing to ignore the uncouth interpretation of his question. "We still have a lot of work to do." Her voice was loud and even, carrying so she only had to say this once. "Cereal today in exchange for something cooked tomorrow." She laid her blue gaze on the speaker,

a dour man still coming into the galley. "Leave us to our work and you'll eat well. Deal?"

"Deal," came a strong voice from the doorway.

"Cap'n!" The men in the room snapped to attention.

"Captain," Melinda dropped her chin in respect.

The man who stepped through the crowd had a bearing proclaiming his leadership, along with the midnight blue jacket adorned with gold buttons. She also noted the small insignia pin on the lapel.

Melinda took his measure and wiped her hands on a towel before extending it. "Captain, Mr. Teneby said you had some trouble with your last cook."

He looked around, taking off his hat. "Considerably improved." Janice stepped up and his eyes fell to the slightly smaller woman. "Thank you both." He took Janice's hand.

"We should be able to start warm dishes tomorrow," Janice explained, caught by the brown eyes and the warm smile.

"Let Teneby know if you need anything. We'll make a stop in Morocco for supplies before we hit the open ocean." He picked up a bowl. "Cereal's fine though." He cast another look at Janice, glanced briefly to Melinda and then flipped an orange lazily in the air, catching it with a smile.

The line filed through more quietly after the captain's departure. Still, it was nearly two hours before Janice and Melinda settled at a table with cereal bowls and oranges of their own.

"That went well," Melinda murmured on a sigh. She peeled away a section of her orange and popped it into her mouth. Her face puckered at the tart, sweet taste. "Not bad," she said.

Janice rubbed her forehead before digging into her cereal. "Yeah, I guess so. Just eighteen more days to go."

Melinda chucked her orange section at the blonde, raising a smile. "You can dry this time," she said as the fruit bounced off Janice's shoulder.

Janice brought up her spoon and let fly a small bit of her cereal at the brunette, laughing when she hit the other woman's throat. Melinda chuckled softly while wiping the mess away, and flung her wet fingers back at the blonde. "Feeling better, I take it?" she asked with a smile.

"What?"

"I noticed you have a bit of a problem with closed in spaces," Mel asked gently.

Janice stiffened her back and her expression was that of a woman who had been slapped. "What makes you say that?"

"The entire time the men were filing through here and it was so full I felt stifled, I kept noticing your cheeks were ashen and you kept finding reasons to disappear."

Janice paused, steepling her arms in front of her watching the spoon swing slowly back and forth over her bowl. She sighed, resigning herself to the revelation. "Well, yes." She lifted her green eyes and pointed out. "Most of the time I can control it though."

"How?"

"Taking my mind off of it," she said noncommittally. *Come on, Melinda*, she silently begged. *Don't ask. Please don't ask.* It had been easy to forget the small dimensions of the lower deck areas while they were so engrossed in cleaning, but the descent of the sailors had invaded that safety zone, forcing her to think about the confining space. So Melinda had been right. Janice had used every excuse she could think of to move back into the kitchen area and stand breathing in the relatively more open space.

And had her thoughts center around the brunette still out with the men, remembering the

bright blue of her eyes and the warmth as their bodies had passed while working earlier. So she kept returning to the serving area and braving the trapped feeling. Just for a chance to be close to the woman that she had discovered had a blanketing effect on her fear.

Janice's thoughts must have shown in her eyes because Melinda just nodded and went back to eating her cereal. "Like me and being seasick I suppose. You learn to live with it. To get what you want."

Janice took a breath and concluded, "Yeah."

They talked about the food and what still had to be done in the galley.

Melinda watched Janice's posture relax by degrees. First her shoulders stopped huddling around her ears and then finally she leaned back, breakfast finished. "Melinda Pappas, would you like a mid-morning stroll on deck?" she asked jauntily.

"I'd love to," Melinda replied, her tone equally soft. They dropped their dishes in the sink and ducked out of the galley, Janice leading the way up to the sun-drenched top deck.

A shudder ran through the metal railing they both held. "The ship's engines just reversed," Janice explained as Melinda's face went ashen. Obviously the sudden shift had unsettled the woman's stomach slightly. "Do you want to go back down, while I check things out?"

The two women had just reached the main deck. Janice was paused with one foot outside the doorway, looking back over her shoulder at the brunette. So Melinda saw the ocean first. "Greek navy," she whispered, alarm clear, even in her low tones. "We're being boarded."

## Chapter 7

Janice and Melinda remained out of sight, watching from behind a lifeboat rack.

The Greek ship, a small speed craft, had eight figures standing on the deck. Two of them pointed weapons toward the Lob Lolly deck, and the two men standing at the railing.

Teneby shouted down, "We declared our cargo back in port. We've already been given clearance to leave."

"There is a report that you have contraband aboard, sirs. We are charged with scouting your vessel, or --" Here the man in a low-slung cap and loose-fitting coat, gestured toward the open water.

Following the gesture, Melinda and Janice, as well as all those aboard the Lob Lolly, could see two Greek naval ships rapidly steaming toward them.

The Greek captain finished his threat. "We board sir, or we send you to the bottom of the sea."

Even from here, Janice could see Captain Bristol's shoulders tense. Curtly he nodded, and stepped back, ordering a rope ladder lowered to enable the inspection team to board.

"What's going on?" Janice heard some of the inspectors exchanging rapid-fire Greek just before two of the three stepped onto the ladder's first rungs.

"The third man... the one staying behind," she clarified with a tiny gesture. "He demanded they search for a false hold." Melinda's blue eyes leveled on Janice's gaze. "And ordered a list of the entire crew's home ports and dates of hire."

Janice frowned. "I wonder how many other crew signed on with us?"

"Probably not many. The conversations over breakfast suggested this group's been together some time."

Janice was impressed. "You were eavesdropping."

The brunette's eyes drifted up and for a long moment the two women just quietly regarded one another, emerald floating in pools of indigo. "Can I help it if I can translate six languages without even thinking about it?" She finally said in a low voice. "Come on. Let's get back down to the galley." Janice and Melinda waited until the captain and the inspection team was in deep conversation, their backs turned to where the two women were standing. Then they quickly made their way back down the stairs.

Halfway down to their quarters, the women stopped at the sound of the general crew call for assembly. Do we go or not? They both thought, turning to question the other.

"What do you think?"

"Captain will be expecting us if he sounded the call," Melinda asked. Janice considered this. "But it wasn't a duty report signal. So..." An idea hit her. "Mel, how would you like to get dirty?"

After a long considered pause where a smile began widening on her face, Melinda carefully thought about it, then said, "I'm right behind you."

Janice turned and the two women hurried the rest of the distance, ducking into their quarters just as they could hear the inspectors begin their tapping explorations of the other decks. The walls ringing with dull metallic thumps the entire time, Janice rummaged through her suitcase and gestured at Melinda to do the same. "Big shirt, and baggy pants, if you have anything," she told the brunette. "Then we're going to finish cleaning the galley."

Melinda pulled her suitcase onto her bed and began looking though she asked, "But we were signaled to report."

"We're going to be late," Janice replied. "Because we were busy. Grease fires are a messy business."

Without another word, Melinda finished her search and found the requested clothes. Janice retrieved her own. Without a word they changed into the new outfits.

The blonde turned while buttoning her blouse and found herself face to face with Melinda's bare back. Long, smooth lines of muscles flexed under skin that reflected the low lamplight of the room in interesting shadows. The brunette was just bending over to step into her pants. Janice felt her heart start pounding, her cheeks heat up and her temples begin to ache. *Janice, you've got to get a grip*, she thought sternly, then waited, chewing her bottom lip between her teeth, for Melinda to turn around. "Tie up your hair," she said finally when the dark head just began to turn around.

Once that was accomplished, Janice tugged on the scarf borrowed for their earlier boarding adventure, and tied back her own hair beneath it. "Just in case they know what they're looking for," she explained with a rueful smile. "It worked last time," she added with a shrug as the two women left their quarters and walked into the galley. Janice pointed to the discarded greased rags stacked in the corner from their earlier cleaning job, a benefit of not being on land. Nothing could be thrown out until they reached a port.

"Time to get messed up," Melinda acknowledged, picking up three and tossing Janice two more.

Grimacing and wincing, Melinda and Janice applied the grease to their faces, clothes and hands in smears and smudges, and occasionally, in outright lumps.

Janice looked at Melinda. "You know something?"

"What?" Melinda looked up from applying the grease to her face. The fine bone structure of the Southerner's face was almost completely obscured, and incredibly enhanced by the dark mess coating her face. She looked childly cherubic and deadly exotic at the same time.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

Janice felt the draw of the clear blue amid the grimy black mess and allowed the feeling to pull her closer, looking up into her companion's face. "You thought I was a cute kid." She lifted a glob of the grease in her palm. "But I bet you made a cute messy one."

She reached up with her hands and painted greasy lines amid the mess on Melinda's face. The blue eyes darkened to an iridescent indigo. "I bet you liked finger-painting as a kid too," her voice was low, filled with a soundless laughter that Janice could feel vibrating from the body in front of her. Fingers drifted up and touched her own face, painting lines and swirls in the greasy patches covering her own cheeks.

She was glad of the grease covering her flushed cheeks, since she could feel them heating under the brunette's touch. Melinda broke the spell with a dab of the stuff on her nose and letting loose the laughter. "We'd better report," she reminded Janice.

*To hell with the report command*, Janice thought even as she shook herself internally and realized the dire straits of their situation. "It could all end here, Mel," she cautioned.

"But it won't," the brunette said determinedly.

"All right. Let's go."

They emerged from the kitchen and started up the gangway, walking past an inspector who did not give them a second glance as they emerged on the top deck.

Quickly the two women crossed to where the crew was assembled, and moved into the back row, stepping between two men whose brows creased in confusion at their appearance. "Grease fire," Janice explained in a low voice to the man on her right, while Melinda stood straight and still to her left.

"Cap'n doesn't like it when people are late," he replied.

"He'd hate it even more if we'd left the fire burning," Janice pointed out.

The man nodded and the commotion in front of them shifted as they heard the next man answer questions.

"What's your job on board?"

"Mechanic, second class, sir," the man replied in a heavy British accent. Even the captain's wasn't that deep, Janice thought.

The man scribbled something on a pad. "When did you join the crew?"

"Four years ago it was, sir. Boarded her in Livuhpool," the reply came back.

Janice studied the back of the questioned crewman's head. Dark hair, trimmed closely, was tucked under a small dustman's cap.

The inspector moved to the next man. "Job?"

"Coal loader," the reply came back, from a dark-skinned, bare-shouldered man with hard muscles bulging in each arm. "Two years," he replied.

"What port?"

"Haiti," he replied. The inspector scribbled on his pad and started to move away. Janice watched with unmoving gaze as he began to talk to the man directly in front of her. Safely behind her mask of grease, she studied the Greek man's face. At her waist, she felt a hand close gently over her left and moved her head slightly to bring the taller woman into view.

"He wasn't from Haiti," Melinda said, her voice nearly soundless. Janice almost felt the words rather than heard them.

*Lying?* she thought. *Well, it was what she planned to do, right?* She admonished herself.

She hoped the inspector reached her first, instead of Melinda. Not that she didn't trust Melinda to play the game. At this point anything the brunette did wouldn't surprise her. First,

drawing off the guards at the ministry, then she came up with the guise for their boarding the Lob Lolly.

No, Janice realized, she didn't want to put the burden of their lie on Melinda's shoulders. The inspector was several men away now, so she risked peaking more loudly than Mel had a moment ago. "I'll start," she said. "Depending on which end he starts, we'll switch so that I'll be first."

"You want me to follow your lead?" Melinda replied, keeping her voice for the blonde's ears only, by bending close and whispering against the scarf.

Janice nodded, unable to speak as the taller woman's warm breath seemed to short-circuit her ability to think and the hand wrapped around her own squeezed reassuringly.

The men and the two women fell silent, waiting for the captain and the inspector to work their way toward them. The low hum of the voices the only sound since the engines had been stopped and the turbines in the engine far below had been stilled.

Melinda watched the progress of the questioning, and listened to all the answers, though a lot of the accents did not seem to match up to their claims of homeport. Something else was going on here. She could sense it. The captain came up from the left, leading the inspector. Janice shifted to Melinda's left so that she would be questioned first. The blonde's compact body brushed Mel's as the switch was made.

Captain Bristol stepped up to them. "Our cooks," he explained to the inspector, whose eyes widened at the sight of the two. "Galley's cleaner than either of you, I presume," he coaxed.

"Yes, sir," Melinda answered, sparing Janice only a glance. "Small grease fire while we were finishing up."

"I noticed you missed the first call request," he replied.

"Couldn't be helped, sir."

The inspector stepped forward. "Enough. Job is cook. Hire date?"

Janice opened her mouth to answer, green eyes moving to the captain's face. The captain spoke first. "Six months ago."

"Port?" The tone belied his impatience. Janice stood stiff-necked under his drilling gaze.

"India," the captain answered. A British colonial holding. A bit surprised, but able to hide it, Janice nodded to confirm.

"Both of them?"

"What are you implying, inspector?" the captain lifted his chin. Nodding and waving his hand dismissively, the inspector moved on to the next man. Janice held the captain's gaze a moment longer and then turned her eyes forward again. She struggled to slow the hammering of her heart in her chest, and again felt the warm squeeze of Melinda's hand wrapping around hers down at their sides.

She took a deeper breath with each move the man made away from them.

Shortly after the run in with the inspector, the bosun blew the whistle for dismissal. As the crew scrambled to resume their duties, the other inspector emerged from the lower decks, a bag in his hands. "I found it, sir. I found it!"

## Chapter 8

Janice's feet froze to the deck. She was less than three paces away from the man and the bag clutched in his hand. She could feel Melinda at her back and the blood pounding in her veins gave

her a rush of color to her cheeks and a rush of warmth to her legs. The man with the bag was not sparing a glance for her. Claspings it to his chest, he jogged to where the captain and inspector stood.

Melinda bent close as they watched him move away. "Do you think..?"

Janice's distinctly felt seasick. "I don't know," she whispered back. She started calculating the distances. Fifteen paces to the bag. There were eighteen, maybe twenty more paces to the railing that led away from the Greek naval ships. "How far can you swim?"

Wide blue eyes locked on her, pupils dilated with surprise. "No. No. No. Jan-ice." She drew out the blonde's name in a pleading tone.

Janice was not listening. She turned away and took two steps toward the assembly of men, emerald eyes glittering with determination. Melinda followed and reached for the smaller woman's arm even as they both came within earshot of the conversation.

"I found the plans to our troop movements, sir." He nodded toward the first officer. "Hidden in a false panel in his desk."

Janice could not believe her ears. She could feel Melinda at her back throw her blue gaze on Teneby even as Greek military roughly hauled him around, throwing him off his feet and holding him up as they shackled his wrists together behind his back.

Teneby said nothing, which bothered Melinda the more she thought about it. Next to her, Janice's body stopped thrumming with so much energy, even as she herself felt curiosity rising like a tide. Something very strange seemed to be going on here, she thought, as she watched Teneby and Bristol eying each other with matching granite expressions.

Janice grasped Melinda's arm as the brunette tried to move to stop the arrest. "No, Mel."

Captain Bristol nodded stiffly once at the Greeks' remarks while Teneby was dragged to the railing and lowered down to the smaller boat. The inspector who had located the stolen maps followed quickly.

"We have what we came for," the Greek captain informed Bristol with a tap of his hat. "You are welcome to resume your voyage, sir. May it be a safe one," he added as he paused at the top of the rope ladder.

Bristol was silent and brooding as he watched the small boat, flanked by the two naval ships, steam steadily out of the way of their westbound course. Melinda stepped up quietly alongside him and looked out over the water. "Why didn't you object, sir?" she asked, without looking at him. "Certainly a British citizen.."

"Teneby knows how I feel, Miss Pappas." He turned and protected his gaze from the mid-morning sun. "I would like lunch brought to my cabin today." He turned on his heel and moved below deck, as Janice strode up to a puzzled Melinda.

The brunette leaned back on the railing and contemplated the doorway through which the captain had disappeared. "Mel?"

"Janice, I don't think we're the only one hiding things on this ship."

The remark was said softly by a voice filled with contemplation. It made Janice look up and find cerulean eyes searching her gaze. "But it looks like we got away from Greece intact," she replied. "I'm sorry for the first officer though. He seemed like a nice guy."

Melinda looked away and thought about the faraway look she had seen briefly on the captain's weathered dark features. "I feel sorrier for the captain," she commented, then pushed away from the railing and gestured to Janice. "Come on, we've got to get back and get our work done."

Janice's forehead developed a furrow as she tried to figure out what Melinda seemed to have

discovered, then shook her head and decided the brunette would share when she felt it was important. She followed Melinda down to their quarters.

Meeting a few off-duty crewmen on their way down, and near the galley, milling the corridor, both Janice and Melinda decided changing clothes would have to wait. They washed their hands and faces in the kitchen water and then dished up a couple platters of food for the stray crewman. They set out crackers, blocks of cheese, strips of cured beef and water.

The brunette was silent through the entire process, until they both stood back with hands on their hips and Janice hoped Mel was going to suggest they get cleaned up next. Just thinking about how dirty she'd gotten, Janice felt the itching start. She scratched at an itch on her chin from the drying grease.

"You go ahead and change, Janice. I'll take some of this up to the captain," Melinda suggested, picking up a small plate and filling it with an assortment.

"I'm sure the captain doesn't want his lunch until we've had a chance to clean up."

Blue eyes flickered from the plate then back up to Janice, who was scratching now at her nose. Melinda suddenly felt the urge to scratch an itch and put down the plate to do so.

"Good. So we're getting cleaned up then?" Janice's chuckle stopped Melinda's hand mid-scratch.

Guiltily she dropped her hand and nodded. "All right."

"Come on. I'll wash your back and you can wash mine." She led the way out of the galley and down to their cabin. As Melinda passed her to enter the room, she put a hand on the taller woman's shoulder, stopping her mid-step. "Mel, I'm sorry about..." she came to a halt mid-sentence. "I don't know what I'm sorry about. Just... you're so quiet. Are you all right? Are you seasick again?"

Earnest green eyes searched Melinda's, and the brunette felt an insane urge to brush the woman's cheek even as she saw Janice's jaw tremble. "No, I'm fine," she said. "Just distracted." Janice looked dubious, but Melinda wasn't sure what other answer to give. She was concerned about their captain, and wondering what other secrets this ship harbored, other than the one she and Janice carried. Janice would not want to hear any of that she was sure.

But the blonde surprised her. "We've got some time," she offered.

Melinda pulled back and stepped further into the room, crossed to her bed and sat down. "Just my conscience I suppose. I'll work it out."

Coming inside as well, Janice sighed. "Are you still wishing I had left Xena's chakram with the authorities?"

Melinda shook her head. "No. I'm just tired of secrets." She gestured to the ceiling. "Can we tell the captain at least?"

Settling on her bed, Janice looked at Melinda's posture, reading sadness in the softly sloped shoulders and fidgeting fingers in her lap. "Teneby was who they were after, Mel, not us. What good would it do to tell Captain Bristol we're carrying contraband too?"

The brunette gave a half-smile, self-deprecating and hopeful at the same time. "It would make me feel better," she admitted.

Janice pulled her knees up to her chest and sat further back on her bed, saying nothing. "Mel, I... I don't know about this." She looked again at her partner and almost chuckled. *Who'd have thought it? The daughter of the infamous Harry Covington, was considering a bout with her conscience.* The brunette laid back on the other bed and the blonde could see the smears of grease on the covers as Melinda rolled herself into her pillow. "Will you say something anyway, even if I don't want to do this?" Janice asked. How far did Melinda's loyalties go?

The brunette closed her eyes, but shook her head. "No. No, I won't."

Janice heard the pain of her choice in Melinda's voice. The woman was leaving the choice entirely to her. How many people in your life have ever done that willingly, huh, Jan? "All right then. At least give me time to think about it?" She sat up on the bed, drawing Melinda's gaze up to her face. "How about I take the captain's lunch? I'll figure out something. You clean up and take a nap."

Melinda remained quiet. Their gazes locked and she could feel the sting of tears at the back of her eyes. She set her jaw against them and looked away. She didn't want to part with her conscience, but she hated being in conflict with Janice even more. "All right," she conceded.

Standing up, Janice tried for a little levity. "Maybe while you're in dreamland, you can visit dinner and find out what we're having. All this fighting with my conscience is making me hungry."

Eyes that had almost washed translucent with melancholy resumed their luminous cerulean color and a smile touched Melinda's lips. "Thanks," she said.

Janice felt better... a little. She found the wash basin and scrounged a cloth from her suitcase, washing up quickly and leaving it on the top of the small counter for Melinda to use. "All yours," she said, watching Melinda sit up. "I'll be back in a little while."

## Chapter 9

Carrying a covered tray, Janice went first to the wheelhouse looking for the captain.

"E's in 'is office, miss," The gangly thin old man standing with one hand on the throttle and the other on the large deck wheel, gestured with his chin to the opposite door. "Down them steps. Firs' door on the righ'."

Janice took a moment to set down her tray and look out over the front of the ship, watching the men cleaning and repairing parts of the ship, then shifting her gaze out to the sea beyond. The sparkling sunlight danced in the cool blue of the Mediterranean making Janice think of Melinda's eyes that night the brunette had come to her aid at the ministry office. She smiled, remembering linking her arm with the taller woman's and walking down the street together. It had seemed so simple, so innocent, she realized. Now look where they were. "Nice view," she commented aloud.

"Not if there's German fish under those waves, miss."

Her smile faded. Janice turned her gaze on him. "What's your name?" she asked politely.

"Reg Porter," he answered. "You're the new cook."

"Well, one of them. I'm Janice and my partner's Melinda." She gestured with a thumb over her shoulder. "German subs out there?"

"They've bottled up the French Atlantic ports since June. Cap'n figures they aren't done yet." He gestured to the food. "You bes' get a move on. Cap'n likes 'is food hot."

"It's just a few snack things. We're still clearing the grime from the galley."

"Weirdest thing that was too, ol' Hock takin' off into the city like that, just afore you boardin'."

"I heard he left just a few hours ahead of us. Not a good cook, hmm?"

Porter looked at her funny. "Who tol' you that?"

"Mr. Teneby."

The wheelman's expression changed instantly. He smiled, showing the uneven capwork on his teeth. "So 'e did, did 'e. Well then that was right informative of 'im."

Janice's brow knit together in confusion. But Porter was done talking. "I've got to let you get

on, miss. I've got a course change in the next little while to ready for."

"All right. Nice to meet you, Mr. Porter."

"Call me Reg, little lady. Everyone does."

"Thanks Reg. See you in the galley for dinner?"

"Yes'm. I'll be right down as my watch ends."

Janice lifted the food again and exited the wheelhouse.

Reaching the captain's door, the blonde paused, shifted her load again and ran a hand through her hair before raising her fist to rap twice.

She pressed her ear to the surface, listening for the call to enter, catching bits of conversation.

"I don't want to involve them if I don't have to." The captain's voice could be heard clearly. "I'd rather not bring it up at all."

"You may have no choice. The visit today came too quickly," a gruff unfamiliar voice replied.

Janice rapped hard twice again. This time chairs scraped the floor and the sound of wood against wood--a cabinet or drawer being closed. Then she heard, "Come in."

Grasping the doorknob she was preparing to push inward when the door swung wide, a large boned man with wide set brown eyes, a flat nose and nut brown skin barred her view of the room beyond. "What d'you want?"

She realized that he was the crewman who Melinda had pointed out he wasn't from Haiti though he had said as much to the Greek inspection team.

"What is it?" he asked again, impatience clearly coloring his tone. "We're busy."

The captain appeared beside the man's left shoulder, his presence drawing Janice's green eyes away from the non-Haitian. She saw him press a hand easily on the big black's shoulder. "You cleaned up, I see," he said to her. "It's all right, Virg. I asked for some lunch."

At this cue, Janice lifted the tray cover.

"Do you want some?" Bristol asked, looking at Virg, but taking the tray from Janice's hands.

She followed him inside. Virg--whatever that was short for--growled, "No. I'll be up on deck if you need me."

Bristol settled back in the leather stuffed chair and lifted a chunk of cheese. Chewing and swallowing, he then gestured for her to sit. "Would you like some? It's Miss... Covington, right?"

Janice nodded. Slowly she settled in a nearby chair, getting her first real chance to study the Lob Lolly captain. She reached for some of the food to cover her lengthy regard.

He was older than she first thought, now noticing the spray of gray through otherwise chestnut hair. Cropped short, it naturally settled around lean features and a sharply defined nose. Brown eyes took her measure and she felt her throat constrict nervously. She almost forgot her second reason for visiting the captain.

Should she tell this man, who had watched his own crewman dragged off to a Greek prison, that she and her companion's possession might put his ship in danger again? What would he do?

But apparently silence was not something the Lob Lolly captain enjoyed. He started easily enough, seeking small talk. "So, Miss Covington, where are you and your friend bound?"

Janice shrugged, working up a casual tone. "Morocco. Same as you."

"Then the American states somewhere?" he guessed, reaching for a strip of the meat. "This is quite good," he complimented.

"Thank you," she replied, set off balance a bit by the change of subject. Cautiously she

answered his first question. "Eventually the States, yes." She leaned back in the chair, running her hand along the carved arms, idly identifying the wood as oak, and the style of the cut as eighteenth century. New England Colonial. Interesting. She dragged her eyes back up to the captain. "What about this ship? Where are you headed, Captain?"

"Home port. Taking some supplies for sale. Dover," he replied. "Our cargo's foodstuffs for the war effort."

"You're not carrying any arms or the German detachments in Greece wouldn't have approved your departure."

"No. No arms. We're a freighter. The Lolly is a ship in the Chatham lines. But lots of things help a war effort. Even if it is only back on the home front."

"Janice shook her head, drawn into a discussion of the war just becoming active on the Continent. "The Germans are moving into everywhere."

He chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. "True, but there's always Churchill. And hope."

Janice felt a shiver travel her spine. "You don't strike me as a man of faith, Bristol."

"I prefer to call it... practical faith. Even the Almighty accepts a helping hand now and again," he replied with a smile.

Janice, who was also not a believer in blind fate, but self-determination, agreed with a smile. "You took the arrest of your first officer quite well."

Bristol's posture became alert.

"Why didn't you object to his arrest?" she asked.

"Teneby had been with this crew since she was formed. I don't know what got into him."

"Apparently some plans for troop movements," she replied with a dry smile. He did not return it. "But that length of service... surely he was worth an argument or two?"

"I will do nothing to endanger this crew. The authorities had what they came for. Resistance would have harmed my men, or this ship."

"Do your men usually take on... independent... projects... without your knowledge, Captain?"

Bristol stood up, his expression no longer one of bland amusement, but displaying a glint of steely anger. Janice wondered what she had said exactly to bring about such a rapid change. Determined not to be cowed she remained seated.

"Miss Covington," he said thickly. "I don't like your insinuations. I suggest you return to the galley. Do your job and I'll do mine." He leaned on the arm of her chair, such that she heard the wood creak slightly under pressure. When he moved to grab her shoulder, Janice slipped from the chair and was at the door even as the chair tipped.

Bristol didn't fall, but the chair clattered loudly in the sudden silence.

"Captain." She excused herself and left quickly.

Left standing in the middle of his office studying the closed door, Bristol mused, "Pretty brave. And bold."

A single rap on his door and Bristol watched it open, admitting Virgil Turandot, his cargo boss. "Well?" asked the big man.

"Teneby selected well. I thought the pretty face might've swayed him. But... she's got brains. If we have to use her."

"Good."

## Chapter 10

When she returned to the cabin, Janice was still absorbing her meeting with the captain. Melinda's instincts were on target. The Lob Lolly crew was not who they appeared to be. She wondered if they were in any danger remaining aboard. The captain's parting words indicated that if she and Melinda did what they had been hired to do there likely wouldn't be any troubles. Janice wondered again: *what of Hock, the previous cook? Was he dead or alive? What had really happened to him? And if she and Mel made the same mistake, whatever it was, would his fate be theirs?*

Sitting down on her bed, the blonde looked over at Melinda. The brunette woman was curled up, knees bent, shoes off and one hand tucked under her cheek. Her chest moved easily with sleep. As Janice's gaze traced the gentle profile, her chest swelled with protective instincts and tangled with guilt.

Melinda Pappas's presence here was entirely her fault Janice condemned herself. Even before the rash choice of stealing the chakram back, it was Janice's telegram to Melinda's father that enticed the brunette to leave her sheltered Carolina life and enter an unstable country to help a stranger with a dubious search.

If not for Janice, Melinda would not have bruises for days from the latest round of an ancient warrior's battle with an ancient god. The archaeologist winced. Oh Melinda had put on a brave face. But even frustrated and distracted by the necessity of exploding her own dig, Janice had not missed the mottled blue, purple and yellow bruises visible all along Melinda's arms, shoulders, back and legs. One nasty purple one on her jaw had given the brunette trouble eating for several days.

Looking now, Janice could see only faint outlines of a few stubborn remaining bruises. She was focused on one on Melinda's wrist laid out against the covers when the brunette mumbled sleepily, "Janice?"

Shifting her gaze, the blonde became caught by eyes the color of a storm-swept sea. "Hi," she said. "Sleep well?"

Melinda stretched, blinked a few times, and rolled onto her back before sitting up with a soft groan. Running her fingers through her hair, she settled the disheveled locks into order. "Sorry about that. I probably should be in the galley."

Janice shook her head. "No, it's all right. You obviously needed the sleep."

The grogginess fading away, Melinda remembered where the blonde had been. She asked quietly, "Did the captain like his lunch?" She leaned over and slipped her feet back into shoes.

The blonde's green eyes went from sea foam to emerald, a sure sign she was disturbed. But she replied, "Yes. He'll be down to the galley for supper though."

Mel looked at her watch. "We ought to start organizing the meal then. It's already three o'clock." She stood and rubbed her shoulders, then rolled them, easing away the ache.

"All right," Janice responded, coming to her feet next to Melinda. "Here," she offered. "Let me do that." She worked gently on Melinda's right shoulder. "Did you figure out what we're serving?" she asked to keep her mind off the warm muscle under her hands.

"They have all sorts of canned beans. Ever make a three-bean salad?" Melinda watched over her left shoulder as Janice shook her head. "It's easy."

"What about meat? We've got sailors here." Janice stopped working on Melinda's muscle and turned, deep in thought. "Do we have potatoes, carrots, stuff like that? Even canned will do."

"I'm pretty sure I saw some," Melinda answered as they walked down the corridor and into the galley. Side by side they tied on towels as aprons. "What do you have in mind?"

"New England boiled dinner."

Mel considered that. "Beef?"

"Any meat will do chunked up, but typically beef."

Melinda chuckled. "I never really pictured you cooking," she said. "I'll enjoy watching this."

Surprised at the comment from a woman she was beginning to trust being herself around, Janice bristled though she tried to cover it with a shrug. Her voice came out much tighter and upset than she wanted. "On a dig, well, it's camping all the time. The meals I know are rough and ready, not high society dinners."

Melinda realized that she had unwittingly hit a sore spot, but the archaeologist's words had been a cut back at her as well.

Hurt expressions arose simultaneously as did the urge to apologize. Turning together each woman raised her hand. Their fingers intertwined.

"I'm sorry," Janice said.

"My apologies." Melinda's voice filled in the hollows of Janice's words. The resulting sound made both women faintly smile. "I didn't mean to sound cutting," Melinda continued.

Janice sighed. "I know." She realized their hands were still clasped and lowered her eyes to study the taller woman's hand caught in hers. The long smooth fingers and carefully manicured short nails were in sharp contrast to Janice's short scarred fingers and torn nails. "I'm sorry I got you into this," she said, dragging her eyes back up to Melinda's face. For more reasons now, she realized, mindful of the new undefined danger.

"I thought we already went through that," Melinda replied easily. Their eyes met for a long moment more than Janice released the brunette's hand, breaking the spell. She took a deep breath. "Okay." Walking to a cabinet, she dropped to her knees and started digging for the dinner makings.

Melinda felt a bemused smile form on her lips. Watching that face work on a quandary in silence made Melinda even more convinced that answering the summons, even if it had been meant for her father, had been the best decision she had ever made.

She turned to another cabinet, pulling down the cans of beans, a mixing bowl, as well as the other ingredients and worked quietly on the opposite counter, waiting for the early arrivals for the second meal.

The sunset rolled into the small portholes as Melinda pulled her hands from the tepid wash water and Janice tossed her the drying towel. The blonde walked the last stack of plates to the cupboard and settled them inside the wire catches that kept the plates from breaking in rough seas.

The brunette set a teapot on to boil. "That boiled dinner was really good, Janice," she said. She settled herself at the nearest table.

Looking from the pot to the woman sitting gingerly on a bench, Janice asked, "Tea?" Turning around she untied her towel and sat next to the taller woman.

"Yeah," Mel replied with a weary smile. "It'll settle my stomach."

Gently Janice put a hand on Melinda's near shoulder and asked, "Seasick again?" She looked around the room. "I could use a stroll on deck. How about you?"

Blue eyes sought green in the quiet as Mel grasped her hand and set both of them on the tabletop. "We've got to mop up in here," she reasoned.

"We can do that after dark. Sunset won't last forever," Janice replied, pulling Melinda up as she stood. Melinda resisted only by lightly tensing the muscles in her wrist and shoulder. "C'mon," Janice cajoled. "I'm tired of being cooped up."

"Then you go." The teapot whistled and Melinda disengaged to take it from the burner's heat. Janice didn't want them separated though. Her uneasy feelings had been reinforced by the conversations between Bristol and Virg and the others at the officers' table that kept stopping every time she worked her way past to refill mugs or refresh a plate. "Humor me," she asked, lifting her chin to bring her gaze in line with Melinda's.

Mel felt her pulse begin to throb in time with the one in Janice's throat. For a potent moment her whole world shrank to a pair of wide green eyes set in a soft face. "All right," she breathed, wondering where her voice had gone. Janice's hand squeezed her wrist and the woman smiled, stealing the brunette's breath. She let Janice lead her out of the galley and up the gangway steps.

## Chapter 11

Sailors were scattered to their tasks when the two women appeared on deck. Breathing deeply, Janice's face finally eased into a smile as she kept Melinda's hand in hers. She led the brunette over to the starboard forward railing. Leaning on it with her arms, Janice looked out on the horizon, watching the play of orange, red and yellow light across the waves. The Mediterranean stretched as far as she could see in any direction, though faintly on the southern horizon she could make out a change in coloration that suggested land. Africa, she thought with a smile, thinking of the teeming cultures that lived there.

As far back as Janice could remember she had wanted to be an explorer. Not necessarily an archaeologist, though that was a large part of it thanks to her father's single-mindedness, but just to go places, meet people and find out their stories, see the way they lived, and the places they called home.

As a child she had read her father's letters, sent to her at her grandmother's Philadelphia home, with the oddest postmarks and stamps, and imagined the things he was seeing based on the descriptions he gave. In that way she had been with him for each of his discoveries even though her grandmother had been determined that she get a young lady's education, and be settled somewhere.

Her grandmother and her father had always been at odds the few times he came home to work the Philadelphia academic society for money. The rest of the time, Janice knew, he had begged, borrowed and stolen the funds he used to finance his obsessive search for the scrolls.

She glanced over her shoulder at Melinda who stood leaning against a boat rack, eyes leveled on the wheelhouse. Thanks to this woman, Janice had uncovered one of the larger collections according to her father's notes. The Ancient History department at the University of Pennsylvania, where Janice guest lectured from time to time to pay the bills, would be properly compensatory for the scrolls, once Janice and Melinda had studied the completely translated texts.

"Janice?"

The blonde smiled and turned back, leaning against the railing with her elbows as she responded to Melinda's call. "Yes?" She realized then that the boat's movement had decidedly made the brunette a pale green. "Oh, no," she berated herself for her lengthy stay on deck. "I'm sorry. Do you want to sit down?" She watched the tall woman sink to the deck and close her eyes.

Janice sat next to Melinda on the deck surface, running her fingers over the surface distractedly before looking up into the brunette's face. Their backs were against the wall, looking out over the western horizon, which was rapidly growing dark. The moonlight began creeping over the bow of the boat, a full moon slowly rising to light the night.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

"What were you thinking about?" Melinda asked gently. She opened her eyes slowly, willing the flip-flop sensations in her stomach to subside. She studied the blonde head next to her shoulder and stiffened her arm against the sudden urge to gather up the obviously troubled woman.

Janice's tone however almost changed her mind. It was soft and hollow, sounding very alone against the vastness of the night surrounding them. "Home mostly, I guess."

Keep her talking, Melinda told herself. "Where exactly is home?"

"Philadelphia." Janice returned the query. "You live just outside Raleigh, right?"

"Yes," she said without elaborating.

Tugging her knees up and wrapping her arms around them for a moment, Janice looked off over the railing out to the light dancing on the ocean before looking back up into Melinda's gaze.

"Do you work at the university, like your father did?"

"Sort of."

Janice heard the reluctance in the brunette's tone and realized it wasn't the seasickness keeping her answers short. "Do you teach?"

Melinda leaned back on her hands on the deck and slowly shook her head. "No."

"A student?" Again Melinda shook her head. Janice put a hand on her hips and asked pointedly, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

"I'm on the Board of Directors and two committees for named chairs." Sighing, Melinda's body stiffened.

"The chairs," Janice finally said quietly. "Named for your father?" Melinda nodded.

"Does that bother you?" she asked.

"No. But this must be very different than what you're used to," Janice pointed out reasonably. "It can't be easy."

Melinda shrugged. "It's different." Then she smiled warmly. "But that's the point. I... I didn't want to..."

"Why did you come to Macedonia, Mel?" Janice leaned back to watch the brunette's face, the breeze taking locks of her hair and playing with it obscuring the blue eyes from time to time.

"You wrote."

"I wrote your father. You could have simply written back and explained that he died before he could answer it."

Melinda shook her head. "I couldn't do that," she said with a low rumble. Blue eyes came up as she brushed her hair out of her face. "I had to come."

"You weren't prepared for the rough conditions."

"No I wasn't," Melinda admitted. Then she met Janice's green eyes determinedly. "Would you have preferred I stay home?" she asked quietly.

Janice frowned. Not come? "No. I'm..." She brushed her hand over the brunette's arm and squeezed it. "Thank you for coming to Macedonia. You've been a lot of help."

Ducking her head, Melinda accepted the thanks. "You would have gotten into that cave without my help." Even as she said it, Melinda knew that everything had transpired as it should, in an almost pre-ordained way. She didn't believe in predestination but so many things in her young life suggested there were just some things you didn't contest.

Like a dream in the middle of the night with a telegram clutched in your fist, that makes you wake up screaming, knowing you have to cross an ocean to trace down a woman you've never met.

Janice's voice drifted into Melinda's thoughts. "I wouldn't have wanted to," she replied. Their hands slid together putting Janice's elbow inside Melinda's as they stretched out their feet in front

of them, hips touching, each studying the other's foot close to her own. "Why can't anything be simple," she heard the blonde murmur. Then Janice's head dropped gently to the taller woman's shoulder.

The action startled Melinda into looking down into the profusion of blonde hair covering her throat and collar. "I wouldn't have wanted you to, either," Melinda heard herself saying softly, slipping an arm around the blonde's back and pulling her against her in a hug.

She sensed the blonde was worried about something but Melinda offered what comfort, even protection, she could out here in the middle of the ocean in the middle of the night. She closed her eyes and sank into the feeling of surrounding and being surrounded by warm contentment.

It was then, almost sleepily, she realized that she couldn't feel the motion of the boat. The sensation was incredible. She buried the spontaneous smile in her companion's hair and hugged Janice closer.

The moonlight shadows shifted and the brunette tensed, sensing a presence behind them. Instincts older than she could guess rose up, almost choking her with their ferocity. She jerked her head around, eyes narrowing on the new arrival.

The sailor walked with the easy rolling gait of one well-used to the sea and its movement. Melinda watched him, her eyes following even though her head did not move. He glanced once in their direction, said nothing and moved away, adjusting a coil of rope settled over one shoulder.

It didn't seem like a good idea to stay out here any longer. Lifting her head she looked up at the position of the moon, arched her neck and rolled her shoulder muscles, gently dislodging Janice. She realized the blonde had fallen asleep.

"Janice," she murmured against the woman's head. "Let's go back below deck."

Janice stirred, blinked and rubbed her cheeks. "Sorry about that."

"No problem," the brunette replied. The archaeologist responded with a dubious look.

"Really," she emphasized. "My seasickness is gone too. I'm ready to get some sleep."

