

*Janice and Melinda both have trouble adjusting now that they are back in Melinda's home town of Raleigh, North Carolina*

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# HOME FRONT

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## Chapter 1

The blonde sat up in bed, rubbing her shoulder and remembering the warm caressing breeze that had disturbed her sleep. Curiously, she glanced toward the floor length window half-shuttered against the late October chill. The ancient oak trees peppering the grounds of the plantation were only mildly bowed by a breeze that certainly could not be called warm this late into autumn.

Adjusting the shoulder of her cotton nightgown, Janice shrugged off the flower print comforter and sheet. Wrapping a casual grip around a bedpost, she slid to the floor. She padded across the small space rugs and a bit of polished wood floor to the window.

She leaned thoughtfully on the side of the opening, crossed her arms over her chest and blinked the sleep from her eyes. The rich green and crisp orange of the foliage delighted her senses. A smile played gently on her lips. Lazily she raised a hand and pushed her fingers through her unbound blonde hair.

"Cup of tea with that view?"

Janice swiveled her head around and bestowed her smile on the robe-clad brunette entering with a small tray. Her long dark hair was loose on her shoulders, a sensuous contrast to the woman's customary bun. It made Janice's heart speed up a little thinking of Melinda just out of bed. She straightened up and reached out to capture a steaming mug from the surface.

Melinda retrieved the second cup and set the tray on the nightstand. Turning back, she joined Janice, leaning casually against the window's edge. She nudged open the shutter and glanced out at

the view of the grounds.

The blonde caught the sparkle of gentle reminiscence in the cornflower blue eyes. "Mm hmm," she acknowledged. "Are you enjoying being back in your own bed?"

"I missed this," Mel answered in a wistful whisper that still managed to suggest a "but" was coming. Janice sipped her tea and waited. It wasn't long. "Guess I got used to the traveling." She squeezed her shoulders together in a shrug, settling her gaze on Janice's sun-bright green eyes.

The gesture and the wild shock of intense desire with which her own body responded brought out a small laugh in the blonde. "If you'd let me stay in your room, I could have remedied that." She grasped Melinda's hand as it came up in a gesture of protest. "But we have to keep in mind your mother, I know."

"I'm sorry. It's just..."

"Too weird for you." She nodded. "Remember we've had this conversation before. The day after we first arrived." She rubbed her hand over Melinda's bare arm, immersing herself in the sensations of touching her lover; more having been denied them by circumstance. The brunette's rose scent filled her nostrils. Her gaze centered on Melinda's lips, having drifted down from the soft lines of her cheeks and aquiline nose. *God, I want to kiss her*, she thought, resisting only because Melinda had asked it of her in a moment of self-consciousness.

She glanced past Melinda's shoulder and noticed the brunette had thought to close the door to the hallway. Just one couldn't hurt.

She eased her cup to the side, trailing her other fingers up to cover Melinda's cheek. With only slight pressure, as her gaze collided with the brunette's, Janice brought their faces closer.

With a light touch of her tongue she dampened her lips and felt the moment both their breathing changed.

The kiss was charged with coiled energy, restrained and headily passionate at the same time. She moved her lips over the full texture of Mel's and felt the moment her partner gave in to the abandon and returned the intimate touch.

Strong, soft hands slipped around Janice's waist, bringing their bodies together and lifting Janice to her toes.

The loud clatter of porcelain on the floor, even muted by the small rug, startled both women. They separated with their thoughts both a little blurred and looked down to see what had happened.

Melinda looked up from the cup and its spilled contents. Her remaining hand on the blonde's hip caressed gently as she formulated something to say.

Janice's smile stole the pain from taking hold of the brunette and making her feel guilty about the private indulgence. "I'll get a towel," she said, stepping out of Melinda's embrace.

"I think I'll suggest Mother visit Boston sooner rather than later," the brunette replied sucking in a deep breath and groaning, dropping her hand even as she claimed a hasty kiss.

The blonde ducked into the adjoining bathroom and returned with a pale orange hand towel. She bent and patted at the damp spot, letting her body brush up against Melinda, who crouched with her on the floor.

"Melinda Chelle, you get off the floor this instant!"

The chilled, deep but feminine voice caused both women to startle. Though off balance, Mel made it upright first, swiveling on her heels. With a quick hand she guided Janice to her own feet. As Janice focused on the slightly built woman in chestnut hair, Melinda offered a calm greeting. "Good morning, Mother. Would you care for a cup of tea?" Displaying her empty cup, she offered,

"I have to go down for another."

"I'll have Vida brew a pot of coffee," she said in a voice that ended the discussion.

"Good morning, Mrs. Pappas," Janice finally offered her own greeting, still a little unsettled from the last few moments. She could see the color rising in Brenda Pappas's face as cool gray-blue eyes leveled on her. Unconsciously Janice straightened under the sharp regard.

"Don't you interview for your new job today, Miss Covington? I suggest you'll be late if you don't stop dallying here."

Janice swallowed and started to respond. Melinda's hand on her arm and a step forward by the brunette stopped her though. "I'm taking her in myself," she heard the taller woman say, even as Brenda's features became granite at Melinda's cool tone. The older Pappas glanced briefly back at Janice then turned and walked away down the corridor, leaving the younger women alone once again.

Melinda slightly shook her head when Janice finally looked up at her. "Well, that went well," she allowed with a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "C'mon, we'd better get downstairs before she sends Vida up to fetch us, then complains that the eggs are too cold because she had to wait."

"I'll be right next door," Mel answered, brushing her fingers over Jan's cheek.

"That's still too far away." The answer slipped out softly as she pressed her lips into the woman's palm. "But I'll manage." She brushed her own palm down the brunette's long lean back as Mel left.

Janice turned to her wardrobe and opened the Carolina fir doors. Looking at the one pair of tan slacks, white collar blouse and Spanish country frock, the blonde mused, "So, what should I wear to the interview?"

It had taken almost all of the week since they had arrived at Beaufort Oaks to line up the interview with the university's history department chair. With no full professorships open, she had agreed to discuss appointment as an adjunct professor, stepping in for Dr. Basil Cuthridge, a British and Celtic scholar, who was preparing to go on sabbatical until the following summer. Today she was expected to essentially survive quizzing by Cuthridge on the names, dates, and important research personalities involved in Celtic and medieval British history. She glanced toward the nightstand at the tome she had culled from Melvin Pappas's library and rubbed her temple. It had meant quite a lot of heavy reading the last few nights.

Having lost everything on the trip back from Macedonia, Janice felt the pinch to earn her first paycheck. Melinda had not mentioned one word about the expenses, sharing or otherwise. But Janice could feel the judgement pouring from Brenda Pappas, which only aggravated Mel and made Janice more determined that she nail down work.

In the next room, she heard the water start as Melinda began to wash. She went to her own sink and rinsed the last of the night's sleep from her face and neck. Refreshed, Janice slipped on her tan pants and white shirt, forgoing the jacket she kept--with Xena's chakram pieces--tucked in the back of the wardrobe. *Ready to face the music*, Janice declared silently and headed down to the breakfast nook.

\* \* \*

Light salmon drapes were pulled back, tied with elegantly draped strips. The morning light bathed the breakfast nook in sunshine. A cloudless sky outside promised a beautiful, if cold, autumn day.

A small wooden table made of pine, dominated the cozy space, set among matching pine lattice-back chairs. A dark-skinned woman of modest height and garbed in a plain cut tan dress, moved around behind the chairs, laying out silver, small plates and bowls. She looked up at the sound of footsteps from the entry corridor. An expectant smile touched her face briefly then in disappointment she dropped her eyes away and quickly placed everything remaining in her hands on the table before pulling out the chair on her left. "Your place setting is ready, ma'am."

"Excellent, Vida. So, what has cook arranged this morning?" Brenda Pappas settled into the chair as the servant adjusted her chair closer to the table.

"Eggs Benedict, ma'am." She returned to arranging the table, and then moved to the small sideboard. "Juice, ma'am?"

"Carefully cleaned of pulp, Vida?"

"Just how you like it, ma'am." The dark-skinned woman's voice was low, and to anyone else's ears would have sounded annoyed, but Pappas was oblivious as she arranged her napkin across her lap and snapped open to the Society section of the News Observer. She reached out as Vida came close and without looking up, took the offered glass and sipped.

"Good, Vida."

"Yes, ma'am."

"My daughter and her friend will be down in a moment. That Miss Covington is going to an interview and Melinda has agreed to drive her. Make sure that Miss Melinda has her hat and coat properly addressed."

"Yes, ma'am."

More footsteps in the corridor made Vida glance up and this time her smile remained in place as the dark-haired tall young woman slipped through the doorway. "Good morning, Miss Melinda."

Adjusting her skirt with a casual hand, Melinda cupped Vida's elbow in her right palm and kissed the woman's cheek with her lips. "Good morning, Vida. Did you have a good night?"

"Yes, miss. You look well this morning yourself, Miss Melinda." Without an exchange of words, Melinda sat at her place and Vida delivered a tall glass of milk and a serving from the teapot. "Did Miss Janice enjoy the tea this morning?"

"Excellent choice, Vida. I think it calmed her nerves considerably. Thank you for your help."

"Coffee?" Brenda looked up briefly and indicated her empty cup with a sweep of her eyes.

"Oh, yes, ma'am." Vida moved quickly to fulfill the request and then walked toward the kitchen door. "I'll return in a moment with the plates. Help yourself to the toast."

Melinda nodded with a broad smile as the dark woman glanced toward her. As she reached for the plate of buttered toast, she heard footsteps marking Janice's arrival. The tread was light, uncertain, a distinct counterpoint to the young woman's usual confident stride. Noticing the diffidence in the blonde's bearing when she looked up, the brunette felt a resurgent aggravation at her mother's antagonism toward Janice.

Smothering the inclination to make a scene, knowing her lover needed her concentration for the interview to come, Melinda smoothed her face into a bright smile, gesturing to the seat beside her. Then she cast about for something to say. "Do you like Eggs Benedict, Janice?"

The blonde settled into the chair and glanced around the room once, orienting herself, then nodded as she put her napkin in her lap. "Sounds fine."

Melinda heard the distraction in her tone and focused her attention on Janice, excluding her mother with subtle body language and intensity in her blue eyes. "Would you like another cup of

tea?"

Janice raised her chin to meet Melinda's gaze and smiled her thanks. "Yes, please." The woman took a long breath in and let it out slowly. "Guess I'm a little nervous, huh?" Melinda smiled, victorious in getting the blonde to forget for two seconds that her mother was in the room. As Melinda stood to get the tea, Janice turned back to the table and looked up at Brenda. "Good morning, Mrs. Pappas."

"Morning." The woman's eyes narrowed and her expression cooled. "That outfit seems a little drab for a university interview."

Janice straightened in her chair, pushing back from the table. Before Janice's brain could unfreeze and she had an opportunity to respond, Melinda's voice was sharp even in its liquid accent. "Janice's attire is entirely appropriate."

"I think I'll grab something at the campus." The blonde swallowed hard. "Excuse me, please." Pushing away from the table, Janice was gone in the next breath.

Her departure left mother and daughter visually squaring off in the small room. "Mother, I cannot believe you did that. I want you to leave. Today if possible."

"You can't force me from my own home, Melinda Pappas."

Melinda set down the cup she had been preparing with tea hard enough for the cup to rattle on the saucer. "I'm a lady. I will not have you treating Janice with such disdain. Just because you don't like the look of her clothes or her having a lack of your definition of 'breeding'."

"She's a leech, Melinda. Mark my words, she'll never repay us--"

"For what? I invited her here, Mother. I practically had to beg her." Melinda pushed off the table where she had leaned to ease some of the anger coursing through her body making her want to swing at something. "She was ready to go back to Philadelphia to no family, no home, and be alone. I didn't want that."

"So you'd rather send me out, alone?"

"That is not what I meant. You're being deliberately unkind. She's bent over backward trying to be polite to you. You didn't even say 'good morning' to her."

"I did," the older woman replied, standing now as well.

"Then you lit into her like she was a sack of cotton."

Both women ground to a stiff silence, eyeing one another. "Her father was nothing but trouble to this family, Melinda. Your father--"

"Is that what this is about? Daddy did work with Harry Covington, didn't he? Some of the business trips he took without us were to Covington's digs?"

"That man was a dreamer. Poisoned your father's good sense with all that nonsense. I tri--"

Melinda straightened with a suddenness that broke her mother's train of thought. "It is not nonsense, Mother. We--Janice and I--found a large cache of the Scrolls."

"Ludicrous." The smaller woman stood and backed up. "Impossible."

"I assure you it isn't. I translated several during the initial part of our trip home."

"Then where are they? You and your friend there came off a train without clothes or bags in hand." Brenda pointed at the entryway. "She's got you dreaming too."

"I told you about the troubles we had on our trip. The boat, the plane crash..." Feeling like she was spinning her wheels in sand, getting nowhere fast, Melinda finally just stepped back with a sigh. "Forget it. Just forget it. Believe what you want. I honestly don't care."

Vida took that moment to come through the doorway with three plates. She looked from

one standing woman to the other and instantly stilled.

Having gotten much of her feelings off her chest, Melinda turned on her heel and left her mother standing alone in the small room, breathing hard. She heard Vida quietly offer Brenda a plate. Then she shut the entire unsavory incident out of her mind and went in search of Janice.

## Chapter 2

Janice stood on a middle step on the main staircase. The blonde paused, resting a steady hand on the scrolled banister when Melinda appeared beneath her.

As plainly as if the other woman spoke, Melinda saw and understood the pain that stiffened Janice's back and tightened her grip on the railing even as she turned a calm face to look at her. But the corners of her eyes were pinched and her nostrils tight. Kindly to allow Janice her silence, Melinda turned her gaze aside and schooled her own throat before speaking. "Come on. There's a coffee shop next to campus." She stepped up to a small closet at the foot of the stairs.

From it she retrieved a navy blue thigh-length twilled cotton coat, sliding it over her blushed rose blouse and dark rose knee-length skirt.

Janice appeared at her elbow as she was tugging her hair free of the coat's collar. The blonde moved past her to open the front door.

Melinda studied Janice's thin white blouse and knew the blonde would need a coat. She stilled the smaller woman with a hand on her shoulder. At the same time, she reached into the closet and pulled out another jacket.

The tan refined leather was a man's short style trench coat with wide lapels and a belt at the waist. Her father's safari coat, she remembered it from a trip the family made to Africa when she was a child.

She snapped it to smooth the fabric, and the billowing scent of mothballs hit the air. Janice's nose wrinkled in an endearing way as she turned at the sound. "For the chill," Melinda offered, holding it out so the blonde would slip her arms into the sleeves.

Moving her jaw in silence as she contained her reaction, Janice did accept the jacket as well as Melinda's help freeing her blonde hair from beneath the material. The brunette's long fingers brushed over her nape and the warmth transferred to the blonde, easing the tension in her neck.

"Your father's?" Janice settled the coat more comfortably on her shoulders and felt the material stretch. Looking down she found the length almost to her knees. *Dr. Pappas had been a very slender man*, she thought.

"Let's go." Mel led the way down the front walk across the edge of the manicured lawn to the maroon 1940 Ford Deluxe Sedan, one of her first purchases after her father's death. The wide bench seat and extra large back seat provided the room to courier many donations for charities hither and yon.

Both women dropped their heads against the breeze coming across the open grounds from the large lake at the northern edge of the property. Janice burrowed deeper within the loaned coat and Melinda was glad she had thought of it as well as been nonchalant about giving it to her. The sun burst on the tangle of Janice's hair as it blew around her face, casting an angel-like halo around the blonde head. Melinda felt renewed anger at her mother.

Reaching the car, she opened the passenger door and gestured Janice inside. Moving around to the other side, she opened the door and tossed her purse on the seat between herself and Janice

as the blonde settled against the passenger window.

Intuition made her glance up at the house before sliding behind the wheel. Her mother peered from the gallery window, a tense hand gripped the heavy burgundy drapes. Catching her mother's eye, Melinda pointedly turned away and dropped into the car.

With a quick motion, Melinda shoved the car into gear, and guided it down the oak-lined drive onto the road into town.

Despite her own reaction to Melinda's mother, Janice could only imagine what that morning's scene had done to Melinda's state of mind. She glanced over at the brunette and studied the woman's profile as she drove.

She kept her eyes on the road, and both hands on the wheel. The driving wasn't complicated, and obvious from Melinda's fingers moving over the wheel's cover, she was terribly aggravated. Janice wondered briefly if some of it was directed at her.

"I'm sorry I walked out," she offered.

"It's not your fault."

"But your mother--"

"Mother can learn to mind her own business. Who I choose to bring into my home is my business not hers."

Janice winced at the anger she heard and in confusion asked, "What's in Boston?"

"Her family."

"Why would she go back there? This is her home."

Melinda took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "My father did not leave the house to her, Janice. He left it to me."

"Why would he do a thing like that? Isn't that unusual?" Janice paused. "Didn't he love your mother?"

There was a long silence as Melinda's hands flexed on the wheel, then quietly she said, "I don't know." Melinda shook her head.

Janice puzzled over that. Finally she caught the signs indicated the university town was just ahead. "Can I treat you to a sweet roll and some tea before I have my interview?"

Melinda pulled into a space marked in front of a small shop at the corner of Dunhill and Broad streets. Over the entrance a painted sign proclaimed "Greenley's Coffee Shop." "All right," she said.

Janice stepped out and straightened her clothes. She saw Melinda shade her eyes and glance across the way and up. Following suit, she identified a large face clock over a bank entrance. "7:22... Time enough for a quick bite before my meeting at eight." She linked her arm through Melinda's and led her into the coffee shop.

Both women's spirits brightened considerably as they settled at a small corner window table and a waitress brought two coffees when Melinda gestured with her fingers. Janice ordered, "A couple of the peach pastries?" When Mel confirmed with a nod, Janice added to the waitress, "And cream for my coffee please."

The waitress nodded and went behind the counter where an array of men were assembled, drinking coffee, enjoying platters of eggs, grits and seared ham slices. They were engaged in friendly banter with each other and the cook behind the counter before reporting for their own jobs. Janice turned her attention back to Melinda. "So, who do you have to see today?"

The brunette shrugged. "Just a few of the board members. Let them know I'm back in town, and I have a lunch appointment with the president's wife. She and I are both on the board at the

Community kitchen. We're planning the Thanksgiving menu and where to get the supplies."

"That should be a busy day."

"You've got the harder job. Cuthridge is not known for being easily amused. Pretty dry personality. Even my father wasn't crazy about him."

"Well he's going on sabbatical. I have to convince him I can teach his classes, not work with him."

Melinda nodded and chuckled. "You're right. I'll come by the department after I've had lunch with Maryann. Probably around two."

"I think I can handle that. Who knows you might find me settling into my office by then." She smiled at the brunette and reached a hand across the table to pat her hand. "Everything will be fine."

"Except on the home front. What am I going to do about Mother?"

Janice shook her head. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

"But she's deliberately hurting you."

"I'll grow a thicker skin."

There was a long pause of silence as the two women accepted their pastries, Janice stirred in her creamer and Melinda took her first bite. Putting down her fork, Melinda's voice broke the silence in a rumby caress. "Janice?"

"Mmm hmmm?" the blonde answered, chewing quietly on her pastry.

"I much prefer the skin you've got," Melinda's voice lowered even further, sending tingles down the blonde's back as she shot a glance up at the brunette's luminous eyes. They shared smiles and finished their breakfasts in companionable silence.

Half an hour later, Melinda pulled the sedan up to the history building, parked and turned off the engine. Janice looked at her oddly when Melinda quickly stepped out and moved around to the other side, opening the passenger door. From her body language, Janice immediately realized that Melinda was nervous. For her. That revelation struck her silent even as she watched Melinda move around her to close the door.

Without a word, the brunette pulled Janice into a tight hug, nuzzling her chin against her shoulder. She could feel Melinda shiver slightly. She put her own arms around Mel's back and squeezed. "Thanks."

Feeling the breeze on her face Melinda pulled back and pulled her emotions together. "You had better get going. Don't want to be late for your interview." She caught Janice's gaze and impulsively caressed the smooth cheek. "Good luck."

"I'll be fine. Cuthridge just better watch out. I might just impress his socks off." She chuckled, and a moment later, Melinda chuckled too.

"Don't let him get you flustered. He does it to his students too. 'Makes men out of them to face adversity,' he says. We students just called it perversity."

"So you had him?"

"Introductory level class about two years ago. Then I moved onto classes out of his field. Seems that happened a lot. Probably a lot of promising British scholars were driven into French or German studies because of Cuthridge."

Janice made a face of wry amusement. "Next you're going to tell me he's fat, jowled and older than Methuselah."

"No, actually --"

"Just go on. I'll be all right. Heavens, if I can face down Smythe, a farcical slime ball, and

come out on top, I can certainly handle a beet-faced Brit with airs." She nudged Melinda's shoulder.

Melinda gave her another quick hug and returned to the car. The blonde watched from the stone steps as Melinda set the car back into gear and drove off. With a quick hand, she ordered her hair and turned to open the large, brass-handled doors.

A weight pushed it open from the other side, startling Janice who jumped backward. She looked up to see a large sallow hand wrap around the edge of the door, holding it from swinging further outward. A sheepish face appeared around that edge, worried brown eyes peering from a thin face with well-groomed muttonchops and dust-brown hair, shot through with a few strands of gray. "My apologies, miss," he said when he spotted her pushing herself off the stone railing. "I didn't expect anyone to be coming in at this hour."

"I have a meeting in the department at eight o'clock," she responded, genuinely smiling as he helped her to her feet.

"Applying to enter the program?"

"Something like that," she answered with a chuckle.

"Well, good luck to you then. I was headed to the dining room for a quick coffee. Department secretary makes a terrible brew." He held the door for her and waved her inside. "Pardon me, but I must be quick. I too have an early appointment."

Janice nodded and watched him hurry down the sidewalk toward the east side of campus. Interesting fellow, probably a graduate assistant, she thought. In the entry she paused, studying the building's interior while she shrugged off her coat and straightened her sleeves and brushed a few wrinkles from her slacks. A set of stairs, with a faded wood banister indicated the route to the second floor. A doorway in front of her had a glass inset for the top panel and a long corridor beyond with widely spaced doorways suggested classrooms. She glanced to a wood placard listing rooms and names.

"Department secretary, 201. Okay." She glanced down the rest of the list, absorbing the other names. "Adelbaum, Vorhees, Thomas, Cuthridge, 208. Okay." She went further and saw "Pappas." "Wonder what Mel's father's name is still doing on the placard. He's been dead a year already." Shrugging the question off, though thinking she might file it away and ask Melinda later, Janice sprung to the stairs, bounding up them two at a time.

### Chapter 3

Janice entered the secretary's office after checking the small tag on the wall beside the door. She heard movement in an adjoining office and looked around, identifying a pair of chairs to sit and wait.

Just as she settled, debating between a formal posture or a casual one, a woman walked in. She was of medium height wearing her golden brown hair done up in a high bun off a vaguely lined, modestly made-up face. Hazel green eyes widened slightly at spotting Janice. "I'm sorry. May I help you?" She put the small mug in her hands on the efficiently organized desk.

Janice came to her feet and introduced herself, then said, "I believe we've spoken on the phone. I'm here to discuss a position with Doctor Cuthridge."

"Oh yes, to fill in while he's on leave. It would be nice to have another woman around here," she remarked as she settled in her chair and moved two books with notes sticking out helpfully from the pages. Then she scanned over a paper written out in a grid format. "Yes, yes. Here you are. Dr. Cuthridge, eight o'clock." She glanced up at a clock on the wall and immediately stood. "A few

minutes past. Oh dear, come with me." Janice followed the woman out into the corridor. "Dr. Cuthridge... intensely dislikes tardiness." She cast a last glance over her shoulder halfway down the hall. An appraising look preceded a conspiratorial smile. "I'll just tell him I held you up with paperwork."

The smile sprang to Janice's lips spontaneously as she felt a connection blossom with their shared possession of the simple secret. "Thank you, Mrs. Collier."

"Call me Bea." She knocked on the closed door of 208. When there was no answer, she knocked once more and then swung the door inward. The office beyond was empty.

*Well, 'empty' is the wrong term,* Janice realized as she took in the cluttered space. There wasn't any person visible in the four-walled space. Floor to ceiling on three walls held mismatched bookshelves. Each was filled to overflowing; many books lay on their sides atop others lined up in the rows of stacks. She caught a few of the titles and smiled. Philosophy to general history. Thinly bound copies of academic papers sat next to map collections in thick binders.

The desk was also covered in books and papers. She spotted the corner of a nameplate and uncovered it with a careful hand.

"Yes, well. This is the place," Janice showed the plate to Bea with a quick smile. "Do you suppose he's buried in here under one of these piles?"

Bea shook her head and backed up to look down the corridor. "He was here earlier. I have no idea where--"

Janice looked up as Bea's voice stopped in mid-sentence and swallowed as her eyes caught sight of another figure in the corridor beyond.

Both women gaped at a man of moderate height, muttonchops shaped around an expressive face. A familiar face. Janice swallowed again. Bea however spoke first. "Doctor Basil Cuthridge, this is Doctor Janice Covington. Your eight o'clock appointment."

Bea presided as the two shook hands, Janice alternating her gaze between Bea and Cuthridge, instantly recalling their brief encounter on the steps out front.

Cuthridge apparently also recalled it. "Thank you for the formal introduction, Mrs. Collier. Dr. Covington and I briefly met one another this morning." He smiled at her benignly. "But I hadn't the pleasure of exchanging names." His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled again. "Thank you, Bea. I'll take Dr. Covington from here."

Bea looked from one to the other, her face concerned. "I'll be transcribing Dr. Leavitt's lecture tapes. In the front office."

Janice kept her gaze even with Dr. Cuthridge's as he assured the secretary, "Thank you, Mrs. Collier. I'll ask if we need anything."

Bea's gaze fell on Janice who spared a smile for the older woman. "Thank you for directing me."

"Of course." The secretary finally responded as she backed up to and out the door.

Janice chuckled as Bea disappeared. "She seems to think of you as a bit of a dragon." She herself remembered the smiling man who had so politely bumped into her earlier. Now she turned to see his back to her.

Dr. Cuthridge moved a pile of books revealing a chair with a thick gray overcoat still draped. "Have a seat." His voice held little inflection, instantly making Janice wary. When he looked up expectantly, she nodded, but did not sit. Instead she backed up and watched Cuthridge briefly scan a shelf and then pull a book.

"You probably have a lot of questions for me," she said finally.

"Some," he agreed, calmly flipping through pages. He stopped and passed over the book. "Read this please."

Janice studied him querulously for a brief moment. She remembered Melinda's advice that Cuthridge liked to put people on the spot. *Adversity huh?* She thought. Lifting her chin, she slipped the book from his hands. She turned it so she could identify the text. The character set was ancient, blocky from being more often carved than written. She blew out a long breath. "First century Gaelic, maybe second." She looked up and caught his nod.

Calling up her skill in this area--*Melinda is the real expert*, she thought--and a little of the cockiness she had used countless times negotiating with her work crews on a dig, Janice began reading the text aloud.

Out of the corner of her eyes she caught a few wincings by Cuthridge and modulated her tempo and the accent she found coming more easily. She caught the ghost of a smile as she stopped reading.

"Now translate."

Without blinking she returned to the top of the passage and began the translation. It was a description of a Celtic union rite--a wedding ceremony.

"At once pass the vine among their digits, interweaving as the roots of the willow tree. Incant the soma, or ritual song, with each drinking from the cup of Mother."

He took the book from her hands at that point. "Your syntax could use a little work."

Janice moistened her lips and rubbed her palms together. "My specialty is not Celtic, but there are many universal structures in the ancient tongues. I have a degree in European history and a specialist's in Mediterranean Medievalism, also several advanced degrees in Pre-Roman cultures."

"Read that in your application." He put the book down and edged his hip over the desk. "I liked the amount of practical experience in your resume, Dr. Covington. It suggested an ability to learn and think on your feet."

He was looking at her steadily now. The professorial demeanor left his features, and he returned to that man she had met on the front steps. The one she had mistaken, by the air of youthful excitement about him, for a graduate student. "What do you want to hear then?" Idealism shone from his dusty features which was then given voice, she knew as she listened, from the heart.

"Commitment." He took a deep breath. "Dr. Covington, I'm sure you've heard I'm very hard on my students." He picked up a magazine and flipped through it as he continued. "I'm hard on my students because I want them to succeed. Not for myself. Not for this," he folded the magazine and shook it at her. "For them. I enjoy harnessing an unbound love of history and channeling it into making graduates who will be incisive, investigative, dynamic, and adept at creative analysis." He sighed. "I want them to think. Not just ingest and spit it all back out."

"That's... very noble." She reeled a little at the conclusion of his impassioned speech. "What I mean to say is... If you love teaching so much, why are you leaving?"

"I registered the leave as sabbatical, yes, but..." He trailed off and Janice found herself watching him pace. "I'm sure you determined that I'm originally from Britain. Dover to be exact."

"Yes, I gathered that much. The name, the accent..." Here she paused with a light chuckle. "Sorry, but you aren't the typical American."

He nodded. "And I suspect neither are you, but back to the matter at hand. I don't know that I will return to the university when my sabbatical has passed."

"Investigating a new position?" Janice had heard of colleagues doing such a thing, using paid time off from one institution to cement a position at another. In just a short analysis, she honestly

had not pictured Cuthridge as the type.

"No. Well, not an academic one." He paused. "I'm going to join the war effort."

Remember the troubles she and Melinda had just skirting the growing war, the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "That's crazy."

"No, it's patriotism, I suppose. I was... listening to the wireless one evening." He gestured at the radio buried under a small curling stack of papers on the windowsill. "They... the Nazis... bombed Britain."

"Friends?"

He nodded. "My home is a pile of rubble. A hereditary noble's cottage on the edge of Dover. Nothing but a pile of plaster, twisted grommets and broken heirlooms." His eyes gleamed a bit greener. "I have to go, but... my students deserve a chance at completing their studies under good guidance." He straightened up and picked up a pencil, twirling it over and through his fingers, then pointed it at her. "You are friends with Mel Pappas, right?"

"Yes, she's better at the syntax than I am as a matter of fact."

"Oh, I know. She's only a credit or two away from completing her studies. She'd be able to present a dissertation within the year if she would just buckle down and write the thing."

"I could make sure she completes her studies." Janice briefly contemplated the nights at Beaufort in the future where she and Melinda could curl up together debating passages and dissecting translations, piecing together life in northern Europe before the dawn of modern history.

"She and my other senior students could also support you. You'll lecture, review my undergraduate students' research procedures, challenge them as well as the graduate students. It's long hours, not a lot of pay and no glory."

Janice smiled, her green eyes taking on the sparkle of accepting the challenge. "I think I'm pretty familiar with that."

"I have all my students' files here. We could go over the course materials and a few of their files." He gestured. "Unless you have another appointment?"

Taking a long pause to think about it, Janice finally offered her hand in agreement. "I could give you my thoughts on their courses of study. How to guide them to more specific questions. And some content I could bring in to enhance the classes."

Cuthridge took her hand and smiled back. "Then, I think, Doctor Covington, that we can begin."

Together they cleared his desk and found the student files. He offered her a cup from the thermos of coffee he pilfered from the campus's dining hall.

Laughing she declined and they began to work.

## Chapter 4

Melinda discreetly uncrossed then recrossed her ankles in the other direction, using a hidden hand to rub her thigh. Unobtrusively she checked her wristwatch and wondered how Janice had been doing for the last two hours.

Though she tried not to, the brunette sighed. Even Cuthridge would have been more fun than this, she thought, watching the others of the board discussing a budget item.

She had come in looking for the college president, just to let him know she was back and inquire if he had managed to reschedule a board meeting she had missed while overseas. She had not expected to hear that if she could wait twenty minutes the meeting could go ahead right now,

that morning. She looked up across the table at the impressive figure of a middle-aged man, broad shoulders encased in a double-breasted blue suit, ready wit sparkling from brown eyes as he addressed a point to the dozen gathered board members.

Jonathan Ryder Smith spoke softly, but his tone carried gravity. "A cost of living adjustment is prudent," he said.

"It isn't something we can afford right now," countered Harold Gobal, a widowed businessman. The Raleigh Mercantile owner had both well-developed pragmatism and wealth. He pulled at his salt and pepper beard with thoughtful fingers.

"Everyone is tightening their belt," Cassidy Zeigmacht added. The widow Zeigmacht held a seat also on the Raleigh city council, her one grown son a proud graduate of the university, so she supported it with her money and her incisive thoughts. Melinda detected the considerations going on behind the slowly scanning gray eyes. Those eyes lighted briefly on her and the brunette swallowed even as she heard herself being addressed. "What do you think?"

Melinda felt all eyes shift to her. Having basically inherited the board position from among her father's responsibilities, she tended to remain quiet and observant, not talkative at these meetings. Also as the youngest person on the board, Melinda was often deciding for herself where her own opinion lay, but not typically speaking much unless it was a Pappas endowed chair under consideration. Ziegmacht occasionally had Melinda over for tea following their monthly meetings and frequently admonished her for her silence. Now it seemed since Melinda's return from Europe that Cassidy intended to change tactics. She would draw the brunette out in public.

Studying the fiscal data that Smith had provided, Melinda started in on a listing of facts, hoping it would bolster her discussion. "In the last year we have lost thirteen faculty members." A tapping drew her attention to Smith rhythmically dropping his pencil eraser against the polished wooden tabletop. "To my knowledge, we have never lost that many in a single year."