Melinda stood and helped Janice to her feet. Following the blonde to the stairway, she looked up and caught movement in the wheelhouse as someone moved away from the front glass. *They were being watched?* Protectively she put a hand on the blonde's shoulder and followed her down to their cabin.

Stepping back to the wheelhouse glass, the captain nodded to Virgil. "What other choice do we have, I know." He dropped his shoulders and murmured, "I'll talk to them." A twinge of misgiving over what he was about to do made him shake his head. "What bastards we are," he murmured as Virgil turned and walked out.

## Chapter 12

Too bothered to sleep, Janice laid awake, arms tucked under her head as she stared through the darkness at the piping running through the ceiling. Glancing toward the other bed, she identified Melinda's sheet-covered form where the brunette lay facing away to the wall.

The blonde smiled, remembering sitting up on deck, and the security she felt in their hug. It had been some time since the archaeologist had last been that at ease around anyone. First there had been the sudden loss of her father -- Smythe, may his soul rot in Hell, had been responsible, though Janice had been unable to prove anything. Then taking control of the dig had been complicated as the men repeatedly demanded she prove she really did know what she was doing.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

Janice rolled out of bed and pulled on her pants. Might as well put this restlessness to good use, she thought, and mop the galley. The gray pants and her loose night shirt were perfect for the dirty job. She padded down the corridor in bare feet and into the galley.

The darkness was deeper here without portholes to let in the moonlight. Slowly she felt to her left for the wall switch.

A shadow exploded through the darkness before her. Something big and hard hit her arm aside before she could illuminate the room. A body fell atop her, throwing them both to the ground. Janice hit the floor with a painful *oof* then rolled beneath her attacker's grip. She yelled near what she hoped was an ear. He howled and boxed her ears. She kicked, dislodging his leg wrapped around one of hers. She batted his head hoping to distract his concentration. Balling her hand, she slammed from right to left across the space between their faces. Triumphant she connected with his nose. The sickening crunch of bone greeted her. She yelled again indistinctly.

Finally she wedged her arms between them. She drove an elbow into his throat at the same time she found his groin with her knee.

The man cried out and rolled away, panting, whimpering and clutching himself. Panting herself, Janice sprang to her feet, stumbled to the wall and flipped the switch.

Light flooded the room, and she identified her attacker with a growl. "Bristol!" Angry, she kicked him. "I think you owe me an explanation." She fished in her pocket, glad she had the unkempt habit of not emptying her trousers before undressing.

Coughing blood and holding his nose the man sat up, but threatened by the gun easing out of her pocket, he remained on the floor. "Damn," he said quite succinctly.

Without his British accent. In fact, Janice realized, it was obvious he was American. "What's your real name?" she demanded, wiggling the handgun's muzzle as a warning.

"James Bristol." She cocked the hammer. "That's the truth."

"What's with the fake accent then, and I assume, false papers. This ship isn't British is it?"

"Put the gun away and I'll explain." She shook her head.

"Go ahead, Janice. Put it away. I think he's going to tell us what we want to know."

The blonde and the captain turned around to see Melinda Pappas leaning on the wall leading into the galley. She had Janice's other gun in her left hand, loosely trained on them both.

"Both of you are like this?" Bristol asked. "I thought Teneby hadn't met you?" he said pointedly at Melinda.

"He didn't. But that doesn't have anything to do with anything," Janice confirmed. "All right, Bristol." She put away the gun and gestured to the table. She reached across the counter in the cooking area and tossed him the towel she picked up. "Time to talk."

For a long moment watching them while they watched him, Bristol just carefully stopped the bleeding in his nose and tested the bridge. The break was apparently small. So the Lob Lolly's captain began with a simple statement that confirmed the women's suspicions. "We're an American ship."

"The entire crew?" Melinda stood at the table's end, giving Janice the weapon she held.

He nodded. "Under orders from the Secretary of the Navy, we've been collecting information on the war here."

"And Teneby?" Blue eyes leveled on him. "Safe in Greece. Collecting more data."

"But he was arrested by the authorities?" Janice queried.

Bristol smiled. "The Greek port authority has been helping us out. We get the information on board, and in response to the threats from the German contingent, they 'cooperatively' send out a

unit to detain us, search the ship and 'recover' the stolen data.

"The originals do go back to the Germans," he added. "But we've already stowed copies."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is," he confirmed. "We've still got to make a connection in Morocco with a plane headed for Washington."

"Why attack me?" Janice asked, rubbing her shoulder pointedly.

"After your questioning in my office earlier, I needed to stop you from snooping. You came across pretty tenacious."

Melinda looked at Janice. "Yes, she does," she offered lightly with a warm smile for her partner. "So, what now?"

"I'm here to ask for your help."

"With making the drop in Morocco?" Janice leaned forward, crossing her hands on the table. She was warming to her element. Deal-making.

Bristol nodded. "We're docking tomorrow and have to unload ordinary cargo to dispel some suspicions raised during our last trip."

Janice had a flash of insight. "Hock screwed something up, didn't he? What did you do with him?"

"We didn't do anything with him. Pretty good cook. Lousy at subterfuge though." Bristol shook his head. "Those of us involved in the drop watched him get shot when we were leaving. Virgil..." He looked to Janice. "Had to kill him so the German authority couldn't question Hock as a prisoner."

Melinda drew breath in shock. "My God." Janice just nodded, aware of the necessity. Harsh, but a reality for a spy.

"Couldn't be helped. Anyway, Virgil did the cooking until we got back to Greece. Teneby met you at the docks," he nodded toward Janice. "And came to us the night before we sailed saying that he'd found a couple of new cooks for us."

"But the usual route hadn't been used to recruit us," Melinda confirmed. "So you had to test us."

"That's why the huge all-crew interrogation. Not our usual style. We figure we could watch your body language, figure out if you were trustworthy or not."

"When you decided we were, that's why you came up with the answer we'd been hired six months ago."

"What are you two hiding anyway? I had the hardest time convincing Virgil I still trusted you. He had this feeling..."

The tables turned now, it was time for Melinda and Janice to exchange looks. Taking a deep breath, Janice answered Bristol. "We have a few things the Greek authorities didn't want us to leave with."

"Military plans? Are you working for the Axis?" Bristol drew up angrily.

Janice shook her head. "No, a few archaeological pieces. Mel and I were at a dig in Macedonia until a week ago."

Bristol stood. "Seems harmless enough. Mind if I take a look though? The Reich's awfully interested in religious items. They might still come after you."

"None of it's religious. Just some scrolls."

"May I see them?"

Janice looked at Melinda, who then answered the captain. "All right. We're all being honest

with each other."

Bristol nodded. "Tomorrow's plans can be discussed next."

"All right," Janice said. "Come with us." The two women led the captain to their cabin. Janice kept him at the doorway while Melinda went to their belongings to retrieve the relics. "I'm sorry, Captain, about this, but..."

As only another person who spent their life keeping secrets could, Captain James Bristol nodded and smiled in complete understanding. "You think you can help us out tomorrow?" Warm brown eyes dropped to her face.

"I'm pretty resourceful," she replied with a quirked smile, enjoying the possibility of a little adventure.

Melinda spent longer than necessary going through their bags and collecting the relics for the captain. She could hear the conversation going easily between Janice and James Bristol and heard the bright note of happiness in the blonde's usually serious tone of voice. She felt an odd knot form in her stomach. Finally she stood, bearing two scrolls, and one piece of the chakram cradled in her arms. "Captain?" She drew their attention to her and watched as Janice broke her gaze with the tall man reluctantly. "These are some of them. Hellenic period scrolls and weaponry pieces."

Bristol tilted his head and reached out. "May I?" Melinda passed him one of the sturdier scrolls. With both women watching, he unrolled an edge slowly, careful not to tear or bend the parchment now fairly brittle despite their well-kept appearance. He glanced over the symbols and wondered aloud at the words. "What are they? Stories? Histories? Birth records?"

"Stories mostly," Melinda confirmed. "by Gabrielle of Poteidaia."

Janice added with fervor, "They're about a warrior woman, Xena of Amphipolis."

Bristol nodded politely, not familiar with the name. "Sounds very academic. You wouldn't have been held up for the Germans. So... What would the Greek government care about a few scrolls?"

"It's the principle of the thing," Janice explained. "Greek historical treasure and hanging on to it... National pride."

"National pride's important. Why are you taking it then?"

Janice flushed red under his regard. "No one believes she existed."

"And you want to prove it. With these documents." Bristol's tone was full of understanding. He sat down on the bed, passing the scroll back to Melinda. "That's kind of what we're doing. Gathering evidence to prove that the war is worth American intervention. We've been trying to find out what, if anything, the Reich, has planned for the United States."

"Find anything yet?" Janice asked, sitting down.

Before James could answer, Melinda went to their door and closed it. "I'm going to turn in," she said as she came back to the bed.

"All right," Janice said distracted. She looked to Bristol. "Maybe we can go to the galley, and discuss this plan of yours for tomorrow?"

"Of course." He stood and looked over at Melinda who was sitting on her bed. "Good night, Miss Pappas."

"Good night, Captain."

Janice and Bristol left Melinda alone in the dark room to sleep, and went back to the galley. The brunette took a deep breath while studying the closed door, then rolled into her covers, wondering why she suddenly had a headache.

## Chapter 13

Grabbing her head, Melinda rolled over unsure what exactly had awakened her. Out the porthole she could see the first gray streaks of dawn. Adjusting her sight to the darkness she blinked and squinted to find her glasses on the nightstand.

The action brought her gaze to Janice's bed where she discovered the covers pulled up and tidy. The brunette felt her face tighten into a frown. She stopped it furiously, reasoning that Janice was a grown woman. What she chooses to do with her time is none of your business.

Finished mentally kicking herself, Melinda rolled out of bed and turned on the light. Finding serviceable clothing among her luggage she dressed in silence. Then she sat in front of the mirror to brush out her hair.

The doorknob clicked softly and she watched through the mirror's reflection as the door opened. Janice, blonde hair catching the light from the lamp, tiptoed toward her bed then stopped and straightened, realizing the light was on. She looked to Melinda who held the brush in mid-air a breath from her hair. "You're awake," she said with surprise.

"Thought I'd better get into the galley and work on breakfast for the crew," Melinda said quietly.

Janice nodded. "I was just coming to wake you up."

Melinda doubted that was her original intent, what with all the tiptoeing but she said nothing to it, again reminding herself it was none of her business. Instead she gestured to the bed and asked, "You were gone before I got up. Did you sleep well?"

Shaking her head, Janice's face bloomed into a smile that sent a lance of pain through Melinda's chest. "Nah. James and I have been making plans for Morocco." She sat on the bed and took off her nightshirt, switching it for a tidier cut blouse, in hunter green. The color sharply drew out her eyes and contrasted with her hair giving the woman a rugged, healthy appearance. Melinda turned back to the mirror and watched the rest of Janice's morning ablutions while she finished with her hair. Finally pulling it back in a low ponytail instead of spending the time to pin it up, Mel stood, heading for the door without another word.

"Mel?"

"Yes?"

Janice grabbed up the brush and pulled it through her hair, tying it back with a bit of cloth. "Wait up." She walked briskly to Melinda's side and then nodded. "Let's go."

Entering the galley first, Melinda noticed the lights were on already and easily identified the smell of fresh dough rising, and the pungency of uncooked bacon. The floor had been mopped, she noticed, stepping carefully over a small, still damp, spot. Entering the cooking area, Melinda reached

for a towel. She stopped with one hand on the counter, brought up short by the presence of someone between her and the stove.

Captain James Bristol, wearing a towel apron himself watched a skillet of fat sizzling in front of him and a spatula in his right hand. He turned, brown eyes lighting on her briefly and then Janice where they lingered. "Good morning," he said.

Janice did not appear at all surprised to see him and just nodded. "I'll get back to the omelets," she said, leaving Melinda in the middle of the floor as she went to a back counter.

"Good morning, captain." To cover her unease, Melinda fell back on her carefully mannered upbringing. "Miss Covington and I can handle the meals."

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He shrugged. "I'm not an awful cook, just don't have time to do it usually." He worked with the spatula in the skillet for a moment then continued. "I thought you... both... could use the help," he said, starting off his comment looking at Janice, then ending on Melinda with a sheepish smile. "So, come on... We can even eat before the rest of the crew gets drawn by the smells."

Janice stirred a whisk through a large bowl filled with frothing contents. Eggs, Melinda guessed. She spotted the pile of uncut vegetables, drained and poured out of their cans. "I'll cut up these for the omelets," she said helpfully. In quick order she had sliced and diced mushrooms, onions and mushy tomatoes.

"Thanks," Janice replied, when Melinda delivered the cutting board contents to her. "These'll be perfect." She folded the vegetables in the eggs and delivered the contents to Bristol. "Here, James."

"Great looking omelets," he commented, taking the bowl. Letting Janice lean over his shoulder, Bristol poured some into the skillet, arranging the vegetables as the egg began to cook. Folding over the top as soon as the skin formed he then covered it. "One omelet coming up," he chuckled. "Who gets it?"

"Give it to Mel," Janice said. "Looks like you could use the boost," the blonde told her friend. "Lumpy mattress?" she asked.

"No," Melinda shook her head. "Just too much on my mind, I guess. "She took the omelet Bristol slipped onto a plate for her and sat down at the table. She kept her eyes on her plate, but could not prevent overhearing the conversation that grew more animated as she left.

"Marakesh is gorgeous," Bristol said. "You ought to see it sometime. But the Moroccans have cornered the market on food. Best anywhere I've ever been."

"What's it like?" Janice asked, accepting another plate of eggs, but not leaving while Bristol cooked his meal.

"There are African heartland, French colonial, even Spanish influences. It's spicy exotic meats and thick sauces," he explained. "There's a place called 'Siobahn's' near downtown. I'll take you there for dinner," he said. "We'll have to stay the night and leave in the morning with the tide anyway, might as well make this look good, and I'll take you out."

Melinda looked up and noticed neither was looking toward her.

"Sounds great." Janice balanced her plate and poured two mugs of orange juice. Melinda saw the discarded rinds of dozens of oranges on the counter, next to a hand juicer. "Here," Janice said, giving Bristol one of the mugs. Picking up his plate and taking the mug, the Lob Lolly captain led the way over to the table.

Janice and he settled to the bench opposite Melinda, who was nibbling on her omelet without really tasting it.

"How is it?" Bristol asked her, cutting into his for the first time. "Nice," she answered.

"Really tasty," Janice added. "Using the bacon fat livens it up considerably."

Bristol laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, that it does." Chewing his bite he speared another and went silent as he ate.

"Melinda?"

"Yes?" The brunette looked up from her meal, noticing that the two across the way had juice and she didn't, decided she didn't like the look of Janice's bright smile and interrupted as the blonde opened her mouth to speak. "Hold that thought, I'm going after some orange juice."

"Oh, sorry about that," Bristol started to his feet.

"Don't worry I've got it. You just go on with your breakfast. We've got to get back to

cooking pretty quickly anyway. It's almost mealtime. So you better finish up."

She fetched her juice and was just sitting again when the first crewmen arrived, hungry and salivating at the smells. Giving up on her meal, while Janice and the captain continued to talk quietly, Melinda served bacon and omelets to the men, mixing up more eggs and vegetables and cooking more bacon as quickly as she could.

By the time the rush was coming, Janice had joined her behind the serving line, taking off some of the pressure of cooking and serving. The captain tipped his hat to both women and followed by the greetings of his men, he ducked out the door.

Word had apparently spread somewhat of Melinda and Janice's "safety" and the men greeted them with more enthusiasm than the previous day.

"Great night on board last night," one said. "Best sleep I've had in weeks."

"You ain't got nothin' but sea legs, Donny," called back another. He nodded to Melinda. "Did you have a good night, miss?" he asked politely.

Saying nothing, the brunette just smiled back and served him a double helping of bacon.

"Thank you," he offered, moving off.

"Doubles for me too, miss," said the next. "A cooked meal," he said with relish. "What a great way to wake up. Like my mother used t'cook back home."

"Home?" Melinda asked, pleased to have something to talk about.

"Maryland," he answered. "Where're you from?"

"North Carolina," she answered her accent pronounced because she made no effort to hide it.

"A real southern belle. Nice t'meet'cha." He tapped the next man on the shoulder and pointed to her. "Get the lady a mint julep. She's all from the South." The man's emphasized Southern accent amused his companions. There was a loud round of chuckles as he leaned forward and tried to kiss her. "Thanks for the meal, darlin'."

Melinda ducked her head and avoided the encounter. Backing up, she looked toward Janice who had gone back to do more cooking. Her back to the serving area, Janice was completely unaware of Melinda's situation. Jaw tight and eyes darkening to indigo, she grasped the man's hand and savagely slammed her other fist in his face. Soundlessly he dropped to the floor. Sheepish looks came from the other men and without another word, each stepped over the man and moved on, reaching to serve themselves. Fighting down her anger, Melinda was just returning the smile to her face as Janice came forward with more eggs and bacon.

"Here you go," Janice said. Not trusting her voice, Melinda ignored the blonde completely and only grasped the tray, set it down and began serving from it. The men eyed her warily, passing whispers down the line.

"Don't mess with the brunette," she heard distinctly. She set her jaw against the lump forming in her throat and prayed for the end of the meal.

Janice dried the last plate and put it away. Turning back she noticed that Melinda had not yet pulled her hands from the soapy water, instead standing still at the sink, eyes looking down into the remaining bubbles and drawing her fingers through them.

"Hey, come on. Captain needs our help as soon as we dock."

"You go on. I'll wait here," the brunette said.

Janice tossed the towel over her shoulder and walked up to stand next to Melinda, where she looked up into the downturned face and saw unfocused blue eyes. "Hey..." she put a hand on the brunette's shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me you were seasick? C'mon sit down."

Melinda shrugged the hand off her shoulder. "I'm not seasick." Her voice was irritated.

"When we dock you ought to come with us. Give yourself a break from the ship's motion. Maybe you'll feel better," Janice insisted.

Snapping, Melinda turned and barked, "I feel fine. I'm finished here. I'm going to go sit in our cabin and work on a scroll." She turned on her heel and walked out of the galley.

Janice heard a heavy slapping sound as the door to their cabin opened and closed hard. She frowned. "What the hell happened to her?" She glanced down at her watch and sighed. "Can't deal with that right now," she murmured. "Time for action." Removing her towel apron, Janice dropped it on the counter and left the galley in a rush.

## Chapter 14

The brunette woman reclined on the small bed, atop the straightened covers. Propped against the wall, a pillow stuffed behind her lower back, Melinda sat reading an unrolled parchment against her upraised knees. She jotted a few notes on a half-filled pad bearing a partial translation.

She was currently stymied and reading further down the scroll, for a context to make sense of an idiomatic phrase. She pulled a small hand bound leather book from under her left thigh and thumbed to a page. Comparing it to the phrasing in the scroll, she shook her head. "That's not right." She frowned.

Closing her eyes, she carefully set aside the parchment. Her stomach twitched, signaling hunger and she glanced at her watch. "Almost noon," she murmured. "That's what you get for skipping breakfast," she berated herself. Setting the small book atop her traveling bag, she walked quickly to the cabin door, deciding on a snack.

She thought about waiting the next hour or so for the ship to make port in Casablanca. She could then venture into the city and taste something local. Going alone though, she realized, was not a particularly smart idea.

And that's what she would have to do. Her partner, Janice Covington, had been asked to help the Lob Lolly crew make their rendezvous.

A knot of anxiety drove Melinda past the galley though and up on deck to seek out the captain and Janice. She wanted to hear from the blonde herself that she knew what she was doing.

Taking a deep breath of the salt sea air, the American southerner stopped a sailor. "Where are the captain and Miss Covington?" she asked.

"Haven't seen 'em, Miss." He gestured over his shoulder. "I have to go make a depth sounding. We're turning through the channel into port." He hurried away.

Melinda moved to the railing spotting the Casablanca port skyline. Indistinct low buildings were nearly obscured by the slow-moving vessels that steamed in and out of the north African port.

Teams of men swarmed over the piers, the ship decks and the rigging and sails of the few older style sailing vessels.

Giving in to her curiosity, Melinda remained quiet, watching the port come nearer and nearer, identifying the tugboat steaming toward them. The smell of fuel and stack smoke made her eyes water but she kept vigil, committing the pleasant pandemonium to memory as she glimpsed another new place.

She sat down on the deck and wrapped her arms around the railing, peering through, oblivious to the steps which resounded behind her.

A male voice finally drew her attention. "So, have you decided to join us, Miss Pappas?"

Bristol stopped at the railing a few paces away, looking at her. Janice brushed her wind-blown hair aside as she stepped up in the intervening space. Green eyes drifted from the port down to Melinda. "Yeah, Mel. Come with us." She gestured widely at the bustling city. "How often are you going to be back here?"

Getting to her feet, Melinda looked from Janice's face, up to Bristol's, then out to the pier where they were being tugged. The same core of intellectual curiosity that had led her into her father's line of work piqued.

She looked back at Janice to give her answer and stopped herself from speaking. Bristol's hand reached across the blonde's back, and his other arm stretched out to point. "There's Timony," he said.

Melinda looked at a caftan-clad figure pacing the pier. Cinnamon-colored face surrounded by jet black shoulder-length hair, well-tanned hands and legs were all that were visible. "Who's Timony?" she asked.

"Our contact. Acts as our dock boss," Bristol replied casually.

"Then give him the papers and we'll be back on course for the States before night tide," she suggested.

Janice put a hand on Bristol's arm as she turned to Melinda. "If we do the exchange in broad daylight we could be arrested." She gestured back to the piers, pointing out a patrolling French soldier. The heightened tension of the coming war had every port on edge. "If we make it look like just another freight delivery though and work from the warehouse, we've got better odds."

"So, exactly how will this work?" Melinda asked.

"You're coming then?" Bristol clarified, one eyebrow lifting over his brown eyes.

"New experiences and all that, right?" she offered, looking at Janice. The blonde smiled warmly before Melinda lifted her gaze to Bristol.

"Good. Terry needed a partner," Bristol replied quickly. He waved to someone behind the upper deck watch railing. "You'll suit perfectly."

Janice and Melinda turned to watch a clean cut man in sleeveless blue shirt vault the railing and land spread-legged on the deck. "Yes, Cap'n?" he called out, coming closer.

"Miss Pappas is your date for the evening," Bristol said. "Miss Pappas, Mister Terence Godwin, nickname Terry."

Bright blue eyes shined out from a young deeply tanned face and he thrust his hand toward her. "Some damn fine cookin' you do, Miss Pappas, and your friend there." He inclined his head toward Janice but that blue gaze never left Melinda's face.

She slowly took his hand. "Melinda Pappas," she offered detail with a cautious smile.

"Like the accent. Real cultured." He turned to Bristol. "Looks like our new cook's just aching for a night on the town, to find some new recipes?"

Melinda realized that set the story she would be expected to play out were they stopped by any authorities. Probably the exchange of information would take place in a restaurant. She looked to Janice. "Will you and I at least be allowed to acknowledge each other?"

"Yeah, of course." Janice smiled. She revealed her story. "James and I are here to make new business for the Chatham Line."

"Will we be leaving together?" the brunette thought to ask. Terry put his arm across her back lightly. Despite his politeness and generally harmless good looks, she still had to stifle the urge to throw her elbow into his stomach.

Janice smiled and looked up at Bristol. "I told you she was smart."

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Bristol looked away from Janice's face and answered Melinda. His answer was singularly unappealing though it was calmly and evenly uttered.

"No."

Worried blue eyes sought green. "Janice?" Melinda fought to keep the panic out of her voice.

"You'll stay an extra night here in Casablanca and leave on the Trojan's Song. James and I will take the Lob Lolly to Algiers in the morning for a document pickup. Then we'll meet you in open waters in two days." She pointed out, "Otherwise you'll have an extra day on the water--in rough seas. South Atlantic boats are reporting a nasty storm off the Ivory Coast."

Melinda shook her head.

Taking her arm, Janice led Mel away from the two men. "Mel," she began.

The brunette would have none of it. She had a stake in this as much as Janice did. They stayed together. "No. No, Janice. We started this trip together. We finish it together. Doesn't that mean something to you?"

"This is a chance, Mel--"

"No!" The taller woman slashed her hand through the air. Janice's jaw set firmly. So did Melinda's.

"I'm used to looking out for myself, Melinda Pappas. No one asked you to come to Greece." She grabbed Melinda's wrist. "This is a chance for me to do something, Mel. Something important."

The brunette barked, "The Scrolls were important! What happened to all the 'they'll change history' talk?"

The blonde looked as if she had been slapped. Her jaw went slack and her cheeks reddened.

Mel went on, her voice tight, barely restraining her anger. "If you leave, Janice Covington, I'm taking the Scrolls. I'll find passage direct to the States from here and I'm gone. Your new friends' crusade can go to Hell because I'm not going to help." She took a deep breath, realizing she was shaking. "Now. You figure out if we do this and stay together. I'm not leaving you in Africa." I care too much about what happens to you, the thought echoed in her head, screaming to get out, but she bit her lip, holding it back.

Janice growled, "Someone would think you're my mother or something." *Why was Mel doing this?* she wondered. "Can't you see I just want to help the war effort?"

Melinda lowered her voice but none of the edgy menace departed her tone. She held the blonde's gaze and asked sharply, "Have you even seen the documents you're going to be handing over here? Has James--" she fairly sneered his name. "Has he once shown them to you?" She gripped the shorter woman's upper arm. "Do you really know who you'd be helping?" Blue eyes searched green imploringly. "Please Janice," she ended in a desperate whisper. "Don't go. They don't need us. We'll find another way home."

Janice looked back over her shoulder. Godwin and Bristol were in deep conversation. She considered what Melinda was asking of her. All through the night James had laid out the plans in detail, answered her questions, and convinced her it was vital to their success that she work with them. She believed him.

The possibility of lending the besmirched Covington name a gleam of polish by aiding in a mission of national security appealed to her pride. A lifetime devoted to a cause most thought was a fantasy, daughter to a man most thought was a thief and a graverobber.

She looked back to Melinda. The other side presented itself. She had a flash of last evening on this very deck caught in a hug with the brunette. If she did this and parted paths with Melinda

Pappas. Janice swept into a pair of pleading blue eyes. Without a doubt she knew she would regret leaving Melinda far worse than continuing as "that graverobber Covington's kid." *Why hadn't she thought about this last night*, she asked herself, now seeing the choices clearly.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to Bristol and Godwin to inform them of her decision. She opened her mouth. And promptly closed it.

The sun glinted off the narrow barrel of a Colt .45. "We need your decision, ladies," Bristol set the hammer. "Now."

Melinda put her hands on Janice's shoulders. The blonde cast her words back to the brunette. "Couldn't you have waited to question this until we were off the boat?" With a sigh she lifted her hands, out of the corner of her eye she saw Melinda do the same.

"Can we make a deal?" Melinda asked.

"What?" Bristol countered.

"We'll help you deliver your information and you leave us here," she reasoned.

"Two American women in Casablanca without papers?" Terry laughed. "Yeah, sure, Jim. They'll be dead by nightfall tomorrow."

Bristol nodded. "Pack your bags then. You're getting off here."

He waved the gun under Melinda's throat. "If you blow this meeting, you won't have to wait for the authorities to discover you. I'll toss you in the drink myself."

Melinda nodded quickly and pulled Janice away, down into the ship where the women threw their belongings in their bags. Terry followed them at a distance.

In their room, with Godwin outside, Janice was quiet for the longest time. Finally she asked, "How did you know?"

Unable to call it anything more than a bad feeling, Melinda said as much. "I didn't feel anything was right." She buried the scroll she had been translating deep in her clothes. "He was too forthcoming when we asked for information."

"You were holding a gun on him, Mel."

The brunette shook her head. "No. I can't explain it."

Shaking her head, Janice rubbed her forehead, warding off a headache. "And I'm supposed to be the skeptic." She eyed Godwin as the two followed him back on deck.

Melinda's whisper only made her feel worse. "He specifically set out to fool you, Janice. Don't take it personally." They emerged on deck. The rope ladder was already lowered over the side and a contingent of the Lob Lolly's crew already moved on the pier.

## Chapter 15

Janice leaned close to Melinda as they walked up the pier between Bristol and Godwin. "We can't just let them herd us around."

"We have to wait for an opportunity," Melinda replied in a low whisper.

The blonde looked up at Bristol, angry again at herself for being so easily taken in. "So, where're we going first?"

Bristol's eyes narrowed on her as he answered, "Timony's waiting at the warehouse." He gestured to a dockhand. The shirtless brawny man set down the box he was moving and jogged over. "Tell Timony I've got a shipment. We'll meet at the usual." The man's dark eyes flitted over the foursome then he jogged away.

For her part, Melinda was showing considerably more calm than she felt. Her mind worked

through everything she had both learned and guessed about the Lob Lolly, Bristol and his crew.

It appeared that she and Janice were still important to the plans. Otherwise they would have been killed at the first sign of resistance. So they were alive as long as they cooperated or as long as the men didn't see another way to fulfill their mission without the women's help.

Once they made contact however, what then? She tilted her gaze toward Janice and felt her chest tighten painfully. The blonde had been willing to separate once. What would prevent her from doing so again, especially should she see a way out?

By demanding they stay together as her heart commanded, had Melinda only stalled the inevitable? *Would Janice run when the chance came, unwittingly or even willingly leaving Melinda behind?*

She wanted, no, needed to know more about why Janice had been so eager to help Bristol. She found an opportunity to ask when the men stopped to talk to the owner of a smokehouse. "Janice?"

"What?" The blonde sounded angry and frustrated just as Melinda suspected she would, but when green eyes came up, Melinda saw the truth. Janice Covington was scared.

The revelation made Melinda feel awful. One of the reasons she had decided to stay with Janice after that first awkward meeting was the belief that the blonde archaeologist had a strong sense of personal goals. It was something Melinda wanted to learn for herself and that she thought being around Janice could teach her. Maybe they weren't so different after all.

"I'm sorry," Melinda finally offered, accepting the blame for their current predicament. "I guess I should have kept quiet."

Janice looked toward Bristol who had his back to them talking with the shop owner, a fat man with greasy fingers, and equally blood-spattered apron. She could see the bulge in his jacket from his gun. "Yeah, you should've," she retorted under her breath. Then she frowned and shook her head. "No. I should have my head examined."

"He was pretty convincing," Melinda considered.

"He really had my number though," Janice murmured with a wince. She sighed. "God, how could I do it again?" She shoved her hands angrily in her pockets. "First the scrolls, now this. I just love lost causes. Damn."

"What do you mean?"

"I spent my life listening to asinine stories and believing the ravings of a drunken fake," she sneered.

"But the Scrolls weren't fake, Janice. You did find them. You proved your father was right."

"Descendants of a hero," she mocked, imitating an older male voice. Mel realized it must be Harry Covington, Janice's father. "My whole life," she went on now in her own voice, "has been one wild goose chase after another in search of glory."

"I don't believe that." Melinda shook her head.

Disappointment in herself spilling over to all her life's endeavors, Janice countered acidly, "Believe it. My father was a thief, a drunk and always just 'one more dig' away from his glory. And I was right there with him. Such a gullible wretch." She looked up at Melinda with her smooth skin, calm blue eyes and saw a woman who had never messed up anything. "You on the other hand are certainly living up well to your ancestry. Smart." She went on, frustration oozing through her voice. "Xena never got gulled into some shallow promise of being famous."

She mused back to the scroll she had been translating. The phrasing clicked for Mel. "Not fame. Power," she corrected Janice absently. Yes, that's it. She thought about the scroll buried now

in her bag. *Would she ever be able to get back to it?*

Further discussion was put on hold as the men rejoined the women. "All right, ladies. We now have two meetings." Bristol pointed to Janice. "We need forty cases of cooking oil."

Terry added, nodding toward Melinda. "And you're going to get fifteen cases of flour."

"What do you need us for?" Janice countered. "Just make the deals yourself. Cooking oil and flour? I don't bake cakes, fellas."

Bristol's face grew taut and angry. He grabbed Janice's collar, making Melinda jump. Brown eyes bore into green. Melinda could feel an itch in her palms and looked to Godwin, whose gaze was pinned on Janice and his captain's exchanges. She considered trying to grab Janice and running, but she knew that would likely fail, and the men would decide they were not worth the trouble of keeping them around. She felt a surge of desire for violence, but then Janice's calm exchange with Bristol defused her in surprise.

"Not really talking cooking oil are we?" Janice countered evenly though his face was inches away from hers.

He nodded. "Smart bitch." He looked over to Terence who had a fist wrapped around Melinda's upper arm, preventing her stepping forward. "I need these buys," he growled tightly. "If one of my other crew walked into those shops we'd be arrested."

"Because of the trouble you ran into last time." Janice peeled his fist from her collar. Physical violence from men she could handle. It was deception she obviously had no skill combatting. She took a judicious step back so she could fist her hands on her hips. "What's to prevent me from turning you in for that?" she asked.

They were on a street in the middle of the day. Janice counted on that public place saving her from violence. And it did.

But Godwin grabbed Melinda and even as Janice jumped to grab hold of her friend's arm, the two men and the captive woman disappeared around a corner into a dark alley between the mudbrick buildings. She rounded the corner yelling for them to stop. She stopped abruptly.

Terence Godwin had a knife blade pinned against Melinda's throat. James Bristol had withdrawn his gun and cocked it, aiming for Janice's head. He fired; she ducked. "What the hell?"

"I'll order him to slit her throat, Miss Covington. Try to rescue her and I'll blow your head off."

Gazes locked, Janice absorbed Melinda's fear into herself. Though her own heart pounded loud enough she heard it over the commotion back in the market, Janice put a stern look of confidence on her face. Stiffening her jaw, she watched the blade shift in Godwin's hands, the silver glint catching her attention. But there was no damage to Melinda's fair, smooth skin.

Looking up at Bristol, feeling the anger seep over her muscles energizing them, she forced herself to demand calmly, "Where's the shop?" *Play the game and bide your time*, she told herself. *Opportunity*, she remembered Melinda's first words to her.

Melinda brought one hand up slowly and wrapped it around Godwin's wrist, in an attempt to prevent getting cut as she spoke. "Janice?" she called to the blonde, who looked over to her again. "Be careful." Get away if you can, she heard herself mentally add. It was true. Seeing Janice in Bristol's fists had made the brunette more concerned for the blonde's safety than her own.

Janice though was caught off guard by the simple two words. Not a 'come back' or an 'I'll be all right', but 'be careful.' Look out for yourself.

No one had ever asked her just to be careful. Oh sure, there had been "Watch your step you don't break that pottery. I need it to sell at the museum," or "Damn it, don't fall down with that! I

haven't translated it yet!" Both frequent cautions from her father when they were on digs.

Even her mother's mother had uttered only warnings against breaking the glass or the dishes, or whatnot. "It's priceless, dear," she would comment as Janice, a clumsy little girl, had set the table for the small, but important dinner meetings to gain the family influence in Philadelphia society.

Green eyes met blue. Just be careful for herself? "I will," she replied gently. And I'll be back for you, she added in silence, hoping the promise showed in her eyes. She turned to Bristol again. "Where's the shop?"

He pointed to a shop just barely visible from the alley. The sign out front proclaimed "Incense, Oils, and Spices Exotic and Pure. Prop. H. Akilim."

"Akilim's waiting for the word. The boxes are all labeled Durena, a local cooking oil extract."

"But anyone checks it and the contents are obvious," she replied. "Your job is to convince them they don't need to," he replied with a matter-of-fact tone. "Feminine wiles," he added with meaning pressing a note into her hand. "Give that to Akilim. Have the shop send a runner to the ship for a handful of sailors. They'll load it up. But you stay visible. If a gendarme even blinks at you, distract him."

"Only that?" She set her shoulders. With a last look around, glaring at Bristol, frowning at Godwin and offering a wan smile to Melinda which was cautiously returned, Janice walked quickly back into the noisy busy market and crossed to Akilim's store.

## Chapter 16

Janice ran an anxious hand through her hair as she sidestepped a portly woman haggling angrily with a fishmonger. "Sorry dear," the woman said in rough French as she stepped into Janice's path, causing the blonde to stumble.

Janice shook her head and extracted herself abruptly. She stumbled into another merchant's stand knocking an array of jewelry off the displays.

"Can I help you?" the merchant asked in French.

"Non, Moi--" Then she saw a gendarme change direction on his patrol at the commotion. "I'm sorry," she offered hurriedly. "Bientot."

She moved toward Akilim's and was just pulling open the door when the gendarme reached her. "Mademoiselle, you are all right, I trust?"

Looking over her shoulder she forced aside her problems to give him a smile. "I'm fine. Just looking for some things to take back home." She put as much lightness into her voice as she could manage.

"You are American then. Sightseeing, yes?"

She shook her head. "Signed on as a cook."

"And your ship?"

She walked up to the service counter before answering. "The Lob Lolly. Merchant marine." The man behind the counter looked up.

"I see." He nodded. He crossed his arms behind his back and sketched a bow. "It is a rare day we have such a lovely woman in our city."

"Just collecting supplies for the galley," she explained. "We ship out in the morning." She nodded to him and smiled again. He flushed slightly and she realized she might have a chance if she played her cards carefully. "Though," she added thoughtfully. "If I finish here quickly, maybe you can show me your town." Good one, she thought, letting her smile grow inviting.

Unsure of her charms, Janice was pleasantly surprised to see him take a moment to preen, pulling at his collar and snapping his uniform jacket into smooth lines. Then he adjusted the lie of his military cap.

She turned away and waved to get the clerk's attention. "Akilim, please," she said softly.

"Oui, ma'am'selle." He went into the back.

The gendarme came up to her elbow and leaned on the counter. "Name's Jean Boutre. Let me help. Sometimes these shopkeepers are difficult to deal with."

"I can--" she protested. Akilim appeared; a cinnamon colored man built along gaunt lines he smiled at her, looked at the gendarme and then back to her. She fished for the paper in her pocket and started to pass it over. "I'd like--"

Snapping it from her fingers, Jean Boutre smiled helpfully and turned to Akilim. "Lady just needs a few things here."

Janice's breath caught in her throat as Boutre glanced at the paper. Then he looked up at her, a confused expression on his face. This is it, she thought. "I can explain," she began.

"I'll have to call in a little help to get it down to the docks for you," he commented with a smile. "Lots of things here."

"Big ship," she replied absently, still silently praying. He read aloud off the list: "Fifteen boxes Durena oil. Eight bags whole cloves. Two boxes cinnamon sticks. One dozen pounds of caraway seeds." He didn't pause, stumble or look askance at a single thing. "You're cooking with all this?"

"All the time," she responded almost giddily.

She watched him hand the paper to Akilim, who took it, read it over himself and looked quizzically at her. "Lob Lolly," she said. "Bristol." She hoped those were all he needed to know. In front of the French officer she was hesitant to be more specific.

"Request however many men you need from the yard," he told Akilim. Boutre offered his elbow. "Now that everything is well in hand. May I offer you a drink?"

Akilim nodded to Janice. As she put her arm through Boutre's Janice caught the proprietor's wink. The whole list was a code, she realized.

Walking through the market she saw shadows moving in the alley where Bristol, Godwin and Melinda had hidden. She wrapped her arm tighter around Jean's. "Thank you for the help. Dinner would be great." They passed close to the alley. "Where are we going?" She raised her voice a little.

"Rick's. Most popular place in all of Casablanca."

Still held firmly in Godwin's arms, Melinda squirmed at the sound of Janice's voice.

Bristol raised the gun barrel where she could see it. "Quiet!" he hissed. "Or the nice gendarme's going to find a body in the morning."

Melinda subsided in her struggles but murmured, "Looks like she made your deal for you."

"We'll see. I'll be satisfied only when the shipment's aboard safely."

"You can't hold us until then."

"Seems I can get her to dance easily, as long as I have you," he brushed his thumb under her chin. "Go on back to the ship, Terry. Time for a little fun at Rick's."

Godwin let Melinda go; with a salute to his captain he hurried back down toward the docks. Bristol kept a hand on her arm as the pair walked through town, following the gendarme and Janice at a distance. Occasionally he stopped their progress, ostensibly looking at wares of the shops.

The crowd thinned, and the make up of the population changed considerably. A higher percentage here were Europeans, easily identified by their lighter coloring and usually broader

features. In the silence, since Bristol didn't make small talk, Melinda found herself playing a guessing game of "homeland", trying to separate out the various Nordic, Celtic and Germanic features of the passersby. Then she caught her first sight of a prostitute, African features blending into an exotic look. Bristol, she realized as they paused at the corner, was taken too.

"Thinking of a little fun, captain?" she asked innocently following his gaze. "Thought this was a working trip."