Smith nodded and contributed, "With the departure of faculty, our enrollment declines. The attraction to our hallowed halls really is not football, as our coaching staff would have you believe." Melinda noticed Beauregard Collier stiffen up at this remark, then returned her gaze back to Smith. "We have to find a way to keep our faculty," he concluded. "And that means money."

"Then they weren't part of the family," Collier, a very gray-haired wiry man well advanced into his 70s, retorted. "Who needs them?"

Doctor Beauregard Collier, a professor emeritus of English, had been with the faculty since before the turn of the century. Having graduated from the undergraduate program at a state college campus in Chapel Hill, he had joined the starting faculty at this new campus further inland in 1893. Bolstered by the presence of several doctors of English and in the other disciplines, Collier had spent his young life, married his wife of 47 years, and raised three boys to study within these halls. North Carolina University was not just a place of learning, but a family to the aging curmudgeon.

"Times change, Beau," Gobal interjected. "Money drives an awful lot of things since we worked so hard to recover from the '29 crash."

Collier and Gobal did not frequently see eye to eye and Melinda waited for the inevitable explosion, but Zeigmacht defused it with a wry turn of wit. "Yes, Harry, but we only narrowly avoided our own crash of '39," she admonished with a quirked smile.

Gobal nodded his head and turned to face her. "Have an idea, Cass?"

"Intangibles are often more valuable than money," she suggested. "Let's institute a faculty member awards dinner, and shuffle the department chairmanships a bit."

"Rewarding those who have kept students, or kept students interested..." Melinda began.

"Or become involved in the campus community. As the other faculty have left that's made more than a few of the remaining ones take on club supervisions, a few have even moved into the houses with the students to support them, or foster study groups," Cassidy confirmed.

"I hadn't thought about that," Melinda acknowledged. "The students would certainly point out faculty they have felt the greatest help from."

"We can begin the selection process and have the final vote go to the student body. Probably be able to have a Christmas assembly to celebrate those awarded," Smith picked up the idea with an enthusiastic smile. "I like it, Cassidy. It's new. Quite original."

"And won't cost much more than a few plaques and a special preparation in the campus kitchens," Gobal acceded.

Melinda smiled. This was definitely the way more meetings should go.

Zeigmacht caught her eye and accepted the smile. "Perhaps you will be able to introduce the new faculty members to the student body then also, Melinda." The older woman raised an eyebrow significantly and Melinda instantly wondered where Cassidy had heard about Janice, not fooling herself for a moment into believing that the news of her house guest had escaped anyone's notice. "A mistress of ceremonies."

"Certainly someone more experienced?" she protested delicately.

"Dear, the rest of us are too old to gush appropriately, besides, I think you have the right... presence, shall we say, to be most appreciated by our student body."

Melinda blushed at Ziegmacht's words. Cassidy relented and changed the topic, though she reached out and patted the brunette's hand on the tabletop. "Well, that settles what's happening at Christmas. Didn't you have a proposal from the student body for Halloween, Beau?"

Dr. Collier nodded. "I'd rather just decline it. I can't see the benefit of letting hundreds of students crowd our campus for the express purpose of drinking and scaring each other to death with hideous masks." He lifted the proposal, formally submitted by the Student Body president. "When I was in college--" he began.

Cassidy settled back and waved her hand generously. "Oh come now, Beau. Don't tell me you didn't kick up your heels as a young man. I won't believe it."

"And I think it's inappropriate to have crowds of people in any one place for such a long night. There's bound to be trouble."

"Trouble? And you've never caused any?" Melinda watched in fascination as Cassidy shifted and put a hand down on the table firmly.

"They're children."

"They are adults," she countered. "How can you justify denying them a party? Typically there's a fall dance as well as a spring one."

"So let's tell them they can have a dance, in town. Halloween night is no time to just open up our campus to revelry."

"Poppycock," Cassidy retorted. "So the fall party will coincide with Halloween. What of it? The spring one coincides with Valentine's Day, so it's not like they're trying to subject the campus to heathen ritual."

Melinda looked to Dr. Collier and saw by his reddening face that Cassidy had hit on probably the key reason for his objection. "It's a carnival they're suggesting, Dr. Collier, not the formation of a coven."

Cassidy nodded at her simple statement with approving eyes. "Melinda's right. If we secure the proper amount of assistance beforehand, I'm sure we'll even have sufficient police on hand to

quell anything unruly."

Collier looked from face to face and sat back grumbling. "I won't sponsor this outrage."

"According to their proposal, Beau, the students have all the supplies. They were merely inquiring as to the use of place," Smith pointed out, which only made Collier grumble even more.

Melinda quelled the amused smile that threatened to break across her face as she watched the by-play among the board members. Well, maybe things are somewhat interesting after all.

Smith shuffled his paper and looked at the time. "One more quick item and then I have to get Melinda to lunch with my wife."

Everyone shuffled his or her papers to the next item: the qualifications of a new faculty member. Melinda sighed, and tried to moderate her voice into quiet tones without wavering from the facts in her words. "The position is for a doctor of archaeology." Melinda brushed back a strand of her dark hair that had come undone from the bun at her nape. Harold Gobal, the board member who had initially fielded the candidate, narrowed his eyes and returned her regard. "Mister Gobal, the bank won't authorize the fund disbursement unless the trust conditions are met."

Smith spoke to it without preamble. "Lipton's portfolio is impressive. Not as many publications as some, but the insight--" University President Jonathan Ryder Smith challenged her refusal of the candidate.

Of the dozen or so others at the table, Beauregard Collier steepled his fingers. "Miss Pappas, the two more experienced candidates have already withdrawn. The government offered them better."

"And the applicant has what?" She gestured with the scrip sheet. "No teaching experience. It's been less than a year since his doctorate was conferred... in Norwegian antiquities. Less than two years in the field at obscure digs," Melinda countered. Then she sat back. "Has he been extended an interview?" She nailed her gaze on Smith. He nodded. "When will he be here?"

"Thursday. With Cuthridge's departure at the new year, we need the position filled. Otherwise we'll be too far down in numbers."

Melinda's eyes widened at the short timetable as well as at the news that meant Janice might not have a position after all. "Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"You were not available for conference," Collier countered. "A research facility was also interested."

The brunette hid her eyes for a long moment before nodding. She hated turning down eager applicants for any of the endowed chairs. The positions held little more than prestige and certainly the money award was more modest than the lure of working for the government. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I'll need to see his full file. See what I can do to convince the fund director that the stipulations are still being met."

"We would like to have the position funded for the beginning of the spring semester," Jonathan concluded as he passed the file via Collier. He pushed to his feet and shrugged his shoulders into his overcoat. "We'll meet again next week after the campus Halloween party has had a chance to die down."

"I won't be back in town from visiting my daughter-in-law and new grandson until the 2nd," Rachel Dumont objected. "Could we make it the 4th?"

Smith shrugged. "Any objections?" he asked of the table. No one responded. "All right then, we'll meet 11 a.m. on the 4th." He moved around the table to Melinda who was collecting her papers and purse as well as trying to shrug into her coat. "Come on, Melinda, I'll drive you over to the house."

"I brought my own car, Dr. Smith," she replied. "I have a friend over in the history department who I should check on first."

"All right then. Where were you meeting Maryann?"

"At the Biltmore Room."

He nodded appreciatively then turned to leave, catching up with Cassidy Zeigmacht as Melinda felt a shadow fall across her shoulder. She smiled warmly at the only other truly young member of the board.

Tyler Jameson stepped up to her. Thirty-four years old, his older brother had married Mrs. Dumont's only daughter and as a banker himself, albeit a young one, he had enough position in town to sit on the college board with some measure of respect. "Miss Melinda, it is very good to see that your trip overseas was a successful and safe one."

"Thank you, Tyler," she responded, tugging her hair from beneath her coat collar and smoothing the nap of the fabric as she picked up her papers. She watched his face pinch and his eyes dart aside for a brief moment. "Is there something else?"

"Yes. I'd very much like to have you to dinner this evening," he gushed. "I was thinking that my mother..."

Melinda smiled. "I'm sorry, Tyler, but I have a house guest. I should arrange things more in advance for a while. Thank you though, for the kind invitation."

"Perhaps later... this weekend perhaps. Sunday dinner? My mother is having a small gathering."

Shaking her head, she squared her shoulders. "I will have to see, Tyler. Please drop a note by the house tomorrow."

"All right." The blond man had very boyish features and an easy smile. "Perhaps your friend can join us." She thought she detected a note in his tone that suggested he was offering more out of form than any real desire that she take him up on that. Clearly he wanted to have dinner with Melinda... alone.

The brunette was not certain how to take that, as flattery or pushiness. He did not seem to be the pushy type, but she admonished herself with her lessons on the trip home from Macedonia. Appearances could be deceiving.

"I'll ask her," she replied, turning her back on him and following Smith and Zeigmacht, who were conversing about some other event earlier in the week on the campus.

She looked back over her shoulder to see Jameson collecting his briefcase and coat, draping the latter over his arm. She thought about Janice for a fleeting moment and wondered what the strong-willed blonde would say to the dinner invitation. A dinner party might be just the thing to give Janice her own contacts within the Raleigh community, Melinda thought.

And had to consider the idea.

## Chapter 5

Straightening her coat and chattering over her shoulder to her companion, Janice reached the bottom of the stairs and reached out for the door leading out of the history department's imposing building.

"It isn't as simple as it sounds," she said, just as her hand closed over air and she stumbled forward into another body. A pair of arms shifted around her shoulder in startled reaction and she bolted her head up, slamming her crown into someone's chin.

"Ow!" Her hand closed over an arm in a frantic attempt to find her center of balance before they went tumbling onto the concrete steps.

Janice released her grip and threw herself backward as she looked up. She felt big hands -- Basil's most likely since he had been right on her heels -- close over her shoulders.

"Janice!" Blue eyes raked her from head to toe as she steadied and gathered her wits.

"Mel!" She was positively happy to see the brunette; excited about the news she had to share.

"Miss Pappas." Basil's drier, lightly accented voice rumbled just off her right shoulder.

Melinda's eyes left Janice's and fell on Dr. Cuthridge where she noted his steadying grip remained on the blonde's shoulders. The position irritated her sense of protectiveness toward Janice. Only after a pause for a breath could she speak. "Good afternoon, Dr. Cuthridge."

"Dr. Covington and I were just headed out for a bite."

"I left a note with Bea," Janice interjected. "The secretary upstairs."

Melinda shook her head. "I know who Bea is." Her emotions upset by the circumstances, she winced even as she heard the cutting tone in her voice.

"Would you care to join us?" Cuthridge intervened. Almost hypnotically drawn to it, Melinda watched his left hand slide down to Janice's elbow where he then pulled it away to support the door.

Janice answered for her. "Melinda already has plans for lunch with Mrs. Smith." Melinda thought she heard a note of pleasure in Janice's voice and considered canceling her plans. She clamped down on the impulse but acknowledged that the notion Janice would not want Melinda along for lunch hurt terribly.

"The president's wife?" Cuthridge clarified getting a nod from Melinda. "You certainly have connections, Miss Pappas."

She drew her gaze back to Cuthridge's green eyes with barely concealed annoyance. "We're both on the board of the Community kitchen," she responded, feeling oddly detached as she spoke, caught between propriety, her growing annoyance with Janice, and her anxiety of facing this particular man, who always managed to overset her when she was in his classes. "We have to plan the Thanksgiving dinner."

Janice's hand slipped over Mel's and the brunette absolutely felt her brain shut down as she looked down into upturned and smiling green eyes. "I got the job," Janice said, her face alight with excitement and pleasure.

A spurt of jealousy that she had not been responsible for that pleasure caught Melinda full force in the stomach. She pulled her hand away and looked up at Cuthridge again. Trying not to notice, she still caught the movement of him sliding around Janice, his right hand guiding the blonde through the doorway.

"Nothing's official yet," he said. "I just have to take her through Personnel."

Melinda considered several things to say next, but none of them found their way to her tongue. She wondered if Cuthridge had told Janice about the board's candidate coming on Thursday. Cuthridge was obviously trying to have someone of his own choosing in place before that happened.

The uncertainty she always felt around this man, who was like her father in so many ways with his careful speech and his sharp gaze, and his formidable intellect, kept her silent. Then too, she realized, catching sight of a clock down the hall, she did not really have time to go into it now. Melinda turned to Janice and said, "I have to get to my meeting. Will I meet you back here later?"

"Basil's given me some notes. I'll go back to the house after lunch to go through them."

Looks like a rainstorm will be coming through."

"Perfect reading weather," Cuthridge commented. "I'll see that she arrives safely."

Melinda felt the words spill forth before she could stop them. "Mother will be happy to see us both for dinner," she looked at Janice briefly. Knowing that was far from the truth, she still hoped Cuthridge would understand he should not linger at the house.

Janice's expression was inscrutable, but she straightened quickly. "All right," she said distantly. "Enjoy your lunch," she added, stepping out onto the building's front steps.

Cuthridge remained in the doorway, allowing Melinda inside to catch a last look at Janice before he stepped away, releasing the door. Melinda's reply was automatic. "You too." And then the two were gone, leaving Melinda studying the door as it fell closed.

With a heartfelt thought, she gave vent to her frustration. *Damn.*

\* \* \*

Janice sat in the front seat of Cuthridge's car puzzling over her words with Melinda. It was an outright lie that Mrs. Pappas would enjoy their company at dinner. The woman had made that clear enough from the first meal that she only tolerated Janice's presence. Meals were silent and tense. The older woman ate slowly so Janice and Melinda frequently ate quickly escaping to the porch outside watching the sun set and the first evening stars appear.

Or more frequently Brenda Pappas would indicate that she had an invitation to this or that home in town. She would make it clear that the other two were not invited. And she and Melinda would eat alone, sometimes coaxing Vani and the cook, a tidily plump very pleasant older woman, to sit with them and share conversation and the meal.

Not going about town constantly did not bother Janice too terribly. Her own preference was to avoid as many parties as possible where she would have to deal with more than a handful of people at a time. But the constant tension had Melinda fairly tied up in knots.

That brought Janice back to her quandary: *why would Melinda lie?* She glanced over to Cuthridge. Melinda had looked askance at him frequently. Perhaps she had hoped to speak with Janice alone? Then again, what was Melinda's relationship to Cuthridge?

Janice revisited her conversations with Cuthridge that morning. They had ranged through various topics, addressing subject matter as well as students in Cuthridge's two introductory classes. She realized, beyond his first mention of Mel's name that he had not delved into her as one of his students as the discussion progressed.

"What do you think of Melinda?" she asked, hoping her voice sounded casual.

"She is a very busy young woman," he replied noncommittally.

"She seemed distracted." Janice crossed her arms over her chest as she observed the passing street sights. "I wonder what happened." The brunette's pulling her hand from Janice's came to mind. "She seemed a little angry."

"Perhaps there is some conflict on the board," he suggested. "Hopefully she will be relaxed later when you see her."

Taking a deep breath, she realized that Cuthridge was right. She could ask Mel later. "So, where's lunch?" she changed the subject deftly.

"Donovan's. It's a popular locale for the students." She smiled. It certainly sounded like a less than stuffy place. "Do you drink?" he thought to ask.

Janice nodded. "Worrying that I won't fit in?"

"Just thought I'd ask. We could go somewhere else."

"I've tossed back a few," she responded with an easy laugh. "Lead on."

"Darts?" He asked as he parked and Janice noticed the small sign on the front of a wood-frame building.

"I'm pretty good at aiming," she answered.

"You shoot?" He sounded surprised. She nodded, wondering what his reaction would be. "Very few ladies I know can handle one without flinching."

"Well, I've been in too many dicey situations to flinch much anymore," she answered with plain honesty.

He nodded. "It's been a while since I saw the dangers of a dig. Perhaps I've made the best decision anyway to get out of the classroom."

Janice shrugged. Cuthridge already knew how she felt about his trip plans. "I'll play you for our first round while we wait for our sandwiches."

"You're on."

They found a table near the boards, Cuthridge nodding to a few students who glanced up with surprised and pleased expressions.

"Do you come here often?" she thought to ask as they gave their orders and stood up to collect the darts.

"Often enough to keep them on their toes," he replied, not bothering to restrain a broad smile. Then he gestured toward the line, shuffling the darts in his hands as she sighted along hers, judging the shafts' straightness. "Ladies first."

## Chapter 6

"Melinda?"

Mel paused with her iced lemonade in hand as she refocused on her lunch companion.

The liquid accent rolled over her name again. "Melinda?"

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"Melinda dear, what's wrong?"

The brunette shook her head to clear her troubled thoughts. "Nothing," she said as plainly as possible. "We were discussing the menu."

"I have arranged all the cooking volunteers." Maryann Smith, the president's tiny, delicately boned wife flashed a smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes. "So now all we need is recipes."

"The committee came up with most of them."

"And I have the shopping list from that right here." The older woman passed over a half sheet of paper with a list of items. "Here's half. I'll take care of the other half." She picked up her fork. "I was still hoping for some of Vida's sweet potato pone," she added. "You weren't at the meeting."

"I had... business in Europe," Melinda explained.

"Successful?"

Melinda considered the answer quietly as she nibbled on her soup and crackers. Had it been? Her many injuries and Janice's certainly could not be considered a success. They had been shot at, lied to, manipulated, even coerced into committing espionage, and she was still unsure for which side.

*But through it all...* She paused. There had been Janice. The trip, for all its terrible setbacks and disappointments, like the loss of the scrolls, which set Janice's work back several years, had

resulted in Melinda gaining a true friend.

A rare thing for the quiet, intellectual brunette more inclined to book reading than bullet dodging. Janice's support, friendship and finally, the love Melinda had come to feel for her had given Melinda a sense of worth unrivaled in her previous relationships.

"Yes," she revealed, feeling the start of a smile that seemed to spin up from her stomach and wrap around her chest, making her arms ache with a need to catch up someone--Janice--in a tight hug and never let go. She tightened her grip on her spoon instead and met Maryann's eyes, unaware of the exuberant gleam remaining. "Yes, it was... very successful."

Mrs. Smith sat back with an expression of appreciation. "You met someone. I can see that." She leaned forward creating an intimate privacy with her body language. "So tell me?"

Melinda nodded. "She's the daughter of a friend of my father's." Maryann's eyes widened, and Melinda realized that was not what the older woman had expected to hear. She added plainly, "She needed assistance translating a series of tablets, and had asked for Father."

"Oh." Mrs. Smith paused, rubbing her palms with her napkin. "From your face, I was certain you were going to say that you were getting married. An intellectual colleague; I never would have guessed." She returned to her sandwich. "She must be a brilliant young woman."

"She is. In fact, she's investigating the position as Dr. Cuthridge's replacement when he goes on sabbatical."

"I thought Jonathan mentioned they had a candidate to replace him as an endowed chair."

"They were discussing it today," Melinda confirmed, warming to the issue uppermost in her mind. "She met with Cuthridge today. The board didn't seem aware of that. Their candidate arrives Thursday."

Now Maryann looked confused. "So who has final say?"

Melinda shook her head. "I don't know. It sounded as though Cuthridge had decided on Janice."

"Is that your friend's name? Janice?"

"Yes, Doctor Janice Covington."

"Covington... Covington? Why does that name... oh never mind... I'm sorry. You were saying that Cuthridge seems to have decided on your friend. Have you mentioned this to Jonathan?"

"I met with Cuthridge and Janice after I left the board meeting."

Maryann was quiet for a long moment. "I think we need to find out what Dr. Cuthridge is thinking. If Dr. Cuthridge plans to go against the board without any sort of support, your friend could end up with a lot of problems."

"I want to avoid that."

Maryann stood up. A waitress immediately intercepted them. Both women declined dessert and paid their check. Walking together to the front of the restaurant, Maryann offered her final advice, "When you find out anything, call me." She patted Melinda's shoulder.

"Thank you for your help whatever happens."

"I haven't done anything yet. But a friendship that lights up your face like that is worth getting to the bottom of this. Your Janice doesn't deserve to be caught in the middle."

"We've been through a lot together in the short time I've known her. I'd like to just make sure she doesn't get hurt."

"You've been admirable the way you've handled yourself since your father passed on. Stepping forward to pick up so many of his responsibilities. Never be afraid to ask for help, my dear."

Struck speechless by the outpouring of support, Mel could only nod and grasp Maryann Smith's hands briefly, who squeezed hers back. "Thank you, Mrs. Smith. I'll call," she managed finally, turning to walk to her car.

For the longest moment she sat gripping the steering wheel tightly as she figured out where to go next. She wanted to talk to Cuthridge. Checking her wristwatch Melinda realized she might catch both Janice and the professor back at the campus if she hurried.

She took a deep breath resolutely driving away from the Biltmore Room and into the late afternoon downtown traffic.

\* \* \*

Janice waved briefly at Basil Cuthridge as the professor wheeled down the plantation's winding drive. The drizzle from the dark clouds opened with a thunderclap, small droplets banding together into a pelting rain as she turned and dashed for the wide front porch of the Pappas home.

She fumbled through her bag and located the key Melinda had given to her two days earlier, when the brunette realized they might have very different schedules in the coming weeks. Finally unlocking the door the lithe blonde pushed the large heavy portal inward and looked around the shadowed entry for signs of anyone else.

Finding no one she proceeded all the way inside and set her bag, a loan from Dr. Cuthridge, on the floor next to the coat closet. She had just opened the small door and shrugged off the borrowed coat when she heard unhurried footsteps resound down the main hall. Hanger in hand she turned to identify who it was. The sound grew louder and Janice centered her sight on the archway leading toward the kitchen, readily recognizing the back-lit figure of Melinda's mother, Brenda Pappas. The woman, only just past fifty, still had abundant dark locks though a shade or two lighter than her daughter's. The length was tugged back in a high loose bun accentuating sharply defined cheekbones and cornflower blue eyes that lit in reflection of the lightning outside.

"Mrs. Pappas," Janice greeted politely, looking on this as an opportunity to alter her relationship with the older woman.

Brenda's eyes settled on her with the suddenness of a pair of thrown daggers. Apparently she was surprised. As Janice felt herself under tight scrutiny, her nerves jerked as a sudden thunderclap echoed around them. She didn't have time to recover before she was questioned. "What are you doing here?"

Janice dared hope as she answered quietly, "Melinda had her own appointments, so I asked a colleague to bring me home."

The woman's look chilled several degrees and Janice wondered exactly what she had said wrong. "I see," Brenda said. "When is my daughter expecting to come home?"

The question came at Janice in a derisive tone but she gamely ignored it in favor of a quiet, truthful answer. "Melinda indicated she would probably be home for supper."

It obviously stymied Brenda Pappas that Janice was keeping her voice calm and even. When the older woman spoke next it was with the clearly felt tone of dismissal. "Supper will be served at half past five." She turned on her heel and walked back the way she had come, leaving Janice feeling as if all the air had been sucked out of her chest.

Janice leaned hard against the closet door as she closed it. Staring hard where Mrs. Pappas had been standing, she sank slowly to the floor crossing her hands, which still held the coat, over her knees.

She asked herself, *what now?* and turned her head to study the pouring rain. Footsteps once again drew her gaze, this time with clear trepidation that it was Melinda's mother back for another exchange. She could not remember ever having this much animosity between her and another person when she had no idea about the cause. Mindful of her manners, she pushed to her feet and squared her shoulders, daring the woman to find fault with her.

But when she looked up, instead of the uninviting expression of Brenda Pappas, Janice now faced the demure smile of Vida Joseph. The black woman was more a friend than a maid, Melinda had told her during their first day when Vida had shown Janice to the guestroom. A blue floral print sleeveless dress hugged her trim body easily.

"Good afternoon, Miss Covington. May I help you take your things upstairs?"

Janice picked up her bag and shook her head. "No, I have it, Mrs. Joseph. Thank you."

"Call me Vida, please. Miss Melinda says you'll be staying a while so let's not stand on formalities." Janice headed for the steps and found Vida remained just off her right shoulder. The woman's dark chocolate eyes looked over her steadily. "Then you have to call me Janice. I do have it... Vida. It's all right."

"Yes, ma'am," the woman responded deferentially though she did not move away from Janice's side. "It looks mighty nasty outside. Would you care for tea to warm up?"

Unassuming eyes met Janice's surprised glance. "Actually, I'm not really in the mood for tea." What she was interested in, she readily admitted, right now, was Melinda's presence, and curling into the brunette's body for a hug... lasting about an hour. Long enough to forget about Brenda Pappas and the inexplicably terrible encounters they kept having. "How about coffee? With a shot of whiskey?" She added the last in a low voice.

Vida said nothing, only nodded and retreated back down the stairs just as the blonde reached the second floor landing.

Reaching her room a moment later, Janice set her bag on the bed and surveyed the telephone and papers currently occupying the small desk. Well at least I have a job now, Janice thought, beginning the process of rearranging her guest room so it could also serve as her office.

She collected a small two-foot bookcase from the far wall, emptying it of the several reading volumes. Placing this next to the desk, she used it for her three primary reference books loaned by Dr. Cuthridge. Atop it, she shifted the phone and settled the student files and the syllabi for Cuthridge's classes in careful piles on the desktop.

As she worked, a small part of her mind kept an ear on the downstairs, as well as the storm outside, wondering when Melinda would get home. She hoped she would not have to dine alone with Brenda.

## Chapter 7

Bea Collier set aside the letter she had been typing for Professor Leavitt. Settling her tan leather handbag over her shoulder, she briefly thought of her husband of twenty years and what to prepare for dinner when she arrived home.

She stepped out onto the stairs and paused. She turned off the light switch by the door and glanced down the deserted hallway. Then she remembered that her in-laws were expected for the evening. Mentally she tossed out half her menu possibilities. Her father-in-law, Beauregard Collier, was very particular.

A figure partly cast in shadow was just coming from a door down the hall. Unable to identify

the person, Bea called out, "Hello."

A familiar voice answered, making Bea smile. "Hello, Mrs. Collier."

"Melinda Pappas! My word, it's good to see you!" Then she was caught up in blue eyes that shined through the darkness regarding her from behind small wire rims glasses beneath a navy blue wide brim linen hat set forward on her dark head. The brunette stopped at a polite distance that allowed Bea to remain at eye level with the taller younger woman. Bea sucked in a breath when she had taken in the brunette's entire expression. Pale cornflower blue eyes, usually light with a sparkle of happiness were now dark swirling pools of deep ocean waves. Her usual demure smile, small but there at most times, was gone. Bea had only seen Melinda this obviously upset once before. *Dear Lord, what was wrong?*

"What's happened, Melinda? Can I help?"

"Where are Doctors Covington and Cuthridge?" Melinda had looked beyond Bea down the darkened hall.

"Neither of them returned after I saw them leaving for lunch." Bea shook her head. So that's what was on her mind? "They were debating something. She easily remembered the sparkling smile of the lithe Covington woman when she handed Bea a torn piece of paper to give to Melinda. "She left a note for you. It's on my desk." She gestured back over her shoulder. "Shall I get it?"

Melinda passed her quickly, then jerked to a stop by the realization of how anxious she was. She gestured for Bea to lead the way. "I called home and she has not arrived. But they aren't here either."

"You could have come up, you know." Bea's heels clicked a staccato as she quickly crossed to the department office and let Melinda inside. Her voice followed Melinda as she flipped on the lights. "You haven't been by in several weeks."

"Where's the note?" Melinda moved to the desk.

"There by the phone," she directed, somewhat surprised by the unusually abrupt tone.

"Melinda, what's wrong?" The usually calm woman with quiet, delicate movements was replaced by this vision of edginess that snapped up the note and read it quickly, crumpling it in her left hand after a moment.

"Where does he go for lunch?" Her cobalt eyes narrowed focused on the startled and very worried secretary.

"Donovan's mostly. Says it reminds him of the pubs back home." She stalled Melinda with a hand on the slender forearm. An unmistakable and unfamiliar sense of power flowed through the muscle. She looked up in alarm at Melinda's face. "What did the note say? Melinda!" She tried to distract the younger woman out of her curt silence.

It seemed to work, a little. When Melinda answered, her voice was less sharp, but now a note of worry shaped the words. "They were going to lunch to talk more about the job." Bea was surprised. It wasn't any more than what Bea had already guessed, and told the brunette, though it appeared the young blonde had gotten the job. Trying to distract Melinda a little more, she commented on that. "Such a nice young woman, this Janice. She's a friend of yours? She's not in trouble is she?"

Melinda swallowed, realizing that she was scaring the poor secretary. Forcing a smile on her face, she nodded. "Janice is the reason I've missed classes the last month. I was in Europe. She came back with me. She..." There was so much more to the story, thought Melinda, her lips twitching at the unbidden thoughts of calm fragrant breezes and the warm satiny skin of her lover under her fingertips. She blinked feeling a bit disoriented.

"How lovely," Bea offered. A smile shattered Melinda's diffidence almost shocking to witness it was so full of longing.

"It's been more than four hours," Melinda protested. The real world instantly banished her thoughts away.

Bea shook her head. "If she's with Cuthridge still, that man could talk to himself for days, dear, much less an appreciative, interactive audience. I'm sure they just lost track of time." The secretary was finally beginning to settle down, realizing that Melinda was just overreacting from what was obviously deep concern for her new houseguest.

Melinda considered that. Based on the note and her conversation earlier with Janice and Cuthridge she knew the lithe, beautiful blonde had been very excited and very distracted. It did not make her feel much better. "I don't suppose you would have the number for Donovan's?"

Bea put down her purse. "There's a book of numbers in the desk. Or we can call the exchange."

Realizing the hour and that Bea had likely been leaving for her own home and family, Melinda sat down, pulled out the drawer and found the book. "I'll try it myself. I'm sorry to have kept you."

She could feel Bea study her for a long moment. "Are you certain?"

Melinda picked up the receiver from the cradle and looked up momentarily. "Yes. I'll be fine," she said, never pausing to consider that she had just peremptorily taken over the secretary's own desk.

Bea only smiled. She remembered when she was so young that every little problem seemed terribly oversetting. The secretary set the lock on the door. "Just pull it shut after you leave."

Melinda nodded, removed her hat and powder blue handbag, setting both aside before skimming through the book pages. She was already thinking she would call Donovan's first, then her home. If Janice wasn't in either place, she'd just look up Cuthridge's home. She listened as Mrs. Collier's footsteps moved away and down the stairs, then rotated the dialing wheel.

After a single ring she heard the telephone pick up at the other end. "Yes. Hello. I'm looking for someone. Could you tell me--? Yes, all right. Doctor Janice Covington. Blonde. Just over five feet tall. She's twenty-seven years old. She'd be with a Doctor Basil Cuth--"

"I just dropped her off," a deep voice interrupted her.

Looking up, a startled Melinda quickly set the receiver back on its cradle without politely closing the connection and pushed herself to her feet. The chair loudly scraped the floor in the silence. "Dr. Cuthridge," she addressed the man standing in the doorway. "I was just looking for Jan-- Dr. Covington."

"I heard." The professor removed his hat, a corduroy billet cap, and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the doorframe. "I left her at Beaufort Oaks safe and sound about thirty minutes ago."

Melinda heard the dismay in his tone and realized she had affronted him. "You spent four hours at lunch."

"She's a very talkative, bright young woman," he replied still watching her closely.

Melinda took a deep breath. She never realized quite how much she could sound like her mother. She asked more calmly, "So, did you give Janice the position?"

"I found Janice very incisive. Even in matters not in her specialty. Early Roman and late Greek period, isn't it?"

Melinda shrugged away the off-topic comment perturbed at Cuthridge's casual use of her

friend's first name. "Did you give her the job?"

"Pending approval, yes."

"Whose approval?"

"Department chair. The Dean. President Smith."

"The board has their own candidate arriving Thursday."

"I know."

Melinda felt apprehension seize like two fists on the muscles in her neck and shoulders.

"And?" She could not shake the feeling of intimacy she was getting from his behavior.

"And what? I'll tell them that the position has already been filled."

"You can't do that, Doctor. It's called breach of intent and the university could be in serious trouble." She walked toward him. "President Smith didn't know you already had a candidate in mind."

That seemed to shake his composure. "Covington could lose the position?"

"Easily." Melinda shook her head, small wisps of her dark hair coming loose from her bun. "I refuse to believe you didn't know. So the question remains... why?"

"It's my sabbatical, my replacement." Now his voice was curt, aggravated. She realized he felt challenged by the board's decision-making power.

Melinda sighed. "Janice's application has to go through official channels before Thursday or they'll force you to take the candidate who did."

"Did you see his file?"

"Yes, I did. I've been told by the board to make sure he meets the endowed chair's requirements in time for the spring term." Melinda moved around the desk and now stood about three feet away from him, effectively herding him out the door. "You have to speak with President Smith. He's the only one who could correct things."

Cuthridge rubbed his chin and took a deep breath. "Will he listen?"

She nodded. "I believe he will. No matter what, you can't avoid this."

"Janice would get hurt," he acceded. "I really like her. Perhaps I should try talking with Smith." He straightened, tugging smooth the lines of his damp overcoat. "First thing tomorrow."

Melinda took a deep breath and let it out slowly no longer quite as angry. "Thank you."

After a moment's quiet, he followed her into the hall. "Where did you find her? I haven't heard of her research before now."

"Europe. Macedonia, more specifically. She telegraphed my father for help with some translations."

"Melvin knew her?"

Melinda shook her head. "I don't think so. I think he just knew her father. I should be getting home. Mother and Janice are expecting me for dinner." She paused at the top of the stairs and looked back at him. "Clear this up, Dr. Cuthridge. Please."

"I don't want to see her hurt either."

Melinda mentally brushed off the contrariness that emerged when she heard the wistful note in his voice. Adjusting her purse strap she walked away. Shocked at herself, Melinda forced her mind off the subject and onto other things. She stepped out of the history building and walked down the shadowed sidewalk toward her car, head down against the steadily falling rain.