"Smart mouth you know that, woman? Just follow my lead." He grasped her arm and dragged her forward into a small open porch surrounded by stone archways. "You say anything out of line, and I'll take it out of your hide."

She stiffened her chin, daring him to hit her in such a public place. "All right," he countered. "I'll have your friend killed instead." She blanched and realized she had just given away her one weakness. "I see we understand each other then."

She nodded tightly. "All right." As they stepped up to the door, he pushed it open and her inside ahead of him. The sound of the door drew eyes to them quickly, and before they could slide away, Bristol kissed her cheek. She had no time to react. He had just successfully marked her as his.

Scanning the room, she found Janice seated at a table near the piano player, positioned so she saw the brunette at the door, but appeared to be looking only at the Frenchman. She gave the woman a smile and saw a small one play across the blonde's lips in return.

All right. So they were still biding their time. She looked at Bristol and recalled every manner she possessed in order to get through the meal.

And anything else to come.

## Chapter 17

"Ah, early for dinner. Would you like seats at the bar or the tables monsieur et mademoiselle?" A man in bowtie, black pants, and crisp white shirt under a starched white coattails stepped up to intercept Melinda and Bristol.

"Bar for the moment," Bristol remarked, studying the full table immediately next to where Boutre and the Covington woman were sitting. "Then we would like the table directly under the fans," he indicated with a slight gesture. "I get dreadfully hot." He smiled ingratiatingly at Melinda. "Isn't that right, dear?"

Melinda nodded, saying nothing. She watched Janice leaning close to the Frenchman and saw the woman's eyes change shade to a deep emerald. The blonde said something to the man, making him laugh. The sound was grating.

"Come on," Bristol said. "We can keep an eye on them from here for now." He led her behind the waiter to two stools at the long, polished bar. "A scotch for me. Over ice," he told the bartender. The smooth-faced man of middle-age rolled a glass from under the counter and flipped it up onto the surface. He dropped two cubes of ice into it, then looked up again.

"Something for the lady?" He asked while unstopping the bottle of golden liquid and pouring a shot over ice for the ship captain.

"Wine, please," Melinda answered when Bristol nudged her. "Bordeaux if you have it," she clarified.

"Nice choice," the bartender concurred, immediately selecting the appropriate bottle and popping the cork, letting the contents breathe a scant moment before sluicing it into a fluted

wineglass. Passing over the glasses, he tapped the counter surface.

Bristol fished a twenty piece Franc from his pocket and flipped it toward the bartender. "Thanks," he said. "Keep it."

The brunette inclined her head toward the bartender and smiled her thanks as he left them to look after other customers. "So, what are we waiting for?" she asked Bristol. "You've got the shipment being loaded. What's the other meeting?"

Bristol downed his scotch slowly and pondered the other patrons for a long moment, leaning heavily on his forearms on the bar. "I'm taking a little profit in an otherwise profitless venture," he commented firmly, but quietly.

"You're selling out your own countrymen. What profit's worth that?" she replied, keeping her voice equally low.

"I'm getting information they'll find useful. There's no selling out happening. You're wrong."

She looked at him squarely and asked with surprise, "Why are you trying to convince me?"

He reached for her chin, and brown eyes looked sincerely into her eyes. "I'm sorry you got caught in this." His fingers brushed her cheek, and Melinda swallowed back a wave of revulsion.

"Wasn't it? You could have refused us passage." Turning her head, she sipped her wine, looking away at Janice's profile.

The blonde was now accepting a platter of food from a waiter, and laughed at something her French companion said, as he forked some chicken into his mouth. She was beginning to feel an edge of annoyance. She was stuck with the questionably moraled Bristol and it seemed Janice was enjoying herself. She thought again that the blonde was probably just biding her time for a good escape opportunity.

It was time she got on with her own escape plan then. She watched Janice excuse herself then, standing and brushing Boutre's hand as he reached for her arm. Time to get some attention, Melinda thought. She could cover for Janice's escape with a small diversion.

She moved to the piano, leaning easily on the upraised surface. Bristol made a move to join her but she waved him off, turning to the dark-skinned well-dressed pianist. "Do you do requests?" she asked with a smile.

"Sometimes," he answered with liquid tones. "Did you have something in mind?"

Having thought only up to getting out of Bristol's immediate reach, Melinda was now at a loss for what to do. She looked from Bristol to the rapidly departing blonde and made up her mind. "I'd like to sing," she said.

"For him?" The pianist remarked. "A song for lovers," he said with a slow smile. "My favorite kind. Name's Sam. What's yours?"

"Melinda," she responded absently as she looked toward the doorway Janice had just walked behind. A small sign indicated powder rooms. "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," she said, looking back to the pianist.

"A duet. Did you have a partner in mind?" He smiled and nodded in assent as she raised her brow questioningly at him. "What's your key?"

"C is fine." Blue eyes flashing she settled next to him, watching as he warmed up on the song's rhythms. She warmed to her ruse and positioned herself where she could see Bristol squirming, unable to bring himself to make a scene. The piano part began, and Melinda fell into the music, remembering the days spent at her grandmother's knee as the woman played wonderful tunes on the one in their home.

*"You say toMAYto; I say toMAHto.*

*You say poTAYto; I say poTAHto.  
You like EEther; I like EYEther.  
You say NEEther; I say NIGHther.  
Our romance is past before it's begun.  
It's plain to see ... we two will never make one."*

Melinda looked over to Bristol with a wry smile. The crowd chuckled and clapped. Bristol frowned, but didn't move as all eyes followed Melinda's gaze for a minute and he was suddenly on the spot.

Smiling at how well her plan was working, Melinda continued. She watched Bristol, making everyone else in the room watch him as well. His eyes stayed on her, confused. And she knew he forgot all about Janice. "But oh, if we part..."

She heard the door across the room click as all eyes focused on her. Moving beyond the sense of being on display, and her natural aversion to it, Mel turned to see Janice emerging slowly, pausing with her hand on the doorknob. *What was the blonde doing back?* She had been certain she was covering for the woman's escape. "Why that might break my heart."

*Stop thinking, Mel,* she told herself, *and sing,* hearing her grandmother's advice echo in her head.

"So if you want OYsters, I'll give up ERsters. For if we part..." Her voice trailed off as she caught Janice's green eyes across the room, and felt emotion choke her. Thankfully it was Sam's turn again. As he moved into his portion, she tore her eyes away from Janice with effort and joined him for the closing joint stanza.

"So... Let's call the calling off... off..." She let her voice drift into silence along with Sam's and shared a gentle smile with him. The patrons of Rick's clapped appreciatively, drowning their conversation. The song was new, playfully romantic, perfect for a mid-afternoon serenade.

"Nice," Sam complimented her. "Sing with me anytime you like." He nodded behind her. "Looks like your fella wasn't too happy about it though."

Melinda turned to see Bristol crossing the floor with a grim look on his face. She spared a glance away from him and noticed Janice standing up straight again since she had leaned against the wall. She winked at the blonde, hoping the woman would understand the song was for her, not for the man who suddenly grabbed her up in his arms in a false hug.

"Nice job, sweet." He gestured to the tables. "Ready for some dinner?" He touched her shoulder. "A little too much attention though. You might want to duck out to powder your nose." He kissed her cheek and patted her hand caught between his. "Give them a chance to forget about you." He looked querulously at her for a moment then shook himself.

Her smile was genuine then. Perfect. Leaving Bristol to walk to the table alone, she exited to the powder room.

Since Sam started into another song, no one saw the blonde woman follow the brunette. Including, surprisingly, Bristol who at that moment was engaged with the waiter and ordering two dishes of the house special.

## Chapter 18

Melinda moved along the short hall, passing the door to the powder rooms and another labeled "office". Then she pulled open the small narrow door at the end, looking around the edge cautiously.

"Leaving me?"

Melinda slammed the door shut quickly and turned around. "Oh, God! Janice, it's you!" The brunette enveloped the blonde in a hug. "Don't scare me like that!"

"Like what?" Ignoring her relief at the effusive hug, Janice backed out of the embrace and pointed at the doorway. "I'm not the one walking out the door."

"I was looking for a back way out. I got away from Bristol for a few minutes." She lowered her voice again. "He thinks I'm powdering my nose."

Janice almost laughed at the brunette's very proper language and reserved whisper. "You don't have to whisper, Mel. No one else here."

"That won't last long." She felt Janice's fingers slide warmly over her palms, then pause. She winced as they traced the raw spot from her earlier encounter with a wall. Her palms were turned over and Melinda watched the bent blonde head as Janice inspected the scrapes.

"What happened? Are you all right? Did Bristol do something?"

"I'm all right. I stumbled into a wall." She moved her own fingers over Janice's hands. Green eyes finally lifted to meet her gaze. "Really. I'm all right. I'm just glad you got away from him." She heard the words in her head a scant second before they spilled out, and couldn't stop them. "That gendarme seems rather taken with you."

"I needed some help. Jean filled the bill nicely." She shrugged easily. "I knew Bristol would be watching me."

*Jean*, Melinda thought with a sinking feeling. Then she brightened slightly, finally digesting the last of Janice's words. "You're just using him? For what?"

"I'm getting back onto the ship tonight."

"Are you crazy? That'll get us killed for sure."

Janice corrected her with a firm grip on the woman's arm. When blue eyes focused on her, she was firm. "Not us, Mel. Me. I got us into this, I'm going to get us out of this."

"I was trying to give you a way out." The brunette brushed her hair back from her eyes. "Why didn't you take it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You came back here. I made sure Bristol forgot all about you. You were supposed to get away."

"I did find a way out," Janice confided. She tilted her head to the side a bit, looking up at Mel with a look of pleasant surprise. "Had my hand on the door too. Then I heard you singing." She laid a gentle hand on the brunette's wrist. "Why didn't you tell me you could sing?"

"It was just a silly little song." Mel shrugged. "It kept their attention like it was supposed to."

"For just a silly little song, it was really good." Janice watched Melinda's coloring change noticeably. "You didn't think so?"

"It's not important. Why did you come back? You were supposed to get away. I can handle Bristol."

Janice gently touched Melinda's raw palms. "Why don't I believe you?" She watched the brunette's face form into a confused frown. "You really expected me to leave? Without you?" She saw the surprise and realized that was exactly what Melinda had thought... and planned. "Now who's forgetting we started this trip together, so we'll finish it together?"

"Janice." Melinda looked away, hearing a commotion in the dining room. "When he grabbed you..." She brushed her knuckles gently over the shorter woman's cheek. "I got scared I guess."

"Well, you can stop worrying." Janice smiled confidently.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

Melinda swallowed. "I like worrying about you." She lowered her head slowly, drawn by confident green eyes.

Janice was swallowed up for a precious few seconds in deep dark swirling blue. Their situation... the whole world fell away in fact, as Melinda's mouth gently touched hers. The feather-light sensation sent a strong shiver down her back and a weakness into her knees. She gripped Melinda's arms more tightly to compensate.

The touch of their lips became firmer. Janice started closing her eyes, wonderously falling under a spell as Melinda's mouth trembled against hers.

A set of heavy footfalls startled them. Both women's hands released their holds and they stumbled back abruptly.

The door marked "office" across the way opened. A solemn-looking man, with a quirked expression, stepped out, and noticed them as he turned to lock the door. "Good evening. Something I can do for you?"

Melinda, whom he had pinned first with his gaze, shook her head. "No. Just using the powder room."

"Well it's back this way, kid." The tone wasn't derogatory, merely informative. He pulled out a cigarette and pointed behind them with it. The women were quiet, looking to one another for a suggestion on how to proceed. "C'mon. I'll walk you there." He gestured for them to precede him.

The trio walked a few steps and paused in front of the powder room door. "You two aren't from Casablanca, are you?"

Janice looked from the brunette to the dark haired man in white cocktail jacket and black slacks and high polish shoes. "We're passing through. The... our ship stopped overnight."

"Dangerous traveling on the water these days. American, or British?"

"American." Melinda shrugged. "What about you?"

He shook his head and chuckled, the sound deep and quickly cut short. "American. Name's Rick. This is my place." He looked at the blonde with a sharp smile. "You two aren't traveling alone, are you?"

"No of course not." Melinda pulled open the door. The gesture was enough to end their conversation, and Rick moved on, tapping his cigarette and lighting it before dropping the lighter back into his coat pocket. He smoothed the pocket before leaving the women alone and entering the dining room.

Just as he entered the dining room, Janice heard a raised voice from among the patrons. "Where is she!"

There was a quiet murmur and then the sound of something slamming into something else. Before she could think about investigating, Janice felt Melinda's hand as it wrapped around her arm and pulled her inside. The space just before the door closed revealed Bristol, face reddening, stumbling into the corridor. "Damn bitch," he said in Arabic, turning on his heel. Another something slammed into the wall which actually reverberated with a low groan from the impact.

In the dark and cramped silence of the powder room, Mel crouched in the corner, holding Janice against her chest, watching the door with narrowed intense eyes. "Guess that decides that," she said wryly. "We're both getting out of here."

Janice chuckled and shook her head. "Come on." She stood up and held out a hand for the brunette. She looked down into the face she had been so close to only a few moments ago. The kiss still bemused her and she wondered exactly what was behind it.

Janice ducked out. Melinda was only a few steps behind when the door from the dining

room opened again.

"Stop!" Melinda dove for the door, hearing Bristol's heavy steps running up behind her. She yanked it open and was half in and out when the captain's strong hand closed over her shoulder. Painfully she pulled it from his grip, feeling the compression that likely meant bruising. Then she was free in the alley behind the restaurant.

Stumbling she came up against a wall and bounced off of it, feeling her already sensitive palms get more scratched. Then she was in a warm grasp. "Easy." Janice pulled Melinda behind her adding, "Now, stay back."

"Covington!" Bristol swung a fist only to see Janice jump out of his way. She turned, revealing her hands as she drew them from her pockets. "Wait a minute!" Alarm filled his voice as he looked down the slim barrel of a gun. "Where did you?"

"Funny what you can obtain from the right people," Janice replied, waving the gun easily.

"But she had no--"

"Not her, Bristol. My French policeman." She cocked the weapon's hammer. The sound shockingly abrupt in the approaching evening's silence. "You've got a choice. Drop your shipment, or I drop you. Right here. Right now."

The Lob Lolly captain stuttered opposition. "I have people waiting for that cargo," he argued. "I can't just--"

"They'll just have to be disappointed. I want you to order the cargo unloaded, or I kill you right here, and take over your ship."

"Janice!"

"Melinda, be quiet!" Her eyes never left Bristol. "I'll blow up your ship," she told Bristol coldly. "You lied to me. You killed Hock after he did his job for you." He looked surprised. "I found out from Boutre. Did you know they just buried the man with no name just two days ago?"

She pointed it at his knees. "You had similar plans for us."

"It wasn't my idea."

"I don't care whose idea it was, or wasn't. You don't just indiscriminately kill people." Janice rolled her shoulders, easing the tension she could feel building.

They didn't see Bristol's weapon until it was there, cocked and aimed right back at them, targeting Janice. Melinda gasped. Janice felt herself squeezing the trigger. She closed distance and watched him fall away from her with a wound in his chest bleeding freely. In an almost surreal moment, Janice felt Melinda's arms close around her. "Not again," the brunette murmured against her head, the words more vibration than sound.

"He was going to kill us, Mel."

"I know, Janice. I know." Melinda continued murmuring as they walked away from the restaurant and the man dying on the alley stoop. Under her hands, she felt Janice's shoulders and instinctively massaged the muscles as the blonde walked.

## Chapter 19

The single gunshot might have avoided noticed, if Jean had not chosen that moment to stand and go in search of his meal companion. Hand still on the back of his chair, he froze. He looked around too suddenly, drawing the attention of his commanding officer, Louis.

Louis stood at the entrance, scanning the dining room while they waited for the maitre'd to identify a seat for himself and his two companions. Spotting Jean standing, he immediately

gestured. The sudden quick look around made him curious.

"I will return," he told his companions, one of the well-to-do couples living in the city. She was dressed in a simple style dress, with flowing skirt, topped off with a shocking chartreuse hat. Her husband wore the typical dining attire, gray flannel pants neatly trimmed to his muscular figure and an open collar maroon shirt.

The wife asked, "What is it, Capitan?"

Probably nothing, he thought. Jean was one of his more easily startled officers. Nervous about the Reich, and indignant about the German movements they heard more and more frequently these days. "I see one of my men. Order your meal. I will join you in a few moments."

The husband nodded curtly. Accepting his grant of leave, Louis started through the diners, winding his way toward Officer Boutre. Not seeing his captain, Boutre moved to the rear of the restaurant, apparently destined for the restrooms. It would have stopped Louis's pursuit, he not being the sort of man to follow another into such a private area without cause.

But then Jean looked quickly over his shoulder back at the dining room before disappearing. The man's eyes scanned the room, his chest moved in a deep breath, and then he pulled the door wide and quickly went through.

Louis then looked for Rick, the café's owner. The tall, dark-haired American met his gaze intently, then bent toward his piano player, the black fellow named Sam, murmuring something in his ear.

*Now that's curious*, Louis thought. He decided to question Rick first. So he crossed the room to intercept Rick as the piano music began.

"Evening, Louis," Rick said easily. "What brings you here?"

"Food. I thought. But you have such a look of invitation about you, Rick. I thought I might trade news with you."

The man quirked a smile then smoothed his face back to uninterested lines. "Really? So you have news to share." He leaned against the bar and gestured for a drink. The bartender moved to fill a glass with his favorite. Rick looked back at Louis, propping his foot on the baseboard of the bar. "Well, I'm all ears. What's new in town?" He took up the drink and swallowed a small bit eyeing the French captain with amusement.

"You are amusing, Rick. How long has my lieutenant been here," he gestured toward the empty table where he had first seen Jean.

"No one there," Rick informed him, looking up past the Frenchman. "I know that."

"Then why don't you ask him? I didn't see him come in, if you must know." Rick finished his drink and set it down on the bar. "Now I have to go assure the customers that the play in the card room is fair. Excuse me."

Louis stood for a moment alone at the bar as Rick left, headed for the card room as he said. The bartender gestured inquiringly. Louis waved off the suggestion of a drink. Looking back over his shoulder he was surprised not to see Boutre not emerging from his business. His instincts prickled and he moved toward the back of the restaurant himself. Patrons gestured to him, some kindly, others furtively. One mystery at a time, he told himself, gesturing back here and there with a smile plastered on his dark features. Finally he gained the door and pulled it open.

The hall beyond was empty. He noticed that Rick's office door was closed, the water closet door was open, and the door at the far end of the corridor, leading to the alley, was open slightly.

*The alley? What in the name of Mary was his lieutenant doing in the alley?* Louis

proceeded quickly. Just as he reached the door and started to peer around it, he felt it pull from his hands.

Unholstering his weapon, he backed up and pointed it at the doorway. With a start, Jean stepped back in. "Captain!"

Sighing, Louis lowered his gun. "Lieutenant Boutre," he began formally. "What are you doing back here?" Boutre started to gesture with some explanation when Louis noticed the blood stains on his hands. "What happened, Boutre?" he demanded, grabbing the man's hands.

Boutre paused for a moment, studied his hands and then sighed. "Come with me," he told Louis. Then he turned around and led his captain out into the alley. As Louis emerged, looking further up the alley a bit, Jean closed the door and gestured to something behind it. "Over here, captain."

Louis turned and started. Bending close to the crumpled man on the stoop. Gingerly he opened one of the man's eyes. "Is he dead?" he questioned.

"Yes. I found him just a moment ago. Gunshot." Once again, Louis noticed Jean looking along the alley. "Did you see his killer?" he asked pointedly.

The gendarme shook his head. "Non, capitain. I found him just like this. I was about to go inside and locate a phone to call headquarters."

Louis frowned then looked at the dead man then glanced back up at his officer. "Let's see if we can't identify this one," he suggested, already beginning to check through the man's pockets.

Jean bent down and assisted, helping to shift the man so that they could check for back pockets as well as remove his coat. Watching to see that the captain's head was down, he looked once more down the alley.

Searching for his date. Each moment that passed increased his feelings of misgiving. Why did they always pick him, he thought with a gentle sigh.

"Come on, Jean." He held up a boat whistle. "Let's call for a car." Louis stood and watched back into Rick's quietly, sensing Jean following on his heels. He looked down the alley himself once more, holding the door for Jean.

He was galvanized into action, drawing his weapon, when he noticed shadows moving in a doorway. "Jean!" he called his lieutenant back. "This way!"

The two French officers jogged toward the suspect doorway. They pulled up short at a laundry's rear entrance, encountering a washerwoman sorting clothes. In rapid-fire French, Louis inquired if the woman had seen anything going on at Rick's earlier. She replied that she had just come from the front of her establishment, where she had been servicing customers. Louis and Jean emerged back in the alley, searching it further up and back down toward Rick's.

"We'll have to close the harbor," Louis said. "No ships in or out until we've searched them for the killer."

Jean nodded. "I'll get right on it, sir." Holstering his weapon, he jogged between buildings and emerged on the street. Louis went back up to the café to call for the car. Boutre studied the faces of everyone milling on the street. He spotted a tall brunette woman walking alone into a pastry shop, then backtracked on the woman's path and noticed a blonde seated at an outside table. He changed direction and crossed the street to the shop. "Miss Covington," he said warmly, gesturing widely. "So good to see you again."

Green eyes flew up to his face and the man knew a sinking feeling that he had found the sailor's killer. He said only, "You are leaving tonight on the first boat out, oui?"

Janice frowned, then slowly nodded. "Oui." He nodded back.

"Bon chance," he added quietly as she stood. He watched her catch up with her friend, that Jean remembered as the singer in Rick's, and the two women exchanged words. The brunette put back her order on the counter, and they walked off into the night. He watched the brunette slip her arm around Covington's shoulder, bend her head close and speak words he could not hear.

Jean Boutre decided he had better get down to the wharves himself, surprising himself with the thought to run interference for the women as they made their escape. The blonde had been a pleasant companion, witty and intelligent. He had managed a good time, and suspected only that the shooting had been in self-defense.

Shaking his head, he took quicker route to the wharves. Perhaps they might have a quiet moment to talk.

## Chapter 20

Janice settled her nerves some two blocks before the wharf district began. She reached up and nudged the weight from her shoulders.

It happened to be Melinda's arm. "Janice?"

The brunette's voice held curiosity but the blonde also could feel an underlying wave of concern practically crash over her. She closed her eyes, stopped walking and turned to face Melinda before she looked up into deep troubled blue eyes. "I'm all right, Mel."

Those eyes intensified their search. Janice could feel the woman's breath on her face when she spoke. "Are you sure?" Finally Mel tore her gaze away, leaving Janice studying the smooth line of her jaw from ear to chin. "The gendarme seemed worried. Do you think he knows?"

*Boutre.* Janice sighed. "He probably guessed." She started around the corner. "We had better move on."

She stopped so quickly that Melinda stepped on her heels.

"Ow."

"Sorry." Melinda looked past Janice, resting her hands on the woman's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Police. Everywhere." She pulled back into the building's shadow. "We'll hide out. Wait for the crowd to thin."

Mel shrugged. "We've done this before. Disguises."

"All our stuff's in that warehouse," she remarked.

"They're searching the buildings now. They're bound to make the connection, when they find our things in the warehouse belonging to Bristol's ship," Melinda pointed out.

"God damned son of a --," Janice replied with deep feeling. Then she caught Melinda's ears turning pink. "Cute." The pink deepened. "Sorry. Guess I'll have to sneak in and swipe it."

Melinda was shaking her head before Janice finished speaking. "No. We're going. I am not getting separated from you again." There was a glint of steel now in the deep blue, which Janice was coming to recognize, as Melinda's intent not to lose an argument.

She was surprised how little it had been used on her, and found it charming as well as challenging. "How is it anyone ever thought you were a genteel Southern belle, Mel Pappas?"

"People see what they want to see."

Nodding, Janice had to agree. "Well. You ready?"

"Lead on."

She peered back around the wall, straining to hear the officers' exchanges as they moved through the buildings, piers and ships. French, inquisitive and bold in tone, filled the air.

"Calumet, move your men to the west section. Past warehouse nineteen. One man in each building."

"What time do you want us to meet?"

"Move quickly. We can't have the harbor closed past evening tide. Merchants'll have our heads. No more than an hour."

"All right. Men, move out!"

Melinda's whisper sounded just off her right ear. "You heard?" Janice nodded, feeling the brunette's form close on hers. "We don't have much time," Mel finished.

Sucking in a confidence-building breath, Janice nodded again. "All right. This way." She took advantage of the lengthening evening shadows and skirted buildings quickly, moving east along the line of piers. She kept track of Melinda with an almost physical sensation that seemed to shift around her back depending on the woman's position.

For now the brunette remained about two paces off her left side, which was good. It allowed for the archaeologist to draw the gun if necessary. So she kept one eye on the roaming officers, and the other on their destination, a small door set in the side of a metal building. Painted over the door was "Pier 6."

Melinda reached out for Janice's shoulder to get her attention before speaking. The blonde's hand intercepted hers. The action startled Mel and she jumped backward, stumbling into a ten-foot pile of stacked crates.

The old worn wood shattered. Surrounded by loud cracking, creaking and crashing, the brunette fell toward the pavement, dazedly covering her head against the tumbling broken planks. A sharp agonizing pain shot down her leg coaxing her hands away from her head.

"Mel!"

Janice's alarmed yell was the last thing the young woman heard before the sharp edge of a thick plank slammed into her head, just over her left ear. She fought the blur in her vision until the ringing in her ears forced her eyes shut. Then the darkness deepened and she felt and heard nothing more.

The debris settled with a groan. Melinda lay somewhere in the middle. No sound broke the silence now settling over the evening. Janice studied the pile frantically. Between the building shadows and the depth of the pile, she didn't see anything clearly for a long heart-stopping moment.

"What happened?" A breathless male voice burst from almost on top of her.

Janice was jolted into action and she started pulling at the wood boards. Dimly she was aware of the man next to her doing the same. She was surprised only in a vague way, since no one had been investigating on this side of the wharf area for the moment. But now, panic rising, she was grateful for the help.

Finally they freed an arm. Tossing aside the wood, Janice climbed onto the pile and dug out Melinda's very still body. She couldn't see movement in the unconscious woman's chest. Adjusting her stance, she ignored the wood that slid away from her feet and knelt in the debris, wrapping her arms around the lolled head.

"Mel?" she whispered urgently. "Please, Mel. Can you hear me?" Gently she lowered her forehead against her partner's and brushed aside the disarrayed hair from her closed eyes. Her hand stilled in a warm sticky pool next to Melinda's ear.

Looking around, Janice's gaze fell on the man who had helped her. "Jean!" she recognized

the friendly gendarme.

He answered. "Don't move her. Tell me what you need." Arms open, he gestured lightly as he spoke.

Responsive to the businesslike tone, Janice answered. "Cloth. Or something to stop the bleeding."

"Blood? On her head?" Janice nodded. "Absolument! Don't move! I'll be right back."

Fear gripped the young blonde. Caught between letting Mel die from a head wound, or trusting a friendly officer in a strange country, she chose the latter. She remained still, listening to her heart pounding so hard she could feel the reverberation in her palms as they laid against Melinda's shoulders. Shifting slightly she laid a palm over the woman's jugular. She could sense nothing. Lightly she brushed her lips on the brunette's blood-spattered cheek and felt the tears well up, choking in her own throat. Her skin was chill to the touch.

And still.

*Oh, God.* Janice's tears flowed into the blood-matted dark hair. She prayed Boutre would return in time.

Squeezing Melinda in her arms, the archaeologist wondered how to give the brunette a chance. She cradled the brunette in a preoccupied rocking motion, unwittingly shifting the pile of broken wood.

"Don't leave me, Mel. Don't you dare leave me." Her voice trailed off. Her throat closed off, clogged by the tears she could no longer stop.

## Chapter 21

Four gendarmes returned with Jean in the lead. Janice looked up to see all of them circling her and then finally, climbing through the debris toward her and Melinda.

"Has she woken up, ma'am'selle?" Jean's tone was formal as well as in French, when Janice knew full well how excellently he spoke English.

She answered in kind. "Non, monsieur." She looked back into the brunette's calm, motionless face.

The four men reached for her and she squirmed back, tugging Melinda with her. Effectively surrounded she could not go far.

The entire situation however upset the precarious balance of the wood, and Janice felt the rubble collapse again beneath her. She squeezed a tighter hold on Melinda as they both fell into a well created by the wood beams. She braced her shoulders, but the fall only stopped when her back and rear were atop the pavement.

Her hips and legs felt bruised by the fall. She ignored that for now. She checked Melinda's face for any sign of waking or additional pain stress. What were bruises compared to Melinda's injuries? With a squeak, The woodpile around them swayed precariously, threatening to topple. With a yelp she attempted to cover both herself and Melinda's face. A few scraps tumbled down on top of them. While a few were deflected by the officers, Janice felt one or two strike her arms and she batted them aside.

Then there was silence. She remained still for long moments more, waiting for her heart to slow down. Under her hands, she felt Melinda's body and clung to that knowledge. That they were here, together, if not altogether safe. But her panic would not go away. Long day, she guessed, realizing that only that morning she and Melinda had been on a boat they thought could take them

home.

One gendarme put a hand on her right shoulder and sought to calm her fears.

"Mademoiselle, please. We will move your friend. But we cannot safely move you both."

Green eyes pulled away from his earnest light eyes and sought Jean's familiar brown. The lieutenant's jaw was firm, but he nodded. So far he had not lied to her.

So she relaxed her grip and felt other hands replace hers around Melinda's body as she was lifted free first, caught up in a cradle hold by one officer.

"Merci," she murmured as he used his stronger legs to move over the debris.

"Everything will be all right," he replied. "Sit here." He settled her gently against the building wall some distance from the accident.

Janice heard an alarm bleeting and coming closer and though she did not tear her gaze from where the men worked, she recognized the arrival of a medical van. Jean must have called for help.

The men stood in a formation around Melinda. One pair linked arms under her shoulders, supporting her head. The other pair slid their arms gingerly under her thighs and lower back.

Jean started the count, directing a steady lift and move. The doctor—at least she assumed by the bag he carried--picked up the directions.

Janice did not realize she had been holding her breath until Melinda's body was lowered to the ground. She felt her nostrils flare in a relieved breath. The exchange between Jean and the doctor was no more than a buzz to the blonde. She tried to stand but found her legs would not support her. Sagging against the wall, she called, "Jean." Her voice was barely a whisper and she tried again. "Lieutenant Boutre."

The gendarme looked up from Mel's prone figure and motioned to one of his compatriots to fetch Janice to him. With the young officer's help, Janice made her way to the doctor's side. "Will she be all right?"

"The doctor says she must wake up before he can make a diagnosis." The doctor nodded affirmatively at the gendarmes words though his eyes remained on his patient. He had his hand gently gripping her wrist. He nodded in steady time to something and finally nodded abruptly.

"It is very weak, but she has a pulse," he announced, to no one in particular, though Janice felt giddy relief at the news and sagged against the man supporting her.

Finally she pushed off and bent near Melinda's head. "I'm her friend," she told the doctor. "What do you need to do now?"

"I must take her to the hospital where I can observe her more easily." He gestured to his bag. "I cannot do that here."

"I understand. In your opinion is it safe to move her?"

He sat back on his heels and studied Melinda briefly from head to foot. "We can do nothing here. We must move her." He focused on the gash on Melinda's head as well as a spreading red stain on her side. "I cannot say what is broken, or not."

Janice took a deep breath and nodded. She stepped back and let the doctor direct the men lifting Melinda once again, and moving her to the back of the medical van.

She started to climb into the van after him. A firm grip on her arm made her look back. Boutre looked up at her. "I have to go, Jean," she said firmly.

He thought for a moment then nodded. "I will come visit you. After I have made my report to the captain."

She had to know. "What will you tell him?"

"Three of my men and I had to clear up an accident at the docks." He waved away one of his

men who had come up to speak with him. More quietly he added, "I will speak with you at the hospital before I say anything more."

Janice reached out and squeezed his hand, giving him a thankful smile. Pulling herself into the van, she sat on the floor as the doors were closed.

She felt the engine start and the motion of the van drew her eyes to Melinda's face.

"Your friend will be all right," the doctor said, as he carefully settled Melinda's head between pillows on the steel frame bed nailed to the van floor.

"Why hasn't she woken up?" Janice asked.

"The head injury, it is a strange thing. Some people do not feel anything at all, all normal very quickly. Others..." Discomfited by his own words he trailed off. He looked at her steadily and moved over to her. "Now. Let me see to your injuries."

Janice looked up at him and frowned. "I'm all right," she said confused. She lifted her hands, and moved her arms. Then she felt a pull in her left shoulder. Looking down, she noticed the blood trickling down the arm.

"It is the shock. You were hurt, but concerned for your friend. So," he chuckled lightly, gathering up a cloth to clear away the blood. "Your body did not bother you with its own troubles."

Janice gritted her teeth against the stinging pain accompanied by the doctor's effort to clean her wounds. She leaned back as he found a tear in her pants and located the source of her inability to stand easily earlier. A wooden board must have jammed into her thigh during the woodpile's collapse. He dug what splintered pieces he could from the gash. The alcohol he poured into it to cleanse it made Janice's eyes water fiercely. Closing her eyes she felt the tugs and pulls as he firmly wrapped the leg in a temporary bandage.

"I will dress it better when we get to the hospital," he said quietly. The van made a turn and both Janice and the doctor were thrown to the right.

She caught herself quickly and then fell back and grasped Melinda's unmoving hand. "Hang in there," she told the woman. "We'll be out of here soon."

Looking up to see the doctor's eyes on her, she inquired, "How much further?"

"One more turn," he answered, just as the van took it. "Then we will be helped out."

Janice waited through the short time it took the medical van to pull to a stop and the doors to open. Then she watched hawk-like as Melinda was removed from the van first and carried inside on a wheeled bed. Leaning on the doctor's arm, she followed.

Concerned for Melinda, she pushed the doctor toward the door ahead of her. "I can make it on my own. Please see to Mel."

Nodding his acceptance of her decision, the doctor hurriedly followed his worst condition patient inside.

An older woman, in nursing whites, walked calmly up to her. "Mademoiselle," she gestured. "Please come with me. I will have another doctor look at your leg."

Casting a glance over her shoulder where Melinda and the doctor had disappeared, Janice turned with a sigh and followed the nurse, feeling the stabbing pain caused by each step. Please, God, she looked ceilingward for a split moment. Please let Mel be all right.

## Chapter 22

The first thing she felt was cold. Then the natural reaction of shivering alerted Melinda to the unpleasant pain. It radiated from the left side of her head, causing a buzzing in her ears that in

turn seemed to rattle her teeth. *God, that hurt.* She concentrated on stopping the shivers.

A faint deep voice echoed somewhere in front of her face. "She seems to be coming around," it said in French, particularly a dialect heard only in the French region on the border between France and Spain. *Well, Melinda,* she silently applauded herself. *It looks like your brains are intact.*

Though her body apparently was not. Scared to open her eyes and make the damage real by looking at it, Melinda cracked her lids only a sliver, identifying that the area was well-lit.

*Okay, not on the pier anymore.* She felt the pain as her chest rose and fell on a deep, breath. Tears rolled down her cheeks in reaction.

A large finger gently brushed the damp skin. "Come on, open your eyes," the voice spoke again, this time in English to her.

She worked her eyes open, catching a painful brightness just off to the left. With a "no" she was certain came out more like a groan, Melinda closed her eyes again. The man standing over her seemed to understand though. Next she heard him tell someone to turn off the light.

In the silence she heard the padding steps of someone walking away and the click of the light switch.

"All right now. Try again." Something soft was pressed firmly to the left side of her head. Amazingly that reduced the ache and she more readily opened her eyes.

She looked up into the older face of a man as details became more solid in the lower light. She searched his rugged square jaw and pale brown eyes for some sense of familiarity and came up blank. She must have managed to create a furrow in her brow because he introduced himself.

"I am Doctor Lupineau. You have been brought to my hospital." He nodded to her. "Now you. Can you tell me your name?"

Melinda rolled her head slightly as she tried to nod. A bolt of pain, fast as lightning, shot down from her head to her lower back, and she stopped moving, a moan escaping between her compressed lips. "Ow," she murmured.

"Try again," he insisted with a pleasant smile. Melinda realized then that she must have a bad head injury and rather than being nosy, he was using the questions as a way to assess how badly she was hurt. All right. Talk then. Gingerly she moved her jaw, feeling a strain in her head, but not much more if she kept herself perfectly still.

Then she spoke carefully. "Melinda. I speak French."

"Magnifique!" His smile broadened in triumph. He switched to French. "Very nice to meet you, Melinda."

"That is my name, right?"

"According to the woman who accompanied you, yes."

She smiled then. "Good."

"Why?"

"I thought my mind was okay, but my head hurts so much..."

"Ah, I see. So you feared amnesia." He chuckled and squeezed her hand. "I thought I was the doctor here."

The laugh caught her unexpectedly, jolting her midsection and hurting not only her ribs but also her stomach. The laugh trailed off. "Where is my friend now?"

"She is in another room in the hospital."

"How long have I been here?"

"It has been nearly four hours since you were hurt."

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

She closed her eyes against a memory flashing before her eyes of falling into the stacked crates at the wharves. She felt an echo of hitting the broken wood and of other pieces crashing down on top of her. She tried to move her arm, and found it stiff and uncooperative. As she turned her head

to look at it, she saw out of the corner of her eye, the doctor's assistant as he went to turn on the examining room light once more. She winced only slightly at the light's intrusion.

"Your head injury was what we feared most," Lupineau was saying. "But yes, you did break your right arm, and we have had to wrap your ribs, though none appear to have broken."

She moved slowly, bracing herself on her right elbow, and rolled so she could look down at her body. She saw the bandages around her stomach and saw the tatters remains of her blouse over her chest and shoulders. Her own pants, ripped off at the knees covered her and a thin blue hospital blanket lay over her lower legs. Lifting it she saw that she sported only a few scratches and bruises.

She shifted the left one under the covers and was gratified to feel a quick response, though there were rough spots on the skin irritated by the sheet. "My legs were just scratched, it seems."

Lupineau nodded. "Would you like to try and sit up? It might help with your head now."

At her slow nod, both Lupineau and his assistant reached behind her back and shoulders, gradually pushing her up. She let her left leg fall off the side of the table, followed soon by her right, which protested when the muscle pulled against her injured side. "I really did it this time," she murmured.

"Mademoiselle," the assistant offered. "you do this often?"

She had been in the midst of her efforts to settle herself on the table edge. She paused and leveled blue eyes, which were hazy but clearing quickly, on him. "I don't make a habit of it, no." Since he had asked in French, she answered him in kind.

"You speak excellently. You are American, non?"

"Yes, but I am a... translator," she answered, keeping it simple. "What is your name?"

The doctor released her arm and stepped back. "Your head aches still?" he asked.

"Just a little."

"I will have aspirin brought to you," he said.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I have other patients now that you have awakened."

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry. Thank you for treating me." She shifted her weight from one arm to the other briefly and raised her broken arm to offer a wave.

He smiled. "It was my pleasure."

Alone with the doctor's help, Melinda sat on the edge of the table caught in the growing spell of silence. But she needed to find out where Janice was, if the gendarme had arrested her for the Lob Lolly captain's murder, and if she was all right. She had a vague notion of the blonde hugging her and then more crashing as the crate pile collapsed further.

"Could I go find my friend?" she asked the physician's assistant. He fixed her with a hard considering studious look. "We should finish dressing your wounds."

"I'd really like to get up and move around a bit. I'm a little shaky still, but movement should help." She leveled her blue eyes to his and blinked. Gently she brushed her nose and confirmed her missing spectacles. "Could I have my glasses." She offered him a bright smile. Running a hand through her hair, she made a face at the mess. She could do nothing where the bandage was taped, but... "And, is there someplace I can get this wood dust out of my hair?"

Caught by that smile he nodded quickly. "Oh, yes. Certainly." He quickly searched the

surrounding tabletops and brought them to her. "Here you are." He looked around again as she put on the glasses. The process was a little awkward with only one hand that could reach her nose. "A nurse can help you with your hair. It is probably good to change the bandages anyway."

He offered her his arm from elbow to hand and stiffened the muscles as she leaned on it. Thankful she was taller than average, Melinda felt her feet touch the floor before she would have needed to jump.