Against the backdrop of increasing thunder and rain which was making it hard to see, the rustle of leaves in the bushes that lined the sidewalk went unnoticed. Without warning, thick hands closed around her upper arms and a hard muscled body slammed into her, driving them both to the pavement before she even realized that she was screaming.

"Shut up!" A fist hit her temple. The voice was familiar. A hand clamped down across her mouth, muffling her yells as she was flipped over, blinking into the pouring rain. Melinda tried not to panic, but the dimness of her vision and the shock of the attack terrified her. She swatted blindly at him, some internal instinct forcing her to push off against the rough concrete and try throwing him off.

Everything was a blur while she fought, not exactly certain how, to flip them over so she was on top, raining blows down on his face. Her heart was pounding, her lungs burning. Then the strap of her purse caught around her wrist, tangling her fingers trying to get it off. She had a close glimpse of his face, too close and too blurred to make identification, and felt his breath against her cheek as she tried to slam her bound fists into his face.

Suddenly, she found herself under him again, face down with her knees crouched under her. The purse straps snapped and then without warning, she felt the scrape of concrete against her face and hands. It tore through her stockings and bloodied her knees. He got his legs around hers. Melinda heard the campus clock tower chime once signaling the half-hour. It was her last clear thought before her head was repeatedly banged into the pavement. She fought off wave after wave of dizziness. Grabbing dirt she blindly mashed it into her attacker's bleeding face. He reared back, slapping futilely trying to see. His left hand did not release her and she was dragged to her feet. Resisting his grip, she was pulled across the pavement. The pavement burned along her legs and hands as she kicked and screamed for help.

In a split instant though she gained good footing and without thought, launched herself backward, knocking him over and taking her body into an airborne roll. Dear God, she thought, disoriented for several long terrifying moments.

When she opened her eyes and righted the world around her, she found herself face down in a rain-soaked flowerbed, panting. Her hands rested between her face and the dirt as she coughed. Be more careful, she heard. Cautiously she ventured a peek at her surroundings. She focused on a nearby crumpled figure and realized it was her attacker. She heaved, throwing up.

Staggering to her feet, Melinda had a good look at the man. Instantly she recognized him as the man Janice had shot and wrestled off the train from New York City. Apparently he had survived and tracked them to the university.

She was bent over catching her breath when she heard him groan. Energy she couldn't have identified a source for, shot through her body. Favoring her right knee, twisted, she now realized, when she had been pulled down--*So how did I get away?*--Melinda quickly located her car and edged behind the wheel. Adrenaline washed over her fear, cloaking it as her body went through several automatic motions and turned on the car, speeding away from the campus. In her rear view mirror she saw the blond man, now filthy and covered in dirt, uneasily rise to his feet.

\* \* \*

Vida Brown looked up at the clock over the kitchen entrance. Just a few minutes before 5:30, she realized. Surveying the dinner she and the cook had just finished preparing she wondered if she could keep it warm for a few minutes more. She had sent the cook home once the meal preparations were cleared away, the woman only coming in now to cook the meals each night.

Melinda had called almost an hour ago but had not come home. She had been disturbed when Vida related that Janice had not yet arrived. Then Miss Covington had come in the door not ten

minutes afterward. She hoped the blonde was still here. Mrs. Pappas would be very annoyed and talk unceasingly about ungrateful, too busy children for hours.

Frankly Vida was not in the mood. She had watched the elder Pappas repeatedly challenge Janice's presence and seen Melinda's usually sunny nature turn sour. She did not know enough about Janice yet, but easily read the pain in the blonde's sharp green eyes.

She headed for the back stairs which led from the kitchen to the second floor bedrooms to collect Miss Janice. Perhaps the small delay would give Melinda the few minutes necessary to arrive home.

Seated in the recently restored drawing room, Brenda Pappas sat on the Piedmont sofa, working on a crossword puzzle as she awaited the dinner announcement. The drawing room's location put her in direct line of sight to the front door, where she kept glancing when the wind and rain combined to throw something against the house. None of the thumps had been Melinda returning home and Brenda acknowledged a knot of worry forming in her stomach as the minutes passed.

She thought briefly of the blonde upstairs and wondered if the Covington woman was also concerned. During their conversation when the blonde had first arrived home, she had been curt and tossed off the idea Melinda might be late.

Brenda stopped writing on the puzzle, sat back and crossed her arms briefly before uncrossing them and pushing to her feet. Driven by something she did not understand, she walked quickly to the front door and opened it, looking out over the wet drive and wind-blown trees trying to see through the downpour.

Quick footsteps sounded on the second floor landing and Brenda realized the blonde had dashed out of her room to investigate the sounds.

It was clear that the blonde cared for Melinda. It rankled Brenda that she was sharing her daughter with a stranger, especially a Covington.

Brenda closed the door and heard the footsteps retreat as she moved toward the dining room. Harold Covington had stumbled across Brenda's husband Melvin about ten years ago. At first, Melvin only assisted with research, combing dusty tomes and already recorded historical finds, to support Covington's wild contentions that some warrior woman had a major hand in ancient history throughout the Greek and Roman empires.

Brenda had equated it with the Britons hunting for evidence of Robin Hood, or King Arthur. If the Xena woman was supposed to have done have the things reported, she would have lived close to two hundred years.

While involved with Covington, Melvin had passed up two offers of department chair and a position as dean at another university. Then he began going to Covington's digs. The frequency had tested the campus' patience occasionally, especially when time after time the trips yielded nothing, or little, of significance. Then he began spending more and more time away from home, leaving her and Melinda alone for weeks, and frequently months. Until finally, all the activity, which Melvin, a bookworm for most of his life, was unaccustomed to, strained his heart beyond its abilities. The heart attack had been sudden and deadly.

Now, with Melinda, all Brenda could imagine was it happening all over again. She squared her shoulders and resolved to vigilantly prevent it. Something she had not thought to do before. She would not lose more family to a Covington's crazy schemes.

## Chapter 8

Reluctantly Janice walked away from the large upstairs window overlooking the Pappas' long driveway. Pensively she rubbed her shoulders fighting down a sudden feeling of alarm. Where is she?

The blonde had immediately left off her cleaning upon hearing the front door open, but now she started back into her room to finish moving a set of books into the attic. She had located an access to the third floor storage space in the ceiling over her closet.

She would have to find a chest or several boxes to more permanently store the unneeded items, but the ability to remove them would keep her room from being cluttered unnecessarily.

Janice put a foot on the lowest rung of a drop ladder and one hand on the side while the other cupped books against her chest.

"Miss Janice?"

The quiet voice coaxed the blonde down. As she turned she answered, "Yes, Vida?"

She watched Vida draw a long breath before speaking. "There'll be dinner downstairs in a moment."

"Melinda hasn't returned yet." A fact that knotted Janice's stomach suddenly more than the idea that she might have to eat dinner alone with Brenda Pappas.

"No, miss. She hasn't." Vida rubbed her hands on her apron and Janice realized that the diminutive woman was also disturbed by the brunette's long absence.

"Well, let's go down and eat. We'll keep something warm for her." Her firm injection of a confidence she did not feel must have worked.

Vida brightened considerably. "You think she's all right, Miss Janice?"

"Melinda has surprised me before with her resilience." She put her arm around Vida's shoulders. "She'll be more upset that she caused us all to worry."

Brenda was already seated when Janice entered with Vida, having let the older woman lead the way down the stairs. Both of them had kept one eye on the front door, wishing Melinda to walk in with an apologetic smile. Two sets of shoulders had dropped when the wished for entry was not forthcoming.

"Have a seat, Miss Janice. I'll get the first course." Vida nodded to Mrs. Pappas and then quickly pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen.

"You've been busy the last hour I see." Brenda lifted her napkin and set it across her lap.

"How... oh, you mean..." Janice glanced down at herself and realized she was liberally spotted with dust and dirt. "I was moving some things into the attic from my room." She considered that perhaps the older woman would not approve. "Is it all right? I needed to make something of an office out of the guest room."

Brenda brushed her hair back from her cheeks as Vida appeared with soup and salad. "So, you will be remaining for a while?"

"I've accepted a position to teach classes for a professor going on sabbatical." Janice knew her excitement was already creeping into her voice, despite her attempts at a calm factual response.

The older Pappas began eating as she composed a reply. Janice was surprised when she replied only mildly, "Sounds like you have everything settled."

Janice breathed, only then realizing the relief she felt. "Thank you."

"Does Melinda know yet?"

"Not all the details, but I mentioned it to her before lunch."

"That was hours ago. Do you have any idea what might have kept her?"

Janice recognized the worry in Mrs. Pappas's voice. "She must have had a late appointment, or a sudden late meeting was arranged."

Brenda must have found that an acceptable answer since she fell to eating her salad in earnest. Janice did also though she glanced over her shoulder toward the front door as Vida arrived with the dishes for the main course. She set the bowls to one side of the table. Both Janice and Brenda realized it was Melinda's empty seat and shied away from looking at it after a moment. *Where could she be?*

The silence filled with the patter of rain... and the crunch of gravel beneath tires. In a tandem movement that made Vida jump, Janice and Brenda bolted out of their seats abandoning decorum and running for the front door.

Janice flung it open and Brenda flipped on the porch lights. The sedan pulled to a stop and the engine was turned off. But nothing emerged from the car. Janice could see the tall shadow of Melinda behind the wheel as the woman's head dropped forward.

"Mel!" Heedless of her lack of cover from the rain, Janice darted off the porch and ran around the car. With a hard yank, she had the driver door open and reached inside to drag Melinda upright.

Instantly the woman's battered face, bloody lip, and torn clothes were evident. "Oh God! Mel!" She pressed the woman's face gently into her shoulder and soothed her fingers through the disarrayed dark hair.

She moved her palm away spattered in blood. "What the hell happened?"

"Dear God," Brenda's voice interrupted from the other side of the car. Janice only peripherally took note of the woman's reaching arms as she focused all her attention on the brunette's face, brushed her fingers tenderly over the numerous bruises. She felt the sponginess of Melinda's left cheek. *What had she hit this hard?*

"We have to get her into the house," Brenda's voice intervened again. In complete agreement, Janice told her, "I'll move her. Clear the way, all right?"

Brenda backed out of the car and hurried back to the house. Janice heard Brenda scream for Vida and shook her head. "Okay, Mel. Come on, open those baby blues for me?" She brushed the dark short locks out of Melinda's face and gingerly traced a bruise on her right temple.

Taking a deep breath, she soothed her hands over Melinda's arms, ribs and legs, seeking out all the warm spots and dishearteningly finding several. *How in the hell had the woman driven home?*

A softly blurred voice stirred her hair where Melinda's head rested against her shoulder.

"Hi."

Janice blew out a breath and had to restrain herself from pulling back quickly in her relief and excitement. "Mel? I'm glad you're awake. Come on. We've got to get you into the house." From the confused look in washed out blue eyes, Janice realized that Melinda wasn't registering probably even half of what she had just said. So she brushed the brunette's forehead, drawing the eyes up to hers, then leaned forward and pressed her lips to Mel's. "You're home," she breathed.

"Home," came back, breathy and uncertain.

Levering herself up from the awkward crouch while her arms kept Melinda upright, Janice raised Melinda so she could shift the brunette's long legs from the car to the drive.

"All right. Up." She lifted again, pulling Mel forward over her right shoulder. Loud groans

from both women accompanied the project, but finally Melinda was standing outside the car, leaning heavily against Janice as well as the rear door of the sedan.

Janice looked up as she closed the door to the car and saw Vida and Brenda backlit by the open doorway. "Come on. Your mother's waiting."

Melinda moved with shuffling steps, frequently stopping with Janice's help. The pair negotiated the steps and finally gained the doorway where Melinda winced at the bright light, then moaned from the involuntary muscle contraction in her battered face. Her left arm would not respond to instructions to block the light and she breathed a request, "Too bright."

Janice shifted so she could support Melinda as well as shade her eyes. "I don't think we'll make it up the stairs," she admitted to Brenda. "Any place else we can lay her down?"

"The drawing room has a long couch."

Melinda faded in and out against Janice's shoulder. The blonde could tell each time the brunette awoke. Her grip around Janice's waist would momentarily tighten as she assured herself of her location. Occasionally too, Mel would nuzzle her hair, and despite calm reason which had taken over from the initial panic when Janice found Mel, the blonde realized she was becoming painfully aroused.

Finally they reached the couch. With Vida and Brenda behind, and Janice in front, the three women lowered Mel gingerly to the cushions. "Bandages, gauze, warm water. Some antiseptic too." Janice looked to Vida.

"I'll be quick." The small black woman hurried off.

"What happened to her?" Brenda asked. "Was she in an accident?"

Janice caught up Melinda's palms and turned them over, brushing her fingertips over the scabs and deeper cuts. "A car accident wouldn't have caused this. Besides the car looked intact."

"Attacked," Melinda breathed.

"Who?" Janice held Mel's gaze steadily. "Who did this Mel?"

"Train." Melinda swallowed painfully and closed her eyes. "The man from the train."

Brenda looked at Janice as the blonde eased away from Melinda, dropping the brunette's hands back on her stomach. "What man?"

Janice ignored her as her brain played one night in her mind over and over again. The flash of a gunshot and the sound of cracking bone and the muscle strain of a final desperate pitch off the back of a train crowded her head for a long moment.

"Someone I thought I had killed," Janice said slowly, turning back. Settling her gaze again on the couch, she asked, "Mel, are you sure?"

Cracked, bloody lips and a purpled cheek moved faintly. Swollen eyelids blinked. "Sure."

"Someone did this to my daughter because of you?" Brenda pushed to her feet. Vida's appearance with the bandages and water did not give her pause. Janice found her way to Mel's side blocked by stormy blue eyes and shaking fury.

Vida knelt next to Melinda and began treating the numerous wounds. She winced when Mel did and felt the slap Brenda Pappas delivered to her own face as if it were no more than a bee sting. Pain washed out both green and blue eyes as gazes met and warred for a long moment.

"Jan... Janice?" The softly uttered name from the couch shattered the blonde's icy feeling and shocked her into movement. She pushed past Brenda and immediately went to Mel's side.

"I'm here, Mel. It's all right. I'm here."

## Chapter 9

Janice cleaned more blood from the scrapes in Melinda's palms being careful around the deep bruising across the knuckles and delicate wrists. Vida and Brenda worked quickly but gingerly to remove Melinda's torn shoes and shredded hose, the nylon fabric catching in her numerous cuts on her knees and thighs.

Melinda squeezed Janice's hands each time a movement particularly hurt and Janice's heart lurched. Damn, she thought. The man who had tracked them down on the train should have been dead. How had he survived a point-blank gunshot?

"We'll need to take the swelling down on her face," Janice suggested.

"I'll fetch some of the meat cuts." Vida handed off the task of bandaging Melinda's ribs to Brenda Pappas.

Brenda took the tape and gauze and looked at it for a long minute.

"Put pressure there," Janice indicated a sluggishly bleeding spot between two of Melinda's lower ribs.

"I can tend my own daughter," the older woman snapped, carefully bending to clean it and then applying and taping down a gauze pad.

"I didn't mean--" Janice cut herself off, remembering the way the woman had cut into her earlier.

"Don't think I didn't hear what Melinda said. What you said. This is your fault." She glared at Janice. "It's the same with all of you," she accused, shaking her hand with the alcohol-wet rag in the blonde's face. "So caught up in your fanciful dreams you don't care who you drag into trouble with you!"

Janice stood up, unwilling to bear the woman's shaking hand directly in her face. Instantly she let go of Melinda's hand when the movement pulled a groan from the injured woman. "Am I going to finally get to the heart of this? I'd love to know exactly what it is you have against me!"

Brenda did not recoil. "I saw her when you both came to this house. Her injuries had barely recovered from that. Now this! Irresponsible. Flighty. All you Covingtons are alike!"

"But I haven't done anything to you!"

"You already have! Look at her!" Janice looked down on Melinda's face. The brunette's face was a tight mask of pain. Various cuts and bruises stood out in stark relief against very pale skin. Janice swallowed the painful lump in her own throat as she imagined the beating endured to cause those kinds of injuries. "I know she's hurt," Janice admitted. "I know it's my fault." She raised her eyes to Brenda's daring her to challenge the conviction she felt. "I will fix this." The clearest vision passed before her eyes, of repeatedly stabbing the Nazi bastard who had done this. She swore.

"You can't fix this! You never could. Just left me to pick up the pieces every time you swept through."

Janice's brow furrowed in confusion and she realized what the problem was. "This is about my father? What the hell did he ever do to you?"

"He stole my husband's future!"

"What?!"

Vida appeared then with a cut of meat on a plate from the kitchen. Janice brushed Melinda's face free of loose hair and took the steak from the diminutive woman's hands. "Thanks." She turned to Brenda. "We will finish this later," she promised in a sharp voice. "I don't take crap about my father."

"You wouldn't. You're just like him. Rotten to the core," Brenda sniped back.

Janice stood abruptly and only just managed not to strike out as instinct commanded. She took several deep breaths and saw the fear in Mrs. Pappas's wide eyes. "I will tend to Mel," she said finally sharply biting off each word.

"I'm not going anywhere," Mel's mother replied, crossing her arms and glaring back.

"I suggest we wait until Melinda's well," Janice countered.

"Fine."

Janice sighed. "Fine." *Why did life have to be so difficult?*

Vida tucked Melinda under a blanket while Janice carefully applied the raw meat to the worst side of Melinda's bruised face.

Other than her explanation of the attack, Melinda had said nothing more. Her eyes remained closed more than open and the woman's groans as they treated her had finally trailed off.

"I think she'll sleep all right now," Vida thought aloud. "The doctor should be here any moment. I called him. I can watch her while you both get some sleep."

Brenda and Janice looked at her as if she had lost her mind. Stubbornness finally edged the rail-thin servant from the drawing room. Brenda took one chair, Janice another. Blue and green eyes locked in silence over Melinda's sleeping figure.

Vida returned, offering coffee. Both women declined.

"Go on to bed, Vida," Brenda said, finally.

"Yes, ma'am. Will you?"

"Not yet, Vida."

"Miss Janice?"

"No." Janice put her head in her hands and rubbed her temples. Mentally and physically exhausted, as if she had suffered Melinda's beating herself, Janice desperately wanted space to be alone with Melinda, to hug her and assure the brunette and herself that she was going to be all right.

But Brenda would not leave. *Okay, then I'll ignore her*, Janice thought. *I need this. Mel needs this*, she added. She reached out and lightly grasped Melinda's bandaged hand. Her own tension eased a little with the innocent contact. Her fingertips smoothed over the satiny skin of the backs of Mel's hands, careful of the bruises on her knuckles. Lacing her fingers among Mel's she brushed the scabs on her palms and bent her head, unwilling to let Brenda Pappas see her weakness as tears gathered in her eyes.

Vida nudged Brenda. "Coffee will help you stay awake, ma'am," she noted as the woman jerked, startling back from being half-asleep.

Casting a sidelong glance at Janice and Melinda, Brenda rose unsteadily on her feet. "All right."

With Vida alongside, Mel's mother left the drawing room.

Janice took a small breath, then another deeper one. By degrees she released her tension and eased closer to Melinda. Finally she crouched at the brunette's side, cradling the dark head in the crook of her elbow.

"Mel?" she whispered, brushing her lips lightly over each bruise. Sleepy cobalt eyes fluttered open and focused on her. Hot tears tracked down the blonde's smooth cheeks. "I'm so sorry you got hurt," she whispered.

"How did I get here?"

Janice quietly answered. "You drove home, but that seems about all you could manage." Melinda's eyes roamed a little around the room's ceiling. "Where am I?"

"On the drawing room couch." Janice brushed Mel's hair carefully. "Are you all right? You did get hit in the head."

"Drawing room, hmmm?" Melinda's voice was raw, quiet, but ruminative like she was analyzing something. "Okay, that explains the unfamiliar perspective."

Janice's brow furrowed.

"I've never been on my back in this room," the brunette answered the question left unasked. "Otherwise I would have repainted the ceiling in here already. It looks horrible." She gradually moved her hand, until her fingers were over her eyes, pinching lightly at the bridge of her nose. "Where are my spectacles?"

Janice shook her head. "I don't know. You didn't have them on." That gave her pause. "Then how did you drive home?" She sat up. "Mel, what do you remember?"

"I remember getting knocked to the sidewalk." She lifted her hands. "I scraped my palms."

"What about the bruises on your face? Or your knuckles?"

Melinda blinked and focused on her hands, seeing the bruises with wide-eyed disbelief. "How?" Her expression grew perplexed.

"I think we have another rescue to thank Xena for," Janice said. She leaned close and breathed warmly over Mel's lips intending to claim a kiss to soothe them both.

"Xena again!"

Janice jerked up and spun around. Cornflower blue eyes narrowed just a few feet away.

"Fantasy! Crock! You're filling her head again with nonsense! There is no Xena!"

Melinda had been distinctly looking forward to Janice's kiss, enough that she could still taste the woman's breath on her tongue. "Mother," she breathed.

Eager and hopeful, Brenda Pappas hurried to her daughter's side, nudging Janice away, who could only move a short distance since Melinda refused to relinquish her hand. "Yes, dear?"

"Please. Go away." Mel's voice was a whisper but she might as well have shouted for the sudden silence that her words caused.

Brenda's words cut through the silence at last, in protest. "But Melinda dear, you aren't well."

"Then... we can... talk when I'm feeling better. Please. The shouting... is really hurting my head."

Brenda stepped back, her face reddening as she reined herself in. "I'll... I'll see you ... in the morning, then." Her head down, she walked quickly from the room.

"Your head hurts? Can I get you something for it?" Janice asked. "Powder?"

Melinda breathed carefully, aware that Janice was trying not to upset her either. "Can you help me upstairs to my own bed?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'll get a cramp in my neck if I stay here."

"All right. Upstairs, then I'll get you some powder and tuck you in."

Being careful of Melinda's tender ribs, Janice helped the tall brunette to her feet and the pair shuffled slowly up the stairs and down the darkened hallway to the woman's bedroom on the end.

They both heard the door chime and Vida opening it to admit the doctor.

"Why do I feel like this isn't the first time or the last I'll be helping you like this?" Janice asked, trying for amusement as she maneuvered Melinda with close to practiced ease. She helped the woman lie down amid the comfort of her own sheets and tucked in the thick comforter around her body.

Melinda grasped Janice's hand and rubbed her fingers between her own. "It's all right."

Janice detected a definite strain and hesitation in the woman's voice, which still managed to sound soothing, like melted caramel. "I'll get you something for your headache and then I'll let the doctor in to see you."

"Getting too mushy for you, Covington?" Mel joked, coughing a little at the end.

Actually Janice now felt bad about the way Mel had dismissed her mother, recognizing now that Brenda had only been fiercely protecting her family, a feeling Janice knew she shared tenfold for this particular Pappas. "Something like that." She wanted to talk to Brenda before her brain shut down from sheer exhaustion. She bent forward and kissed Mel's forehead. "I'll be right back."

Janice met the doctor in the hallway. The middle-aged man was trimly dressed in a loose suit jacket and carried a small bag. "Where's Miss Melinda?" he asked.

"In there," Janice gestured. "She's complaining of a headache and has a lot of bumps and bruises."

"I'll check her for a head injury and find a way to make her comfortable," he said.

"Thank you, Doctor...?" Her voice trailed off in question.

"Spaulding. Who might you be?"

"Janice Covington. I'm a friend."

"Covington, hmmm. Well then, Miss Covington, excuse me. I'll be right back."

A quick search of Melinda's medicine cabinet turned up a small box of the headache powders. She ducked into her room, returning with the small whiskey bottle Vida had provided her earlier for her coffee.

This ought to knock the edge off Melinda's pain quickly and let the woman get a comfortable night's sleep. She returned to the bedroom and stood back a little, watching the doctor examine Melinda's eyes, listen to her chest and talk briefly with the brunette who offered only a mild description of her accident.

Spaulding stood and gestured for Janice to come forward. "I can't see anything terribly wrong. Keep an eye on her tonight though. Do you have something for headache?"

"I found this in the medicine cabinet." He examined the box and nodded. She dispensed the powder into a cup and poured a little whiskey after it.

Melinda drank down the contents in a quick gulp. "Lord Almighty!" She gasped as the alcohol burned a fiery trail to the pit of her stomach. Lassitude followed quickly and she settled back quietly.

The doctor nodded. "You'll be fine in the morning, Miss Pappas. Get some rest." And he left.

"How on earth do you enjoy that vile drink?" she murmured as Janice tugged the covers up and tucked them in snugly around Mel's shoulders.

"Burns away the pain," Janice said frankly. Melinda's eyes drifted open at the simple answer and Janice watched them flutter shut again. "Good night, Mel."

"Good night, Jan." The brunette reached up a hand and pulled down against the back of the blonde's head drawing her lips closer.

Janice tasted the whiskey as their mouths met. She shivered when Melinda's tongue began a sweet exploration before she dragged herself away.

When she turned around, still shaken by the depths expressed in that single kiss, Janice found Brenda Pappas standing in the doorway, a storm brewing in the cerulean eyes. Nudging Mrs. Pappas back, Janice pulled the door partly closed.

"Damn you," Brenda accused. "Get out!"

Fiercely, Janice shook her head. "I'm not leaving, Mrs. Pappas." She let her feelings for the woman's daughter show fully in her face. Her eyes brightened and her lips softened into a smile of almost child-like unfettered joy. "I can't."

She took a deep breath, praying for guidance that this was the right thing to do, right here and right now. "I love her."

## Chapter 10

"Don't you dare pollute this house with that lie!"

Janice felt a warm presence at her back at the same moment she felt the air shift and Brenda's right hand sped toward her face. The woman's hit did not land, instead intercepted by long fingers seizing her wrist.

Cobalt and cerulean eyes locked over Janice's shoulder. "That's enough."

The voice was so low it was almost nothing more than the vibration Janice felt through her back where Melinda's body leaned. When Brenda pulled her wrist away, rubbing it lightly and turned her back, Janice nudged herself back inside the door and spun, grabbing for Melinda instantly.

"Dear God, Mel. Don't ever do that again."

"I thought you could use a little help."

Janice paused, bracing Melinda with her hands around the brunette's back. The woman's voice was all wrong. She looked up once again almost releasing the heavy body in her hands in her surprise. There was a harder edge to Melinda's bearing, a stunning vibration of power off the slim form that made her seem more primal somehow. Janice had seen the look before, but was still surprised to see it again. "Dear God! Xena!" She realized how loud that came out and tried again, more quietly. "Xena?"

"Yes." The body sagged a moment, then gradually there was a change in the woman's demeanor once more. She straightened to her full height, disentangling herself from Janice's grip.

"What... How..." Janice blundered about for a way to express her confusion and was contained only when a pair of firm hands wrapped themselves around her upper arms and pushed her onto the bed nearby. "How in the hell did this happen?" Her thoughts rushed out falling over themselves.

Searing cobalt eyes captured her gaze. "You needed me," she said simply. "Melinda let me help."

"Is she able to do that? Just ask and you pop out? Did you... come out... before? To help her get away from the Nazi I mean?"

Xena chuckled. And it was, Janice realized, Xena not Mel. The southerner had a considerably daintier laugh, whereas the Greek warrior's amusement was more a vibration in her chest that came out in a low rumble.

Janice tried very hard to grasp the idea that Xena's spirit and Melinda's could occupy the same space, namely Melinda's body. "Where... Where does Melinda go when you... um... borrow her?"

"I'm here, Jan," came back in a tired voice, strained and breathy. When Janice focused on the brunette's face, she was thunderstruck by the difference. The jaw was softer, the gaze from the eyes no longer as piercing.

"Incredible." The blonde reached out and grasped the long fingered hand that rested next to Melinda's hip. "Mel?"

"I'm... tired," the brunette admitted.

Instantly Janice stood and coaxed the brunette under the covers and helped her slide back against the pillows on the bed. "I think I have to go smooth things over with your mother. You should get some sleep."

"Don't let her hurt you, Janice."

"I think she's hurting too," Janice said finally.

"You always did try to fix things," came back softly in a stronger, more vibrant voice.

Janice sat back from where she had been brushing her fingers over Melinda's cheek. "Geez, Xena. I was talking to Mel."

The brunette's cobalt eyes lifted to meet her gaze and the lips quirked into a bemused smile. "Sorry."

"Just don't make it a habit, all right? Now, can I have her back?" The playful smile left slowly and Janice saw the faint glow recede once more. "Get some sleep. I'll be back in a little while to check on you."

Mel's voice answered vaguely tired. "All right."

Janice leaned close and searched the soft features for a long moment before finally lowering her lips to Mel's for a kiss. Beautifully the gentle touch deepened and Janice caught herself sucking in Melinda's sweet breath as the injured woman's arm slipped around the back of her head, long fingers lacing through her hair and Mel's heartbeat sped up under her palm where it rested on the woman's chest. "Good night, Mel," she finally offered, pulling back and settling Melinda's hands once more against the covers.

"Good night, Jan."

Vida stood in the hallway, alone, when Janice emerged from Miss Melinda's room. The blonde woman looked around. "Miss Janice?"

"She's sleeping easily now, Vida. It's all right."

"You should get some rest too, miss."

Janice shook her head. "I think I ought to talk to Mrs. Pappas."

"You can't, miss."

"I don't like issues hanging, Vida. It's just not my style. She needs to understand that."

"No, that's not... What I meant is the missus isn't here."

Janice stepped back. "What? It's nearly midnight. What on earth?"

"She put on her coat and left out the back door just a little while ago."

Taking a deep breath, Janice put her hands on her hips. She studied the floor as if looking for answers in the long hallway rug, a vaguely oriental design in burgundy. "I guess she didn't leave the property then. I didn't hear a car."

"No, miss."

Janice lifted her gaze to chocolate eyes. "Does she have a place she likes to go, Vida?"

Vida considered the question. What she knew of Melinda's mother ran counter to telling the young blonde where she had gone. Mrs. Pappas was fiercely devoted to that particular place, and it was only by chance, since she had once been looking for the woman, that Vida herself had discovered the older Pappas's personal hideaway. But then she took account of the woman before her. There was an unshakable devotion in the compact body, one she suspected might be able to heal more than just young Miss Melinda, but perhaps the mother as well.

*Odd that*, she thought. *One tears it asunder. The next might put it back together.* Shaking her head of the far too profound thoughts, Vida then nodded. "Yes, miss. She does. Head out past

the stables. You'll see a copse of trees. There's a... little cove tucked against the side of the lake."

Janice grasped her hands briefly and then hurried down the corridor, down the stairs and Vida peeked in on Miss Melinda sleeping as she heard the back door open and close again, heralding Miss Covington's departure from the house, who certainly earned high marks for bravery in the servant's estimation.

The rain had cleared away the cloudiness of the day and now faced with a clear sky the moon cast its reflected light against the slumbering earth. Janice thought the description fanciful the moment it popped into her head as she stepped clear of the large house's circle of light. She stepped out onto a cobbled stone path leading toward the lower land and the river north of the plantation property. The lake Vida spoke of must be the spring source of the river and lie between here and the end of Pappas land.

The world was cast in variations of pale blues and the spectrum of gray. The outline of a hay barn rose like a mammoth off the path to her left. The ground dipped and swayed sloping down and away on the right, and she glanced down at the split in the path scanning the dirt.

Nodding she moved quickly down the right path, following the slight indentations left behind by the elder Pappas. She shivered in her thin shirt but doggedly continued forward.

The ground sloped upward slightly and when she reached the top, Janice saw the shimmering still waters of the lake reflecting the half moon crystalline clear.

As she neared the edge of the copse Vida must have meant, Janice slowed as she considered what to say. Or even if the older woman would let her say anything, which was very unlikely. *I must be crazy*, the blonde thought, coming to a stop and leaning against a tree, staring out at the lake.

She caught movement off to her right, out of the corner of her eye. Not looking directly at the older woman, Janice stood briefly, shoving her hands into her pants pockets to keep them warm. Then she leaned back against the tree and finally spoke. "You ought to come inside where it's warmer." Janice groaned. For all that she hated dissembling in others she found herself frequently engaging in it. She avoided looking to see what reaction her words caused, and shook her head. "No. Never mind. That's not what I came out to say."

"What do you want?"

Janice looked down at the dirt bank leading down to the lake and stuck the toe of her shoe behind a small rock, nudging it out and kicking it into the water, rippling the surface. "I want what most people want, Mrs. Pappas. Someone to love, and someone to love me."

"And your behavior," she spoke the word distastefully, "is acceptable nowhere. My daughter was meant for better than this."

"She probably does," Janice replied honestly. "But for reasons I can't understand entirely she loves me." The blonde pulled her hands in exasperation from her pockets and combed her fingers through her hair. "She's intelligent, compassionate, dedicated, settled. So many things I never thought I'd find."

"Gallivanting everywhere, you certainly weren't looking very hard. And the moment the opportunity presents itself you goad my daughter into taking a horrifying, dangerous trip."

"Actually, I wrote Mr. Pappas the telegram, Mrs. Pappas." Janice hazarded a glance toward the older woman to see she wasn't looking toward the blonde either. She softened her voice in direct proportion to the stiff set of Brenda Pappas's jaw. "She chose to answer me herself."

"But she was hurt. Badly."

"I protected her as best I could, but her choices put her in dangerous situations. Her quick thinking in several circumstances saved our lives in quite a few of them."

Brenda Pappas must have changed locations. When she next spoke her voice came from a slightly different direction, up and behind to Janice's right. She had left the water's edge. "Why didn't you send her home?"

Janice turned. "I tried, when we first met. She is a very stubborn woman," she admitted.