"Then I'd like to find Janice." Steadying herself on her legs proved a little more difficult than she had imagined. Not because her legs were injured, but because she couldn't straighten over her injured middle. She sighed carefully, feeling the muscles and skin pull taut and then relax. "God, why can't anything be simple." With her left hand bracing herself on the young man's frame, Melinda gestured with her immobile right arm. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

Janice laid with her head resting on her wrists, her pant leg ripped open to the bottom of her rear. Eyes closed she could feel every pull on the tendons and muscles as the nurse cleaned her thigh wound. Tears had stopped awhile ago, and now she just felt her face constantly wincing as each bit of wood was removed. "Got it all yet?" she asked, trying for casual.

They had been at this for the last two hours. She had not been seen right away because her injuries were not life-threatening; but once she sat down she had been unable to get up again to check on Melinda's progress.

The wait without word, and without seeing the brunette was beginning to make her chest ache for an entirely different reason than the bruises from having Mel fall on her when the wood shifted.

She winced as the nurse pulled more at the injury. "Could we take a break?" She had been lying on this damn table without moving. Her kidneys were protesting the fact that she hadn't been able to shift her position that long.

"Almost done, I think," the nurse replied. She was the same woman who had helped her after the doctor went to tend Melinda.

There was another sharp tug on the back of her thigh, followed by a pinch and Janice took a deep breath, looking over her shoulder. Her thigh was wrapped tightly with a thick bandage. "Wood really makes a mess, hmm?"

The nurse looked at her with an expression of disbelief. "You are a very interesting woman to make jokes," she remarked, though she gestured that Janice could now get up.

As Janice moved through the stiffness and ripped off the pant leg covering the bandage, she offered, "I've had bulletwounds in worse places... but not by much." She tested her weight on her leg and satisfied she wouldn't fall over, she stepped away from the table.

A male voice interrupted. "Excuse moi?"

Janice dusted her blonde hair back from her face with a tired hand and looked up at the doorway. "Lieutenant Boutre," she acknowledged the man now standing in the doorway.

"I have brought someone so that we can have a conversation," he said carefully, looking sideways at the nurse.

Janice accepted the unspoken request for privacy. "Could you leave us alone?"

Gathering up some of the used gauze and towels, the nurse nodded and left them alone.

"Did you have a chance to check out the boat?" she asked him without preamble.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

"Your accident happened before we could," he answered. "You were very lucky we were down at the docks." He gestured at her thigh. "How is your friend?"

"I haven't seen her since we came in." Janice shook her head. "I'm sorry you didn't get onto the boat. It's probably left port by now."

"It has not."

"Good. Are you sending out another inspection team?"

"There is no need."

Janice's brow creased in confusion. "I don't understand."

"We have known about the Lob Lolly since her last visit here," he answered. He ducked his head away from the fulsome glare she delivered. "It is not that we did not ... Hold on," he said finally, stumbling to explain. "I'll be right back."

Janice waited while Jean was gone; her mind filled with questions. She sorted through them and came up with the most important one to ask. When Jean reappeared at the doorway, she was ready. "If you knew about them, why didn't you do something before now?"

"They benefit the Resistance with their supplies."

"But they carry high grade explosives. And also bargain for secrets. Secrets against the Resistance," she pointed out.

Jean stepped back and his captain stepped inside. "This is Captain Louis Renault."

She looked at the shorter, thicker man and examined his face, trying to take his measure. "The Resistance may benefit by their supplies, but they give information about the same things to your enemies."

Crossing his hands behind his back, Renault studied his feet for a long moment. "I am in a very difficult position, Miss Covington." She raised an eyebrow at Jean. "Yes, my lieutenant has told me of your day in Casablanca."

He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "As I was saying. It is difficult here, with the Reich breathing down our shirts, and yet our brothers meet also to form a Resistance under our noses. To be a good man to my country, I put my life and that of my men in danger. Or I can tell both sides that I will do nothing."

"Bristol came to us committed to the Resistance, but my ambivalence... It... made him angry."

"So he started selling his knowledge to the Germans?" Janice shook her head. "Incredible!"

"Bristol was not a simple man. At times rigidly loyal to the noble cause. Other times wrapped up in a need for money." Jean Boutre shook his head. "I don't entirely understand why he would enlist you to make his communications meeting for him. Or his supply requests. The merchants would give him all, and more. Whatever he requested."

Janice opened her mouth to say something. But another voice made the explanation she was seeking.

"It wasn't money, Lieutenant. It was acceptance." Janice looked toward the door and a grin spread across her face.

Melinda, looking as battle-weary as she herself felt, leaned on the doorjamb, one arm in a heavy splint and bandage, her other hand wrapped white-knuckled around the doorknob.

Blue eyes felt hungrily into green. "He wanted acceptance, acknowledgment of his heroism. It was as simple, and as complicated as that."

Janice moved to the woman's side and squeezed her hand. "It didn't matter what side gave him that. If they did, for that time, he gave them his loyalty." She looked to Boutre and Renault.

"And because money was usually involved, he appeared to be a greedy blood-sucker."

Jean nodded. "It makes sense now." He turned to his captain. "What should we do about his ship?"

"Who was the man's first mate?"

Janice supplied, "Virgil Turandot."

"Turandot can be talked to, I'm sure of it," Boutre said. "I've heard him around town. Definitely pro-French."

"So we're just going to turn the ship over to the service of the French Resistance?" Melinda asked. "Bristol or not, the crew was responsible for a man's death, Captain?" She appealed to the French officer's sense of law and order.

Renault remained silent for a long time. However when he finally answered she could see no way to refute him. "If I bring them in, I would have to bring in your friend here. Murder conviction would put her away for a dozen years. Even a self-defense conviction would hamper your journey by several months." Refute him, or argue it, and Janice, in a bid at being fair, would have to go to jail as well.

The brunette looked to Janice for a long moment. An ache started low in her chest and rose higher the longer she remained standing. "Well, Janice?" she said, with a rush of air as she lowered herself abruptly into a chair. "Do we stay? Or go?"

Janice leveled her green eyes on Jean Boutre. "What's the next chance we have to get out of Casablanca?"

Boutre looked at his captain. "There might be a plane the day after tomorrow headed for the States. A few other passengers are expected soon."

Janice looked to Melinda. "We'll need our things out of the Lob Lolly warehouse."

"You are not mad, Janice?" Jean looked at her with uncertainty. The blonde didn't want to just let the crew of the Lob Lolly go about its business as some sort of double- or triple-agents. But she didn't want to spend the next six months to sixty years sitting in a jail cell for committing an act of self-defense. "No. I guess not."

"Then all we need is a place to stay for a couple days," Melinda summarized with a sigh of relief. "Normal would be nice for a change." She hugged Janice to her with her good arm and smiled. She sucked in a breath and caught the slightly antiseptic scent of Janice's skin, from all the cleaner used in her wounds. Still the feel of them together, both safe and whole, well mostly, left her almost giddy with relief. She smiled against the woman's waist, since Janice stood right next to her chair.

Jean chuckled. To Janice he said, "You have a very amusing life, Miss Covington."

"No. Just amusing company, Lieutenant," Janice replied, giving Melinda's hand a squeeze.

"I will send an unmarked car for you both," Renault concluded. "They will take you to rooms I will arrange in a hotel. It is the least we can do for your troubles."

"Thank you, Captain," Melinda replied. The two women remained lightly entwined as they watched the officers leave.

Finally alone with Melinda, Janice looked down into the open blue eyes. "I'm so glad you finally woke up." Crouching was out of the question, and sitting down was also going to be difficult, so she leaned forward, bracing herself on Melinda's shoulders, careful of the broken right arm.

"You really had me worried, Mel. I'm glad you're going to be all right."

"Thanks, Janice. I don't remember much."

"Be glad you don't. It was not an experience I wish to repeat." The blonde looked over the

brunette. "How can you be related to Xena and still be such a complete klutz?"

The brunette's cheeks reddened in embarrassment. "I seem to remember someone..." She broke off, squeezing her arms around Janice's waist. "Stopping without warning and grabbing my hand."

"Startled you?" Janice remembered back to that moment, with a steady warm feeling sliding up her back, when she realized it was Melinda and she reached back to grasp the woman's hand in a reassuring hold. "I didn't mean it."

"Well I guess we're even. Looks like some of the crates fell on you too."

Janice chuckled and hugged Melinda. "I guess so." Impulsively she bent her head down. But the quick reassuring peck on the cheek didn't materialize. Instead she captured Mel's lips in a lingering kiss. Hearts full of worry, relief, giddy joy, and the newest edge of passion, kept them clinging long after the kiss finally concluded. "God, Mel," she murmured, breathing in the soft scent of the brunette's hair, which had been washed clean of the blood that had bathed her face earlier. Gingerly she kissed the spot on the bandage where the board had struck hardest. "Next time you intend to check out for an hour. Check with me first."

"I'm sorry I scared you," Melinda replied, tugging Janice's chin down so she could look into the green eyes shadowed by the memories of her earlier terror. She brushed away a tear that escaped. She kissed Janice lightly and then pulled back.

Janice caught herself suddenly yawning. She realized the tears were a combination of exhaustion and emotional turmoil. "It's been a long day."

Melinda gestured for Janice to help her up. The blonde offered an arm and between the two, they were standing side by side shortly. "Let's go," she directed with a flourish.

The two women moved slowly, but determined to push through their injuries, to the front waiting room to watch for the promised car. Janice tried to sit next to Melinda after helping the brunette take a seat, but found the chairs too hard against her bandaged thigh.

Melinda looked from the hard wood chair to her own lap and gestured. "Would you like to try here?"

"I could hurt you," she answered from her place leaning back against the window. "Besides it wouldn't look right."

"Do you really care how it looks?" came back the reply in a soft lilt. Janice swallowed. "Really? Over comfort?"

"All right, but if I'm too heavy, you tell me right away. Understand?" Janice lowered herself carefully to Melinda's lap.

Adjusting her position Mel felt the blonde sliding away. So she grabbed with her good arm around the woman's waist, resting her chin on Janice's shoulder. The slight stretch ease an ache in her back and she closed her eyes and sighed contentedly.

Janice's head tilted against hers slowly and her eyes closed as well.

## Chapter 23

Melinda sat at the vanity, studying her reflection and the room draped in shadows behind her. She glanced at the clock and noted it would dawn in only a couple hours. The only appointment they had was a supper engagement with the two French officers, Boutre and Renault, at Rick's café American.

Moonlight beamed onto the double bed, light a dancer's spotlight, illuminating Janice's hair

splayed on the pillows. The effect brought a smile to Mel's face. It had been a dream of Janice Covington that remained most vivid from Melinda's four hours unconscious.

The brunette closed her eyes. Instantly the dream reformed in her mind. Everything about it consumed her senses. The sights, scents, sounds, and sensations were as vivid as if they were happening right now.

The tent smelled of sand and leather tack. The sleeping bag beneath her was roughened cotton twill. Rolling her head to the side, she found a fall of blonde hair across her shoulder. The soft texture tickled her lips when she pressed a kiss on it. Her bed partner shifted in sleep and a muscular arm slid across her stomach, which she realized was bare. Looking down at their bodies she acknowledged with a strange feeling of indulgence that both of them were naked. It made her tug her bedmate closer.

She stopped tugging but the woman continued to move across her body, lifting up and finally a face tilted toward her. Luminous green eyes sparkled with heat. A small hand slid over Melinda's breast, teasing the nipple. A bolt of lust instantly shot to her groin, and Janice's green eyes narrowed in triumphant passion.

Their mouths melted together, like their kiss in the back of Rick's. Only she was more at ease, and a sense of familiarity washed over her, instead of the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of that first time.

The fine hairs on Janice's arms left tingles in Melinda's hands as she slid her palms along them. Then she cradled shoulders and finally cheeks between her hands as the kiss deepened. Feeling the combination of soft hair and the delicate skin of Janice's ears, as their legs slid together made Melinda groan now as it had then, and awakened her.

Blue eyes searched their reflection, awash in confusion. She noticed the beads of perspiration and reached for a cloth in the wash basin. The cold jolted her heated skin, but finally she felt her cheeks cool and her heartbeat slow. The ache in her right arm and side, which had awakened her and sent her from the bed in the first place, was back. She rubbed her shoulder firmly, trying to unknot it.

Looking back up into the mirror she realized the covers had been thrown back. Janice was gone, the white sheets reflecting the moonlight more brightly than the blue cover. Mel turned on the small stool and found Janice just four feet away off to her left. She looked up into questioning green eyes. "Janice?"

The blonde pulled her fingers through her hair. "Been awake long?" Green eyes took in Melinda's appearance with concern. She watched the brunette rub at her shoulder. "Still hurting?" Janice asked, stifling the concerned tone that threatened. Melinda's injuries had been severe, and it had taken Janice several bouts with her self before she had been able to just leave the grown woman alone to fall asleep. She watched Melinda rub her shoulder again, probably unaware she was even doing it. "Here, I'll see what I can do." Janice took Mel's left hand and cradled her right elbow in her palm and led the way back over to the bed. "Just sit here." She settled onto it, keeping her bandaged leg over the edge and tucking the other ankle under herself as she pulled Melinda down. Her thigh cradled Melinda's hip.

"I don't-- Really, I can--" Melinda's protests fell silent the moment Janice's fingers met her shoulders. It felt like she had been touched by a live wire. Lassitude invaded her limbs. "I--um, thank you," her voice fell to a whisper.

"No problem. I feel pretty good now," Janice admitted. "You should get some sleep. It'll

probably help." Mel's skin was hot and soft under her hands and Janice was having a hard time concentrating.

For Melinda, the dream had returned. Dreams were one thing though and reality quite another. She reached up and nudged Janice's hands off. The woman's fingers trailed down her back, eliciting shivers. "Thanks, that-- I appreciate it."

Janice enfolded her in a quick hug from behind. "I'm just glad you're still here, Mel." As she spoke her breath caressed the brunette's ear. She felt the body under her hands shiver. "Get back under the covers and get some more sleep," she added then.

Mel stood and watched Janice adjust the sheets before she moved back onto the bed and slid under the covers. A bit awkwardly, because of her splint, she then laid back on the mattress and shifted to get comfortable.

Janice watched the woman's struggle and moved to adjust the pillows. She could feel the heat from Melinda's body rising up and almost engulfing her. She planted her hands and then reached under Melinda's head to plump the pillow.

The blonde's scent flooded over Melinda. She heard a question and focused on green eyes inches from her face. "What?"

"Are you comfortable?"

Swallowing, Melinda answered, "I-- um, I am, yes."

"Good," Janice replied with an exuberant smile.

"You're in a good mood."

Janice sat back on her hands and nodded, unfolding her legs. She carefully bent her legs and wrapped her arms around them. "Yeah, I am. We're out of Greece. We've got Xena's chakram and scrolls. We had a few scrapes." She shook her head at this last. "But we got rid of a crooked captain, stopped some espionage, and even had a run in with a pile of crates.

"But," she unfolded herself and leaned forward looking into Melinda's face, drawn close by a desire to hug the woman. "You're alive and so am I. And that's great." She quickly kissed the corner of Mel's mouth as she trailed dark hair through her fingers. "Tomorrow we'll board a plane to the States."

Melinda's good left arm settled around Janice's shoulders and back. "Home," she said, not realizing how much her blue eyes sparkled with expectation and pleasure at the sound of that word.

But Janice heard it, and with slow movement molded their bodies together. Nightshirts separated them, but curves fit and the air exploded with sensation.

Melinda gave in. Eyes darkening to indigo in the moonlight, she felt her arm moving as she watched her palm cup the back of Janice's head. Blonde hair slipped loosely between her fingers. Insistently, and without any resistance from the archaeologist, she began to explore Janice's lips.

Tenderly she tasted the soft skin, exploring the differences in texture and taste. They were softer and smoother than the lips of the few men the Southerner had kissed before. The unique taste drew her in to experience more.

She brought her tongue into play to identify the flavor. But once she licked Janice's lips, eliciting a moan from the blonde, amusing herself with a classification study was the last thing on her mind.

Watching the same combination of revelation and confusion flow across Janice's mobile features helped Melinda break off the kiss. She could not bring herself to put the blonde from her however. An arm slipped around her waist and a small hand squeezed her hip, and light lips touched her shoulder. Melinda discarded all thoughts of separation and rested her head against Janice's as

the smaller woman nuzzled into her shoulder. In repose, she listened to the blonde's breathing.

Neither of them wanted to say anything. Morning would be soon enough to talk about the line they seemed to have crossed. But for now, they were alive, they were together, and it was enough. In the silence that enfolded them, Melinda was never quite sure who fell asleep first.

## Chapter 24

More used to long and early hours, Janice woke first. Comfortable though, she kept her eyes closed letting the sensations in one at a time.

The early morning sun warmed her back and she flexed her shoulder muscles in cat-like content at the feeling. She shifted her jaw and swallowed against the slight dryness of her throat. Turning her chin into her pillow she felt it shift in response.

Her eyes blinked open and she remembered where she had fallen asleep. Or rather, on whom. She inhaled and caught the muted scents of cinnamon and natural salts, tempered with something that smelled like honey. *Incredible*. She lifted her head and gazed on Melinda's collarbone, eyes drifting up over her barely moving throat and chin with fascinated eyes.

She was bringing her left hand up to indulge her senses in a caress when she felt muscles flex in the arm curled around her back. She moved her gaze higher still and watched blue eyes appear from behind long lashes. Moving her own shoulder she moved out of the sunbeams from the window. Melinda's face took on a golden flush.

Finally their gazes met and Melinda slowly smiled. The expression reached down into Janice's stomach and pulled on something. A warmth blossomed and she smiled in reply. "Good morning," her voice a soft burr. She eased onto her hands lifting her weight from Mel's chest and scanned the woman, her expression slowly becoming serious as she noticed the bruising on the brunette's arms, and caught sight of the edge of a bruise on her chest. "Are you feeling any better?" Careful of her own thigh which only twinged in protest, Janice sat up.

Melinda leaned on her left side and followed suit, careful of her splint. She pulled the long fingers of her left hand through her hair, settling it in reasonable order. "A little," she finally answered.

"I'll help you unwrap it and clean up, then. Do you feel up to a little sightseeing today?"

"You don't have to help me," Melinda countered while reaching for her glasses. "I'll manage." She tucked them onto her nose and adjusted the left side with her good hand. When she tried the same with her right, the movement failed, made impossible by her splint. The strained muscle and the cracked bone screamed in protest at the small movements.

Janice reached over and adjusted the ear piece. "It's all right. I want to help." She ran a hand lightly down the splint and over Mel's fingers. "It's kind of my fault."

"I was on the pier by my own choice, Janice," she countered, her tone colored with "we are not going through this again" annoyance.

"Not that." She grasped Mel's hand and pinned her left on the covers. "I thought about it. You jumped into those crates because I scared you, didn't you?" Janice held Melinda's gaze for a long silent moment.

"Well... Not scared." Melinda swallowed.

"Startled then." Janice was rewarded for her insight by a small nod. The motion was filled with a sensuality that came naturally to the brunette, and it captured Janice's imagination. She leaned close, keeping hold of Mel's gaze. "Well, I'll make sure I move--" She gestured toward

Melinda's lips with her eyes. "More deliberately." She slipped her left hand from Melinda's right and showed it to her. She saw the woman's heartbeat pick up in the pulse at her throat. The heat between them rose a notch. "From now on." She brought her lips to Mel's offering up a long light kiss. Her hand slipped around the brunette's back, pressing firmly in the middle, bringing their bodies closer.

"No sudden moves." She showed her right hand as it slipped away from Mel's left. Slowly, while blue eyes followed, Janice traced a path over Melinda's left side, up the curve of her ribs and the swell of her breast through the night shirt. Her other hand paused on the bandage on Mel's right side.

"I've never felt like this before," Melinda's murmured voice became swallowed up when Janice's lips touched hers again.

"Me neither," Janice replied, just as low. As she lowered Mel back to the bed. It was true. Her past relationships were fast, carnal, over as quickly as they started. They were begun in heat and ended in hatred, or disinterest. This felt different. Down to the soles of her feet, Janice felt different, a lot of joy, a little fear, a lot of apprehension. Then she met Melinda's eyes and felt contentment, passion and promise. "But--"

"But I like it." Their voices slid together as their bodies did, gazes intertwining.

Janice's thigh protested when she tried to adjust her position. She bit her lip and felt the shock wave from the pain collapse her limbs. Melinda caught her with her left arm, and tried with the right, only to groan aloud when the break strained. Janice crashed to the bed beside Melinda, the spell broken as she closed her eyes in tension and pain.

Breathing deeply against her own aches, Mel tugged the blonde locks behind Janice's ear. "I think we'll wait though," she said softly, "to explore it."

Melinda tugged Janice against her left side as they let the mood pass slowly, listening to their heartbeats that steadied into a matching rhythm.

"You do wonders for that beat up hat," Melinda commented. Janice leaned against the bed while settling her fedora on her head. She tilted it slightly askew over her right eye, stiffening the brim with a practiced sweep of her hand.

"It feels good to finally be back under it," Janice replied. "What with always portraying the proper lady for Bristol."

Mel nodded. The blonde filled out the rest of her outfit nicely as well, she thought. Tan pants and a white button shirt with a wide collar that emphasized the smooth, definition of Janice's throat, slim waist and rounded hips.

Then the blonde pulled on her leather jacket. The mottled dark and light tan leather hid the woman's charms like wrapping on a present, hiding Janice inside the loose shape. "Where did you get that jacket?" Mel tugged on the collar. "It's a little big for you."

"No short jokes okay?" Janice said teasingly. "It works nicely that I fit into small places on a dig."

"You fit perfectly into other places too," Melinda offered in rejoinder, tucking Janice into the crook of her left arm. She used her right to lift the woman's chin for a kiss.

Janice absorbed the kiss and fed it back to the brunette, tucking her arms around Mel's waist. She caressed the brunette's ribs through her light blue blouse. She felt the edge of the bandage on Mel's stomach which she had helped reapply earlier. Looking up she caught sight of the smaller bandage remaining over Melinda's left temple and remembered the agonizing wait in that wood pile for help. "I'm glad you're here," she said quickly before she could think about it.

"So am I."

Stepping back to offer her elbow, Janice offered gallantly, "Care to see Casablanca with me, Miss Pappas?"

"Let's go."

Down in front of the boarding hotel Captain Renault had arranged, Janice hailed a cab. She helped Melinda in before sliding onto the backseat herself. "Marketplace," she told the cab driver.

## Chapter 25

They had been exploring the market for the better part of three hours. Leaning against a building wall, Melinda admitted, "I think I've had enough." They watched a plane roar overhead, its engine changing speed as the pilot prepared to make his landing on Casablanca's outskirts. "You think that's our plane?"

Janice shielded her eyes and took in the plane's size. It was a six-, perhaps eight-seater. "Doubt it." She brought her gaze back to Mel and saw the rounded shoulders as she adjusted her splint. "We could go early and visit the travel office to ask." She brushed a reassuring hand over the brunette's left arm. "Worried? Or tired?"

Blue eyes blinked several times and Mel brushed her hand over her brow before patting Janice's. "Captain Renault did say. So it must be just exhaustion talking."

"We'll sit a while." Janice led the way to an outdoor café table. "Isn't your leg bothering you?" she asked as she settled into a wrought-iron chair.

Janice sat as well, successfully hiding the wince as her thigh twitched at the change in position. "Not really. I've worked through worse."

"High tolerance for pain?"

The blonde grinned ruefully. "Gave my grandmother 'heart palpitations' she used to say when she saw how many times I kept trying crazy stunts and busting bones."

"I thought you were with your father growing up."

Janice looked off at the milling crowd. "Sometimes."

Mel's hand slipped around hers. "Your grandmother preferred you didn't travel with him?"

"She always blamed him for my mother running out. She ran out on dad, and me, but my grandmother never saw her again either."

"Oh. But since your dad traveled so much it was probably better for you in one place."

"You're looking at probably the only woman who was never properly 'finished' in the Philadelphia society. I was thrown out of two schools and in the third when everything went to hell."

The brunette frowned. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Finishing schools are for pampered, mealy-mouthed--" She suddenly realized who she was talking to, and concluded quickly. "They're not for me." She changed the subject. "So, what's life like in North Carolina?"

"Much like life in Philadelphia I suspect," Melinda answered hollowly. She looked up and waved over a waiter. "Hungry? I'm famished." She requested, "Lemon pastry." An eyebrow arched at Janice and the blonde found herself scrutinized very politely by the waiter.

"I, um, the same. I guess." He smiled and departed with a quick bow. Left with Melinda's silence Janice felt an aching need to explain. "I'm sorry if it sounded like--"

"No." Melinda shook her head, looking out on the crowd. "No need to say anything." She pulled off her glasses and awkwardly cleaned the spotless lenses.

"I was--"

"Expressing your point of view? I know."

"Would you let me get through the apology just once?" Janice raised up and stilled Mel's hands across the table. "Now, look at me." Blue eyes fighting some emotion Janice couldn't identify slowly rose to meet her gaze. "I'm quite sure you had a great childhood and that you have some great friends from school. I was just saying I didn't. It came out wrong. I'm sorry I hurt you."

Melinda sat up straighter. "All right. It took me by surprise I suppose." She carefully tucked her glasses back on. "We can't expect to understand each other completely."

The waiter returned with their orders. As Mel picked up her fork and Janice reached for the pastry with her fingers, the blonde chuckled. "I'd like to learn." Janice smiled and bit into her pastry.

"I'll do the same." Melinda chewed carefully and swallowed. "Will you tell me about you growing up?"

"What? You mean all at once?" Janice dusted her fingers clean. "How long have you got?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Based on what you said you didn't grow up with your father, and growing up with your grandmother in Philadelphia wasn't fun." After pausing to nibble, the brunette continued, "What did you love most while growing up?"

Janice didn't pause. "Dad's letters. No contest. Because of them I was there for every discovery, every triumph. Even a few of the failures. I knew that I wanted that life. He wrote so vividly. Everything about it was perfect. The adventure, the danger, the revelations."

"And now? Do you feel the same about archeology now?"

Janice smiled. "It's an adventure, Mel. More than I imagined, and I was able to imagine quite a lot." She nibbled on her pastry and continued. "You know the first time I saw Smythe my father was laughing in his face."

"When did your father die?"

"Smythe killed Dad nineteen months ago," Janice replied matter-of-factly.

"So he didn't know you tried to contact my father."

Janice pursed her lips. "He didn't know I wrote. But Dad told me that Melvin Pappas was the only person he trusted enough to work on these translations."

Melinda stabbed her fork into her pastry and mused, "I didn't know much about my father's life."

"But he taught you syntax," Janice sought clarification, her tone clearly confused. "That's not quick, or easy."

"I started reading his papers about a year before he died."

Janice's brow furrowed. "Self-study?" She put down her pastry. "Incredible."

"After my father died, I looked up Dr. Jerral at the university. They had worked together--I knew his daughter... from school." She tapped her forehead. "I studied privately. Seems I have a knack. Jerral was surprised at my quick progress."

"Why did you start studying?"

Melinda pursed her lips again and took a deep breath. "I hoped it would make us... closer, I suppose."

"I don't understand."

Shaking her head, Melinda gestured for the waiter. "Our bill, please."

"Mel?"

"Too long," was all she said as she studied the paper for a moment then dug into her purse.

"Time to clean up for our dinner dates," she said finally.

Janice frowned, aggravated that the story wouldn't unfold right now, but nodded. "Can I promise a long quiet night by a fire someplace when this is all over and get to hear the story?"

Accepting Janice's hand on her elbow, Melinda nodded.

## Chapter 26

"Good evening. Welcome to Rick's again, Captain." The two men and their companions were greeted at the door by a portly white haired man, rounded glasses perched on a cherubic nose and hiding hazel eyes under a head of fly-away white hair. He paused as he recognized the brunette.

"Miss. The orchestra wondered what had become of you. It was a lovely voice you shared with us."

Melinda was surprised. With all that had happened she had almost forgotten the silly song. "I... missed my boat," she said softly.

"Miss Pappas has agreed to be my guest while she waits for her plane," Captain Renault explained, tucking her arm back under his elbow. Nodding toward the blonde, he added, "This is her companion, Miss Covington."

"And Lieutenant Boutre. Yes! Welcome to you both once again. Would you like a table in the main room, or a private parlor?"

The captain's eyes gleamed. Janice, who had been scanning the room with interested eyes, noticed it. "Main room," she interjected. "I like the music," she explained when the men's eyes leveled on her.

Boutre smiled. "I think captain, we have guests tonight who should be indulged."

Renault was silent for a long moment. "All right. Near the windows. I need the air."

"Yes sir.. This way, please." Tucking menus under his arm, he led the party to their table.

Passing the orchestra stand and the piano player, Melinda caught his eye, and smiled. Sam returned the smile and started a light, airy tickling of the keys.

"You like piano music?" Renault's question accompanied his hand sliding on her back as he pulled out a chair. "Please." He indicated the seat.

"Thank you. Yes, I do." She set herself down gracefully.

"Sam will come over to play just for you, if you like, mademoiselle," the waiter said.

"Oh no." She shook her head. "That isn't necessary."

"As you wish, mademoiselle," he replied agreeably. To all four he posed, "A drink to begin your evening?"

With Boutre's suggestion, the four decided to share a bottle of Burgundy Black, a strong pungent wine made from the deeply purple grapes common to the region. Both a tart and sweet experience. "I have not had such a favorite from home since accepting the posting here," Jean remarked.

Janice asked, "So you are from there?"

"Oh yes. Tresame was the nearest town, a speck of nothing even at that, to my family's property."

"Was it a vineyard?" Melinda asked politely.

Jean shook his head. "My family raised chickens and ducks. We just liked our wine very much," he chuckled.

"Miss Pappas, you are from the southern United States, are you not?"

"Yes." She said no more.

The waiter returned with the foursome's drinks. He popped the cork and offered it to the captain to sniff. Nodding, Renault directed with a wave of his hand that all should have a glass. "To America, then," he toasted, lifting his glass, eyes warm on Melinda and then Janice in turn. "For sending us such shining representatives." Sipping he then set down his glass and asked, "Did you enjoy your visit to the marketplace?"

Melinda covered her surprise. "Yes. It was a lovely chance to stretch our legs since we will be flying out tomorrow."

"Oh, I doubt that," he replied. "All tomorrow's flights are filled. A week at least before you could have a seat," he informed them nonchalantly.

Janice shook her head, beginning to get an odd feeling in her stomach. "You promised us two seats tomorrow, Captain."

"I had not checked the exit lists. Surely you don't expect me to remove someone else so that you might have a seat. Others have been awaiting a flight much longer." Still appearing unfazed, he sipped his wine quietly.

"To Lisbon then?"

"Full also." He smiled at Melinda who looked ruefully to Janice. Melinda mentally checked her geography. "Toledo then?"

"I do not believe any flights land in Toledo, Miss Covington," Boutre interjected, sounding helpful, despite the information.

"That doesn't help," Janice replied tersely. "Is there a charter service?"

Again Boutre was thoughtful. "There are two charter services at the airport. Mileto's and Congo Air Caribbean."

"Both would charge the shirt off your back, Miss. No offense meant, but that's the truth," Boutre finished, sipping at his wine.

Seated across the table from one another, Janice and Melinda exchanged looks. Then the blonde had an idea. Her look to the brunette suggested, "follow my lead." Turning to Boutre, she asked, "Would you like to dance?"

Melinda went along, her misgivings doubling when Renault's gaze gleamed predatorily. "Shall we join them?" he asked her.

"I would like to discuss tomorrow's planes further," she replied.

"On the dance floor then," he countered. Standing he grasped the back of her chair and breathed in her ear, too low for Boutre or Janice to hear. "For a... shall we say, finder's fee?... I could arrange to have two seats on a plane the day after tomorrow." Melinda could hear the leer in his voice.

Glancing up to catch Janice's eye, Melinda saw only the blonde's back as Boutre led her over to a small space by the orchestra. She asked herself what to do now, as Renault's hand closed over her wrist. She hated making scenes.

She remembered her conversation with Janice as they embarked from Greece. Looking at Renault, she wondered how to prevent that from happening here. It certainly did not seem promising.

## Chapter 27

Boutre took Janice's hand and led the blonde to the small area near the orchestra currently occupied by two other couples. The four made room for the newcomers. As Melinda watched, the

Frenchman took Janice in his arms for one of Sam's slower tunes.

She felt her heart rate change just before Renault's hand closed over her arm. "Shall we join them?" he asked, already leading her, despite polite resistance, to the dance area.

Uncomfortable, but unable to come up with a way to leave without causing a scene, Melinda followed Renault's competent but unimaginative steps. When she turned she caught Janice's eyes on her and smiled. The blonde looked toward her dancing partner and Melinda's heart skipped a beat with anxiety.

Renault leaned close and looked up slightly into her face. "You are an excellent dancer." She absently nodded. With his index finger he traced a line on the inside of her palm as he held her left hand. "Do you have any other skills to share mademoiselle? I might be persuaded to accommodate you... should you... accommodate me."

Melinda stopped moving, pushing his hands away from her as discreetly as possible. "Captain, I--" She was utterly stunned to silence.

"I have much I could hold against you. It is only for a night. Certainly you American women can find nothing objectionable in a little fun?"

Melinda blinked. She felt an answer boiling up, carried along on a burgeoning rage. The edges of her vision turned dark and Renault's face shimmered a bit in her sight. Her left hand opened and closed rhythmically at her side as she tried to figure out what to do. The faces of the diners around them began to blend together.

An arm moved swiftly across her body, shoving her away. A blur connected with Renault's jaw and she saw past her protector as the police captain crumpled to the floor.

Melinda's vision cleared and she met green eyes looking up inquisitively. "Are you all right?" Janice's voice was hurried. "Come on, we're getting out of here." The two women turned and found their exit path blocked.

Rick Blane, the café owner, with the piano player Sam at his shoulder, looked them over. Then their gazes flicked up behind the two women. Janice moved instinctively, protecting Melinda from the rising Frenchman she had belted.

"Louis?" Rick's voice was calm, questioning, but not challenging.

"Only a misunderstanding. I stepped .. on her foot," Renault explained.

When Janice turned to view Blane's response, she was surprised to see him raise a hand to her shoulder. "Sam, would you see that the ladies have a moment to clean up?" He brushed his hand over her knuckles, and she glanced down to see the scrapes.

"Yes, sir, I will." He motioned to Janice and Melinda. "Come along now."

Janice listened as she walked away keeping herself a step behind on the brunette's left side.

Blane's voice changed as he moved Renault toward the door. "I won't tolerate fighting in my place, captain."

"It wasn't..."

"It was, but you're the law around here, so I can't do anything. Boutre," he added. "He's your captain."

"I didn't see anything, Mr. Blane," the gendarme answered honestly. True, Janice thought, she had kept his attention elsewhere, while she kept an eye on Melinda and Renault.

Blane apparently didn't believe him innocent. His voice was well-masked, but Janice could detect the disgust. "Your kind never do. Now. The ladies are staying. Are you going?"

Janice risked a glance over her shoulder and saw the captain and lieutenant suffering as the

center of attention in a silent room. Satisfied, and flexing her sore knuckles, she put her hand on Melinda's back as they left the dining room.

Sam led them up a short flight of stairs. "Mr. Blane has a room where you kin clean up and relax. You gots a room someplace else? I'll send someone t' fetch yore things."

"He's is very kind," Melinda said. Her first words since her mind blanked at Janice's spectacular defense.

"Mr. Blane, he don' like fightin' in his place. Nor a woman getting' trouble."

"We don't wish to stay here any longer. Can Blane help us find a flight out tonight?" Janice asked as they paused before a door.

Sam unlocked it and pushed inward. "I don' know, but he'll be up later after the place closes for the night. T' talk and y' kin ask him then." "Our things are at a room Renault arranged for us," Janice supplied.

"I know the place," Sam replied. He nodded toward Melinda who walked past him into the room and sat mechanically at the small table in a straight-back chair. "She gonna be all right there, miss?"

Janice again felt the edgy tingle that had made her stop Jean and throw herself between Melinda and Renault. "I'll see to it," she replied firmly.

"All right, miss." Sam took himself out, closing the door with a firm click.

She moved across the room in a flash to the brunette's side. "Mel?" The linguist couldn't find words, so resorted to nodding. The blonde put her hands on Melinda's knees as she balanced in a crouch. "I'm sorry I let that happen."

"Not your fault," Melinda managed. "I should have paid more attention to... should have realized..." Her voice trailed off and she put her face down in her palms. "I can't believe I.. that he..." She faltered again. Distraught blue eyes sought green. "What was I thinking?"

Her gaze locked finally with Janice's and she knew what she had been doing instead of watching Renault. She had let herself get distracted by Janice's burgeoning relationship with Jean Boutre. In doing that, she had not taken the time to properly counter Renault's advances.

"You weren't actually attracted to Renault, were you?" The archaeologist dug a little.

Mel shook her head. "Were you?"

"What?"

"Were you... Did you like Jean?"

Janice shrugged. "Information is always useful."

She remembered how her body had tensed every time Boutre moved closer to the blonde. *Fear? Or jealousy?* "It was a ruse?" Breath rushed out of her lungs.

"It worked. We learned all sorts of things because they found us comfortable to talk to."

"Yes, but now... how do you propose we get out of Casablanca?"

Janice smiled. "We seem to make friends as easily as enemies around here. I think we can find our way onto a private charter."

Melinda's smile appeared with Janice's congenial tone. "You think so?"

"Yeah, I do." She stood up, feeling a wave of relief flow through her limbs. "After everything that's happened, maybe I better ask."

"Ask what?"

"Ask if you want to go on separately, or together?"

Melinda was surprised. "Why wouldn't I want to go with you?"

"Are you a glutton for punishment?"

"No. But I'll take a good adventure any day." Janice shook her head. "Besides. Somebody has to keep you out of trouble." Melinda's left hand slid up Janice's hip and she rubbed her fingers over Janice's raw knuckles.

The touch sped up Janice's heart rate. She responded to the dig with a low throaty voice. "Oh, trouble huh?" She leaned into the brunette, settling her thighs between Melinda's knees. She bent down and cupped the woman's chin in her palm. Breathing across the soft lips, she murmured, "Then you better stop me. I think I'm in trouble." She claimed the brunette's lips in a deep kiss. She tasted the wine on the woman's lips and licked once over the softness.

Melinda groaned as tendrils of fire raced through her body in response. "I don't want to stop." Grasping Janice's shoulder with her good hand, she looked up into smoldering emerald fire. Trying to understand and control the reactions of her own body, her voice was breathless. "Maybe it's me, maybe it's the situation and I'm just scared..."

The bed bounced a little under Janice's elbows as Melinda fell back against the mattress, pulling the blonde down over her. Caught up in the fiery expression on Melinda's face, and the trails of heat left behind by the woman's hands, Janice sucked in a deep breath. "Or maybe we're falling in love," she added, surprising herself and Melinda with the words.

## Chapter 28

Janice caressed Melinda's cheek as she explored the woman's lips with her tongue. Her sigh passed into Mel, who gave it back.

Trailing her left hand over Janice's side then down across her hip, Melinda found the spot where the petite woman's shirt had pulled free of her trousers. Her fingers contacted the soft warm skin just below the outline of ribs. Janice's breathing hitched in her throat, heightening Melinda's desire. She tried touching Janice's cheek, to coax open the woman's eyes, but her confined right arm frustrated that.

"Janice?" she breathed against full soft lips. Under her hand she felt the blonde's heartbeat hesitate.

Pulling back and settling her weight on her hands instead of Melinda's hips, Janice only hoped she wasn't about to hear a request to stop. "Yes?"

"Could you move?"

"Oh." She brushed Mel's fingers that peeked out of her splint. Then she noticed the tears staining Melinda's cheek. Brushing them away she asked, "Did I hurt you?"

Melinda shifted and patted the mattress space to her left. "No." She smiled and lifted her right fingers to Janice's face, tracing the contours awkwardly. The blonde's eyes closed in sensual reflex. "Come here." Her soft words were rewarded with Janice's cheeks turning pink. Green eyes washed through with desire as she lay down beside Melinda.

Janice trailed her fingertips over the buttons of Mel's blouse. Through the sheer fabric she could feel every heartbeat and reveled in the brunette's rising body heat. She cupped her palm over Mel's covered breast and smiled seductively when Mel's breathing changed.

She set about unbuttoning the sheer blouse and nibbled at the brunette's lips. In a great rush she let out her breath, as her hands slid against the taller woman's twin mounds for the first time. An almost electrical pulse charged through her body. Patience was abandoned. Tenderness abounded, but they helped one another out of their clothing more hurriedly. Shoes and stockings joined socks and boots in a heap on the floor, followed closely by the rest. Kissing skin as it was

revealed, Janice and Melinda soon lay naked together on the bed, skin to skin for the first time.

Finding it easier to move now, the linguist caressed her right hand over the curve of Janice's hip and slid fingers under the loosened blouse. The first time her fingers moved over Janice's nipple, the woman froze in place, arms shaking as she tried to remain upright. She absorbed it all with avid curiosity, noting how each touch changed Janice's breathing, causing it to hitch, or stop. Then she saw the woman draw her lip between her teeth. Mel nibbled at the archaeologist's prominent collarbone.

"I--" Melinda licked her lips and swallowed against her dry throat. "I'm not use--"

"Not usually this bold?" the blonde supplied. She moved onto her knees and wrapped her arms around Melinda's neck before kissing her soundly.

"Not used to this," the brunette corrected when Janice let her go for a breath. It was as close to an admission of her utter lack of experience as she was comfortable with right now. She watched Janice move, muscles moving easily and felt her groin tighten painfully. Her heartbeat pounded loudly in her ears.

She wanted to show Janice how much she had come to feel over the last week, but inexperience left her adrift. She tugged the blonde's head insistently indulging in a kiss, something she understood, but which still left her gasping in reaction. "I don't know what to do," she murmured, hoping Janice would understand. She lifted her eyes to Janice's green, seeing a sense of wonder and lingering edge of hesitation mirroring her own.

Janice pressed her body along Melinda's. Body heat mingled and formed a cocoon sensation on their skin. Pulling back, Janice kept up a light stroking of Melinda's side, as she watched the changing tensions in her companion. Piercing blue eyes that drilled into her soul left a feeling between desire and awe. Janice fell into Melinda's arms again.

Melinda nuzzled her face through Janice's hair, inhaling the intoxicating scent of... She smiled as she identified only soap and baby shampoo. It seemed perfectly suited to the simplicity with which Janice lived her life, and mingled with her body fragrance in a heady way.

Drifting in the scent of apples and lotion, Janice pressed her cheek into the hollow between Melinda's peaks and kissed the swells lightly. Arms tightened reflexively around her shoulder. The action widened her smile more as she lifted her head to find Mel's eyes. Her head butted the woman's chin, raising a startled "ow" from the brunette.

Janice brought her other hand over then traced her forefinger lower following the faint swell of the brunette's stomach. She cupped the rise of the woman's pelvis and the soft dark down covering Mel's mound. "How about we move a little... more deliberately?" She consciously invoked the same

words from their last memorable kiss. Instead of claiming Mel's mouth, she moved a finger between the woman's labia, causing her hips to jump. "Startled you again?" Janice teased lightly, moving her finger in small circles over the rigid flesh she found.

Mel's hand moved in a circle on Janice's back. "A little," she admitted. "But... don't stop." Janice's steady strokes elicited an involuntary groan. "God." She was unable to think clearly, a sensation both exhilarating and frightening.

"I was thinking more along the lines of goddess actually," Janice remarked with a smile, slipping a finger easily through the warm soft folds awash with wetness. She leaned forward and kissed Mel again, as the woman's head fell back. Her kisses drifted down over Mel's throat as she slid one finger to the second knuckle inside Mel's center, feeling the brunette's inner walls ripple in response.

"That feels wonderful," the brunette breathed.

"You feel wonderful, Mel," Janice replied. She moved her fingers, sliding them deeper, rewarded with Mel's quickening breath and shifting hips.

She lowered her mouth to Mel's breast, drawing the nipple in. Responsively Mel arched her back off the mattress and Janice's fingers slipped all the way inside.

She arched her fingers along the inside walls of Melinda's center. Her fingers found a tiny rough spot just at the edge of her reach. One touch made her lover shake, so she withdrew, not wanting her to reach fulfillment yet. She let the tip of her tongue drift over the woman's hardened clitoris.

Mel felt an explosion building. Like a shaken champagne bottle, she could imagine the bubbles appearing and rushing toward the cork. The feeling centered in her groin. Finally as Janice's fingers slid out almost completely then moved quickly back, her body spasmed and an orgasm washed over her, brightly flashing daylight behind her closed eyes. She gasped and groaned, her hands closing over Janice's upper arms.

Her own orgasm close from the wash of sensations as Mel's muscles rippled around her fingers. Janice released the nipple in her mouth. Then she slid along supple, damp and warm skin and brushed damp hair from Melinda's forehead.

The taller woman shifted to ease her own groin that still throbbed and her knee came up between Janice's thighs as she raised up to offer her lips to Janice's to share the musky taste.

The smaller woman moved to increase the pressure, then her hands moved quickly from grasping Melinda's shoulders to her hips. Turquoise eyes grabbed her and Melinda watched while stroking fingers over Janice's increasingly damp skin as the woman reached orgasm. Janice's thighs squeezed Melinda's knee. The blonde grasped her hand and guided it into herself. "Feel what you do to me," she murmured.

The sensation was unique. When Melinda pulled back, feeling the strong hard muscles of Janice's thighs and then returned to the soft cocoon of her core, the contradiction fed her curiosity. She brought Janice off once more with her tentative exploration, and lingered on the precipice herself until the blonde's fingers slipped down her stomach and into her, as they kissed again.

With Janice's touch, Mel felt a rising urge, envisioning herself as a panther shouldering through underbrush. It was the weirdest flash, eliciting an incredible sensation of coiled power and she let it guide her through unfamiliar territory.

Tentatively she explored Janice's skin, growing bolder with each of the woman's reactions. A shiver, a gasp, or a low throaty moan followed her touch. She drew out each reaction with a dedication that later she would compare to her linguistics study habits. This was decidedly wanton of her, she realized, as Janice's incoherent voice crackled over her skin, and she only sought to drive the woman out of her mind with desire.

"Mel?" Janice's throaty voice slid over her, as silken as Mel's favorite pair of pajamas back home.

She paused, resting her cheek against the inside of Janice's thigh, tenderly kissing the skin just above the bandage. "Yes?"

"I'm so glad you came to Macedonia," Janice murmured. She ran her fingers through the dark locks, noticing the array of color, from lustrous black to a red-tinged blonde and all the brown shades in between. "You were so reserved." Janice threw her head back, caught up in the sensations caused by Mel's lips tracing along her swollen flesh. "I'm... glad... I finally saw... the real... you." Her words drowned in gasps as Melinda's lips found her hardened clit. "Sweet Mary, Mother of God,"

she groaned, tightening her fingers in the brunette's hair.

Mel's stomach muscles tensed in reaction to the sweet new taste and smell that was rapidly climbing toward the top of her list of favorites. Finally she eased away and watched Janice ease down from the heights she had been to herself earlier.

"That was a surprise," Mel breathed, kissing Janice's forehead as she counted slowly, trying to slow her breathing. She traced idle lines on Janice's stomach, seeing a flash of dark ink forming swirls in her vision across the skin. The vision accompanied a wave of emotion that gave her a sense of rightness, easing away the last of her fears that her inexperience would be a problem.

Janice watched the fleeting emotion pass across Melinda's features however and wanted to help. She turned playful. "And here I thought I was deliberate enough." She suggested, "Maybe I should try again?"

Blue eyes blinked in languid objection and recognized that Janice didn't care about her experience or lack of it. That hadn't been what this had been about. "Later." She rolled herself into Janice's embrace, sliding down until she could rest her head on Janice's shoulder. The intensity waned, leaving her exhausted and content in its wake.

Janice arranged Melinda's loose hair gently as the brunette's eyes closed. She felt an edge of her rare playfulness remaining and lazily twirled locks of Mel's hair around one another in a soft braid. This felt incredibly good, Janice acknowledged and closed her eyes and absorbing the smell of lotion and apples now tinged with perspiration and the scent of Melinda's release.

She tugged Melinda more snugly into her shoulder and lifted her injured thigh carefully across Mel's strong one. She watched the sleeping face, marveling at how often she had done that over the last week, increasingly aware of her growing attraction for the Southerner. But acting on it had been as unexpected as much as it had finally become inevitable. Certainly she had not expected anything like this lay in store for them a week ago when the very proper looking woman first stumbled into her tent in Macedonia.

## Chapter 29

Janice absently continued stroking Melinda's naked shoulder as she soaked up the quiet. Melinda's light breathing, besides stirring the blonde's hair where it rested on her shoulder, rasped contentedly. She then identified the soft tick-tock of a clock's gears and followed it to a small box-clock on a nearby table.

She shook her head in disbelief. Almost two hours had passed since the café piano player--she remembered the owner calling him Sam--had brought them up here.

"Mel?" She bent and brushed her lips against the sleeping brunette's forehead. She bit her lip against a groan of pleasure as the taller woman moved and her lower stomach was brushed with long fingers. "Wake up. We've got to get dressed."

A blue eye peeked up at her, the action impossibly endearing. "How late is it?"

"Almost ten."

Melinda stretched, wincing slightly as her right arm moved wrong. "I'm... sorry. I fell asleep." She blinked and rubbed her face briskly with her left hand. "It's not well done of me, I suppose."

Janice just patted her shoulder. "I'll make a deal with you, okay?" She chuckled and leaned back on the pillows, propped up on her elbows, taking the opportunity to admire the brunette's naked figure as she rested on her elbows and stomach next to her. "No expectations in the bedroom."

No

proprieties. Be yourself."

A look of consternation altered Melinda's smooth features.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, we won't do it. If you'd like to try something, say so. I'll give anything a try at least once." She smiled as Melinda's expression changed as she realized she was being given a huge freedom.

"And the other side of things?" Mel asked.

"Don't expect me to adhere to all the society rules when we're there."

Melinda absorbed that and realized the unspoken pledge. Janice was planning to stay. She felt so much pleasure at that prospect that her chest hurt. "Do... do you mean that?"

The blonde grasped Mel's hand and lifted it, cupping it in her own as she brushed her knuckles against the brunette's cheek. "Do we have a deal?"

Blue eyes ignited with an inner light and Janice found herself pulled into a hug surrounded by the tinkling of relieved laughter.

She realized that Melinda had thought honestly that Janice might leave. *How could she have considered the archaeologist to be that shallow?* On the tail of that she remembered Mel's words just before Janice made love to her for the first time.

*But that was silly,* she countered. *She's a grown woman, nearly thirty. She can't be that... naive about...*

The blonde studied Mel's body language, as the brunette plucked at the sheet, eyes cast down. *Damn.* "Um. Mel?"

The dark head came up so suddenly, so anxious to hear the blonde's words, that Janice could guess at the answer even as she formed the question in her mind.

"I'm your first lover, aren't I?"

Blue eyes widened then narrowed. Then she watched Mel shake her head negatively. "I... Of course, I..." The brunette cleared her throat. "I've dated before, of course."

Janice lifted Mel's chin with the side of her hand. "I'm your first lover. Of either sex. Aren't I?" She tenderly kissed soft quivering lips then pulled back. Dark hair shifted across Melinda's bare shoulders, as the linguist nodded in silence, looking dejected.

Thinking through every moment of their lovemaking, the archaeologist saw dozens of moments she would have handled differently, or said something different, if she had learned beforehand of Melinda's ... lack of experience. "I'm sorry your first time wasn't... more special," she apologized.

Mel was quick to argue. "Oh, no. No, it was..." She let the amazement, contentment and memory wash over her again. "It was... I felt like I had been waiting all my life. And it was better than I ever dreamed. You were..." Melinda brushed the blonde woman's cheek tenderly. "Perfect."

The unabashed praise went straight to Janice's cheeks, brightening them red in the low light of the room. "It's getting late. We ought to get dressed." She captured Melinda's hand and dropped her gaze away from the brunette. "We'll likely--"

A sharp knock sounded at the door.

The blonde's voice sank to a throaty whisper. "Have visitors soon." Springing off the bed, she gestured Melinda toward the bathroom. "Just a minute!" she called out.

Melinda closed the bathroom door and Janice stepped into her trousers sans underwear and rapidly buttoned up her shirt. She strode to the door and opened it inward. "Good evening," she greeted her visitor.

Rick Blane stood there looking slightly ruffled with his coat askew and his bowtie undone. "Good evening, Miss--?"

"Covington. Janice Covington." Quickly she stepped back and let him enter the apartment. As she watched him step through, she realized where Sam had delivered them. "Thank you for the use of your rooms. My friend and I appreciate what you did down in the dining room."

"No problem. Where's your friend?" He looked around, clasping his hands behind his back and meeting her eyes again.

"Mel--Melinda Pappas. She's... indisposed right now." Just then the water in the bathroom, from the sound of it, began to rush into the sink.

"That's fine. Fine. I understand from Sam that you are bound for the States."

"Yes. As soon as we can find a flight out," Janice confirmed. He led the way over to a table on the other side of the room with two chairs.

As they settled, Melinda appeared at the doorway, her hair wrapped up in a towel and a robe around her figure. He studied the brunette for a long moment that almost prompted Janice to comment. But then he said quietly, "I may have a solution to that."

Blue and green eyes met across the room, exchanging hopeful smiles. "Tell us," Melinda asked politely.

### Chapter 30

Melinda walked over to the table trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. She caught Janice's eyes on her instead and almost turned around. The blonde's expression would have been that of studied disinterest to anyone else. But Melinda could see the slight tension around the corners of those green eyes, the slightly widened pupils and the brief moment when the blonde's tongue wet her lips. It made her stomach do flips and want nothing more than to get back to the bed. The whole experience was just too new. While in the bathroom, she had regained some measure of calm by splashing water on her face. But that had not truly stopped the visions in her head of the blonde's naked body against hers.

In the mirror she had spotted the towel and robe hanging on hooks behind her, which had given her the idea to pretend to have been bathing.

Now, Mister Richard Blane, the café owner, was politely maintaining eye contact and she gave him a reserved smile. "I apologize for the disturbance," he said, even though it was his apartment. "I thought it best we talk now rather than later." He split his attention between her and Janice as he continued. "I know of a flight leaving at daybreak tomorrow. It's bound for Lisbon for refueling. Then on to the States. I know the pilot well."

"A mail plane?" Janice clarified.

He shrugged. "Sort of." Looking askance at each woman he continued honestly. "It's not the most comfortable flight, but after you downed Renault, I think you'll find it better than staying here."

Melinda looked at Janice then asked, "Has he threatened to detain us and pursue charges?" She settled a hand on the blonde's shoulder and squeezed. Janice shifted and Melinda couldn't help the smile that shaped her lips as she felt the woman's muscles bunch and flex under the cotton.

"Boutre had him carried out, so no, he's not downstairs. If Renault has woken up, he's back at his office right now."

Janice shook her head, putting her hand over Melinda's fingers and feeling the edge of the

woman's splint. "No more trouble." Leveling her gaze on him, she dropped her voice into a bargaining tone. "What do you want for putting us on that plane?"

"Couriers." He paused. "I want you to deliver a few messages for me." He looked to the door then the window. "I was going to go, but everyone already knows you want to leave Casablanca. Your departure would not look unusual."

"Whereas yours would. No thank you. I played that game once and got stung badly." Janice stood and watched Mel sit down. Hands stuffed in her pockets, she paced, considering her options. *More espionage?* She shook her head. *He's American. Probably been over here a while. Maybe it's just messages for his family.*

*Don't be an ass, Janice. Not twice.* Bristol had done the same, playing on her expectations of what men like him do and why. Well she wasn't going to fall for it again.

And that was the crux of her problem. She and Melinda wanted out of Casablanca. They had tried the official route, and discovered that path was lined with bedroom demands. Now here they had an unofficial route, and it was paved with the same choice that had eventually led to her killing a man.

She turned slowly and studied Melinda sitting quietly. The brunette kept her head down, studying her hands twisting on her lap. The stark white of the bandage nestled in her dark hair drew Janice's thoughtful study. The Southerner had been hurt badly in an accident, in a place she would not have been had Janice simply been more circumspect in her decisions. She flexed her fingers, remembering the hard feel of Melinda's splint contrasting with the softness of her skin as they made love just an hour ago.

No. There would be no more putting the brunette in danger. "I think I'd rather take my chances with Renault," she said finally. Mel looked up to her at that declaration. "Wouldn't you?" she asked rhetorically.

Melinda kept her counsel in silence for a long beat, very aware of Blane's attention. She finally replied, "No. I wouldn't. I want to go home." She left off "with you" with difficulty, unwilling to let anyone hear the plea she knew would be in her voice. "And I am not leaving this city with you behind bars."

"Seems your friend wants to leave, Miss Covington. What do you say?" He brushed his palms over the tabletop. "Do we have a deal?"

Janice looked at Melinda, who calmly gazed back presenting her back to the café owner. For her eyes only she noticed the blue eyes widened in concern. *I'm not trying to leave you*, she wanted to say. I'm just not willing to put you in danger by trusting the wrong person. Instead, she said, with a question in her voice, "Mel?"

"Please don't, Janice."

Frustration mounted and the archaeologist's voice was rough when she came to her decision. To Blane she directed, "I want to know everything I'm carrying and why. No secrets."

The café owner stood slowly. "It's better... for you both, if you don't know."

The blonde shook her head emphatically. "I know everything you do... or no deal. I'll find us another way out of Casablanca if I have to cross the desert and get out by Cairo." She stabbed a finger at him. "You want us to carry it then you tell us what it is."

Blane was silent for a long moment. She remained still, setting her jaw firmly and keeping her gaze level as he took her measure. His words, when he finally did speak, however, startled her. "Do you have a gun, Miss Covington?"

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

"Sam's having our things retrieved," she answered calmly though her heartbeat had doubled.

"You'll need it." He offered a hand, which she took and shook briefly. "We have a deal then."

Coming around the edge of the table, Blane nodded to Melinda. "Good evening, Miss Pappas."

"Good evening, Mister Blane."

Janice walked beside him to the door. "Miss Covington, I'll be back in an hour with the papers and your information. At four a.m. I'll have Sam drive you to the airfield." She nodded. "Don't make me regret involving you."

"Don't make me regret getting involved, Mister Blane." She held the door firmly as she concluded, "After I read through everything and feel comfortable, then I'll agree to deliver your messages. Not before."

He nodded and she firmly shut the door behind him. Turning around once more she found Melinda only a step off her right side. "Looks like we have one more adventure before we get home, Mel." She slid her fingers over the brunette's arms and into the roomy sleeves of the robe. It felt so good burying her face in the soft cloth covering Melinda's breasts. She breathed in deeply and let it out with a sigh.

Melinda's hands in turn, slipped around her back. Warmed all the way through by the "we," she smiled against the blonde's hair and said, "Just so long as it's 'we'. I'll follow you anywhere, Janice Covington."

That warmed Janice all the way through in return and she tilted her head back to meet Mel's understanding gaze. The woman's embrace tightened and Janice's parted lips were met in a lingering kiss.

They were still standing in the embrace, resting their heads together when Sam knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Janice asked quickly. Melinda pulled out of her grip and took a step back.

"It's me, Sam, ma'am. I's got your belongin's."

Melinda smiled at that. The clothes they had worn to the restaurant were inappropriate for the rough travel they were about to face. Janice rubbed her shoulder as she turned away. "Glad you found it. Come on in, Sam."

The black man led another two men who toted the bags inside. "There fine?" he pointed to the bed and looked inquisitively toward the women.

"Yes. Thank you," Melinda answered.

The men set the bags on the bed and walked out. Janice detained Sam with a hand on his arm. "Sam?"

"Yes'm?" Chocolate eyes regarded her with an indulgent, almost grandfatherly smile, which she found refreshing.

She considered her question carefully. "Is Richard Blane a good man?"

The piano player nodded briskly. "De bes'. Works hard. Tries good. Makes an honest livin'." He straightened up. "Why you askin'?"

"Just my curiosity, is all," she replied. "Don't worry about it." She patted his shoulder as he left. "See you in a few hours anyway."

When the blonde turned back she found Melinda was already going through her bag. "What do you suggest?" the brunette asked.

"Clothes," she replied with a quirky grin. Playfully she reached out for the robe's lapel and leered at the bared breast.

Melinda chucked the nightgown in her hand at the blonde. "Seriously."

"Seriously." Janice caught the light cotton garment and shook it out, studying the style. "Ruffles? Ugh." She walked over to the bag. "Don't you have anything practical in here?" She ticked off on her fingers her suggestions, pulling out examples and dropping them on the bed as she went. "No ruffles. No pleats. Oh dear, no flowers." She dug in toward the bottom. "Who packed you for this trip anyway? The Mother Abbess?"

Melinda frowned and took the garment Janice had just pulled out, away from the blonde's hands. "Look at the very bottom," she said evenly.

Which Janice had just reached. The blonde pulled out a pair of midnight blue jeans and a men's flannel shirt. "Much better," she stressed.

"For when I was going to stay on at the dig... after helping you out of your jam, of course," Melinda explained. She put her hands on her hips. "Contrary to popular opinion, I do have some sense."

Janice held the flannel shirt up to the brunette's berobed torso. "Big enough you think?"

Taking the shirt, Melinda nodded and started to untie the robe's belt. "What are you going to wear?"

"The usual," she replied with a smile, digging in her bag for tan jeans and a thick cotton button top.

"And the hat," Melinda added, as she saw Janice pulled out the beat-up fedora and snugly adjust it on her head.

"Yeah. And the hat. Helps me think," she countered, and started back into the bag after her toiletries.

Melinda snatched the hat from the blonde head. Janice reached for it, but the brunette lifted it out of her reach. Jumping for it, the archaeologist frowned.

"You shouldn't wear this beat up old thing." Melinda ruffled Janice's hair with her free hand. "You have beautiful hair." She bent and kissed Janice's lips. "And, you know, it hides your eyes." Her baby blues blinked and smiled into the green ones inches away.

The blonde had to laugh, but wanting her hat, she stunned Melinda with a sensuous kiss. When the woman's hands dropped in surrender, Janice made a grab for her maligned accessory.

With a victorious smile she slipped the fedora on her head. She swallowed hard at the sight of Melinda's glazed blue eyes devouring her absently. "I'm going downstairs to talk to Blane."

"If you're going, so am I," Melinda countered.

"Not like that you're not," Janice replied, wiggling her fingers in which she held the robe's belt. Melinda stood in underclothes and the unbuttoned flannel just hanging on her shoulders, revealing the curves of her body easily. Because of Janice's quick hands, the robe lay in a pool around the brunette's bare feet. The blonde admired the fetching view with a broad smile then tapped her hat's brim in farewell.

"I'll be down quickly," Melinda promised. Janice left, pulling the door shut with a click behind her.

## **Chapter 31**

She stood in a pool of golden light from the bedside lamp, the maroon robe pooled around her bare feet. Her dark hair swirled around flushed cheeks and bare shoulders. The shoulders tapered into sleekly muscled arms, ending in hands with long elegant fingers. Blue eyes swirling like the sky on a cloudless evening swiveled up to meet her gaze. Janice's heart thudded double time.

Again. Moving down the stairs to meet Rick Blane in the café office, Janice paused, tightening her grip on the handrail. She had intended only to leave the woman too undressed to immediately follow so she had time to speak alone with Blane. However, Janice found herself fighting a surge of desire that robbed her of breath and the power to think clearly. *Come on, Jan, you've got work to do*, she scolded herself. *Focus. This may be her first sexual experience, but it wasn't yours.*

So why was she unable to close her eyes without seeing the brunette's slender curves? Falling over and over again into the memory of those blue eyes turning indigo at the moment of the woman's fulfillment. She heard again the soft cry from the deepest part of her own chest when Melinda touched her in her inexperience. God, she was falling hard.

She brushed her hair from her face to regain some semblance of composure and continued down to Blane's office, the only light in the darkened café coming from underneath one door down the back hallway. Knocking, she waited for him to open the door or call her inside. She studied her hands and forced Melinda from her mind for the moment, hoping she was going to be able to get them home safely after everything that had happened.

"Come in," Blane's strong voice finally pierced the silence.

She turned the handle and pushed inward, stepping through and looking up to see Blane, with another man on his right. They were both leaning with both fists on the desk, head and shoulders positioned such that she realized they had been looking at something on the desk when she entered. "All right, Blane. I'm here ready to talk." She looked to the second man before returning to Blane and asking vaguely, "Do you have something to show me?"

Rick straightened up, as did the other man. "Good. I was just about to come see you."

"My friend is sleeping, so I thought it best we met here," Janice hedged. "So. Let's see it." She held out her hand. He dropped a packet of papers into it, the yellow of the manila envelope a bright spot in the rather shadowy room. "May I?" she indicated a table she had noticed when she first entered. Silently he inclined his head and nodded.

Janice strode to the table and emptied the contents of the envelope onto the surface. Papers slid in disarray and she picked up the ones on top. She scanned the dates and numbers scattered on the pages, and shuffled through others, finding roughly drawn maps, obviously by observers on hand. Troop strengths and the dates on which they had been tracked. *But which army? Whose forces?* "Where would I be delivering these?" she asked, continuing to read.

Blane's voice sounded directly behind her left shoulder and she spared him a quick glance as he said, "The Undersecretary of State in Washington."

Janice raised her eyebrows in surprise, and no slight admiration. "Pretty high up there. Can I see some proof he's expecting these? I'd rather not just walk in to a set of handcuffs."

Blane gestured to the other man. Janice watched him approach on her right. Unlike the café owner he kept a bit of distance, obviously aware that she would feel threatened and boxed in if he entered her personal space. "Show her, Lee."

Janice kept her eyes on Lee's hands.

The blond man reached into his pocket. As he started to pull it back out, she stiffened, dropping the papers and reaching for her gun. "No need, Miss Covington, just papers," he said stopping instantly. He nodded. "Excellent reflexes though."

She slid the gun back to its place in the back waistband of her pants and took the papers he presented to her. She identified the seal of the United States on the top. She scanned the emblem, looking for signs of forgery, or mimeography, but found nothing suspicious and read the body of

the message:

*We must assure that Interests are served in knowledge and keen observation of the Foe. It is the decision of this department that the one known as Black John can meet this purpose. Documentation of the Foe should be transported regularly for full compensation.*

Janice scanned the rest of the document. Its vagueness both suggested the proper authority, as well as making her stomach flip with uncertainty. "Okay. Black John. Is that you? Or him?" She looked up at Lee.

"It does not matter," he replied tightly. "One of us is not much without the other."

"So, the Café American is a meeting point. Makes sense. Legitimate business in a freely operating city. Who would shut you down without proof? What are you going to do once the Germans threaten here?"

"I already left one city because of the Germans, Miss Covington. I'm not leaving another."

Taking new measure of the café owner, Janice nodded slowly. Conviction she understood. This didn't feel like Bristol's carefully contrived stories convincing her to help. She looked away from both men and felt them both take a few steps back as she returned to her study of the documents to be carried.

"What do they intend to do with the information?" she asked. "Are there plans for the US to join the war?" She uncovered a map of what looked like the French coastline, detailing ports and landings. She knew from her own knowledge of the situation the Germans already occupied those locations. So these were definitely details of German movements.

"What he intends to do with it, we don't know, but it is enough to know that we will keep the States safe."

Moving to other documents she found other sites circled with numbers over them. *An accounting of the distribution of German occupation forces?* Then in other areas, written upside down from the other numbers were more numbers written in different hand. *Resistance forces? Allied military positions?*

She saw names scribbled near many of the numbers. All were followed by code symbols, probably of rank. Commanders? Contacts? She didn't know enough of the situation to tell for certain. Thoughtful as she continued absorbing the contents of the collection, she failed to hear the knock on the door to the office.

Blane's strides across the room to check out the interruption brought her head up. When he stepped back from the door, she saw Melinda standing there, dressed now in her flannel and jeans. She nodded to Blane who gestured for the brunette to enter. Lee shifted on the balls of his feet. "My friend, Melinda Pappas," she introduced. Working to overcome her feelings of discomfort, she relented and decided she could use the brunette's point of view. "Mel, could you come take a look at these?"

She held up two papers that she was having trouble with, and watched the woman cross the room to the small table. The brunette settled in another chair, taking the papers with slow fingers and looked from Janice to Blane to Lee with a curious expression before bending her head and reading the documents. "Are these them?" she asked obliquely.

Janice nodded. "Yes."

"Who's going to be receiving them?"

Looking to Lee, who lifted his eyes to the ceiling in a gesture of 'what the hell' before nodding, Janice answered, "The Undersecretary."

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

"State? Or Defense?" She shifted the two pages out of her hands and picked up others, reading determinedly. She set those quickly aside and reached for more, obviously looking for something in particular.

"What is it?" Janice asked. Instead of answering her right away, Melinda looked up to Blane and Lee. "Six months?"

"More likely a year," Lee answered with a flash of interest in his hazel eyes. He had watched with interest at the papers she picked and chose in the pile.

"Pacific?"

Lee nodded.

Janice put her hands on her hips and interjected, "What did I miss?"

In reply, Melinda pointed to three papers. Pushing everything else aside, she laid them side by side on the tabletop, arranging overlapping edges and then stepped back. "That."

Numbers and names and lines of landforms started to blend, forming new lines and formations. She suddenly realized she was looking at a map of the Pacific and identified sixteen major islands. It was clearly plans, not for German movements, but for Pacific Rim occupation... by Japan. "How did you get these?" Incredible. They were half a world away from the area under discussion.

Blane answered her. "An alliance is forming."

"Between Japan and Germany? You're kidding. To what end?"

"Hitler intends to use Japan to distract us," he conjectured.

Janice shook her head trying to take this all in. "How'd you see it, Mel?"

The brunette shrugged. "The troop numbers were strangely spread out, then I just flipped one around in my head, and realized I was looking, not at the French countryside, but at a section of the Pacific."

"What was a German doing with the Japanese plans?"

"Is that courier dead or alive right now?" Melinda asked.

"Carrying them to Berlin, and no," Lee answered. "So, will you now carry these for us?"

Melinda's hand slid onto Janice's shoulder and squeezed. She could almost hear the brunette's voice in her head, assuring her that it was the right decision. The blonde looked squarely at Blane. "All right, you've got a deal."

Rick held out his hand. "You've got your plane ride home then." He walked toward the desk and pointed at Lee. "He'll take you to your pilot. His job's as a mechanic at the airfield."

Janice and Melinda stepped back and waited for Lee to cross to the door.

"Mister Blane?"

Rick looked up at Melinda. "Be careful when the Germans come looking for those plans."

"I'm a businessman, Miss Pappas. The Germans won't bother." He mused, "There are much bigger nuisances to the Cause than me."

"The Germans consider no threat too small, sir." She offered him a friendly smile and accepted his silent nod. "Good night."

"Good night," he answered, as she followed Janice and Lee out the door.

On the café floor the trio paused. "You should return upstairs to complete your packing," Lee said. "I'll tell Sam you're ready to leave."

Janice and Melinda nodded and watched the blond man walk away. Putting a hand on Mel's shoulder, Janice leaned close and in a low voice asked, "Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

Melinda's blue eyes drifted down and she smiled into questioning green. In an equally quiet

voice, she confessed, "If half of what it reveals is true, we need to get it to somebody back home."

"How did you decide to look at it that way?" Janice asked, curious.

Melinda shook her head. "Pictograph communications often used to frustrate me until I realized that sometimes you had to change your perspective to figure out what the connection between the pictures might be. It's a trick I first learned to read Egyptian."

Janice nodded. "Trust a linguist to realize there's more than one way to say something." She smiled easily and slipped her hand into Mel's. "All right. Let's get packing," Janice concluded, leading the way back up the steps to the room.

## Chapter 32

The streets were silent on the drive out to the airfield. Janice sat next to Sam, who was taking care of the driving. Leaning on the seat back, the blonde turned to talk with Melinda sitting in the back with their bags. The road surface was pock-marked and riddled with potholes. After a particularly hard jolt that sent the brunette scrambling to reseat herself, Janice ventured, "Are you comfortable?" Melinda just looked at her with an inscrutable expression. "I'll take that as a no," she smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

Since leaving Rick's place, Melinda had grown steadily more pensive and withdrawn. Janice knew it was the package of papers that she carried inside her vest pocket that consumed the brunette's thoughts. The same could be said of her. She reached back and grasped Melinda's hand in a gesture of comfort. "We'll be airborne soon. How are you with planes?"

Melinda frowned in confusion. "I-- Fine. I just have trouble on the water."

"Good. Then it should be a smooth few days." She turned to Lee. "How long is the flight to Lisbon?"

"Probably two or three hours, Miss Covington."

"Great, long enough for a catnap." Lee glanced at her. "I didn't get much sleep," she explained to Sam. Catching Melinda's gaze, she offered a private smile for the brunette's eyes only and added, "Neither did you." Acknowledging the statement with a small nod, Melinda's cheeks took on a rosy tinge. Janice patted her hand and turned back around. "Are we almost there?"

"Just around this turn," he answered as they made the turn and Janice could see the signs for the airfield, and the fencing clearly backlit by runway lights.

"Some airfield," she remarked "I don't see anything but hangars. Is there a flight tower?"

"No. All flights are registered with the office in town and then you're on your own."

Melinda realized something. "So, how often do the police run their patrols?"

"First patrol passes at 7 a.m. You'll be long off the ground by then," he answered confidently.

"All right, so where do we meet our pilot?" Lee had stopped next to one of the small hangars, set back off the runway. A rough concrete drive served as a taxiway between the hangar and the tarmac. As they all stepped from the car, Janice took her bag from Melinda and offered the woman a hand up.

Lee remained on his side of the vehicle and waited in silence. When Janice turned to question him, he only nodded back behind her. "You'll find him in there."

"What's his name?"

"Couldn't tell you that," he replied calmly.

"What's he look like?" Janice could see two or more figures moving through the hangar around a snub-length plane with a wide blade nose prop and two longer blade wing props.

"Just do what Blane said," he answered. "He'll find you."

Janice sucked in a steadying breath. "All right. So... can you tell us, at least, if that's our plane?"

"This is the hangar where I was instructed to drive you," he confirmed.

Grasping Melinda's arm, she tugged the woman toward the larger of two men working on the plane's underbelly. "Time to suck it up," she murmured.

"What?"

"Oh nothing," the blonde dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Hang on, here we go."

She stepped up and cleared her throat. As coached by Blane, she questioned, "Two times two is four. Four for golf."

The man straightened, turned and wiped his hand on a dirtied rag. "What tee time?"

"You can choose," she responded with relief filling her voice. "Anything we can help with?"

"Nah." He shook her hand and gestured. "Just board. We'll be underway as soon as the tools are put away." He looked to the brunette. "You fly often?"

"Not recently," she said without elaborating. "Anyplace you want us once inside?"

"Out of my crew's way and mine."

Janice's hand fell from Melinda's as the brunette moved to comply. "Once we're airborne," she told the man. "I want to talk."

He nodded. "Now board up."

Janice and Melinda moved quickly up the steps and turned to look back down at the tarmac before entering the plane. Another car drove up and a man and woman stepped out. Attired fashionably and carrying what appeared to be only overnight bags, they nodded to the pilot and then mounted the plane's stairway. Janice guided Melinda inside before the couple reached the top.

Together moving down the narrow aisle and the rough appointed seats, they took up residence in the front facing of a set of four seats. Melinda stowed their luggage in an overhead rack as Janice waited. "Inside or outside?" the blonde asked.

"Outside is fine," Melinda answered, settling to the seat and putting her feet on the opposite seat.

"Good." The archaeologist acted as if she was adjusting the waistband of her pants and slipped her hands behind her back under her coat and shifted her revolver as she sat down. The other couple settled in a set of seats further back, stowing their bags under the seat and almost immediately settling back and closing their eyes.

Melinda watched them with concealed glances, as she sat back and peered between the seats toward them.

"Mel." The blonde patted the woman's pantleg. "Something wrong?"

"Dating or married?" she asked.

"What?" Janice forcibly kept her voice down though she could not keep the surprise from her voice.

"It's a game," she replied, also keeping her voice low. "I used to play it with friends on long trips. We'd look at people and wonder about their backgrounds. So... Are they dating or married?"

"Likely neither," came the reply. "They're playing a role like we are."

Melinda's hand closed over hers on the arm of the seat between them then pulled away. "I thought we were at least dating," she said, turning her eyes away from the surprise now shining in Janice's green eyes.

Janice reached out and took Mel's hand in hers again. "It's been one hell of a first date then."

A smile warmed her features as the brunette turned back to her. "And it's not over yet."

"Can I give you a good night kiss?" she bantered back.

Janice swallowed and nodded. Melinda's hand was then suddenly cupping her chin and drawing their faces close. Soft lips moved over hers and the world faded back a bit, letting the brunette's touch become her whole world for the span of several seconds. Hands dropped together on the separating arm and slid over one another. When the kiss ended, she met blue eyes steadily gazing into hers. "Some kiss," she commented breathlessly.

Melinda's smile swept across her features. "It's been a lovely date so far," she quipped.

Leaning back as the pilot boarded and entered the front cabin, Janice thought about Melinda's confidence. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Mel's head drifted toward her shoulder so the blonde shrugged a little straighter in her seat. Melinda's eyes closed as her head touched down, and Janice whispered, "It's all in the choice of partners."

It was really amazing how much confidence the brunette could inspire in Janice. With just a touch of her hand curling into Janice's own, she had surrendered her safety to Janice's watchful eyes. Within moments she had closed her eyes and her breathing evened into sleep.

With the closeness of the warmth, keeping alert was more difficult for Janice, but she did it, darting her eyes around the plane, counting the ceiling tiles and the number of rivets in each spine circling the plane's body.

Three hours to Lisbon, and then a refueling layover. She kissed the dark hair under her chin. Late tomorrow they'd be on their way to the States. Finally.

The plane's engine stormed to life and the vibration made it even harder to remain awake. But Janice did, keeping her eye on the window view past Melinda's shoulder.

## Chapter 33

Once the flight leveled out, Janice considered her options. She had wanted to speak with the pilot. To do that however meant moving Mel, who dozed peacefully in the quiet, her body curled such that she had the blonde effectively pinned to the seat.

Melinda's splinted right arm rested across Janice's stomach and the brunette's head occupied all of the archaeologist's right shoulder. Janice's right hand was pinioned between Mel's hip and the arm of the chair. There was no doubt that moving would awaken the brunette and Janice was loath to do it.

Watching and listening to the woman sleeping, Janice was drawn to the gently fluttering long eyelashes as she dreamed. She wished they had had more time to spend in bed together the previous night. Janice longed to fit herself snugly into those soft curves and talk long into the early hours.

Melinda's chest expanded evenly with each breath and Janice found herself watching long strands of hair work their way over Melinda's shoulders because of the slight movements. When Melinda's hand shifted, Janice sat back a bit suddenly startled and shy, like she'd been caught with her hands on stolen goods.

Her reaction made her wonder exactly what it was between her and the Southerner. Was it merely lust, or something truly deeper, more sensual than sexual, more intellectual than physical? She hadn't allowed anyone this close to her the entire time since she had taken over her father's work.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

The warm feeling grew stronger the longer Janice remained quiet, studying Melinda while she slept. Lust she was familiar with, and had thought composed the largest portion of her attraction to the brunette. But since making love, she found herself desiring more. She wanted companionship as well, someone to talk to that understood her and what drove her. And for her part, someone to expend the energy on to get to know.

Melinda was certainly complex enough to spend a long time getting to know. One minute the proper Southerner, delicate, polite and unobtrusive. The next minute she was a woman of decisive action, exuding tendrils of presence into every corner of a room.

She returned to watching the woman's breathing steady once again. Curiously she noted that her own breathing slowed to match Mel's and the feeling of calm that stole over her settled the question. She was in love with Melinda. *But what of life in the States?* She had hers and the brunette had another, 500 miles away. *Despite their words, would their lives separate again?*

Absently, the blonde caught a strand of dark hair and wound it around her finger, bending close and breathing deeply of the elusive scent. Dropping her hand she brushed her fingers over Melinda's and marveled at the differences in their hands. Where Melinda's were smooth, Janice's were roughened. Long rounded fingernails contrasted with the short blunted ones on her own hands. Her skin tone was more tanned, while Melinda's was lighter, but more golden in tone.

She watched the fingers slowly flex and the tendons and muscles moved with steady purpose under the skin. But it was the burring, sleep-filled voice that drew the blonde's head up to meet peaceful azure eyes that took her breath away.

"I thought you needed to talk to the pilot."

Janice brushed her left hand over Mel's right in her lap once more, glanced at the cockpit door and then looked back into the brunette's eyes, inches from her own. "It'll hold until we land," she said quietly. "Go on back to sleep."

Melinda shook her head and sat up, brushing her hair back off her shoulders. "How long have we been airborne?"

Sitting back, Janice answered easily, "Not long, maybe half an hour."

Melinda smiled then asked, "When we get back to the States, what do you want to do first?"

"You mean after we deliver the mail?" Janice clarified, tentatively, unable to believe that the brunette had broached the subject first.

"Mmmhmm."