"So you're saying that none of this is your fault. How convenient for you."

The blonde stiffened. "I never said that. I will absolutely, positively take blame for the things I've done wrong against Melinda." She took a step toward Brenda who consciously took a step backward. "But what I will not do is take responsibility for something I had no control over." She put her hands on her hips and then slashed them in opposite directions each time she covered a point. "I will take responsibility for sending the telegram. I will not take responsibility for Melinda's decision to answer the telegram by traveling to Greece. I will take responsibility for the injuries she received when I did not effectively protect her. I will not take responsibility for the things my father did or did not do to you and your family a decade ago."

Brenda frowned, taken aback by the rapidly fired off list. "Harry Covington was a no good dreamer."

"Whatever else he was, Mrs. Pappas, he was my father. I gather that he did something to you or Dr. Pappas, and I'm sorry for it, but I won't pay for my father's mistakes. Melinda's well being and my desire to make sure she is happy and remains so mean that I have to find a way to make you understand this. The tension between us is driving Mel into hard choices I'd rather she didn't have to make... That you weren't forcing her to have to make."

"I? I have done no such thing."

Janice strode up the embankment until she was even, eye to eye with Brenda Pappas.

"Whatever your original intention, Mrs. Pappas, nevertheless, you have forced her to weigh her family loyalty against her love for me."

"She will not love you."

Remembering her parting kiss with the brunette lying upstairs trying to sleep, Janice shook her head. "It's not a matter of 'will', Mrs. Pappas."

The woman became red-faced and she mumbled about 'tarnation' and 'unnatural things' as she turned her back on Janice.

"Mrs. Pappas, did you love your husband?"

The woman turned abruptly, flashing blue eyes settling on the blonde with disdain. "Yes, but you would know nothing of that kind of love," she charged.

Janice accepted this answer without rancor. "And did he love you?"

The older woman stood silent, a sentinel on the higher ground for a long, long moment. She did not answer, and only walked away, pulling her cape closer around her head as the tail fluttered in the night breeze behind her.

Alone on the copse overlooking the lake, Janice swallowed hard, wondered if she ought to continue trying, and turned her face up into the light rain that once again, began to fall, as she walked a circuitous path back toward the house.

## Chapter 11

*The dimly lit cavern exploded with light and a vibrating crash. She felt the wave slam her body through the air and the crush of rocks and dust against her palms and face when she hit the cave floor. Startled, she could find no voice to scream before she blacked out.*

Surging upward from the darkness, Mel wondered where she was. Her body ached; her head pounded a rhythm to match her pulse. She flexed her hands, the long fingers sinking into softness instead of the unyielding ground. Disoriented, she opened her eyes carefully and dimly identified that she lay in a pool of sunlight.

The warmth seeped into her skin, easing aches and waking her brain by degrees. She blinked in annoyance as she suffered a brief ringing in her ears. As she was moving an agonizingly pained arm and shoulder, to put her hand over her exposed ear, the ringing stopped. Gradually she rolled onto her back and looked up to see the ceiling of her bedroom.

The muted colors of her room diffused the sunlight from the windows and she lay quietly. Contemplatively she consciously muted the feedback from numerous points of pain.

Melinda realized the fleeting dream images that had awakened her had been her recollection of Ares Cave. It always stopped just short of any awareness of Xena's arrival in her body. The old memory must have been triggered by the attack the night before. Gingerly she guided both palms over her eyes and directed a query inward. *Was Xena still present?* The brunette felt a brief twinge in her chest in response.

The realization that she had the spirit of a long-dead warrior pushing around her insides should have bothered her, she knew. Then again, she thought, the woman was a relative. A wry chuckle escaped her bruised lips. Deep in her psyche Melinda felt an answering vibration and drew momentary comfort from knowing that her unique bond saved her life last night.

Vividly, if a bit second-hand like she'd been standing off to the side, she recalled the Nazi's attack. She rolled onto her side, facing her bedroom door. Only vaguely did she remember getting home. She wondered if she had managed to warn Janice that the dangers in Europe followed them still.

She had both legs off the side of the bed, bent over searching for her slippers, when she heard footsteps.

"Mel! What are you doing out of bed?" A firm, small hand grabbed her shoulder and she lifted her chin, wincing at the pain in her neck and back as she looked up into the inquisitive green eyes of Janice Covington.

Her brain moved a little faster than her throat. "...talk to you," she mumbled.

"Well I'm here now. Lie back down and we'll talk." Solicitously Janice's firm hands guided her back down, adjusting the covers. Then the blonde's fingers trailed through Mel's hair and the brunette realized the woman's fingers were shaking. "God, Mel! You scared the hell out of me."

"I apologize," she responded, working her throat and jaw carefully. "Why? It's not your fault you were attacked." Mel arched her neck slightly to meet Janice's gaze, watched it grow troubled and drop away. "It's mine." Steeling herself through Janice brought her eyes back up.

Mel felt a brief surge and volubly countered Janice's stark self-castigation. "It's not your fault either."

For a long silent moment the two women exchanged stubborn looks. Then Janice turned away. "How's your head?" she asked, avoiding the discussion.

"Fuzzy," Mel admitted.

"Your ribs?" Janice's hands lightly skimmed the bones in question.

"Sore."

Hands moved over her arms and cheeks. "Your arms? Face?"

"Stiff," Mel responded quietly.

Slowly Janice smiled a barely noticeable curve of her lips up on the left side. "How's your

stomach?"

Mel responded with a smile of her own. "Positively empty." She felt Janice's hand slide over hers on her chest. "Is it too late for some breakfast?"

"It's just past lunch," Janice replied. "Vida figured you would want something. We both figured it ought to be light." She squeezed Mel's hand. "How does chicken soup sound?"

"Like a start."

Janice nodded. "All right. I'll be right back up with two bowls." Patting Melinda's hand, she rose from the bed. Mel tracked her light tread down the hall, then the back stairs.

Following her light lunch, Melinda moved out of her bedroom, despite Janice and Vida's protests. In deference to them she only moved to the porch on the second floor which gave a beautiful view over the back acreage of the vast property.

Janice settled in a woven chair and Melinda relaxed gradually in a folding lounge. The companionable silence stretched as each woman worked on her own quiet thoughts. The afternoon sun and breeze filled the late autumn day with a pleasant feeling.

Melinda felt her head grow heavy and must have dozed a little. Next thing she heard was Janice's voice, softly calling her name. "Mel? Hey?"

She blinked and met emerald eyes. "Hmm?"

"You want a blanket or something?"

Slowly she shook her head, feeling the pain shift through the muscles in her upper back and neck, and finally easing. "I'm all right." She cocked her head toward the sun briefly. "It's nearing supper," she guessed.

Janice glanced down at her wristwatch. "Yep. Almost four o'clock."

"I had better start getting ready for dinner."

The blonde stiffened up. "You... don't have to go down tonight. I'll... bring a tray up."

"Mother will give --"

"No she won't."

"Janice, I know that she--"

"She left." Just like that. No inflection, no skirting the issue. Janice laid the fact out.

Mel took a deep breath. "When?"

"This morning after breakfast. She... came up to look in on you. I... saw her leaving your room. Next thing I heard the front door... and then... the car started." Janice looked down at her hands. "I'm sorry that I drove your mother away." Green eyes glistened when she looked up again. "I... was trying... I didn't mean..."

"Did she say something to you?" Mel felt the fever of quicksilver fury course through her and half rose off the chair.

Janice stood up, shoulders rounding, and walked over to the porch railing, leaning heavily on it as she turned into the breeze, letting it lift her blonde curls off her face and neck. "No, she didn't say anything. She didn't have to... I... know."

"She could have just as easily left because of what I did," Mel countered. "It's not your fault."

"It is my fault," Janice retorted. "I should never have written and drawn you to Greece. I shouldn't have dragged you all over the Mediterranean. I should have been more responsible. I got us shot at, beaten, the plane crash..."

"Stop it!"

Mel's sharp tone snapped Janice's head up and around.

"Janice, come here." The brunette's voice was soft, but her tone was firm and her words

even.

The blonde nibbled her bottom lip for a moment then she moved to stand at the foot of Mel's chair. Green eyes traced up the battered body until their gazes connected. Blue eyes held hers with a touch of angry fire. She winced.

Mel reached out her hand. Tentatively the blonde's fingers met her own. She tugged the woman to sit. "Now, I'm only going to say this once." She waited until she had the other woman's complete attention. "I do not now, nor have I ever blamed you for anything." She squeezed the hand held lightly in her grasp.

"I do not regret one minute of your presence in my life. I think I have loved you from that first moment when you appeared and told Smythe's men that wasn't a way to treat a lady. You were so self-assured, so cocky."

Janice remembered the bravado that had immediately sprung to her lips in a bid to protect the delicate looking woman who had entered her camp. She took a deep breath, tired and worn out. "It was an act," she said, finally, unburdening herself. "I just knew that I couldn't let them hurt you."

The air between them became charged with silence. Finally, Melinda lifted Janice's chin, probed her gaze and said, "I know."

Janice's expression collapsed with those words, certain that now that her lie was known Melinda would send her away.

The brunette's next words however surprised her. "I did not fall in love with you because of some damsel in distress notion of a knight in shining boots and khaki, Janice Covington. Or do you really think that little of me?" Melinda could feel the resentment rising in her voice, but couldn't stop it.

Janice didn't understand; she had failed Melinda in a very primary way; a failure of protection. Why wasn't she angrier? She could hear the resentment in Mel's voice, but the words suggested that Mel wasn't angry, but hurt instead. "Why?"

"You have the most remarkable streak of compassion, dedication and quick-witted intelligence I think I've ever met. You are at times willfully stubborn and other times I can feel you are so alone and lost. All I want to do is hold you and tell you it's all right to cry." Melinda caught Janice's surprised reaction. "Right from the beginning when you insisted you had to go back for the chakram and scrolls," she explained. "I could see it. I wanted to help, but you wouldn't let me."

"Again. Why?"

"Because you taught me how to be strong, Janice. You showed me."

Janice shook her head. "It wasn't me. It was Xena. Inside you."

Melinda could feel inside herself another consciousness briefly sit up and take notice. She shook her head though and the sensation quieted back. "No, Janice. Xena allowed me to be strong enough physically. You showed me the desire to give it a try. Because you have that same desire. At first I thought nothing frightened you, but then I saw... some things do... yet you fought through them anyway. That's courage, Janice. I... didn't... possess that... until you showed it to me. Because you wanted to be my friend."

"Yeah, now look what that did. Some friend I turned out to be. Your mother left you same as mine left me."

Melinda released her hands abruptly. "I see. You figure you need to fix my life." She pushed away from Janice and struggled to her feet from the lounge. "Janice, I had a bad relationship with Mother years before you came along."

Janice reached out for Mel's shoulder, but the brunette shrugged off the touch without

looking at her. "But she's your mother."

"Yes. She is. My mother. My problem. Don't try to fix my life, please. Just... be my friend." She turned around, leaning heavily on the outside wall of the house as she steadied her gaze on Janice, within arm's reach. "I love you, Janice. But I need to run my own life."

"What about the rest?"

"You mean the Nazis and the rest of it?" Janice nodded. Mel took a deep breath. "You are still a much better shot than me." She grasped Janice's hand when it lifted toward her own. "Will you just... stick by me?"

The blonde woman's eyes teared over and she nodded, swallowing back the lump gathering in her throat. "I... promise, Mel." There was a touch of wonder in her voice.

Mel bent close and pressed her lips carefully over Janice's cheek, tasting the tears, and then, tenderly, tasting her lips. The blonde groaned; Mel groaned in response and the kiss deepened.

"I... should tell you something," Mel murmured as Jan's mouth left hers and the small blonde burrowed carefully against the taller woman's chest.

"No. No, it doesn't matter," Janice protested. "I'm... so sorry... I was acting stupid." She pressed the back of Melinda's head gently down so she could taste the soft lips again.

"No, it does matter. I..." She swallowed wondering how, after seeing how torn up Janice was about this... "How could I have ever been jealous of Cuthridge?" she murmured.

The blonde pulled her head back. "What?"

"I... you were so excited. I... went back to talk to him... that's... why I was late coming home."

"You went back to the campus?" Melinda nodded. "And after dark... Jesus, Mel... that was... You were jealous of Cuthridge?" Her voice held another note of wonder. Melinda nodded again. "Do I still have a job?"

"That's the other problem. The university board might make him drop you for their candidate."

Janice pulled away from Mel. "I... think you had better start at the beginning."

## Chapter 12

Vida set the tray with its platters, cups and silver, on the table between the two women. "Will you need anything else, Miss Melinda?"

Janice glanced up from the dinner, inhaling the aromas of roasted chicken and sweet basil corn. "Smells wonderful, Vida."

"I'll tell cook you said so, Miss Janice."

Melinda's gaze left the petite black woman's figure and drifted to Janice. "Vida, why don't you take the rest of the week off. Tell Millie that Janice and I can manage."

Janice remembered that the next day, Thursday, was the same day last week that Vida had taken off. Probably a regular occurrence.

"Are you certain?"

The blonde could see Mel settling herself with a bit of stiffness. "I'll be fine," she insisted to the housekeeper/cook.

"You know my mother's number," Vida replied. "Call if you need anything."

Melinda smiled. "All right. I promise."

With that settled, Vida returned inside as the evening breeze picked up.

Janice dipped her fork into her chicken and flaked off a bite, bringing it to her mouth with a

savoring groan. "So, are you going to tell me what that was all about?" The brunette looked up from her own plate in surprise. "Come on. I know tomorrow's her day off, but the whole week? What's up?"

Cleaning her fingers unnecessarily with the napkin, Melinda leaned back and remained silent for a long moment. "I want her safe." Melinda put aside her fork after another bite. "Janice, the attack... They're here. And it is foolish to think they aren't going to find their way here very soon."

"So... you want her safe elsewhere." Janice nodded in understanding. "Come on, finish up. I'll tuck you into bed."

Melinda returned to her plate. "I'd rather have a bath. I feel... filthy."

Janice nodded. "That can be arranged." She nodded at the brunette's plate. "Finish. I'll go start the water and then take our dishes down to the kitchen." She reached over and rubbed her fingers over the back of Melinda's left hand. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For... making me see reason. Old habits die hard I guess."

"Which one, accepting blame for things that have nothing to do with you? Or being overprotective?" There was a smile on Mel's lips even though the words stung... just a little.

"Being overprotective, I suppose first. But the blame... has been around a long time too." She accepted Melinda's nod. "I guess my grandmother had an influence on me after all." She forked another bite of chicken then lifted her drink to her lips.

Melinda's fingers changed position, now rubbing the back of Janice's hand. "Formidable lady?"

"Yeah. Dad and she... There were always sparks in the room. She thought he was so beneath my mother... but then when my mother... left... It was his fault. My fault too, I always thought. If I had been a little... I don't know... more of a balance between them... Maybe... I could have... I don't know..."

"Janice, you were a child."

"Yeah, all of eight years old. Then suddenly even Daddy wasn't around anymore. I... hated my grandmother for that... for driving him away."

They fell silent and finished their meals. Janice collected the tray of dishes and silver, leaving briefly to take it all downstairs. She decided to do the actual washing after she had the brunette safely sleeping.

Melinda moved slowly to her bedroom, sitting on the bed and carefully sliding her feet from her slippers before unbuttoning her pajama top. Janice entered to find her struggling with her hair, unable to hold her shoulders in the higher position for very long.

"I'll get that," she offered, sliding onto the bed's mattress behind the brunette. Gently she nudged Mel's hands out of the way and released the clip and pins. The silk texture of Melinda's fine dark hair wrapped itself around Janice's fingers and the heat from her skin awakened the suppressed desires of the last two weeks. Abruptly she released Mel's hair and slid off the bed, going to the bathroom. "I'll draw the water."

"Janice?" Melinda remained on the bed, a little worried about the blonde's reaction. She worked off her pajama bottoms and wondered what to do next.

"Yes?" The archaeologist's clear tone was partially drowned by the sound of running water. Then she stepped out of the bathroom to stand in the doorway.

Mel's breathing quickened as she studied the petite form clad in the soft white blouse and tan slacks. They really had to do something about the woman's depleted wardrobe. But right now all

Melinda could think about was the curves the clothes hid. It had been a very trying two weeks and from Janice's tentative behavior now that they were alone, it was clear the blonde didn't quite know where they stood.

"Will you... help me wash?" Melinda was uncertain if she could recapture the easiness of their relationship from the trip home, but with her mother's presence no longer an issue, her own desires clearly demanded she try. Janice had yet to return to her usual self despite Melinda's reassurances.

Janice nodded tightly. "All right." She walked across the room to the bed and offered her hand, palm up, to Melinda. "I'll help."

The brunette slipped her left hand into Janice's right and pushed off the bed, coming wobbly to her feet. The blonde's arms quickly caught around her nude waist and steadied her. "Thank you."

"No problem." The hands fell away and she walked beside Janice to the bathroom.