She answered slowly, neutrally. "I don't know. The artifacts should go to a museum and I did have money from the Antiquities department of Penn State."

"What pieces are they expecting?"

"The pre-Hellenistic culture pieces we found in the upper levels. Pottery, religious artifacts, etcetera."

"The things from the altar to Ares." Melinda watched Janice's reactions carefully, wondering how best to ask her questions.

"Yeah," Janice leaned back and set her hands in her own lap. "What do you intend then to do with the Scrolls?" Janice was quiet, looking at some distant point. "Would you mind a suggestion?" When Janice shrugged, the brunette continued, "My father used to teach at UNC. Perhaps we could make a presentation in our fathers' names?"

Janice's face turned ever so slightly into a smile. It would be a chance to repair her father's reputation, and shed light on his lifelong passion. "I want to be able to study the scrolls," she said succinctly.

Blue eyes twinkled. "The presentation doesn't have to be all at once," she said. There was a long pause as Melinda wrestled with her seat, and other internal things, to get comfortable. Then, facing ahead, not daring to look at Janice's face while she asked, she quietly suggested, "You... could stay with me... just while you complete the research and present the parchments... if you would like."

Green eyes blinked as Janice pulled back and studied her. Melinda swallowed self-consciously. "I don't need a place to stay," she commented, stressing the word "need." "I have an apartment in Philadelphia," she finished.

"Oh." Janice watched the tremor start around Melinda's eyes, and she saw her swallow hard and stiffen her jaw. She realized that Melinda was actually trying to ask her to live with her.

Despite her earlier desire to work something out so that she could continue to see the brunette, Janice found the question unsettling, and ventured matter-of-factly, "Philadelphia would be kind of far to conduct the research. Certainly not... efficient if the objects go to UNC." Azure glinted with light and the faintest of smiles began to form on Melinda's lips. Janice could feel her heart hammering in her chest and the blood thrummed in her ears.

One part of her screamed about not needing anyone. It was smothered to silence by a sunlight-framed face with sky blue eyes, hardly breathing in expectation of her words.

Whether or not Janice needed anyone was suddenly irrelevant next to the feelings she had being partnered with this woman. She wanted to stay. "Besides," she aimed for nonchalance, managing only partial success. "The correspondence could get pretty cumbersome if you're going to help with the translations. It certainly would be... easier... working... more closely... if we were... living... closer together." She paused for a long beat. "Right?"

The brunette flushed and the reaction made Janice's heart skip a beat. "Just... exactly... what I was thinking," Melinda responded.

She brushed her lips against Mel's cheek and felt the woman's head turning slowly to bring their lips together. Her hands came up to cup the brunette's cheeks as Melinda's did the same. Suddenly the plane dropped and dipped under them, breaking the contact.

Gripping the chair arms as the turbulence continued, Janice looked out the window then up toward the cockpit. She put a hand on Melinda's shoulder as the brunette started to rise. "What the hell is going on?"

The plane lurched again and Janice bolted into the aisle, Melinda at her back. Together they moved quickly to the cockpit door and yanked it open.

## Chapter 34

Melinda looked over Janice's shoulder into the cockpit beyond. Wind brushed her face and she turned into it seeing a hole shattered in the plane's left cockpit window. The pilot's chair had been torn from its bolts and the pilot lay slumped on the floor against the left instrumentation panel. Another man stood at the pilot's stick wrestling with the ship's unresponsive controls.

Janice leaped to the co-pilot's chair, immediately beginning to assess the instrumentation. While trying to raise the airplane's nose, the co-pilot, now pilot, barked at the blonde in chopped Frech. Swiftly the archaeologist strapped herself in and sought each control.

The besieged airplane shuddered. From Melinda's vantage she checked the forward view and reported, "Another round's coming in." She kept her voice calm but the co-pilot waved off her words as he struggled with the shaking control stick. He happened to glance up and then barked at

Janice, "Roll left!"

Struggling to hold herself upright, Melinda watched Janice adjust the left wing's profile and the plane staggered in an arc left.

"Roll! Roll!" Janice tried again. The plane's body shook violently then began to tilt.

Between airspeed and the changing presentation of its form to the wind, the airplane did finally roll out of the way of the strafing rounds. An explosion rocked the plane but it was not a direct hit.

Janice worked to level the flight once more, and all three of them looked out the window to see the coastline coming up far too quickly. The froth of the sea's waves smashed against the cliffs and staggering rocks of the Spanish coastline. Sea salt smell filled the air competing with the raw smoke smell of the missile exhausts.

"Trim the flaps," the co-pilot called. Collecting air under the wings and nose forced the plane up, but not fast enough.

"Mel, get out!" Janice yelled, scrambling from the co-pilot's seat and stumbling toward the door.

"We're going down, Maman!" The panicked co-pilot pushed past them both, stumbling over the pilot's body as he fled the aircraft.

A rapid exchange of French and the other couple on board was on their feet, grabbing their things as the co-pilot tore open a locker and rummaged for life vests.

Melinda pushed past the others and tossed Janice their two bags from the overhead bin. As they reached the front of the plane once more, the co-pilot thrust open the door and gestured the others out ahead of him.

"Aiyee!" he yelled as he followed them out into the open air about a hundred feet above the sea.

Pausing at the doorway, Melinda looked into the cockpit to see the looming Spanish cliffs and the jagged rocks. The wind's howl set up a screeching wail around them. She looked down at the dead pilot and paused. *Movement?*

"The pilot's still alive," she told Janice as the blonde joined her at the windswept portal.

Janice pulled on her arm. "We can't. Go on! Jump!"

Melinda shook her head. "You go." She started away from the doorway and leaped for the pilot, dropping her bag on the deck. "I'll get him."

Looking at the bag on the deck and up at the brunette, Janice sighed. Knowing there wasn't time for an argument, she dropped her bag and helped Melinda with lifting the injured pilot. "Get a vest!" she told the brunette, who then scrambled over the seats and pulled several from the locker. When she got it, Janice worked his body into the vest.

"Thank you," Melinda murmured.

Janice kissed her hard and fast. "Now, jump!" the blonde ordered. "I'll drop him after you!"

Melinda, wearing her own vest, nodded and fell backward out of the plane's door. Watching, Janice waited until the brunette head reappeared before pushing the pilot out. She kicked the bags out in front of her as she too, finally left the plane.

The fifty or so feet of free-fall upset Janice's stomach and she hit the water retching. Unable to stop the inclination to breathe, she found herself sucking in salt water and choked. Ignoring the pain in her head and chest, she fought toward the surface, finally breaking into the sunlight and air.

She tried to get her bearings coughing and spitting. A huge rock face loomed in the path that

the current was dragging her. With deliberate strokes across the current she gradually pulled away from immediate danger. She bumped into something in the water and a hand encountered something large and slick. "Melinda!" she panicked, thinking it was a shark.

The object bobbed up next to her and she was swept with relief at seeing the dark brown of her wet leather suitcase. She spotted the shoreline and worked herself toward it in fits and starts, occasionally pulling and occasionally being pulled by the wave-tossed suitcase.

Gunfire and large weapons rapid-firing drew her eyes across the water toward a pair of ships battling nearby.

She was treading, watching this when she heard a faint yell over the roar of the water. "Janice!"

Turning toward the sound, Janice let go of the bag as Melinda came up. "Mel!" Relief at the brunette's presence swept a weakness through the blonde's already tired limbs. She slipped under the water.

A strong hand found her and dragged her back to the surface. "Janice!"

"What happened to the pilot?"

"I lost him against the rocks," Melinda acknowledged. "I'm sorry I shouldn't have --"

"It's all right. You tried." Janice rolled onto her back and floated. "Let's get out of the water."

Melinda pulled her arms strongly through the water alongside Janice and the two women made their way toward the distant shore. Taller, Melinda found bottom first. Shoulders and legs shaking from the effort and the cold, she reached back and grasped Janice's arm, lifting the woman forward to find the bottom for herself. Together they staggered through the tide and finally onto the beach, falling to their knees in the sand.

"Are you okay?" the brunette asked Janice who was spitting and coughing hard enough to shake herself off her hands as she tried to balance. She wrapped her arms around the blonde's waist and squeezed once before letting go. "Janice?"

Finally catching her breath, the blonde could answer. "Yeah, I'm okay."

More gun reports ripped across the water and drew the women's attention. "Do you think we were caught in the middle of that?" Melinda asked.

"Only if they thought we were its... air... escort." Janice's voice trailed off. "Damn. You know something? We might just have been. Flying so low.. Attitude.. Damn.. Damn.." The blonde picked up a fistful of sand and cursed again as she threw it at the water, mad at herself for yet again missing an important bit of information.

She spotted a small boat being rowed toward the shore. From the occupants' attire she realized they were German sailors. "Germans!" she barked, already pulling on Melinda's arm and climbing to her feet. "Move!"

The brunette followed as Janice led the way up a rocky path toward the top of the overlooking cliffs. Melinda felt Janice reach back and pull her into the cover of some rocks. Landing hard on her knees, she protested with an "oof."

"Sh!" Janice fished into her waistband for her gun, but it was gone. She searched for a better hiding place. Finally she spotted a small ledge in deep shadows. "There!"

The Germans made shore just as the two women settled in to hide and watch. They started arguing over the evidence of the women's movements, gesturing around at the rocks. Then Janice and they noticed two people staggering onto the shore further east up the beach. It was the couple from the plane.

Taking up the chase with a yell, the sailors quickly ended it with two shots from the

foremost man's pistol. As Melinda and Janice watched, the bodies were searched and then left for the carrion already beginning to circle. The sailors returned to their boat with a whoop and hollers, rowing out strongly toward their ship once again.

Wind and sand stung her face. Turning away from it, Janice saw Melinda leaning against the rocks, her gaze fixed on the scene that had unfolded. A tear rolled slowly down the chiseled cheek. Saying nothing, the blonde settled an arm over the taller woman's shoulders. When she thought the gesture had settled Mel's nerves, she pulled away, leaning back against the rocks and closing her eyes. Safe for the moment, she sought to rest and recover from her exhaustion.

"Janice?"

She replied quietly, keeping her eyes closed. "Rest. We'll move on in a bit."

"What about our bags?"

Janice bolted upright almost colliding with Mel. "The Scrolls!"

## Chapter 35

Before Melinda could react, Janice leaped from the rocks they were using for cover and scrambled down the incline. Skidding and slipping on the loose rocks, finally she tumbled onto the sand. The brunette followed more cautiously. "Janice!"

Janice visually raked the shoreline, taking in where the waves slapped at the beach. Shading her eyes from the sunlight she searched just outside the surfline in the water. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?" Mel stopped just off Janice's shoulder, bending over, bracing her hands on her knees and panting. From that vantage however she had a good view of the back of the smaller woman's pants. A red stain marred her injured thigh. Alarmed, Mel grasped Janice's hand. "Sit!"

"What?" Janice turned and looked at her, then pulled away before Melinda could pull her down and started jogging down the beach distracted. Between short runs and turning constantly to scan the waves, the blonde was soon stumbling along.

Mel jogged to keep up. Her gaze never left the blonde's back. Her own arm throbbed painfully, the splint's extra support long gone and unnoticed in all the commotion. "Janice!" She tried again to call the blonde back.

Distracted she stumbled and fell into the pocked sand, landing on her left side by design as she threw her weight. Lying on her back she yelled, a noticeable strain in her voice, "Stop! No more!" She grabbed her throbbing forearm and just lay there panting, tears running unchecked down her cheeks and into her dark hair. "Janice!" she called again.

The archaeologist heard Melinda yell above the crashing sound of the surf. Turning in mid-stride she turned her ankle and fell on the sand. She struggled to get up but finally acknowledged the pain in her thigh. Gingerly she prodded the injury and winced at the fresh rush of blood. Rolling onto her stomach to try and rise again, she spotted Melinda back some distance on the beach.

The sight of the brunette laid flat out goaded her to her feet. Fearing the brunette hurt, she limped quickly to the linguist's side. "Mel!" She dropped to her knees and grasped the woman's arm. "Mel?"

Unfortunately it was the woman's right arm. With a howl of pain Melinda jerked it free and brought her gaze around. Janice could see the blue eyes growing darker, more cobalt than azure. Melinda bit each word though it was amazing she managed not to raise her voice. "Don't. You. Ever. Run. Off. Like. That. Again. Janice. Covington. Ever." She looked away to the surf, her jaw setting firmly. "You could've killed yourself," she concluded. Her voice broke from exhaustion, emotion

and pain. She hugged her arm tighter to herself and fell silent.

The blonde's thigh throbbed. The pulse was painfully magnified as she sat in silence studying Melinda's turned-aside profile. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

*Oh boy, this was bad.* She tried again. "Are you hurt?"

Bluntly. "Yes."

"Your arm? Or somewhere else?"

Resigned, after a long thoughtful silence, Mel answered, "My arm."

Janice stood carefully and scanned about for a couple suitable pieces of driftwood. "I'll redo your splint. Do you think you rebroke it?"

Melinda still did not look at her, tested the arm, grimaced, but shook her head.

Janice, never one for handling the silent treatment very well, found the wood she was looking for and ripped off a length of fabric from the bottom of her own shirt. More roughly than she intended she splinted Melinda's arm before standing and flopping down on the sand a short distance away, eyes intent on the surf.

Gingerly testing the splint, Melinda gradually let go of her aggravation, recognizing it for mostly physical frustration rather than emotional. It was unfair of her to take it out on Janice. "Thank you," she said finally.

"No problem." Janice dug her fingers through the sand. Frustrated she rubbed her aching thigh.

"I'm sorry I got so upset," Mel said quietly.

"I was pretty stupid, huh?"

"You were... anxious."

Janice sighed. "They're gone. After everything I've done to get them safely home, they're gone."

The brunette nodded. "Looks that way." The blonde flung herself down again. "Please be careful," Melinda urged.

"It's over." The archaeologist got to her feet and strode away down the beach, moving her leg with care, obviously bothered by the effort.

The linguist carefully moved onto her feet and followed. "It's not over. We still have to get home."

"What for?"

"What do you mean 'what for? Where should I start?'" Melinda ticked things off on her fingers. "Familiar faces. Not jumping at every thump in the night. Trusting the people around you. There's a war going on over here." She grabbed Janice's shirt and then her own. "Clean clothes, for God's sake. Your work--"

"My work was here, Mel. The scrolls--"

"Those scrolls are gone." Mel grasped her shoulder, pulling her around. "There are others."

Bristling at how calm the brunette was, while she rapidly came closer to flying completely into a rage, Janice scoffed, "You don't care."

"I care," Mel replied evenly. "But running yourself into the ground doesn't do any good."

"So what do I do now?"

The blonde's easy dismissal of their partnership hurt. So Melinda stressed her individual choices in reply. "I'd like to go home. Take stock." She turned back to considering them together. "Maybe we can review some of our fathers' notes, and come up with other places to look."

Janice pointed at the water. "My father's notes are out there. Somewhere. In addition to the scrolls, Mel, I had all my father's research. My research."

Melinda looked out at the water too. "Well, then, I suppose we start with anything your father sent to mine."

"You're taking this awfully calmly," Janice remarked sullenly, sitting on the sand and letting the water wash up the beach under her.

The brunette sat next to her more gingerly. "There's no point in getting upset. It never helps and I can't think straight."

"You're a better woman than I," Janice opined. "I feel like screaming and kicking things."

"Why aren't you?"

Janice looked quizzical. "Wha--?" She shrugged. "You have a dampening effect on me, I guess."

"Would it do you good to know that I feel like punching something too?"

"You? Why?"

Glancing at the afternoon sun-dappled sea and then back at a pair of eyes every bit as glittering and green, Mel said, "Because it all upset you."

They remained still and silent for a long time, wondering what to do. Melinda wondering if what she said was enough, and Janice wondering how to respond.

Finally she put a hand on Mel's knee and leaned close to lightly press her lips to the smooth cheek. "I thought I was the more experienced one here." She patted the knee and pulled back. "Thanks."

The brunette nodded and accepted Janice reclining into her shoulder as they both looked out at the sea in silent regard.

Despite her words to Mel, the longer Janice sat the lower she felt. The Mediterranean had take her dreams from her. "C'mon, let's go," she finally said, getting antsy.

"Relax. We've got plenty of time before dark," Mel replied. "My arm hurts. I'm winded. And your leg could use the extra rest."

"Taking care of me?"

She nodded slightly in agreement against the blonde's head. "Works for me," she said finally.

Janice slowly wrapped her arms around Melinda's waist. "Me too."

## Chapter 36

The cry of gulls overhead woke Janice. Carefully lifting herself off Melinda, she blinked in the late afternoon light. Most of her was finally refreshingly dry, although her clothes were stiff from having been abruptly starched with sea salt. Shifting she noticed her rear was wet and cold. Looking down, she saw they sat now inside the surf line, in about an inch of water.

"Mel, get up." She lightly jostled the dozing woman's left shoulder. "Tide's come in," she added when faded blue peered up at her.

"Feeling better?" The taller woman stretched, winced once at the strain in her side from sitting so long and stood.

"Ready to find a farmhouse, some food, and directions," Janice responded, enjoying the view as Mel's clothes pulled taut across her chest.

Melinda smiled and brushed a loose lock of hair out of her face. Her stomach growled. Sheepishly she concurred. "Sounds like food's next on my list, too."

They reached the top of the beach, and stepped onto the gravel and sand road that wound down the back of the cliffs toward a small hamlet. The western sky at the horizon and the rolling foothills of the Spanish countryside were cast in a mauve glow, laced with orange fleeced clouds in a combination, Melinda thought, only Mother Nature had the skill to render beautifully.

She took a deep breath and caught the distinct aromas of wildflowers mixed with the spicy, mouth-watering smells of food.

"Do you hear that?" Janice's face lit up.

Melinda cocked her head and concentrated. "Music," she mused. Casting a long look back at the beach then down at the blonde, she caught the smile. "You like it?"

"Yeah, I do." Janice adjusted the waterlogged leather jacket on her shoulders and then automatically reached for her hat. Finding it gone, she took a deep breath. "And I could really use a smile right now." She patted her head. "Hat's gone. Scrolls are gone." They looked out at the sea. Trying to push down the pain, she tried to keep her voice even. "Looks like we haven't accomplished much. It's back to the legends. Ocean's claimed it. Even the scrolls can't possibly last long in all that salt and muck." Her voice had still broken slightly, and she sighed heavily, turning away from the sight.

"Now we have to figure out how to get home. Let me see if I..." Digging into her pockets, a look of wonder crossed the blonde's features. Janice shook her head in disbelief. "Okay, so all's not lost. I've still got these."

The brunette watched, eyes widening as the small woman's hands reappeared from inside her coat. Tears stung her eyes as she drank in the halves of Xena's weapon. "Oh my God..." Melinda's smile was slow, but broad, quickly involving her entire face from the tilt of her eyebrows, to the narrowing of her eyes, on down to the dimple that formed in each cheek and in her chin. Janice thought the expression endearing and gave an answering smile.

She spoke frankly though as Melinda's hands closed over hers and slowly lifted away the pieces. "I lost all my funds though, so we might just end up hocking the thing to get enough to eat and that plane ride home."

Melinda shook her head emphatically against that course of action. Taking a deep breath to collect herself, she shifted the two pieces into one hand and reached up, delicately pulling aside her lapel. "I didn't keep all my funds in my bag." She extracted a small flap of leather and unfolded it, revealing about fifty dollars in American bills, stiffly half-wet, but definitely genuine currency. "I don't know how far it will get us. We might have to bargain something--other than the chakram--for them."

Janice chuckled. "Smart move. All right. So, food first, right?" Letting Melinda keep the weapon pieces, she accepted the bills and folded them carefully, tucking them in her inside coat pocket.

"Let's secure a room first. I desperately want a bath."

"You just took a bath," Janice teased. "Biggest tub in the area... the Mediterranean."

"You can have it. I want warm unsalted water and at least an hour to soak."

They reached the outskirts of the small town and companionable silence reigned as they watched the town's evening celebration getting underway. Colorful banners proclaimed "Independence" and painted lanterns swayed from the lamp posts.

They passed several street musicians playing xylophones, drums, and guitars. A young man in front of them gesticulated to his own singing as he crooned a love song in throaty Spanish. A woman working a pair of thick wood castanets swept past and around them with a wide welcoming

smile shining from doe-brown eyes under a wild tumble of ebony hair.

She caught Janice's attention with a flair of her hips and the blonde laughed as she began to clap to the rhythm. Following the woman's steps, the blonde spun and toed her way through several turns, then waved the woman on and turned back to find Melinda had paused, crossing her hands in front of her waist studying the blonde. "What?"

"You should dance more often," she answered. Janice chuckled. "I just really like it. Take it seriously and that takes all the fun out of it."

"She certainly liked you."

Janice realized that Melinda possibly felt slightly jealous. She shrugged. "Not my type."

Her brunette companion tilted her head in silent question. "What is your type?"

"What's yours?" the blonde countered.

Melinda nodded. "I'm not certain I have a type. I haven't exactly had much experience."

Janice brushed her hand down Melinda's right arm, gently lacing her fingers with the brunette's. "Same here. Not the lack of experience, but rather the lack of 'type'," Janice sought to assure her.

"Who was your first crush?"

Janice took the change of subject with a smile. "Okay." She thought about it for a while and then ventured, "Errol Flynn." She turned it back on the brunette. "How about you?"

"Fred Astaire."

Janice chuckled. "But he always had Ginger."

"I could dream," Mel replied. "Besides I loved watching him dance."

Janice danced up ahead a few steps and spun, finding a pair of very interested blue eyes just beginning to lift to meet her eyes. "Then, come dancing with me tonight." She kept her gaze level and voice even, but her expression hopefully would leave Melinda no doubts who she desired.

"You're a little short to be Mr. Astaire," the brunette replied with a short laugh.

"And you're too tall and dark to play Ginger. How about we pretend?"

After a long moment of absorbing silence where the light seemed to settle in vague shadows around them, Melinda tilted her head slightly and murmured, "Janice, you're incredible." It was amazing how happy she felt despite everything that had happened.

"Why thank you, Ms. Pappas," and Janice pulled away to bow low with a deep laugh. She straightened up and grasped the woman's hand. "Let's get you bathed and then I'm going to show you a good time." She winked at the brunette, who bashfully dropped her blue eyes. "Tomorrow we'll find a plane and leave adventure behind. So one more night... for our dreams?"

"You may regret it. I've been told I have two left feet."

Janice looked down at the feet in question, covered in her stockings, but no shoes. Her own boots had stayed on because of the fact that they hugged her legs all the way up her calves. "I think you have attractive feet. We'll need to find you shoes though. Are the rocks bad?"

"Not really. Reminds me of days on the barrier islands spent at clambakes."

Leaving their hands intertwined, the two women went in search of a room and drank in the sights, smells and sounds of the fiesta getting underway as the first stars appeared overhead.

## Chapter 37

"You are bella, yes?" The older Spanish woman clucked as she adjusted the last flounce and stepped back from the footstool. Melinda stepped down carefully to the floor, watching the skirt

flair around her ankles as she turned.

"You do wonderful work, senora," she replied. "I am plain. The dress is wonderful."

"Carmen, please," the woman answered. "You are sweet child."

Footsteps sounded on the staircase and she turned with Carmen to watch Janice's descent.

Cleaned up from their beach adventure, Janice's blonde hair had been left down from its washing. Now dried in a sunburst of color around her head and shoulders, it was tamed with a loosely tied green band of cloth.

Melinda watched Carmen Toval de Sandovalles cluck over Janice's final look and smiled on their good luck.

Insisting her guests enjoy the festival properly dressed, Carmen had given them the dresses, two of her own from many years ago. With clever alterations she had made them fit.

Janice's dress lay off one shoulder, the flounce of the neckline accentuated the narrowness of her waist.

Melinda's skirt had been lengthened with two more layers of flounce, giving her a demure ankle length. Janice, more of a height with their hostess, had not needed the addition, though the skirt came to mid-calf. Melinda decided she liked it. The length showed off the smaller woman's muscular calves and petite feet, in a way her calf-boots had hinted at, but never really revealed.

"Muy buena. Bella," Carmen finally pronounced on Janice, standing back.

Janice grasped her hand in thanks and smiled at the woman's sons, 24 and 27, who were their escorts for the evening. Vega, the daughter, appeared at the top of the stairs.

Vega, only 17, wore a bright orange and yellow dress, which stopped above her knees in a form-fitting skirt. The shoulders were demure, but the neckline was daring. Carmen gave her daughter a stern look and Vega firmly stifled a chuckle.

Which made Janice chuckle. "Midnight, Senora?"

"Before," Carmen replied drily, accepting the levity. "Ah, what am I worried for. Vega is in good hands with her brothers and you to look after her."

"Ah, Mama, Sergio loves you."

"No, dear, he loves you. He tolerates me as a plow horse tolerates gnats."

Chuckles abounded. While they had been dressing, Vega had enlightened Janice and Melinda on her boyfriend, Sergio. The shopkeeper's son had been sweet on Vega since the festival two years ago, and had on several occasions, told Carmen that he would ask for Vega when she was 18, not a day later, and not a day before.

The young couple's eagerness was a source of contention between mother and daughter, but the way of things, Carmen had said.

It was during that conversation that Janice and Melinda found out that their hostess's own husband had died just after Vega's birth, from an epidemic. "My children God spared," she said, calmly after so many years alone. "It was my soul He chose to split."

Vega was a petite version of her mother, rich sun-darkened skin complemented by velvet-brown intelligent eyes, with a strong dose of fun-loving. She had the same warm, welcoming smile that had convinced Melinda to accept the offer of a room when they first encountered Carmen. They had been counting their change from obtaining two meat wraps from a street vendor.

Now, Carmen swept her arms wide and opened the door, ushering her brood and her guests out. She accepted kisses as the group flowed past.

Vibrant music and light filled the town's center. Street entertainers circled among the dancers and dancers intermingled with those consuming festive foods and colorful candy treats.

## Going Home by Lara Zielinsky

The smells made Janice's mouth water. She followed a particularly colorful candy stick with her eyes. "What's that?"

Stefano sprang from her side with a laugh and disappeared into the crowd. They all quickly lost sight of him.

"He must have sighted a friend," Melinda mused. Turning to Vega she asked, "So, where is this young Sergio of yours?"

The girl laughed. "He will meet us at the main tent," she said. "This way."

Melinda, Janice, and Vega's oldest brother, Disanto, followed the teen through the crowded streets.

Stefano bounded up as they came to a stop next to the main hawkers' tent. Inside Melinda could see games and booths full of wares. She looked to Stefano as he spoke to Janice. "Miss Covington. This is for you." He pulled out a candy stick, about a foot long, from behind his back.

Taking it, Janice eyed the multi-colored confection and then looked at him a bit surprised. "I don't know--um, thank you," she quickly said when she saw his smile falter. Carefully she licked at the tip and grinned. "This is very sweet," she told him. Looking at Melinda she added, with an offering gesture, "Very sweet."

Melinda took a quick lick, their gazes meeting briefly across the candy since Janice kept hold of it. Breathlessly they paused, affected by the light mood and their closeness in an intimate way as both women's stomachs squeezed in reaction. Melinda started to lift her hand to take the stick.

Vega's squeal of delight broke the spell. Both Janice and Melinda turned, their shoulders unconsciously touching as they stood between the two brothers. Their sister bounced into the arms of a strapping young male, wearing a black vest over a crisp white shirt. His black pants had a brown stripe down the outside of each leg.

Vega took off her own hair tie and secured it around his neck as they kissed. Pulling back she adjusted the effect and then led him back over to her brothers and new friends.

"This is Sergio," she introduced. "These are Janice and Melinda, from America."

"I am pleased to meet you," he offered to them both, bending charmingly over each woman's hand. "Will you be watching the fights later with Vega?"

"Fights?"

"Yes. Certainly you have heard of bullfights?"

Melinda and Janice exchanged glances. Janice turned back to Sergio. "We've heard of them, but never seen one."

"Then tonight you will see!" he pronounced with an upthrust of his arm and a laugh.

Janice and Melinda, flanked by Stefano and Disanto, followed Vega who clung happily to Sergio's arm as they strode through the town to a small stadium near the edge of town.

Melinda continued to absorb the sights and sounds of the festival, looking around at the happy faces of the villagers.

A sudden movement off to her left caught her attention and she turned to see a man, his back to them, suddenly gesticulating wildly with a shopkeeper. "Phone," she heard him ask in Spanish, though his accent suggested he was not a native speaker.

A chance glance over his shoulder and she saw his face. "Oh my God," she nudged Janice's arm. "Janice!" she gasped in a sharply curtailed breath.

"What?"

"The pilot!" she gestured over toward the shop. Janice was stunned. "Wait a minute. You had

to let him go. You can't mean our pilot."

"Our pilot," she confirmed.

"What is it?" Disanto asked, seeing the women's concerned expressions.

"You should go on to the stadium," they said. "We have something we must see."

He shook his head. "I will stay with you." Looking around, he waved Stefano, Vega and Sergio on. "We will join them later. Now, tell me what you would like to do."

Melinda looked at Janice who shrugged, so she explained in brief. "We were in a plane crash this morning. And were certain that everyone else had died." She gestured toward the now vacant shopfront. "But I thought I saw our pilot over there."

"A plane crash! Madre de Dios!" He exclaimed and then asked, "So you wish to check on the well-being of your pilot? I can understand this. Let's go."

Melinda was still uneasy, but Disanto would not be persuaded otherwise. So the trio moved through the crowd toward the shop.

The shop, a milliner's, was empty when they stopped in front of it. Pressing her hands and face to the window, Janice could not make out any lights within, or movement.

"Mel, I think it's all right," she said, grasping the woman's hands. "I can't see anything."

"He has to be around her somewhere. I didn't imagine him."

Janice gave her a quiet look. The brunette had not seemed affected by the decision to let the pilot go when they had been out on the water, fighting for their own safety. Perhaps now, she thought, the regret was finding a way into her conscious?

She brushed her hand over the woman's elbow. "We'll keep our eyes out for him, all right?"

## Chapter 37

The trio met up with the others just as Sergio was separating to go into the matadors dressing rooms.

Disanto and Stefano gallantly secured bouquets for the women. Each took special care with his presentation.

"You are a welcome guest, please enjoy our entertainment." Disanto bent over Melinda's hand and kissed it.

Stefano's smile reached ear to ear as he picked up Janice's hand and wrapped it around the bouquet. "For the loveliest woman in all of Spain," he proclaimed importantly.

Janice blushed and the two men put them and their sister on their arms, leading them into the audience stands.

Looking around, Melinda absorbed the details. The sights of young lovers, older couples, and pre-teen children dashing about their parents' feet in games of chase, gave way to the sounds of the laughter, conversation and the further off sounds of the bulls rustling around in their pens and the night birds calling to one another. She could smell the abundance of food and reached for Janice's candy stick as she sat down.

"Are you all right?" the blonde asked as Melinda settled next to her and she passed over the candy.

Sucking on the end of the stick, Melinda frowned for a long moment then turned to Disanto. "I can't believe they really do this. It's so dangerous."

"It is a skill studied since very early. To enter the ring and face el toro is the highest honor," he assured her.

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Vega overheard. Leaning across Stefano's lap she offered, "Sergio has won every match, Melinda. I promise you he is very good. Thrilling to watch." She patted the woman's knee in a bid to reassure the brunette American of her certainty.

They all looked to the sawdust and dirt arena floor as musicians sounded a call to attention for the beginning of the event. Janice felt a hand slide into hers on her lap, and looked down to see the brunette's long fingers interlaced with hers. She looked up into uncertain blue eyes, gave the hand

a gentle squeeze and smiled. *I've got you*, she thought.

The first matador, an older man probably in his late forties or early fifties, strode into the ring from the gated entry with a bold stride and flourishing sweep of his sword and cape. With a grand display, he brandished the sword before his body in an almost invisible series of motions. At the conclusion he saluted the audience, and sheathed the weapon. "Toro!" he called in challenge.

A chute door opened opposite where he had come in, and a massively shouldered, nearly two ton black beast trotted out, kicking and snorting. An array of picador spears circled his gargantuan throat like a wreath. His eyes rolled wildly and he spotted the man in the ring with him.

Cheers erupted as the matador stepped aside from the first charge of the enraged bull. The man reached out and slapped the passing animal's hindquarters causing another cheer from his audience.

The cape came out, held in the matador's fists. He drew the bull's attention back to himself by wildly waving the fabric. He called out to it in a loud voice and stood still as it trotted around and turned to make a run at him.

Cheers subsided during the run, only to erupt as the bull made another close but harmless pass.

Back and forth the matador coaxed the bull, until the animal's step was slow. To cheers he withdrew his sword and raised it high.

Melinda shifted nervously and finally could watch no more as the bull was coaxed into another run, this time toward the hidden sword. Janice felt her own stomach clench as the brunette turned her head into her ear and her harsh breathing almost drowned out the crescendoing cheers.

A true stab and the bull stumbled to his knees. Another strike and the matador stood victorious over the gored bull. Janice gasped; Melinda bit her lip holding back her reaction. The crowd around them rose from their seats and raised their fists to cheer the matador's success.

"God, that was a shock," Janice remarked, brushing her fingers lightly over Melinda's cheek once the people in front of them blocked the view of the arena floor.

"Is it over?" Mel asked, lifting her blue eyes to Janice's green.

"It's over." Janice soothed her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Do you want to go?" Melinda took a deep breath and nodded. Janice started to her feet. "All right."

Vega begged them not to leave. Disanto and Stefano were alarmed by how disturbed the two American women had become and out of compassion, suggested they all return to the other activities of the fiesta.

"I'm sorry our customs bothered you," Disanto offered, his brown eyes were deeply pained. For himself or for them, Janice couldn't tell, but she didn't want them feeling guilty.

"We're just... not used to it, I guess." She had helped Melinda to her feet and in the commotion turned toward the arena floor where she caught sight of the bull being dragged off. "I think we'll just go for a little lighter fun."

Disanto stood. "I shall leave Stefano to watch after our sister. I will accompany you

wherever you wish to go."

Melinda swallowed and shook her head. "Really. Stay. We'll be fine." She diligently kept her eyes averted from the arena floor and walked toward the steps, excusing herself past several reveling spectators.

Following, Janice offered Vega her wishes for luck to Sergio, and politely put off Stefano's attempt to make amends and follow them. "We have had a long day. Perhaps we are too tired to appreciate it properly."

Finally Stefano stepped aside, letting her pass and she joined Melinda down at the bottom of the steps and the two women walked out of the bull stadium. She was skirting around a street vendor selling hand woven oxtails when she looked up and saw a man looking at them.

It was only a flicker, but there was recognition in the dark eyes before he turned away and walked hurriedly off. "Mel," she caught the brunette's attention ahead of her. "Let's go this way," she added vaguely, not wanting to be wrong should there be just the smallest possibility that her own words to Stefano were true.

That she was so tired she had seen their dead pilot staring at them from the crowds.

Melinda's hand slipped into hers as they matched stride and she led the way, weaving through the throng until she reached the spot where she was certain she had seen the dark-haired, well-tanned pilot. Looking around curiously didn't look like anything else and Melinda commented on it.

"What did you see?"

Janice didn't have time to answer. The pair had moved away from the bulk of the crowds and now stood in an alley between buildings where many doors led from the street.

One opened on creaking hinges. The sound spun the two women around. "Me," the mostly shadowed figure confirmed then stepped into the full light of the night.

He was indeed their pilot from the ill-fated flight of that morning. His clothes showed evidence of their dousing in the Mediterranean, ripped off at the knees and elbows, and shredded across the chest from the unfriendly currents he obviously fought to reach shore.

Melinda stepped in front of Janice. "If you want to blame someone, blame me. I had to let you go after we got out of the plane."

"Oh, I'm not here to blame anyone, Miss Pappas. I want to know if you have the papers."

"The papers?" Janice and Melinda exchanged glances.

"Yes," he answered tolerantly. "Do you have the papers meant for the State Department?"

Melinda shook her head. "We lost everything."

"You've been following us around town waiting to ask us that?" Janice was incredulous.

"Those papers are very important to our cause Miss Covington. They are more important than any one life."

"German sailors shot the other couple from our plane and we haven't seen your co-pilot since he jumped out."

The pilot laughed. "Decoys all of them. You and I were important, ladies. We must reach the United States quickly." He shot them another glance. "You are certain you do not have the papers?"

Janice vigorously denied it. "We have nothing left."

He studied them for a long moment, casting looks from one woman to the other and then finally sighed. "Then I bid you farewell, ladies. I will report our mission a failure."

Melinda and Janice watched in pensive silence as he left them, melting away into the crowd. "Guess I wasn't crazy after all." The blonde took a deep breath and impulsively hugged Melinda. The

brunette hugged her back. "I believe I promised you a dance." Her voice was filled with relief.

Moving back into the crowd they headed for an area several musicians and dancers had staked out to enjoy the moonlight and the magic of music. Its melodies seeped in, replacing the unease from the bullfight and the run-in with their former pilot with a vibrating sensation, which began in their joined hands and wove threads of warmth through their hearts.

## Chapter 38

Shoulder to shoulder they leaned against a lamppost near the circle of dancers that formed around a quartet of musicians. Melinda absorbed the intricate steps to the dances as the bright reds, blues and greens of the women's dresses floated and bounced to the rhythms. Even a banana yellow large brimmed hat on one woman's head kept time with the jaunty beat.

Janice on the other hand watched the musicians themselves as their hands moved over palm drums and satinwood guitars' strings. Her fingers moved in time over the lamppost behind her back as the pulsing beat infiltrated her blood.

The food smells were still here, the sharp tangy scent of cilantro and jalapeno and the strong smell of tomato, but somehow it faded in comparison to the body scent of her companion. Wildflowers and a heady musk surrounded her the closer they stood.

Her tapping fingers encountered others, similarly drumming on the metal post. Glancing down, she followed the overlaying fingers up to a small, delicately boned wrist and then along smooth skin and fine hairs to the slight crease on the inside of an elbow. Her eyes trailed up a sleek bicep until they encountered the flounce of the pale blue dress's neckline and the daring amount of skin it revealed.

Bringing her chin up she traced the smooth throat and finally her gaze drowned in the deep regard of moonlit blue eyes. "Like it?" she asked, feeling as well as hearing the tremor in her voice.

Melinda did not answer; she couldn't find words when she tried. So instead she lifted her right hand to Janice's cheek while her left fingers traced up the woman's muscular arm as she bent and gently touched her lips to the blonde's.

Startling herself she inhaled and could not hold back the groan called up from her toes it seemed. There was a strong scent of smoke from the grilled chicken Janice had consumed in her dinner. It brought back a strong image of the first time she had seen Janice at the dig and leaned back, marveling at the very different look of the woman she held in her arms right now.

Aside from the obvious dress as opposed to pants, the green of the dress brought out the caramel color of Janice's skin and the deep emerald of welcoming eyes that had held disdain just over a week ago.

She thought about how much she had changed in the same time, growing more self-assured and decisive.

Home would not like that, she knew, wondering how she could go back to the quiet society woman her mother expected. She acknowledged she did not want to go home. At least not right away. She kissed Janice again and could feel her mouth open to speak.

Janice's words tumbled out first. "Mel, I--You probably have a lot of people expecting you to come home, don't you?"

"Yes," was all she could think to answer, her own thoughts sidetracked by the desire to know what was going through Janice's mind.

"That's important. I never had that--that I wanted anyway. All I ever wanted was to travel with

my father. You like quiet evenings reading at home by a big fireplace--"

"North Carolina doesn't have big fireplaces," Melinda corrected. "Just small ones."

"Oh. Bet you've got a big library den then and curl up there all the time to read."

Melinda smiled. It was clear to her that Janice was trying to talk herself out of intruding on Melinda's life. That was the only thing Melinda wanted though. "I prefer the veranda when the weather's nice," she explained. "You'd like the view," she suggested casually.

Protesting, Janice shook her head. "No. I couldn't. I wouldn't want to intrude on your family."

Brushing a soothing finger over the blonde's trembling lower lip. "Janice, I am convinced you are the only thing that would make it bearable." She paused thinking. "I want you... to be there."

Janice found a plea revealed in the eyes turning indigo with emotion. Leaning into a hug, she heard the brunette's heart hammering in her chest. "All right," she murmured. Immediately the tempo under her ear slowed and the arms surrounding her squeezed tighter.

The two women separated but remained in a loose embrace, gazes locked. The street suddenly seemed too crowded as they felt all the bodies moving around them. The music became an uncomfortable cacophony, distracting them from the quiet communion.

"Want to go somewhere?" Janice asked.

"Some place quiet," Melinda concurred. Janice turned her lips into the woman's palm as it passed over her cheek. In reaction the brunette's knees quaked.

The archaeologist nodded and looked around, seeking a path out. Tucking her arm around the taller woman's waist, she swallowed, feeling the rising emotions and sought to calm herself. Looking away from Melinda, she remarked, "Spain's a pretty place."

They paused on a ridge looking back at the fiesta and then out at the slice of Mediterranean Sea that sparkled with moonlight.

"It feels like this is all a dream," Melinda remarked softly, in awe. "But I want it to be real. To stay real."

"It's real." Janice smiled, feeling much the same way, and leaned up to kiss Melinda's cheek, drawing the woman's gaze down to hers. "Do you want me to pinch you?" The brunette's eyebrows shot into her bangs which made Janice openly chuckle. "Come on," she coaxed, leading Melinda toward the Toval home.

Carmen was asleep when Janice let herself and Melinda back in. They paused to take in the woman sleeping on her couch, obviously having tried to wait up for her children. Or perhaps her guests, they thought and shared a smile. The Spaniard had been everything kind to them, and they wondered privately how they might repay her for her kindness, beyond paying for their lodging.

The fiesta's music drifted in through one open window and the melody followed the two women upstairs. Considerably muted it was only a soft cloak around them as they reached their rented room.

Janice laid her hands on Melinda's arms, hugging her from behind as the brunette pushed the door inward. She inhaled a steadying breath and felt her heart speed up at the mingled scent of wildflowers and arousal that drifted from Melinda and herself.

The brunette turned and Janice immediately sought lips to kiss and felt Melinda's hands caress her lower back with an urgency she felt as well.

How fast her heart raced and how quickly her desire for Janice rose to an almost unbearable peak startled Melinda, so used to calm decisions and quiet thoughtfulness. She craved making love with the petite blonde again. "Janice," she breathed. "I love you."

It was then the back of her legs hit the bed and she fell onto the firm mattress.

Janice was right there, over her, soothing with touches that made Melinda completely forget her embarrassment. Her body seemed to surround Melinda's as their body heat made it seem that no space at all separated them.

Their lips touched and Janice's reply warmly passed from her mouth into Melinda's, searing the brunette's heart in her chest. "I love you too."

## Chapter 39

Melinda buried her hands in Janice's hair as the woman lowered her head along her bared collarbone. Warm soft lips were kissing from one side to the other in a heady tease that was driving her mad. Janice's tongue darted out across the pulse point in her throat and Melinda's eyes were suddenly open, focusing on the cream-colored ceiling.

A deep chuckle accompanied the frustrating pause of light hands over her breasts. But Melinda didn't want to stop. "Please," she groaned.

The deep timbre shot straight to Janice's groin. Her response was visceral. She slid the dress off of Melinda's shoulder baring an unbound breast for her eyes to feast. Not satisfied, she leaned back and tugged on Melinda's dress. Keeping a thigh thrown across the brunette's legs, she helped the woman out of the borrowed blue dress, nearly as soft as the skin she uncovered. "You really looked good in that," she said as she laid it aside and returned her gaze to blue eyes going reflective and clear in the moonlight.

"Yours too," Melinda replied, tugging down on the low neckline and revealing the dusky edge of an aureole. "You should wear dresses more often," she added.

Janice slid from the bed. "A little hard on the knees on a dig," she countered with a smile while she tugged off the dress and set it aside with care.

Melinda rose to her elbows and watched the blonde return to the bed. Hips moved and to distract herself she focused on the slim-fingered hands reaching for the sheets. The brunette her lips frequently, enjoying the view and wondering if she would have enough time to explore the suntanned terrain. "Janice," she murmured. "You're beautiful."

The blonde's skin took on a rosy tinge. She settled next to Melinda and slid her palm over Melinda's thigh. Their eyes lifted and met. Janice felt the pulse in the thigh she caressed jump slightly.

The one touch was not enough. She couldn't resist indulging her tactile sense. Melinda's skin was satin under her palms. She turned and nudged the brunette onto her back once more, straddling the woman's thighs.

Returning her hands to the smooth skin, she traced hollows between the brunette's ribs and a soft line of hairs leading from Melinda's belly button downward. She felt the quick intake of breath as she neared the woman's mound. Determined to keep this slow and long, she retreated and instead moved her hands to shoulders and upper arms, feeling large hands cup under her elbows as she bent forward to share a deep kiss.

Mel could not decide which she liked more: Janice's kisses or the simple warm feeling that grew more intense as the smaller woman fit herself into Melinda's own curves like two pieces of a puzzle.

She slipped her arms around the other woman's back and stroked her hands down the muscular shoulders, back and buttocks, memorizing. She found rough areas where she knew there

had to be scars. One long one in particular went from the blonde's left shoulder down in a jagged ridge to the top of her pelvis. A subject for another time, she realized when Janice nudged her hand away and settled it instead on the curve of her butt cheek.

Lowering her head, Janice captured the brunette's lips roughly. She inhaled, stealing Melinda's breath, and then exhaled gently, giving her breath back to the linguist.

Melinda inhaled and she exhaled again. Then Mel returned the intimate gesture, quick pupil that she was, challenging Janice's grip on reality as their breath joined in her own chest. The intensity made her arms shake.

Janice fit her knee between Melinda's thighs and the brunette bent hers, pressing upward into Janice's center. Heat and wetness met them both and the slightest pressure elicited rough groans of pleasure.

Watching Melinda's control beginning to slip, Janice eased her hand, palm flat, between their bodies, enjoying the rapid ticking of muscles involuntarily contracting at her touch.

Firmly she moved her tongue around the brunette's rapidly hardening nipples. She closed her eyes, sucked the nipple inside her mouth as she slipped two fingers easily within her center.

As she expected Mel gasped, already precariously balanced on the edge. Holding her hand still, Janice sought to delay fulfillment from coming too quickly. She wanted to take time that their hurried time the day before had been unable to let her share.

"Jan," Mel breathed, exhaling as she sought to find her own calm center. But it was eluding her. The blonde smiled. She was definitely losing control. It was the first time in memory that Mel had ever used the shortened form of her name. If they weren't close before, it was a sign that the brunette had ended any distance between them. Something that Janice had found easy from the start.

Melinda was the Southern woman who had first stumbled onto the dig. Mel was the woman she had in her hands now, who had stood beside her in a ship's galley, cleaning grime off the counters, and then held a gun on a ship's captain. She was brave and loyal as well, traits Janice appreciated above all others.

Love shined from her eyes too. She smiled into the darkening orbs and felt Mel's hands start the sensuous and slow journey up her thighs to her hips then over her shoulders as her hair was brushed back with loving fingers.

Melinda's hands moved from the blonde's upper back to her lower back, fingers sliding between her cheeks and over her entrances from behind. "God," she heard herself breathing, unable to keep the outburst in check. Two long fingers curled up inside, eliciting a deep wrenching groan.

The blonde's reaction helped Melinda focus. She thought about all the things that she had learned about Janice since they met. She saw again the face half shadowed by a fedora, lifting to challenge Smythe's man who had held her at gunpoint. Quickly she flashed forward to the woman who had grasped her hand and pulled her from Ares' closing tomb. She remembered their first hug, Janice impulsive after blowing up the charges that buried the tomb for another century or so.

Had it only been two weeks ago? It felt like a lifetime. It was the first moment she could remember thinking she belonged to something bigger than herself. To someone. She leaned up and kissed Jan's hair. The blonde rolled to the side and both hands were free. She cradled Jan's cheek in her palm, drowning in a fiery emerald gaze. The folds around her fingers were hot and wet as she explored, watching the effect of her touch in Jan's face. She found a ridge of hard flesh and paused when Janice's eyes closed in an expression of tension. She kept her hand still until the green eyes opened and focused again. "Sorry," she whispered.

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"Don't be," Jan replied. "I just want this to last." Her gaze steadied and she withdrew her fingers from Mel's center. A faint groan followed. "I want you to enjoy this," she told the brunette.

Moving down Mel's stomach she caressed the outer curve of soft breasts. She lifted one then the other to her lips and kissed around the globes before returning to Mel's lips and licking around the edges until they parted.

Mel tried to speak around the kisses as Janice's knee created a welling of need in her center. "I want you," she finally said.

"You have me," Janice replied, sliding away from their kiss and drifting her breath across muscles that eased at her slightest touch. "I never thought that was possible for anyone to make me say," she admitted.

Understanding Janice's independence as much as she understood how her own had been awakened on this trip, Melinda nodded and they turned. One hand intertwined fingers with the other's, while each sought to absorb the other into her skin and senses with kisses and light licks and touches on intimate places. Fingers became slick as each found her way inside.

For Melinda it was a sensation of crawling up inside Janice, surrounded by a cocoon of warmth and love where she could grow.

Janice felt protective and protected all at once. Adventure beckoned and she could feel every inch of Melinda beside her. She leaned forward and licked her way to Melinda's hard nub, making the brunette's hips jump. She deepened her strokes and matched her rhythm to that of Melinda's fingers in her own center.

The pace grew faster until an explosion of breath and sound rocked them. Mel gasped as her thighs held Janice's hand, with flexing fingers, in place as she rocked on the digits with abandon. A second shock wave hit and Mel screamed. Startled, Janice's release was quieter, but no less powerful, stripping the blonde of breath and bone as she went limp against the brunette's body.

Damp fingers left gently shaking bodies that sought each other as a steadying force in the aftermath. Intertwining hands they rested them on the sheet between their bodies. Green and blue eyes, crystalline with the unshed tears of strong emotion, held gazes with deep abiding smiles.

Melinda leaned back, trying to ease her muscles quaking in the aftershocks. Her head met the board at the top of the bed and she realized she had hit it there earlier as a dull pain briefly surged. "Ow." She reached up and rubbed her crown.

"Are you all right?" Janice asked leaning up and brushing a concerned hand over Melinda's own fingers.

"Bed's short, I guess," Mel answered, taking Janice's fingers in her own and kissing the digits one at a time as she held the green gaze.

Janice's smile was slow and sensual. "So," she murmured, unable to find the strength to raise her voice. "Do you still want me to come home with you? That scream might wake the neighbors."

"We have three hundred acres," Mel replied, tucking her head into Janice's shoulder. They rolled together to look up at the ceiling fan, feeling its welcome breeze. "There are no neighbors for miles."

Janice's chuckle filled up the silence as they looked at each other, and watched the moonlight highlight dust motes in its path from the window across the bed and their naked, tangled bodies.

There was a knock at the door. A frantic woman's voice called out in rapid Spanish, "Are you all right?" It was Carmen.

"This is going to be a little difficult to explain," Janice said wryly as she removed herself from the bed.

Without conversation Melinda moved under the covers and Janice pulled her dress back on as she crossed the room and pulled open the door. "Hi, Carmen," she offered, pulling her hand lightly through her disheveled hair.

"Oh blessed Mary." The big-boned woman pressed her hands against the door in relief. "You are all right? I heard a scream."

Thinking quickly, Janice stepped back and gestured at Melinda. "Blister," she said. "Big one. On her big toe."

The Spanish woman was silent for a long moment, studying Melinda in the bed and then turned her blue eyes on the blonde. "I know you make her scream like that, Senorita Covington. You should use antiseptic when you clean a blister," she said blithely, but there was a smirk in her eyes.

Janice felt her cheeks reddening as Carmen merely followed up her startling words with a nod and left. There was no doubt in her mind that Carmen Toval y Sandevallos knew the truth. Had known it before she entered the room. Unable to wipe the stunned expression from her face, she slowly closed the door to their room.

"She guessed, didn't she?" Mel ventured.

"Yes, I think all mothers have a sixth sense about that." Janice laughed and crawled under the covers, curling up in Melinda's embrace.

## Chapter 40

Melinda awakened to the early sounds of morning. Braying donkeys, clucking chickens, snorting pigs and a gaggle of geese, she thought, ticking the sounds off.

Then there was a quiet intermittent trickling sound. Her brow furrowed as she tried to identify whether it was inside or outside the Toval home. A glance at the window showed the early sunlight sparkling through a dew-covered window, but it was not raining.

She shifted the sheet on her shoulder and slowly rose up, scanning the room. Behind a screen she saw shadows shift and her tired brain realized why Janice was no longer in bed with her.

The trickling sound came again. A peace settled over Mel as she pulled herself from the bed along with the sheet, wrapping it snugly around her nude form. Brushing her hands through her hair, she walked to the screen.

Peering around the edge, her smile widened even more as she caught a glimpse of Janice's muscular arm curved over her tanned back, squeezing water and soap from a sponge. Wet blonde hair, darkened to a russet from the water, matted on her shoulders.

The archaeologist turned her head to push her hair aside and green eyes, the lush green of a grassy field back home, caught Melinda staring. "So, you're finally awake." Janice's voice was a soft burr.

Melinda offered to wash Janice's back as she entered the private area. "Good morning," she replied and took the sponge over Janice's back as the blonde flexed her arms and braced herself on the tub's sides half out of the water.

"Oh yeah, it is that," came Janice's answer as she reveled in the light scratching sensations that sparked her quieted senses. With a splash she rinsed and then rose to her feet. "Pass me a towel," she asked, turning around.

Having backed up so she wouldn't get wet, eyes fixed on her partner, and now distracted by

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the water trails falling from Janice's body, Melinda did not immediately register the request. Finally she mechanically reached for the towel flung over the screen's top. "Here." Stepping from the tub, Janice looked up at her. Mel backed up to let her pass. "Have you been up long?"

Janice considered if she should tell the brunette the truth. She seemed a little skittish this morning herself. Janice had stayed awake comforting Mel to sleep after their second rather exploratory joining.

Much more than their bodies had joined though and for all the words she had used to tell Mel how she felt about their whirlwind attraction, there were dozens more inexpressible. It had grown from flashes of warmth, blossoming from little things, unconscious gestures really. From the ready acknowledgment of her hurt by the officious maitre'd in Macedonia to the silent understanding about Janice's claustrophobia. Then the warm spot would heat at times like Melinda's intervention with Bristol, holding the man at gunpoint without looking as shaky as she must have felt. She helped, and did it without putting Janice into a position less than independent.

It had turned to love when Melinda revealed that she, Janice, meant more than the Scrolls. Never in her life had she been more important than that.

The revelation smacked her in the head and set her to reevaluating, which had kept her up, arms wrapped around Mel's shoulders and her chin resting in the woman's dark hair. Each breath filled her more deeply with awe at the scent of their love. And she grew a little afraid as time passed in silence too.

So the faintest beginning of the sunrise had driven her from bed to wash away the signs of her sleepless night before Mel could see.

She looked up now into Mel's patient gaze, realizing the silence had stretched on as the color changed from a light sky-blue to the warm interested sea-blue. With a faint smile, she finally said, "Just a little while. Long enough for a bath." She gestured. "Want to borrow it?"

Leaving Mel behind the screen, Janice listened to the sounds of the brunette stepping into the tub. She caught the deep quick intake of breath as Melinda sank into the cooled water with a slosh.

Expecting the Southerner to say something, to call her on her story, Janice had paused with her hands on the bedspread as she straightened it. But the sounds of splashing and quick movements followed instead. Then she heard Mel call, "Could I have a towel?"

Janice looked around and tucked her own towel in at the edge before snatching up a soft orange towel from a table near the door. She rounded the screen to find Melinda just standing, water sluicing off her hair and body. "Courtesy of Carmen," she quipped, shaking it out and passing it to the brunette.

Melinda said nothing as she took the offering. Toweling off her face she then pulled it across her chest and looked at Janice leaning against the wall. She opened her mouth but was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Senoritas, I have a change of clothes for you."

Janice looked to Mel who said in a frank, low voice, "We have to come up with some way to properly repay this woman." Janice nodded and went to open the door.

The Spanish woman entered quickly when she saw Janice clad only in a towel and shut the door. "I brought a few more things so you have something to wear home."

Barely covered by her towel, since it stopped just at the top of her thighs, Melinda rounded the screen. "Senora Toval, here are the dresses we borrowed last night." She picked them up from the foot of the bed and brought them forward.

"Keep them."

"No, please. We will purchase something--" Janice responded.

"I will not hear of it," Carmen insisted. "What little money you have cannot possibly obtain all that you need." She shook her head. "No. The dresses are yours. When would I wear them again?" She put her hands on her hips and stared both women down, despite her diminutive size and smile.

"Vega," Janice tried.

"My daughter prefers newer styles, more flash." Deciding that ended the discussion, Carmen pressed the clothes into Janice's hands.

"Give us your address at least so that we can return them?" Janice suggested.

She shook her head and turned, dismayed, toward the door.

Melinda thought quickly. "We'll come up with something else," she whispered to Janice.

"Senora, please. Wait."

Carmen turned, her hand gripping the side of the door. "Si?"

"Muchas gracias, Senora," they said together. "We are poor guests to seem ungrateful," Melinda added.

"We're sorry," Janice concluded.

"Aiye, this new independence. My daughter, she suffers it too," Carmen lamented with a dramatic flip of her hand. "It is hard, I know." She smiled and changed the subject. "There will be food when you come down."

Melinda quickly nodded. "We'll be right there."

"Dressed please," she clucked with a scandalized tone. "My sons are not eunuchs."

Stunned, Janice and Melinda did not laugh until after Carmen had swiftly let herself out and they both heard the door firmly click shut in the silence.

## Chapter 41

Dark haired and smiling warmly, Stefano stood at the bottom of the stairs when Janice and Melinda came down for the meal. "Good morning," he greeted cheerfully taking the hand of each woman and escorting her the last step.

Vega looked up from where she was finishing arranging a place at the table. "You missed a wonderful match," she gushed, running over to Janice's side.

Melinda caught the frown on Stefano's face as his gaze trailed over Janice who stepped down to the floor in front of him but was immediately caught up by his sister. "Good morning, Stefano."

He turned away from watching Vega and Janice and smiled at her. "You look well rested," he commented politely. Offering his hand, he took hers and gallantly kissed it, then shot a glance over his shoulder, and frowned again. When Melinda followed his gaze, she realized what was wrong.

Janice was in conversation with Vega as the two went into the kitchen, their backs toward the room. Mel looked back at Stefano to see him working up the words to ask a question. His face, boyishly smooth despite his 24 years, was partway between chagrin and disinterest as he struggled. They walked together to the table and he never managed to ask the question as Vega, Janice and Carmen pushed through the door in quick succession, carrying serving platters.

The smells of sausage, warm fresh bread, eggs and grape juice filled the air. The platters were set down on the table and it seemed the signal for chatter to begin among the Toval children.

Vega, sitting and serving herself from the eggs, looked across to where Melinda had settled

and watched Janice claim the seat to her left. "Did you sleep well, Melinda?" Her mouth currently occupied with sipping from her mug of grape juice, Mel could only nod. "Sergio won his match last night. I'm sorry you could not see it."

"What did you do after the bullfight?" Janice interjected, while passing the bread to Stefano who had taken up the seat at her end of the table, between her and his mother. "Mel and I found the street musicians and dancing."

Stefano passed the bread platter on to his mother and mused, "Really? We headed there afterward, so Vega and Sergio could meet up again, and didn't see you."

Turning to Stefano, Melinda put her hand on the top of Janice's chair, and responded, "We actually didn't stay long. We came back here after walking out toward the bluffs and watching the moonrise."

Disanto, nibbling on a sausage, put down his fork and asked, "So, did you like our fiesta?" His voice drew Melinda's gaze.

"What was it for anyway?" Janice asked, looking to each of the Tovals. "Anniversary of our beginning," Vega supplied. "Two thousand years ago a pair of fishing families blew ashore here, wrecking their boats. So they settled, married locals and continued fishing."

"Do they teach the history in school here?"

Carmen nodded, but pointed out an altogether more fascinating reason. "We are directly descended from the first families."

"They must be ancestors of the entire area. Two thousand years is a lot of generations."

"You know a lot about history then?" Stefano asked now that Janice had spoken again.

"I hope I do. I'm an archaeologist. I specialize in Mediterranean cultures."

Melinda smiled and nodded. "Ancient Greece holds her attention right now."

Janice looked over and concurred. "In fact we just finished an excavation near Thermopylae."

Carmen, who had been sitting quietly, finally asked, "We never did ask what you do. Ancient history? And you, Melinda?"

"I read the texts, or carvings, found at the sites. I'm a translator."

Janice looked up briefly and shared a quick smile with Melinda. "This was actually our first joint excavation."

"Have you been to many places?" Vega asked.

"I have been to a few. Greece, Turkey, Romania, Italy, Bulgaria. I have a few plans laid for a trip to the Caspian Sea, Western China, and India later. My research takes me all over."

"The troubles in Germany, France and Belgium must make traveling to some of these places difficult," Disanto pointed out, then dug back into his plate.

"Yes, it has made a few changes to our plans." She looked at Carmen. "Is Spain under occupation anywhere?"

The older woman paused and shook her head. "Not yet. We had a few Spanish on the occasional sunken ship, but nothing has been directed against Spain." She picked up her juice mug and sipped briefly. "So we remain safe, for now."

"I hope it continues that you miss Hitler's attention," Janice replied sincerely.

Vega looked to her mother, silently indicating her empty plate. When Carmen nodded, she stood and cleared her plate. Before she walked away, she asked Janice, "Have you met any Nazis on your trips?"

Melinda and Janice thought about that a moment. "No, I don't think we have. We've met a few people with unusual... agendas, but I don't think we've met any Nazis. Why?"

"Because I read about them, and want to know more. They are nationalists, right?"

"For Germany. Hitler says--" Janice paused in a way to indicate she didn't always put much stock in Hitler's propaganda. "He says that he wants all Germans united under Germany's flag."

"The Spanish aren't Germans, so we are likely safe," Stefano supposed. Janice put a hand on his shoulder, which he studied with interest while she spoke. "I hope you're right. But I don't know."

The conversation trailed to silence on that sour note and Janice pulled her hand from Stefano's shoulder. Returning her attention to her own food, she finished, but when she started to her feet, she felt a gentle hand lightly press on her right thigh. Glancing at Melinda, she caught the slightest shake of the dark head.

Immediately she stilled and reached for the grape juice. "I think I'll have another glass."

Stefano quickly intercepted her hands as he had been starting to his feet as well, and poured the juice. "Anything else?" he asked, his eyes lingering on Janice, but then reluctantly he passed his gaze over the others at the table.

Carmen smiled at him. "I think it's time for the table to clear. There is work to be done around this house," she said finally, pushing to her own feet with a soft scrape of the chair's legs. To Melinda and Janice she said, "You may sit for a while. When you are ready, Stefano will take you to the airport."

"How far?" Janice asked.

"An hour. Not much. Your plane was likely headed to this one anyway, so you will be getting back on the path to home." She paused, with the sausage tray in one hand and the egg platter, both empty, in each hand. "Where's home?"

Janice looked to Melinda who answered, "I live in North Carolina. It's on the eastern coast of the United States."

Carmen nodded. "Is it a nice place?"

"North Carolina? Well, yes, it's very nice. My family has a farm--" Janice interrupted Mel with a chuckle that made her pause. "A big farm there."

Vega asked, "Does it get cold?"

"Yes. We get lots of snow every year. We usually get the first just after Thanksgiving."

Disanto questioned, "Thanksgiving?"

Melinda smiled. "It's our festival of founding," she replied simply. "Late November."

Disanto came out of the kitchen and went to the back door, picking up a pair of gloves. "We need more firewood," he told his mother. "The woodbin's nearly empty."

Janice pulled Melinda into the kitchen as Carmen followed. "We'll help with the dishes, Senora Toval. It's the least we can do."

"You shouldn't."

"We want to."

Stefano and Vega remarked that the task would go quickly with the four of them working, and Carmen retreated. "I have sewing to do."

"Where should we leave our things?" Melinda asked.

"Keep them," she reminded them. "You have need of the clothes."

"But--" Janice protested, tying an apron around her waist so the dress was protected.

"No, please. Accept them," Stefano insisted for his mother. "It has been some time since we had guests who shared so much of themselves."

Melinda and Janice began sorting the dishes on the sideboard and filling the sink with soapy water, and Vega stood ready to rinse while Stefano found a towel for drying. Vega changed the

subject to Sergio's performance at the bullfight, much to Melinda's chagrin.

## Chapter 42

Janice leaned on the window of the small passenger car watching the Spanish countryside pass. The little vehicle ate up the miles. Her instincts were awakening again, after the brief respite, and she found herself nervously watching the road behind them.

At this hour they were not traveling the roads alone, though traffic was not heavy. Several other vehicles had left town with them and gradually, as the miles passed and businesses were identified, they peeled off going to their respective jobs. The whole situation seemed perfectly normal. Like any day in the States.

Somehow though she guessed the States would be a very different place. Particularly North Carolina. She looked over her shoulder at Melinda in the backseat.

She wondered again what sort of daily routine Melinda had left behind to travel to Macedonia. She wondered how she would fit into it when the brunette brought her to her home.

Not ever admitting it to Mel, Janice was not entirely sure she could fit in, but the will to try was there. Because Mel had asked her to. The brunette seemed relaxed as she too studied the countryside. She peppered the driver, Stefano, with questions from time to time.

"Where does that go?" she asked about a dirt road that wound its way toward the top of a hill.

"Factory," he said. "Those of us who don't work a farm, or shop in town work at one of three big factories in the area." Politely Janice turned and watched him as he spoke. His voice became a little more animated as he continued. "That one bottles milk." He glanced over his shoulder at Melinda and smiled. "Mama sometimes sells our excess milk supply to them. Most of the time though she simply passes it around town."

Melinda smiled back. "Your mother is very kind-hearted. It still bothers me that she would not accept payment for our stay."

"You were not the usual tourists," he pointed out.

"No, but still..."

"Mama never takes from those in need."

Janice considered the pocketful of money both she and Melinda had since they had split up Mel's remaining funds to assure that each of them had something should the trip separate them.

"We could have paid her. It is only that we lost our luggage."

Stefano sighed. "It is the principle of the thing with Mama."

Janice thought about their goodbyes with Carmen, Vega and Disanto. Carmen had tried to press on them each two more dresses, other than the ones they finally gave in and were wearing. She had also turned away all their offers of money. Repeatedly. But she kept smiling. At no point did the Spanish woman ever get angry. She just finally ushered them toward the door and then the car.

Vega had been filled with considerable disappointment at their departure, displayed only as a young teenaged woman could. With a delicate pout and pleading eyes. Janice remembered the embrace of the young woman and telling her that Sergio was very lucky, and she had better remind him of that from time to time. The young woman's response had been a laugh and a stronger hug.

Stefano's voice interrupted her memories. "I sometimes wonder what would be different had Father lived. But she's made a good life for all of us."

Janice interjected, "Which brings up a question I have."

"What question?"

"How is it you and Disanto haven't married and moved on to your own families?"

Stefano shrugged and returned his eyes to the road a long moment before turning back to answer her. "My brother feels responsible. So do I really, but with Dis it is different. I remain because I haven't really found a woman I want as wife. Dis... Well, Dis says that's the reason. I'm not so sure he doesn't just want to take care of Mama."

Janice thought about that. Disanto had spent considerable time standing quietly. His eyes followed Melinda from person to person as the brunette was passed along for good byes. He had shaken Janice's hand but kept his eyes on Mel, the archaeologist remembered. When the brunette walked up to say goodbye, he looked a little startled, then took her offered hand.

She remembered the softly exchanged words. Melinda offered, "Thank you for your hospitality, Disanto Toval y Sandevallos."

"It... has been a considerable pleasure to have met you, Miss Pappas," he replied.

"Melinda please. We are friends."

He seemed a little surprised to hear that, but when Melinda lifted her chin that little bit to meet his gaze and smiled, his own smile became stronger and Janice realized that Disanto had been perhaps falling in love with Melinda. "Friend. Would you consider staying on a while."

"I really must get home to my family."

Disanto had looked about to frown, but then nodded slowly and dropped Melinda's hand slowly. He tried to hide it but Janice realized he was definitely disappointed.

She didn't blame him. She glanced over her shoulder seeing Mel leaning against the window, eyes half-closed. Aside from her physical attraction to the brunette, Janice found herself attracted by the woman's intelligence, quick wit, and soft smiles. *Any man would want her*, she told herself.

Melinda's hand stole softly across the back of the front seat, and Janice brought hers up to meet it. The gesture floored her with the realization that instead, she, Janice Covington, had her. Her eyes widened. Mel's smile was soft and her blue eyes were bright with emotion.

Slowly she her hand slipped from Mel's touch and Janice turned back to study the passing miles.

Melinda watched the front seat through half-lidded eyes, and occasionally the outside passing scenery. Stefano glanced at Janice from time to time and then would shake his head slightly and return to driving. A faint smile touched her lips at the third time he did that. The young Spaniard was definitely taken with Janice and having a hard time acknowledging to himself that she was really leaving.

It warmed Melinda to realize that the blonde was leaving with her. For a while, on the beach, after realizing the Scrolls had been lost, she was not certain Janice would continue on to the States with her.

She remembered the heart-pounding fear she had experienced, chasing the blonde down the beach. She rubbed at her eyes to hide the renewing tears at the memory of collapsing on the sand and screaming for Janice to stop. *Please. Don't leave.*

Mel's cheeks heated slightly as she remembered how she had convinced Janice to stay with her. She had never considered herself needy, but when it came to thoughts of returning to North Carolina, she needed to know Jan would be at her side.

The structures of the airport began to loom into view, and she straightened her shoulders, sitting up. "Won't be long now," she commented.

Stefano looked at the airport and straightened his own shoulders, turning the wheel onto the road that led around the field toward the passenger area.

They had no bags to check, so Janice put on her one piece of salvaged attire, her leather jacket, inside the pockets of which, Melinda knew, was the pieces of chakram. It looked very out of place over the soft green straight skirt dress Janice wore. Feeling her heart jump when Janice's eyes caught hers, Melinda absorbed the contradictions of beautiful woman and rough and tumble readiness and fell more in love.

Stefano offered Janice one arm and Melinda accepted the other. Inside they checked with the flights and found one destined for New York leaving in about an hour. "Or there's one tomorrow headed for Washington," Janice pointed out.

"Do you wish to stay another night with us?" Stefano asked, looking at Janice.

Melinda clearly saw the hope in his eyes and wondered what Janice would say. She caught the blonde's gaze but said nothing, letting her choose.

"I'd rather leave today," Janice said finally. "We have a lot to do once we get there."

Which was not entirely true, but the fact it was said warmed Melinda's heart. She started to reach for Janice's hand and stopped herself, looking to Stefano instead.

Stefano was deflated though he tried valiantly to hide it. "All right. I will wait with you."

"Thank you," Melinda said to him as Janice separately went to arrange for their seats. His eyes followed the blonde. Melinda changed the subject. "Stefano, I would like to still find a way to repay your family."

"It is really not necessary," he replied.

Hoping to find a way to help the family through Stefano's infatuation with Janice, Melinda thought fast. She borrowed a flight list and pencil from the ticket counter and wrote her address on the back. "Perhaps we can repay it this way then." She pressed the paper and several bills into his hand. When he had identified the money and the address, he looked up in surprise. "Don't say no," she added. "America is a fascinating place."

## **Chapter 43**

The terminal was busy, but not crowded. About one hundred other people were moving around between ticket windows, chairs, and doors from the parking lot, arranging flights, changing plans, or resigning themselves to lengthy stays as some of the rarer destinations weren't coming up for several days. Common departures were to Casablanca, Cairo, London, Paris, Stockholm, New York. Less frequent were flights to Istanbul, Rome, and Rio De Janeiro. Among the crowd were families, businessmen, even a few emigrants, seeking new opportunities and dragging bags of their belongings. Melinda saw one family and wondered about their story. The eight-year-old girl carried a worn blanket over her shoulders and clutched it closed with one hand while her other held tightly to a small magazine. Melinda could see fashion plates and realized the family was headed to America. Perhaps the girl would go to school, and work in a clothing factory, sewing clothes and adding to the family income. Melinda looked to the mother. A bit worn around the edges, it was still clear that the older woman looked forward to the trip. Behind the disheveled look of long travel, there was a gleam in her brown eyes as she walked up to a flyer on the wall, carrying the family's youngest child, a boy of two, in her arms.

The brunette turned around and found Stefan hovering over Janice, chattering aimlessly at her about this and that. His questions were not intimate, just curious, but Melinda felt a spurt of..

jealousy?--could it be? She walked across the space, nudging around the crowds and tapped him on the shoulder.

Melinda pointed out to Stefan the same display and asked for a coffee, pressing a few coins into his hand. "Janice and I need to sit for a few minutes," she said quickly. She watched him go and then turned back to find Janice had already moved off again.

Taking a deep breath and sighing since all she wanted to do in this crowd was hold Janice, she pushed politely through and scanned the small area of seats. Ah, there.

Just now sitting down in chairs near the double doors marked "To Planes," Janice leaned back and looked around. "Certainly isn't New York," she commented, as Melinda settled, crossing her ankles demurely and sitting up carefully.

"You've been to New York?" Melinda asked quietly.

Janice rolled her eyes with a laugh. "My grandmother insisted at least once a year. Shopping."

Leaning back and beginning to slide a hand around the back of Janice's chair as she leaned close to speak softly in the din, Melinda was startled when she caught movement just off Janice's shoulder.

Two coffees were pressed at them. She backed up, took one and acknowledged the younger Spanish man with a nod. "Thanks," Janice said, looking up at him. "I needed this."

"I'm glad you will like it." Stefano leaned against a wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "New York is nice?"

"Some people think so. Personally, I think it's a can for human sardines. Just suck 'em in and eat 'em up." The Spaniard looked puzzled. "I just mean that living there is crowded, dirty, and not very pleasant."

He looked at the money in his pocket, cupping it and looking at Melinda. "This is where you want us to come?"

The brunette shook her head. "I live in North Carolina. About four hundred miles to the south. Less city, more country. More like here, I suppose," she mused.

Janice had seen Stefano's gesture in his pocket, and now the conversation sank in. "You're coming with us?"

Stefano shook his head. "Miss Melinda, she gave us the money to come if we wanted to. I'm going home and discuss it with the family."

"You won't let your mother say no to the money, please?" Mel insisted. "If you think she won't take it, or won't want to use it, you find a way to save it someplace."

"I'll try to do as you ask."

Melinda could only nod. "I know you will."

"Besides," interjected Janice, touching Stefano's wrist to catch his attention, "if the war comes here--No, no," she countered the shake of his head. "If the war comes here, you'll need good currency."

"You have been through many wars?" he questioned with a slightly nervous sounding laugh.

Janice nodded sagely. "I have been caught in the middle of revolutions. In the end, Stefano, it isn't the man standing, but the man standing with capital that wins in the end."

Surprised by Janice's sanguine advice, Melinda watched the blonde drop her hand from Stefano's wrist, caught the look of adoration shining from the Spaniard's eyes and sighed. Trying to be nice was very difficult sometimes.

A thick-bodied man in shirtsleeves and a hastily windsored tie stepped up to the doors and

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pushed them open. "The flight to New York is now boarding. New York is now boarding."

A small collection of people rose from their seats. Janice and Melinda among them, stood and Stefano stepped back, shoving his hands in his pants pockets. "Stefano, remember what we said," Janice offered, stepping into the crowd behind Melinda.

"I won't forget you," he promised. Janice, catching his voice, briefly turned and waved. "Until we meet again," he called to her, waving back.

Nodding, she turned back and disappeared into the crowd. Melinda shrugged at Stefano and disappeared after her.

Catching up to Janice at the ticket point, she thrust her own ticket in at the same time as Janice's. "Hey, almost left me behind," she murmured into the blonde's near ear.

"Sorry about that," came the reply. "I'm just ready to get going again, I guess."

"Stefano getting to you?"

"No, not really that... I'm just..." Her voice trailed off. Melinda's smile quirked up on the right side of her lips. "Okay, yeah, I guess he was getting to me."

"He adores you," Mel shrugged trying to make it appear she had little concern about it and not quite succeeding. Janice still caught the tension in her partner's blue eyes.

"He's nice enough and all that, but he'll forget about me in time." Janice paused as she tucked away both their papers into her jacket's inner pocket and gestured for Mel to precede her onto the tarmac. Janice quickly turned her frown into a smile at the stewardess greeting the passengers at the plane's doorway. She leaned close to the brunette as they entered. "But I'm interested in you, and that's going to be too much competition for him," she said with a smile that turned to a chuckle at Melinda's raised eyebrow.

"Really?"

"Really." The blonde shook her head. "Mel, you're one in a million." The comment made Mel blush and Janice teased her about that as they settled into a pair of seats over the port wing. "If you're embarrassed now, what are you doing to do when I can't help myself and kiss you accidentally in public?" She waited until Mel had settled in her seat and then leaned across the bit of space separating them and planted a tender kiss on the brunette's lips.

Their gazes locked and with a soft exhalation, Melinda fainted.

Pulling back, Janice smiled tenderly and adjusted the brunette's position to a more comfortable one and then sat back. She held Mel's hand and quietly rubbed the back of it with her thumb until blue eyes gradually opened and she smiled. "That answers that question."

Melinda's skin took on a pink flush once again. Quietly she said, "You enjoyed that."

Janice looked taken aback with shock for all of two seconds before she nodded and said, "Oh, I definitely enjoyed that."

"You won't do that to me at home, will you?"

"Only if I think you want me to," she assured her with a smile. "What better way to get you out of a bad situation now and again than to have your knees go weak?"

Shaking her head but then laying it against the blonde's shoulder, Melinda acknowledged the pleasure that suggestion gave her.

Around them, other passengers stowed their baggage and settled into the seats. An expectant air of quiet flowed through the plane. Everyone looked forward toward the crew cockpit and then out the windows.

With a roar, the plane engines spun to life. The motors sputtered loudly, then settled into a drone right outside their window. The plane shuddered and started moving forward.

Janice closed her eyes and felt Melinda's hand fold around hers when the plane began to pick up speed. Finally she felt the slight feeling of drop when the plane lifted from the earth and started to climb.

"Next stop, New York," Melinda whispered in her ear. "You want to go shopping when we get there?"

Looking at her with a perplexed expression, Janice wryly replied, "No, of course not. I want to show up on your family's doorstep in a borrowed dress, water-rotted boots and a leather jacket smelling of sea salt."

Melinda chuckled. "Okay. I'll arrange for the money wire from the airport when we land."

"You don't have to do that."

Shaking her head, Melinda's hand slipped over hers again. "I want to. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be here."

"If you hadn't come, Melinda. I wouldn't want to be here. Now," she admitted, grasping the woman's upper arm. "Now, there is no place I'd rather be."

"Seriously?"

Nodding her chin firmly, Janice replied, "Seriously."

"Well, um... I think I'd better let you know that our pilot is on this flight."

Janice lifted her head and frowned. "Of course there's a pilot on the flight. How else--?"

"No. The pilot from Casablanca."

"Flying this plane?"

Melinda shook her head and made a motion with her hand for Janice to keep her voice down. "No," she clarified in a whisper. "He's a passenger on this flight." Janice scanned the nearby seats. "No... toward the back of the plane. About six rows." Janice turned her head to peer around the seats. Melinda's hand grasped her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Well looks like we all get to settle in for a long flight."

"You don't want to do something about it?"

"What can I do? We're about to fly out over the Atlantic for ten hours. I don't leave planes in the middle of the ocean." Janice shook her head. "Besides what would he do? We don't have anything, remember?" She sat back and thought about that. "Speaking of... I wonder what he might want with us? We honestly don't have anything any more. It all went down with the plane."

Melinda fell silent. "I suppose he might be returning home himself."

Janice realized that did not make her feel any better. Resolutely she folded her arms across her chest, feeling the solid form of the chakram pieces and grasped Melinda's hand under her arm. "Well, let's take advantage of the trip and catch a few hours sleep," she suggested, patting her shoulder. "Rest up." She closed her eyes and then shook her head, patting her blonde locks. "I miss my hat," she complained softly.

The remark made Mel chuckle. Gazing out the window, she studied the low clouds passing outside. Dropping her head back into the padded seat, she let the warm feeling of Janice's hand in hers seep through her body, relaxing it. It was a long way to New York, she finally acknowledged. Janice was right. What could they do... what could he do... on a plane over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean?

## Chapter 44

The small view through their window was beginning to leave Janice feeling cramped. The

flight had started easily enough, both Melinda and herself napping. But now, two hours into the flight, she could see the end of France's northern coastline and the beginning of the Atlantic Ocean.

Her stomach churned. She contemplated that food was planned for the flight in another hour. In the meantime, without their bags, and without belongings of any kind, she didn't even have a decent book to read. Sighing she admitted to boredom. The feeling was not a pleasant one for her, so used to constant activity over the last few weeks. She turned to Mel to possibly get the brunette to talk, to take her mind off the situation, and instead found the linguist breathing quietly and easily, deep asleep.

Brushing lightly at the other woman's hair, Janice resigned herself to having to find her own entertainment. It wasn't like she couldn't. She'd traveled alone for almost a year after her father's death, and before that spent a lot of time entertaining herself unless her grandmother decided her presence was required at a society function. Well, a little small talk might not hurt, she thought. Standing, she stretched and nodded politely at several heads that turned her way. "Buenas Dias," she offered to one Spanish couple patting their sleeping toddler in the seat opposite.

"Buenas Dias, Senorita," the father replied, nodding to his wife. In Spanish he introduced himself and his wife, the Minteguezes.

"Janice Covington," she introduced in return. "Are you emigrating?"

"Yes. My brother-in-law, he has a business in a town called..." He paused a moment, checking his memory and considering his pronunciation before continuing. "The Bronx. We are joining him there and will go into business together."

"Have you visited before?" Janice asked.

"No. They visited last year and suggested we join them." His dark eyes gleamed with the promise and visions his brother-in-law obviously had described for him. "It sounds very wonderful."

Janice shrugged. "I'm from Philadelphia myself. But New York is full... of a lot of opportunities."

"You have lived in the United States a long time?" The wife spoke up quietly as her child shifted in his sleep and she returned to patting him. He did not go back to sleep and instead sat up groggily and rubbed his eyes.

Owlishly he looked up to Janice and grinned. "Bella senorita," he gushed and waved at her, causing the blonde to smile. He then waved his arms at her. "Hug," he demanded in a simple tone.

Senora Minteguez nodded when Janice raised a questioning brow, so she gamely reached over and swung the boy into her arms, accepting a hug.

Wow. She pulled back, staring into innocent dark brown eyes and felt him pushing his small fingers through her hair. "Hello. What's your name?"

"Mig'el," he answered proudly.

"Hi Miguel," she replied. "I'm Janice. Are you enjoying your trip?"

"Thankfully he sleeps most of the time," Senora Minteguez commented. Janice nodded at her in understanding.

"I haven't been back in the last few years, but I was born there, yes."

Senor Minteguez glanced over his shoulder. "How is it you and she aren't traveling with anyone?"

"We are. We're traveling together," Janice replied, glancing back toward Mel and seeing her still quietly asleep.

"What my husband means to ask. Is there no man traveling with you? Your husband, or hers, perhaps?"

Janice stood slowly and shook her head, nonplussed by the question. "We don't have husbands."

"Did your husbands die in Europe, or ..."

"Neither of us has been married."

The Minteguezes studied Melinda and then Janice more carefully. "Ah, your fathers... Interesting. We had heard of the richness of Americans... They must have given you a trip to Europe as a present."

Janice's brow furrowed, rapidly finding it hard to continue conversing, but she shook her head and passed Miguel back to his mother, where the boy accepted a treat from a bag and settled quietly eating, observing the adults with owlsh eyes. "No, actually my father is dead. He died in Europe. I'm an archaeologist, and Miss Pappas is my assistant."

"You are scholars?" Minteguez did not bother to hide his surprise. "I would have thought... Women can... Amazing." He finally stumbled to a halt and shook his head in disbelief. "America is very different."

Janice nodded and looked up again to check on Melinda. The brunette was still sleeping, but it was other passengers that caught her attention. "Excuse me," she politely withdrew from the Minteguezes.

Walking quickly down the aisle, she put a firm hand on a male shoulder. She demanded tightly, "That's my seat."

The dark haired man looked up from his position leaning close to Melinda's head and shook off Janice's hand, saying nothing. She put her hand on his shoulder again and gripped firmly. He stood. She braced herself for a confrontation and felt the adrenalin kick her heart rate up. "What do you want here?"

"Would you, and your companion, considering joining me during the meal?" he asked quickly. "I'd like to talk," he added as she moved forward a menacing step.

She shifted her hand so it wrapped around his elbow and tugged. There was no question she could drag him. What she was hoping was he had no desire to make a scene and would follow her when asked, "All right. We'll talk. Not here." She gestured with her other hand toward the back of the plane.

He took a long moment to decide, but then nodded imperceptibly. Taking that as a yes, Janice led the way back to the rear of the plane where a few empty seats would give them a small amount of privacy.

## **Chapter 45**

Janice put herself in the only defensible position, standing in the aisle with him at the back of the plane. If anything went wrong she could very quickly put distance between them. She adjusted her jacket, wishing again that her gun had survived her Mediterranean swim.

The motion put him on his guard and warily he studied her, keeping his hands very obviously away from his own coat and pockets.

She considered for a moment stuffing her hand in her pocket and like a six-year-old pretending she had a weapon. Shaking her head at herself, she figured he was unlikely to fall for it anyway. So she dusted a frustrated hand through her blonde locks, and then pointed her finger at him. She began very calm and quiet. "All right, you've got my attention. Talk. You could start with your name," she barely breathed the words.

"Martins. I'm here for your protection."

"Bullshit," she cursed shortly, still keeping her voice low, but there was no mistaking the menace. "You dropped our plane into the damn sea!"

"Your plane?! Your-- I'll have you know that plane was mine. I didn't plan to lose it either! It was supposed to be a simple escort job. And it blew up in my face." He breathed deeply. "Blew up my plane."

"Escort mission? What was the ship carrying?"

"Who gives a damn? Germans fired on it, so I fired back. Simple as that. I was escorting you." He murmured, "I was supposed to make sure you got safely on a plane to the States."

Janice had a flash of insight. "Blane!" The Moroccan café's owner had to have something to do with this.

"Yes, damn it. When you lost the papers, I called him. He changed the mission. 'Stay with them,' he said. 'Make sure they make it onto a plane.'"

"We did--as you could see--so why are you still following us?" she retorted, forcing her voice low again.

He pulled her close and kissed her soundly, making it appear they were perhaps having a lovers quarrel. Harshly his whisper hit her ears. "Because they're following you now. And your friend."

"Nazis?" Stunned, she pushed at his chest only lightly when she pulled back to watch his eyes as he answered with a tight nod.

His lips twitched in memory of their brief touch. "I can't afford to have them know who I am, but our cause also can't let you die. What was in those papers is still in your head. And in hers. The Nazis can get it, or we can get you to Washington in one piece."

He looked past her at something or someone toward the front of the plane. She didn't dare take her eyes off him. "Now that you've drawn attention to us, better go along with me to get us out of the spotlight."

"I--?" she sputtered. "You were the one taking my seat. Getting too close to my friend." She poked him in the chest. He looked chagrined. "You wanted me to come after you. You had to know I wouldn't just stand there."

She was having a little trouble concentrating. Not that his kisses had been any competition for Melinda's. No. Only that she seemed to be falling into the trap once more. Believing, when maybe she really shouldn't.

He nodded again. "There are two spies on this plane ready to jump you when you get off."

"Why didn't you simply detain them in Europe?" Scanning his face, she tried to pick up the slight twitches of a falsehood, or a nervous reaction. But there was nothing. He was agitated though. She could tell that from the flexing of his hands and the constant adjustments he made to his posture.

"On the plane they can't contact anyone else."

She shook her head now. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but, as you point out, I have little choice." She took a deep breath. "Gunfire would be unwise, so... what's your plan?"

"Pose as my wife, trying to leave me while we were vacationing."

Already shaking her head again, Janice interrupted. "Won't fly. I've already been overheard telling an emigrating family that both Mel and I are unattached."

He frowned, then brightened. "Get ready to slap my face," he murmured.

"What?" She barely got the word out before he leaned forward again, grasped her shoulders

this time and crushed her smaller body into his, kissing her hard.

She fought and freed herself. The crack of her fist into his jaw sent him flying backward into the rear wall as the sounds echoed through the suddenly hushed and still passengers.

"Don't you ever touch me again!" she uttered, her voice overflowing with contempt.

He rubbed his jaw and successfully hid a chuckle. Then he moaned loudly, "Don't leave me, mi amore."

Exhibiting a glorious display of high dudgeon, cheeks aflame, shoulders back and chin up, Janice turned on her heel and moved back up the aisle to her now vacant seat next to Melinda. She scanned the faces that watched her sit and rubbed her sore hand, well hidden in her lap.

The Minteguezes were the last faces she glanced away from. The wife nodded quietly and the husband shook his head. Well, they must have bought the abandoned lover bit Martins played.

It wasn't until her breathing calmed that she felt amused eyes watching her. Looking across her shoulder, Janice caught sleep-faded blue eyes, almost transparent in the low cabin light, half-open and watching her.

"Amused?" she asked quietly. Blue eyes twinkled then the brunette straightened her back a bit and blinked quickly to wake herself fully. Janice's laughter started silent in her chest until it bubbled out softly when Melinda took her reddened hand into her own and gently began massaging the abused bones and muscles.

"Did you at least find out his name?" the whispered reply came back.

"Martins," she replied and closed her eyes as the brunette's touch, sent shivers coursing over her spine. It was easy to focus only on their point of contact, the fingertips sliding easily over one another, and she let herself drift, just a bit.

One brief moment she opened her eyes and caught, for just a moment, a pair of eyes focused on her from eight rows away, toward the front of the plane. Light hair and narrowed eyes framed a rounded jaw. He turned away quickly. Janice wanted to sink through the floor.

A Nazi spy. Reflexively her fingers closed over Melinda's now, and she drew her head around to meet curious blue eyes. Pitching her voice so that it only carried to Melinda's ear, she murmured, "Nazis."

An eyebrow went up. A remarkably tame reaction, Janice thought. Her own first reaction had been quite close to panic though she tamped it down with effort. When Melinda responded, it was amazing that she could even speak. "Well, guess that's what they can do... even in the middle of the Atlantic."

The stewardesses appeared at the front of the plane. Separating, Janice and Melinda settled back to accept the light dinner.

With one green eye, Janice kept the blonde man in the corner of her sight. With the other, she found Melinda's hand between their seats, and grasped it both to give, and receive, reassurance.

## Chapter 46

"Mama, aqui!"

The excited child's voice stirred Melinda from sleep. Soon the entire plane filled with the hum of excitement. Words filled the air and children clamored for looks out the windows.

The plane slowly banked left through the clouds. Brushing her hair out of her face, Mel watched the land appearing as the cloud cover parted. The Mahattan skyline slipped away and the harbor itself came into view. She stood, careful of the still sleeping Janice as she moved from their

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seats.

"Liberte," someone murmured nearby, awe filling the deep male voice. Melinda turned to see an older man, aged well into his retiring years, with weathered features and broad shoulders curved slightly inward. Looking back out, she first caught the edge of the torch, arcing into the sky.

An ocean liner tracked along the painted orange path of the reflected setting sun.

She had never been this close anything that big. The effect took her breath away. She pressed a hand to the glass and sighed. Home.

A small hand tugged on her arm. She looked down into the uplifted round face of a young girl, dark hair trailing down her back, clothed in traditional Spanish dress. "Read?" she asked.

"Please?"

Focusing again on the statue, she saw what had caught the girl's attention. Words in English she did not understand but wanted to know. And as she read, Melinda felt the hopes of millions who had crossed the Atlantic.

*"The New Colossus*

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame*

*With conquering limbs astride from land to land;*

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand*

*A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame*

*Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name*

*Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand*

*Glowes world wide-welcome; her mild eyes command*

*The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,*

*"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she*

*With silent lips. " Give me your tired, your poor,*

*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,*

*I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" "*

She looked down at the girl and realized in the awe shining back from that face, that though the words seemed only partially understood, her own emotions as she read had conveyed something special.

The rest of the plane had heard too. She looked up, blue eyes panning the still occupants, meeting quiet gazes, blue eyes, brown, gray and finally, settling on a pair of green eyes just off her right shoulder. A soft hand slid against her back.

"That was really beautiful, Mel." Janice glanced though at the faces and added, "Can you translate that to Spanish? I think they'll get it a little more."

With a thoughtful expression, the linguist recited the poem in Spanish, amazingly giving it another cadence and quality just as hauntingly beautiful as the original. Janice shook her head at the skill she knew it took to accomplish that, and brushed Melinda's arm.

The plane's occupants now understood, and the rendered words caused a few tears. Of joy. Of pride. Of hope. Of apprehension.

"Please have a seat, ladies and gentlemen. We are on approach to La Guardia airport, the New York area's newest transportation center. Mayor La Guardia and the citizens of New York City

welcome you to the United States of America." The pilot's voice interrupted the still tableau and people slowly scattered, returning to their seats.

Those near the port windows continued to watch, until the New York skyline obscured the view of the harbor... Even so, the torch could be seen still, cast golden by the rays of the setting sun.

The lamp beside the golden door.

The final words of the poem flitted again across her mind as Janice settled back down and Melinda's strong grip steadied her nerves as the plane arced down toward the runway, and the lights illuminated the plane's path with a ghostly light.

The darkness already crept on the airport, hidden behind the taller buildings that made up the city's skyline. In the plume from the wheels touching down, Janice could see soft drifts of snow which had been pushed from the runway.

Winter was early, just a little.

She frowned.

"What's wrong?" Melinda asked softly, still clasping her hand. "We missed the first snowfall." Melinda's face took on a quizzical expression. "Look?" She pointed out the drifts.

Melinda shrugged. "First snow hasn't fallen yet where we're going though," she reminded Janice. "It comes a little later to the Carolinas." She lowered her forehead against the blonde's. "Unless you don't want to head there," she said slowly, letting the tiny kernel of doubt resurface for a long breathless moment.

Janice rubbed Melinda's cheek, where a small muscle had started ticking in fear. "I'll be there for you," she promised.

The plane rolled to a stop and passengers started moving to retrieve coats removed while the plane was in the air. Men and women shrugged into threadbare coats and helped children to adjust small blankets on their shoulders.

Melinda and Janice stood and realized, other than Janice's coat they didn't have anything warm enough to wear in the wintery temperatures. The blonde shifted the coat onto Mel's shoulders, like a cape. "Here, you take it," she suggested.

"I couldn't," Melinda denied, trying to pass it back, but Janice's firm hand held it in place. "Let's at least share." She pulled Janice against her, fitting the smaller woman into her shoulder and positioning the coat so it fell partly across the shorter woman's back.

Then suddenly Janice was not there beside her any longer. Melinda looked up to see the blonde fitting her fist beneath a man's jaw with a quick uppercut.

She saw the man's body fall back, arms spread. In one hand a knife started slipping from his grip. She kicked out, causing his hand to slam into the back of a seat and the knife went flying through the air to skitter noisily against the plane's windows.

She felt hands along her back and lunged backward, startled, knocking herself and whoever had touched her to the ground in the aisle. Rolling onto her stomach she punched out and saw the heel of her hand strike someone in the middle of the throat.

A gagging sound was the only thing that followed her to her feet. "Janice!" she yelled for the blonde.

Turning, she found the archaeologist in a tangle of arms and legs, fists and knees flying against a blonde man, his hat having skittered away during the fight.

"Mel! Move!" Janice effectively used her voice to disorient the attacker, and Melinda watched his eyes roll back in his head. She grabbed Janice's arm in that moment and using the backs

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of the seats, she dragged them both off the plane, along the more awkward route.

At the door of the plane, Melinda noticed everyone else gone and looked back to see the man who accosted her beginning to stand. She realized he was the pilot from the plane. What had Janice discovered was his name? Oh yes. Martins. Well, the man would have a headache to stop one of the big Ringling Brothers circus elephants.

Closer, the other who Janice took on, barely moved, groaning as he struggled ineffectively to roll from his back to his stomach and rise. His obstruction of the aisle prevented Martins from following too quickly.

She doubted he would have anything nice to say anyway, and looked to Janice. The blonde's hair was mussed, but her color was high. She had enjoyed the fight, Melinda realized. She took a deep breath herself and acknowledged her own adrenalin rush from the incident.

"Let's go," Janice tugged on her arm and the women, knees shaking, stumbled down the stairs and ran across to the safety of the busy terminal.

La Guardia, in all its newness, still carried within the smell of fresh paint, and Melinda scanned the open space for the exit. "We'll have to catch a cab," she admitted.

"Let's take the subway." Janice shook her head.

"Why on earth would you want to do that?" Melinda asked as they attained the street outside.

"Because I've never done it," she said simply. "Haven't you ever done something just because?"

"Yeah, flying out of here and into Macedonia comes immediately to mind," Melinda replied with an easy smile. "All right, we'll take the subway."

They started scanning the signs, looking for the proper direction.

Another of the lone travelers from their flight stepped up to the curb beside them. "Where are you going?" he asked in broken English, with a heavy Italian accent.

"Downtown," Melinda answered.

"Do you know how to get to Broadway?"

She then took in his attire and realized the young man was an aspiring performer, in his skin-tight clothes and thin shoes.

Janice finally pointed to a sign that indicated "To Trains." "You probably should go downtown as well."

The trio, with the women side by side and the awestruck Italian trailing as he looked at the sights and absorbed the sounds, walked across the open area and then onto the beginning of streets leading toward an isolated station building near the edge of the airport's property.

Cabs, cars and buses, streamed away from the airport, into a growing mass of swarming life affectionately called "The Big Apple."

Glancing at Janice, who was taking in the sights with eyes almost as big as the Italian, Melinda smiled. She looked ready to take a huge bite of the place. The thought made her chuckle and then her stomach rumbled.

"Let's find something to eat," she said suddenly as her stomach made a noise right next to Janice's chest, the vibration, though subtle, still made the blonde laugh.

They entered the darker building housing the entrance to the subway and fished coins to pay the boarding fare before walking onto the platform and into a train just about to pull away from the station.

The Italian young man settled to a bench and Melinda politely asked his name. "Bertoli," he replied.

"Your first time in America, Bertoli?" Janice asked. "Yes." He fidgeted. "I did not want to become a grape farmer."

Janice nodded. "Enjoy it," she said. Then she settled against the middle pole with her back and looked at Melinda who settled on the opposite bench. "I'm going to," she murmured for the brunette's ears only.

## Chapter 47

Melinda spotted a bank as she and Janice stepped out onto 6th Avenue. Promising Janice she would return quickly, the brunette disappeared. Temporarily abandoned Janice leaned against the white stone wall, her arms crossed over her chest, as she watched the people hurrying past.

The posture gave her a look of indolence as she scanned faces. Without her hat she could not continue to observe someone if they looked in her direction. Hanging her head, she rubbed her hair absently.

The battered fedora, now adrift somewhere in the Mediterranean, had been her father's. It had not been a deathbed gift either. To her it had been a living, breathing thing that represented her father's life, his work, and in his giving it to her when she first arrived, having scuttled away from her college studies, a mark of his love and acceptance that she wanted to follow him, instead of the life his former mother-in-law had seen as more fitting.

Studying the slice of sky visible amid the building tops, Janice painted the scene again in her mind's eye. It had been a British dig, about six miles or so from the ruins of Stonehenge. The sun was setting on a long day in the remains of a Celtic camp alongside a group from the Cambridge Ancient History department.

She had heard of the dig through her own collegiate contacts since she was studying pre-history culture and archaeology in a summer program at Cambridge. Upset that her father had not written her of his plans, she had immediately requested a transfer from her dig assignment on the other side of the country. Ready to go in with a full head of steam, she instead blustered to a halt when the stocky dirty man, his blonde hair dusted with gray, only looked at her, smiled and pulled her into a bone-crunching bear hug.

*"Jan, m'girl. Oh baby, Jan. It is you, darlin'. Gods be praised. How'd you find me?"*

*"It wasn't easy," she murmured, caught in his muscular grip, and surrounded by the heart-warming smells of rich soil and clay and honest sweat. Something her grandmother would not have any idea about, Janice was certain.*

*Tears coursed over his cheeks when he took a moment to pull back and study her face. "God, you look more like your mother every day."*

*"I do not. Everyone swears I'm the spitting image of the great Harry Covington." As if to punctuate her point she slapped her knee and spit clear fifteen feet ping-ponging a tin sample collection bin.*

*"Well with aim like that you ain't doin' too bad an imitation, I'll tell ya." He slapped her back and the next thing she felt was a warm band settling over her ponytailed hair. He had swept his brown felt hat, the one he wore in all the pictures he had sent her over the years off his very own head.*

*And put it on her own.*

Janice blinked, feeling the tears gather in the corner of her eyes and caught the few stars of the night visible over the bright New York skyline. It wasn't like this on a dig. Clear night skies

filled with stars. No city lights for leagues in any direction.

That night she and her father had laid outside on the ground, catching up. Idly they made shapes in the night sky far into the early hours.

A warm hand touched her shoulder. Canting her gaze around she looked up into crystal blue eyes. "Hey there," she said, working her throat around the lump she had not quite yet cleared.

"So where do you want to eat?"

"Let's just get something from a coffee shop." She gestured toward a little corner place where the open sign in the window beckoned.

Nodding easily, Melinda followed. "I've got enough for us to get a bus or train to Collier County. Which would you prefer?"

"Train."

Realizing as they ordered from the reed-thin waitress that they had not eaten anything substantial since leaving Carmen Toval's home, the women found themselves ordering more than drink. A platter of eggs and a platter of half sandwiches soon joined the coffee carafe. Melinda ordered a refreshing glass of cold grapefruit juice and Janice sipped on a tall glass of milk.

"Tomorrow night then, huh?"

"Yes."

Janice chewed quietly on the last bite of her sandwich considering her words carefully. For all that they had traveled together the last two weeks, and even in the last few days had become physically close, she was unsure about just gallivanting up to Melinda's home. She asked quietly, "So, tell me about this home? Who am I likely to meet? What sort of place is it?"

"Beaufort Oaks is a Antebellum plantation, non-working, but I've spent the last few years restoring some of its older areas, returning them to an approximation of their original appearance."

She paused to eat, a little astonished she was quite so hungry. She would have to moderate her appetite quickly or suffer the disapproving looks from her mother. "Originally it was a crop plantation. Soybeans, cotton, peaches, that sort of thing. Then the bottom fell out of the cotton industry somewhere just after the war. Cotton was scaled back and a stables built. Now Beaufort Oaks boasts horses. Thoroughbreds at first, but now it's quarter horses for hunter competitions and casual riding."

"Sounds really like a nice place."

Melinda straightened her shoulders and finished her grapefruit juice before continuing. "It's home. No matter what schools they sent me off to. No matter the dozens of times my father took us with him on his lecture tours--family vacations he called them though we never did much other than wait around for him to finish a lecture--we always came back to Beaufort Oaks. To the same room I've slept in for almost thirty years. To the same staff people, the same stables, land, horses..." She trailed off having watched Janice's expression grow more somber with each passing word. "You probably don't like staying in one place very long."

"You're right. I don't. Staying in one place always meant being under my grandmother's thumb. And I hated that. Absolutely hated it." Janice sat back, stirring her milk with an idle finger before pulling it to her lips and taking a long draught. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be taking that out on you."

"So you'll still come with me to Beaufort?" The brunette canted as Janice tilted her head in quiet thought. "I thought we were..." Her voice trailed off as she considered that perhaps Janice felt trapped, between Mel's desires and her own because of the fact that they made love. "I can... I can say no commitments. I did not expect..."

The blonde looked up, green gaze drifting in blue. The realization hit her that Melinda was scared about "I didn't expect to fall in love, either, Mel. But it's not the commitment. I... It's just strange for me to consider staying in one place after four years going anywhere and everywhere... at a whim."

"I see." Melinda dropped her eyes. "Europe will be out of the question for a while. What other research sites do you have?"

"I don't know. I'll have to check my father's notes." She paused and said in a slow "reminding herself of the painful truth" sort of voice, "but they're all gone now." She dropped her head into her hands.

"I have an entire houseful of notes my father kept," Melinda pointed out.

The blonde looked up, "Notes? Your father? What?"

"I told you. My father's notes. I wondered what most of them were about, but your father's name shows up frequently, so perhaps..." She shrugged, not sure she needed to finish.

She did not have to. Janice's back straightened and she concluded, "They were correspondents. Collaborating already." Janice's voice filled with an excitement that put an ebullient smile on her features. "It will take a lot of cross-referencing since we no longer have my father's side of things," she cautioned.

"I know," Mel replied.

"Months of work."

"At least," the brunette countered. "There is a huge study. And two libraries."

Janice turned the idea over in her mind. "I'll have to find some place to teach. No Covington ever sponged off of anyone."

Melinda nodded. "You... could have your own wing at Beaufort, to settle in... for the long nights of... reading."

"Original texts will have to be dug up."

"The libraries probably have it. If not, UNC has an extensive Mediterranean bequest."

"I'll need a translator." Janice pressed a hand over Mel's on the table.

"Are you asking me?"

"Know any other translators?"

"About four dozen," she answered quietly.

"Okay, let me be more specific. Do you know any translators who are descended from the subject of study? And who I'm madly in love with?"

Melinda's smile was slow. "So you'll stay?"

"You've just given me another adventure, Mel. How could I say no?" Janice stood, gesturing at the table and put several bills under her now empty milk glass.

Melinda stood and met Janice's gaze quietly. "Thank you." She reached for and captured the shorter woman's hand in her own and tugged the blonde against her, lifting the woman's chin so she could look down into green eyes swirling with untold depths. Lightly she pressed her lips to Janice's. "I'll try to keep it interesting," she promised.

Janice voiced the comment that had been on both their minds off and on the last few days. "Interesting could be used to describe our trip getting here."

"If one were given to understatement," Melinda added wryly. "Rather than stay here, why don't we catch the last train out," Janice suggested, intoxicated by the scents swirling around her from Melinda so close.

Walking out of the shop and standing with Janice in the cool breeze of the night, Melinda

asked, "You're sure about this?"

Janice kissed her. "Mel, where's the station?"

## Chapter 48

Melinda's nose twitched from the fumes of the train engine. The last train of the day was already grinding its wheels, the tracks humming from the vibrations as it left the station. The roar of the wheels echoed in the cavernous building as she and Janice hurried across the platform.

The conductor was just lifting himself to the last step when he turned and spotted the blonde and brunette moving quickly, waving their hastily purchased tickets. "Come on then," he gestured.

They came within a few feet of the moving train and in tandem despite their size difference, took a last leap for the stepladder on the back of the train. Two pairs of hands wrapped around the guide rails and the brunette snatched for a bouquet of flowers that fell away. The blonde grabbed her flailing hand instead and hauled them both to safety on the tiny rear porch. Panting lightly they handed over their tickets.

He read, "Collier County?" Drawing his clipper he marked the two tickets and handed them back. "Sleeper car's two up. Follow me." He secured the chain link over the small opening and then led the way into the train.

Melinda started forward with Janice but then paused, groaned and grabbed her knee, preventing it from buckling. Janice wrapped her hand around her upper arm and waited for her to look up. "What happened?"

"Twisted my ankle I think," she admitted wryly. "Okay, hang on to me." She shook her head as they moved along more slowly together. "Guess something had to go wrong, huh?"

The dining car was empty as they quickly moved through. Melinda took a deep breath as she put her foot down gingerly. "Hopefully it's over," she sighed.

The conductor, already at the break between the next car, caught their attention. "Here's a cabin for you, ladies." The tinkle of keys preceded the door's dull click as the lock was released. He swung the narrow door inward when they approached. "You'll hear the call for the Collier station around eight."

"Thanks." Janice tipped him and then helped Mel inside. Letting the brunette go, she turned and closed the door. When she turned back she found Mel had lowered onto the narrow bench along one side. "Let me see that ankle," she suggested even as the linguist bent over working off the buckle of her heeled shoes. Pushing her own hands past Melinda's she finished the task and then prodded her arch and ankle. Melinda sharply drew her breath. "Swelling already," she confirmed.

Mel pulled her foot from Janice's grasp and slid back. "Thanks. Just get me a cold cloth, I'll be fine in a few minutes."

Janice eyed the injury dubiously but did as asked, standing and pulling down the bed before she ran cold water over a wash cloth and passed it over. Mel took it in silence, wrapping it around her ankle.

Watching the brunette in pain, Janice castigated herself for having made them late. She pulled off her leather jacket and set it over a hook next to the door. She bent forward and kissed Mel's cheek in a silent gesture of apology. "You want the bed?"

Reaching over, Mel held Janice's head close as she returned the kiss. "I know you had other ideas tonight," she said quietly.

"Oh. Hey, well... We'll have a chance for some private time once we get to Beaufort Oaks,

right?" Reminded of her desire for the brunette, Janice felt her body senses heighten. Melinda's scent surrounded her. She felt a sensation not unlike an itch that needed scratching but was out of reach. She brushed her hand over Melinda's forehead and lingered, tracing the brunette's face. "Go to sleep."

"I'm not really tired," Mel replied, stroking her hand over Janice's cheek. She moved to the side and gestured. "Join me?"

Shaking her head, Janice pressed her lips into the palm. "Mel," she breathed. "I can't."

"Jan," came the reply. "It's just a sprained ankle."

The blonde felt her resolve failing. She looked into blue eyes warm with love. "It's not a good time." She rubbed Mel's thigh tenderly. "I feel a little guilty about all this."

"Why? I landed wrong."

"If I hadn't stopped to get you the flowers, we wouldn't have been late."

"I liked the flowers."

"Still," Janice argued softly.

"Janice." The brunette's voice suggested disappointment.

"Yes?" the blonde answered warily.

"Please don't blame yourself any more."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" Green eyes searched blue wondering how in such a short time Mel could understand her so well.

The brunette shrugged. "I don't. But I know how I feel."

"How's that?"

"That I love you. You don't deserve blame for anything."

"You're pretty forgiving."

"An affliction I enjoy suffering, I'm sure."

Janice chuckled as she settled on the seat next to Melinda. The other woman's larger hand wrapped around hers and squeezed firmly. "Thanks."

"I had a good time, Janice. Please believe that."

"Did you?"

"Yes, I did. Thugs, spies, double-crosses and all." Janice laughed. "But it wouldn't have been anything without you."

Janice swallowed. "All right. Now you get some sleep. In the morning you have to introduce me to your family."

"Oh. Right." Melinda laid back on the small bunk, rolling onto her side in order to fit in the small space. "Almost forgot." She harrumphed and closed her eyes. "I wish," she mumbled.

Janice chuckled and patted the brunette's shoulder. Watching her breathing even out, the blonde waited until Mel was asleep before moving away and leaving the small cabin.

She was almost to the door leading to the next car when it crashed inward and two men rushed headlong into the narrow corridor.

The lead man, in a dark suit and tie fell over her in his haste. She recognized the American pilot Martins as he rolled and finally stumbled back to his feet.

"Hey!" she caught his attention for a split moment.

The second man she recognized as the blond from the plane. He charged them, crashing into both and tumbling them to the floor of the car in a heap.

She grabbed Martins's leg and the blond man's arm. "What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded. A gun waved in her face and she stopped thinking. Striking out with a powerful fist she

nailed the blond in the chin.

His head snapped back and she grabbed the gun at the same time. Kicking herself free, she was off-balance when Martins's hands joined the struggle. For a terrifying split second she lost track of the weapon's orientation.

*Crack!* The explosive force of the weapon's discharge threw her free of the kicking and punching men. They all became very still for a long breathless moment.

Then Janice gasped as Martins flung himself onto his back, holding the barrel of the gun in his hand. The blond fell back against a cabin door with a loud thud.

Dazed, they all looked up as several doors along the corridor opened. A young man in red print pajama bottoms was closest.

The blond man on the floor leaped to his feet and stumbled off, pushing past several gawkers. Janice grabbed for him but missed, instead finding Martins collapsing. "Stop him!" Martins yelled. She and the other passenger caught him before he could fall completely over and lowered him more gently. "Damn!" he cursed. His labored breathing swallowed up the word as he finished. "Warn you," he muttered.

Janice then found the reason why Martins was so weak. Blood spread across his lower chest and its sticky warmth coated her hands quickly. His hands slid over hers, bringing her gaze up to his face.

"Take this," he breathed, pushing the gun into her hands. "You'll need it."

"Hey, lady. What's going on? Do you know this man?"

"Sort of," she answered, distracted, studying the gun in her palm and the pale drawn face of Martins on the floor. She demanded, "How'd he find us?"

"Bank," he answered. "I tried to stop him." He made a motion with his shoulders vaguely like a shrug and finished. "Trailed him to the train station."

"But he didn't know we were on it. It was a last minute decision."

"Was going to beat you--home," Martins breathed his last word--and his last breath, dying in Janice's grip.

"Oh my god." Janice looked toward the voice to see Melinda sagging against the window as she took in the sight of the dead man and obviously his words.

Janice only wondered if there were any more on board. She turned the weapon in her hand in a useful grip and looked around, getting to her feet. "I'm going to get the conductor," she announced. "Come on, Mel." She grabbed the woman's hand and reached into their cabin for her coat before running in the same direction the blond man had disappeared.

## Chapter 49

"Where do you think he went?"

Even though Melinda had posed her question in a low whisper, Janice made a quick shushing motion with her hand.

They were peering into the window of the next sleeping car. The shadows were deep and the scene quiet. If he was in there, he had gone into one of the cabins.. possibly an occupied one. That thought: of others being endangered, prodded Melinda into action.

"Come on, Janice," she urged, reaching for the door-pull.

"What do you think--?"

"Janice, he's in there. Someone's going to get hurt if we don't get him out. Now, let's go."

Blue eyes glittered with determination.

The blonde nodded in agreement. "All right. I'm first." She reached past Mel and grabbed the door handle herself, pushing inward slowly. Their steps were the only sound as they entered.

Melinda kept her palm on Janice's waist as she moved along with her eyes on the space where the cabin doors met the floor. *Dark. Dark. Dark.* She stopped. A dull light showed under the next door. She wrapped her fist into the fabric of Janice's dress, bringing the blonde to a quick, silent halt.

Meeting the woman's eyes Melinda jerked her gaze down toward the suspect cabin door. Janice glanced down. Swiftly she brought the gun up, gesturing for Melinda to get back.

Something moved on the other side of the door. Janice moved the handle and then kicked the door panel inward. It slammed and bounced off the inside wall and she leaped forward, gun leading.

The light from an electric lamp spilled through the room, illuminating a wide-eyed couple on the fold-out bed.

The man pushed an anxious hand through golden hair as he pulled the covers to the woman's shoulders. "What is this?" he demanded.

Janice felt her cheeks heat, and lowered the gun. Backing up she offered a curt, "Sorry," just before Melinda pulled the door shut. She glanced up at Mel to exchange a thought when they heard another door click.

Jumping around, Mel led the way and they resumed pursuit, following the sounds into the next car. She let Janice through the door first and for a moment they stood in the space between the cars. The rattle of the train wheels on the track drowned out the possibility of any conversation. Gesturing, Janice reached for the door handle.

She felt the shower of glass on her hand before she finished opening the door. A sharp pain traveled over her side from hip to mid-chest. Falling forward into the corridor, she relied on instinct to sight back along the bullet's path and fired her gun. "Mel!" she screamed for the brunette she could see falling in after her. Had she been hit as well?

Now in the quieter space of the car, they both clearly heard a shot ricochet over their heads. Janice followed the sound back and aimed before squeezing off another round.

A groan reached her and praying she had made the right judgement, she clambered to her feet. Weapon level, she moved down the corridor, feeling Melinda breathing on her left shoulder. "All right. Whoever you are, stand up. Now." She could just make out the shape of a man bent double in the shadows. She pointed the gun at it. "Don't do anything suddenly." She cocked the gun loudly. "Or you'll suddenly be doing nothing.

A pair of dark blue eyes came out of the darkness as he swiveled his head toward her.

A crackling announcement broke through the broadcast system. "Next stop, District of Columbia, North terminal. D.C. North next stop."

The train lurched as the engines were slowed and reversed. Janice went off-balance. He grabbed for the gun but she held onto it as Mel tumbled over them both. The thought that the brunette had not been that close behind her made her look up to check on Melinda.

The brunette's feet landed squarely in the blond man's chest. Janice fell back as the gun came free. She blinked and opened her eyes to see Melinda in silhouette pull back a fist and slam it into the man's face.

But he was physically stronger than the tall brunette and in quick succession, though Janice tried to grab his feet, he had thrown Mel off, flipped the brunette on her back and reared back to

punch her in the face. A string of epithets fell from his lips.

The force of the shot Janice fired threw him back into the wall. Howling in pain, he leapt over Mel's prone body and grabbed for the door.

Falling through the opening as she reached it, the blond man tumbled onto the step between cars. Janice held the door against the rush of air, witnessing his tumble from the tracks leading up to the D.C. station platform.

Strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her back inside the train car. She rolled over Mel's body and sprawled against the wall.

"Janice?"

The blonde looked up from her crouch as she tried to catch her breath. She watched Mel waver and asked with concern. "Mel? Are you all right?" Trying to take a deep breath she felt a searing pain in her right side.

Mel's arms were around her as she collapsed; her brain finally overloaded in acknowledging the pain. Darkness fell to two points of concerned blue. "It's all right," came the softest assurance she had ever heard.

\* \* \*

The sunrise appeared by the time Melinda felt assured enough by her first aid measures to step back from tending Janice. She had hauled the smaller woman into her arms and staggered back under what energy she was surprised to find. Melinda realized Janice's right side had been badly scored by the bullet only once she had removed the blonde's coat and dress. But thanks to the chakram pieces--Mel could see the scoring as the bullet skittered along the metal instead of digging into Janice's hip--the injury was considerably less severe than it could have been. She had just lost a lot of blood in the excitement.

Mel had just settled back, resting her head on her upraised knees and crossed arms when she heard the call for Collier station.

*Time flies when you're having fun*, she thought and sighed. She leaned over and jostled Janice's bare shoulder half hidden beneath the sheet.

Green eyes opened then a cautious hand cupped a no doubt throbbing temple. "Hi," Melinda offered when Janice looked toward her.

"Where are we?" Janice's gaze moved over the room.

"Just pulling into Collier station."

Janice got a good look at Mel in that moment. She checked a bloodstain. "Oh good, that's mine, not yours."

Mel looked down. "I didn't have anything else to wipe my hands."

"Well, let's get moving. Train won't stop forever." Janice groaned as she pushed up and slid, with Mel's help, from the bed.

"Neither will Mother," Melinda added.

"She's the one you called to pick us up?" Janice stiffly donned her dress again.

"She was the only one who answered the phone and I didn't have much time. So I just told her when we should be arriving and where we were at the time." Mel tucked an arm around Janice and guided the blonde down the corridor and off the train.

The platform was busy when they stepped down, but Janice still hoped to spot Mrs. Pappas before they were noticed. She was not lucky enough.

"Melinda Chelle Pappas, it's about time you showed up. Not a word for a month and then out of the blue! I raised you with better manners than that."

Turning around, Melinda guided Janice with a soft touch.

"And what in the good Lord's name happened to your clothes? Where did you find that horrid dress?"

Melinda sighed. She wasn't up for this right now. Not with Janice weakening in her grip every minute. But she waited, holding the blonde more firmly with each passing second.

Janice happened to think the dress, dirty or not, was quite attractive on Mel. "Sorry for the short notice, Mrs. Pappas, but getting back to the States proved a little troublesome."

Curled brown locks swished away from the face of a woman in her mid-fifties. Gray-blue eyes left her daughter to focus on her. "Who are you?" The question was simple but Janice sensed judgment in the tone.

"Covington," Janice replied, not extending her hand since Melinda had her arms firmly gripped about mid-bicep. "Your daughter came out to my dig in Macedonia."

If it was possible for a look to be physical like a smack to the jaw, then Mrs. Pappas used such an expression. Janice frowned as the woman looked back to her daughter. "Still chasing dreams, I see..." She shrugged, schooled her expression and turned her back. "Well then... let's get you back to the house and... into something more... clean."

Mel put a hand on Janice's shoulder and called her mother's attention back. "Mother, this is Janice and she'll be staying with us a while. I would appreciate a hot bath before I get dressed down in front of her."

Janice caught shock on Mel's mother's face just before the woman's chin dropped, the sharp look vanished and she asked more gently, "Do you have any bags?"

Mel answered, "No."

"All right. Let's go home then," Mrs. Pappas turned to Janice as she spoke. "I'll have a guest room prepared as soon as we get back."

"Thank you," Janice replied.

Blue and green eyes met then shied away from one another. Three women moved quietly toward the station doors. Once outside, Melinda, holding Janice up gingerly, leaned close and whispered, "Home at last."

"I can't wait to see it."

The morning sunlight caught them both in its glow as they walked to a well-apportioned Chevrolet sedan parked at the curb. The dark-skinned driver in cap and gloves held the rear door for them.

## **THE END**

*Well, they made it home in (mostly) one piece. Beaufort Oaks however is another entire adventure, continued in my story, **Home Front**.*

*Thank you for going home with Melinda, Janice... and me.*