The bathroom boasted a huge claw-footed ceramic tub. The mirror over the small counter and sink was already coated with a thin film of steam and the air was warm and moist. Janice offered her a hand again and she lowered herself into the water, sighing as her skin and muscles twitched in the heated water. Carefully she fully submerged, letting the heat relieve some of the headache she was experiencing as she tried to think what to do next.

"Would you wash my back?" she voiced as she finally lifted her head and shoulders above the surface.

Without a word, the blonde moved around behind her. She fished a wash cloth from a drawer and then soaped it. The cloth's texture moving over her back awakened Melinda's nerve endings with a happy jolt. She shifted so the blonde had access to as much of her back as possible and the attention continued.

Janice felt the taller woman's tight muscles and soon worked over Mel's back and shoulders with firmer fingers and the heels of her hands, in small massaging circles. Her own shoulders and arms tingled after a little while and she realized it had been some time since she had engaged herself in purely physical activity. "I've got to get back to exercising," she murmured to herself.

"What?" Mel prompted only vaguely hearing her.

"I was just thinking I should probably find some time to exercise." Janice's hands moved over Mel's arms. "I shouldn't be getting this tired from just giving you a back rub."

"It's been an odd couple of weeks for you. No dig to keep yourself occupied."

"There's been plenty to do," Janice protested.

"I know." She paused as Janice came around and leaned over the side of the tub gesturing for Mel's foot. She obliged and sighed as the blonde's sinewy fingers prodded through the tensions in her feet, ankles, and calves. "But you're used to physical activity. What... if I told you I was thinking of refurbishing more of the house? Ripping out flooring, replacing the baseboards, painting, sanding, the works."

Janice paused, rubbing her thumb over Melinda's instep. "Which rooms?"

"I was thinking we'd start with your room."

"Why? My room is fine."

"You need an office don't you?"

"What if I don't get the job?" Janice eased away from the tub and settled on the commode seat, hunched over, hands pressed together pensively. "You said the board had another candidate in mind."

"I thought he might be using you as a pawn to get between the board and the rules. But

Cuthridge seems sincere in wanting you in the position. I convinced him to talk to John... Smith, the university president," she clarified. "Maryann--that's his wife--suggested I try." The brunette rolled her shoulders and started to reach for the shampoo. Janice caught the movement and reached it first, passing the bottle to her, which she waved off. "Would you?"

Janice moved around behind her once more and Melinda felt a little easier explaining when she couldn't see the blonde's face directly. Sudsy fingers massaged through her hair and over her scalp. Closing her eyes she sighed. "If you meet Maryann," she murmured, "she's going to bombard you with a lot of questions I think."

"Oh?"

Melinda nodded, closing her eyes as she felt the water start sluicing down over her head rinsing away the dirt and grime. "I... couldn't stop thinking about you. Finally I told her I'd met someone in Europe... to explain my distraction. She... thought I met a fiancé."

She could feel Janice shifting behind her and for a precious moment she wanted to see Janice's face, but resisted. *Guess that was a bit unexpected of me*, Mel thought.

When Janice did finally speak, it was to change the subject. "Did a lot of people know you were going to Europe?"

"No. Vida knew. But I didn't tell anyone else. I just went to find you. A lot of people never considered me that impulsive, so there's been a few shocked looks."

"Melinda, I know you and I know you're not nearly that impulsive. So what exactly was it about my telegram that did it?"

"It wasn't... well not entirely anyway. After I received it, I couldn't get it out of my head. I left it on my father's desk for almost two weeks unopened. The... thought of someone... I'd have to tell them about Father's death... It... Well, anyway, I read it because the curiosity got to be too much."

Janice chuckled and eased around, leaning quietly, arms folded, on the side of the tub, listening. "I'll believe that. You are positively the most curious woman I have ever met."

Mel accepted the comment. "Anyway, the... your message... intrigued me. I... started to research some of the answers for you, planning a reply which would just fill in your answers, and then I was going to tell you about Father's death. I had no idea how close you were... or even if you really knew him... But I knew I would have to tell you."

"But why in person?"

"The reason for that... came later." Melinda closed her eyes, thinking back and continuing her narrative. "After I had been researching things for about a week, I... started dreaming... At first it was ordinary dreams, wondering what a dig was really like, wondering what this J. Covington was like... Then I had a nightmare... terror really. I saw weapons, fireballs, gunfire... felt a sense of... urgency, and a sort of... helplessness." She looked at Janice. "There was a crystal clear vision of you... and I had never met you, but it was you... in a cave... Ares's cave I know now... I saw you take a knife in the chest." Melinda took a deep breath. Janice's hand slid up her arm to quietly knead her shoulder. "You... died. I woke up panting and in a sweat. I told Vida I was taking the first plane out of the country that night. Her brother drove me to the airport. I flew into Rome first, and booked passage on a small fishing ship. They dropped me in Tunis then I made my way to you. It took me six days. I kept thinking I'd get there too late... for what I wasn't sure, but I was terribly concerned about not arriving in time."

Janice puzzled through this. "What do you think now?"

"Smythe was the one who took the knives. I remember seeing that just before I blacked out."

Nodding, Janice's fingers drifted through the water. "So... you were coming to my rescue."

There was a long silence as Melinda stood up in the water, letting the excess sluice off her body as she accepted a towel from Janice's hands. She stepped out and wrapped it around, tucking in the corners. Janice's gaze drifted up to meet hers. "Always."

The blonde's breathing hitched and she stepped back. Melinda stepped past her and exited the bathroom, going to her wardrobe and retrieving a clean nightshirt. Pinioning the towel with her elbows, she eased it over her head and the towel dropped as the clothing replaced it.

Janice moved to the bed and pulled back the covers, helping Melinda onto the bed. As she backed up though, Mel slid her hand up Janice's arm and tugged her down. Settling on the edge of the mattress, the blonde brought her green eyes up to Mel's blue. "Janice, I... want you to stay." The blonde's breathing hitched. Melinda could feel the change in her pulse under her fingers on the smaller woman's wrist. "Will you?"

"You need your sleep. To get well."

"I need you," she countered.

"But you're injured."

"I know." She tugged Janice down next to her, and brushed her fingertips through the edge of blonde curls. "But I'd rather fall asleep in your arms." She accepted the surging desire in her stomach and channeled it into her expression. "It's been a long time."

"I know." Their gazes held for another several heartbeats and finally Janice dropped her eyes. "All right."

Melinda smiled. "Go change." She kissed Janice's fingers after grasping them and bringing them to her lips.

Janice nodded, bending over as she slid off the mattress. She brushed her lips over Melinda's briefly before departing for her own room briefly.

Melinda watched the door and her smile was quick when the blonde reappeared. Her blonde hair was wonderfully mussed and the soft green of her eyes was now more verdant. She held out her hand and lifted the covers in invitation, rewarded with Janice's warm body soon nuzzling against hers.

Their arms eased around each other and both women breathed deeply of one another's scents. Janice nudged her nose into Melinda's damp hair and Melinda inhaled the spicy aroma of Janice's skin. She squeezed gently and felt Janice squeeze in return. "I love you, Janice Covington."

She felt the blonde swallow as the muscles of her throat moved against Melinda's head. A soft kiss was pressed into her hair. "I love you, too, Melinda Pappas." There was a hitched pause. "More than I thought possible."

Cocooned in each other's warmth, the two women fell asleep in one another's arms for the first time in more than two weeks. From Melinda's balcony window, the autumn breeze brought the sounds of cicadas, frogs and grasshoppers instead of Spanish fiesta music.

But it was just as wonderful.

## **Chapter 13**

Janice rolled over, stirred by the sunlight warming her cheeks and nose. When she moved though, she bumped against something. Opening her eyes, she let her gaze trace over the smooth chin and throat of her companion. She was possessively sprawled across Melinda's chest, her left arm wrapped around Mel's peacefully rising and falling ribcage. She kissed the collarbone

invitingly displayed by the neckline of the buttoned sleep-shirt. The warm weight of an arm across her back shifted and fingers lazily brushed over the crown of her hair.

"Good morning." Melinda's voice was a rumble under Janice's ear. She raised herself and smiled down into gradually focusing azure eyes. The brunette's hand nudged at the back of her head, so slowly she lowered to receive a kiss. "Mmm... Good morning."

"Feeling better?"

She lightly poked Mel's ribs, pleased to not see any indications of pain in the beloved face. "Hey, that's my question."

An eyebrow lifted in reply. Then Janice became the object of an intense sensual assault as full lips captured hers, nibbling, parting and finally tasting her mouth, chin and throat. She could not help the groan that escaped as finally the Southerner's lips moved from hers.

"All right." She drawled out the words and then chuckled. "You're fine. I'm fine." Then she surrendered to the wash of love and passion Mel had awakened, and now continued to stir, as their hands explored.

Mel was still tender in places but apparently her strength had returned as a result of the full day's rest. Rising up, she rolled over the smaller woman and sensuously moved their bodies together, mouths exploring.

They shed their nightclothes and heated skin was soothed with cool intimate touch until urgency replaced languor. The waves carried them both, depositing them to rest once again, the taller now sprawled over the smaller.

The sound of their heartbeats pounding in their ears faded gradually. A distant ringing replaced it. Identifying it as the telephone downstairs, Melinda abruptly kissed Janice and dragged herself from the bed. "I'll get it," she said, pulling on and belting her robe before quickly disappearing.

Lying back and throwing her arm over her eyes to focus inward on relaxing, Janice listened to the hurried steps that moved down the hall, to the front entry where the phone continued to ring. She sat up and pulled her fingers through her hair, listening as the phone stopped mid-ring and caught Melinda's gentle voice, "Pappas residence. Hello?"

She retrieved her nightgown from the floor and pulled it back on before taking herself down to join Mel.

"I see," Melinda was saying as Janice arrived. She was brushing her fingertips over her forehead. Distracted she only glanced toward Janice on the stairs once before returning her gaze to the phone base and her attention to the voice on the other end. "All right. I understand." Pause. "Yes. She's right here." Melinda lifted the phone away from her head. "It's Dr. Collier, from the board."

What? Janice took the phone carefully, scanning Mel's face for a sign what this was about. "Hello?" she asked into the receiver. "Yes, this is Dr. Covington. What can I do for you, sir?"

A gentleman's burr responded, a Carolina southern accent smoothing the edges of his words. "Dr. Covington, I am Beauregard Collier, on the university board. My colleagues and I would like to meet with you."

Janice looked up to meet Mel's gaze. The brunette's forehead was slightly creased and she reached out to grasp the long-fingered hand worrying at the belt of her robe. "May I ask... Is this about the position in the history department?"

"Yes. Can you meet us in about an hour? The board room."

Janice looked up, seeking the mantle clock in the drawing room. "About 10:30? Yes, sir. I'll be there." She paused. "Thank you, sir."

"See you in an hour, Doctor. Good day." The line closed and Janice felt her arm go a little numb. Melinda grasped the phone and set it back in the cradle. "I-- need to be at the campus in an hour," she summarized.

The brunette nodded. "All right. You go upstairs and shower. I'll fix us something to eat and we'll go." She circled around behind Janice and squeezed both shoulders as she guided her back to the stairs.

\* \* \*

The couple arrived at the campus administration building with a minute to spare. The president's secretary, a heavy-set woman of middle years and a carefully coifed bun of brown hair, settled her skirt and blouse carefully when she stood from behind the desk and escorted them to the conference room on the second floor.

"Miss Pappas, you go right in. Doctor Covington, the president has asked for you to remain here until you are called." She indicated a small couch across from the boardroom's double doors.

With Mrs. Melvaney between them, Mel offered Janice only a quick smile before letting herself inside the other room.

"Good morning, Melinda," greeted her before she had fully turned around. She located Cassidy Zeigmacht seated next to President Smith at the head of the table.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice." Smith stood, holding out his hand and gesturing to an empty seat. "Coffee? Or tea, Melinda?"

She settled into a chair next to Tyler Jameson. "Nothing. Thank you. I'd rather not keep anyone waiting."

"Good morning, Melinda," Jameson offered quietly as they both turned their attention to the other side of the table.

Harold Gopal pushed back his chair and stood. "Good, now we can get down to business."

The president said, "Of course, Harold. Why don't you call the meeting to order?"

Gopal however was unfazed by Smith's sarcasm. "We've got a problem, ladies and gentlemen. I asked for this meeting in order to resolve it." He set his jaw and his voice was stern, unpleasant when he spoke. "We have a professor out there who didn't trust us enough to do a thorough search for his replacement. So he brings in his own." Gopal's gestures grew more emphatic with each word. "That is unacceptable."

Melinda winced but kept her thoughts from her face with difficulty. Mrs. Zeigmacht pointed out, "So what do we do? Fire him? Seems a little harsh to me."

Smith volleyed, "He's leaving in January regardless. So we still have to arrange instructors for his classes."

Gopal slapped his hands together. "So you're in favor of his choice? Just like that? Sight unseen? This... girl?"

"Covington is not a girl, Harry. She's as much an expert in her field as you are in yours."

Beau Collier turned to Melinda, who met his gaze evenly as he questioned, "She mentions your father among her research references, Miss Pappas. What do you think of her skills?"

Lacing her fingers together, having considered that this question might come up, Melinda answered carefully. "Doctor Covington's experience marks her as a dedicated archaeologist."

He seemed a bit taken aback by her brief statement. "That's all you have to say?"

She did indeed feel a desire to say more, but carefully squelched it and shook her head. "I

don't believe I should, sir. Doctor Covington is... a guest in my home."

Zeigmacht nodded. "So you know her well?"

"We have worked together before; yes, ma'am."

"Then I'd like to meet this Covington woman at least," Cassidy remarked. "Certainly that's reasonable, Harold?"

"You want to run her through another interview?" Smith asked looking around at the gathered faces.

Along with Zeigmacht, four others forming a simple majority also nodded. Gobal looked positively green. "This is highly irregular," he intoned, sitting back down with barely concealed ire. "We have a candidate who went through the process." He tried another tack. "This will set a bad precedent."

Tyler nodded. "Perhaps we were wrong to leave Cuthridge out in the first place." He looked over at Melinda who was carefully trying to keep her expression neutral. Trying to draw one out in her, he let a small smile play on his lips briefly. "At least we can hear her out."

Melinda nodded. "All right."

Gobal looked around the table. "Smith?"

The president shook his head and then stood. "I'd like to have everyone participate in the evaluation."

Already shaking her head, Melinda remarked, "Sir, I shouldn't."

"Are you withdrawing yourself?"

"It's only proper, sir. I'll wait in the corridor."

"I'd really like to have a history person," he replied. "I'm already withdrawing myself," he admitted. "Maryann, I think, hoped I would summarily decide in Covington's favor."

"You wouldn't, sir."

He shrugged. "Perhaps not. But I want this resolved. And no further contention to come of it." He turned to Gobal, who was silently fuming at his own fingers fisted on the table. "You, Harold, and the rest can hash it out without me."

Gobal was disturbed by the president's decision to remain out of the process. "I trust you to be fair, Jonathan."

"Then may I suggest a fairer solution?" Smith's gaze drifted from face to face. Several nodded. "I would like to question both Lipton and Covington together, if you are all agreeable?" He sat down at the table of nods. "All right, Melinda," he sighed. "You're excused. Send Covington and Lipton in."

Mrs. Dumont caught Melinda's hand as she passed. "You're a wise young woman, Melinda." She gave the slender hand a brief squeeze. "I promise we'll be fair."

Mel wondered which candidate Mrs. Dumont would eventually choose, then shook her head. She would say nothing. In a couple of hours more than likely, majority would rule. She let herself out of the room, listening as conversations started up within.

In the corridor, she found Janice sitting talking with a young, unfamiliar blond man. She cleared her throat and gained their attention. "Are you Doctor Theodore Lipton?"

"Yes I am." He stood and offered his hand. "Please, call me Ted." His voice suggested a decided disdain for his formal address. A year, perhaps two, younger than Janice, his face held a bookish intelligence. His handshake was soft and his tone colored by an accent notable for its absence. *He must be something of a linguist*, Melinda thought. Exposure to so many languages and dialects tended to blunt one's natural accent.

"The board would like to talk to both of you," she said. "I'm going to get some coffee." Carefully she avoided Janice's questioning look, stepping back instead and gesturing the other two toward the conference room. "Through there."

When the door closed, Melinda pressed her hands to her eyes, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she sat down to wait. She distinctly felt someone approach from the right. Peeking she noted men's shoes then sat back and looked up into the concerned face of Basil Cuthridge.

"You look like you could use this more than me," he suggested, offering the cup. "It's tea."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I think you've done enough."

He noticed a faint bruise on her temple and tentatively inquired, "What happened to you?" He gestured to his head to identify the location of the injury on hers that he had noted.

"I had an accident," she replied quietly.

When nothing else was forthcoming, Cuthridge decided the pleasantries were over. He sipped the tea sighing as if to brace himself. "So... what's the verdict?"

She told him about the decision to re-interview both candidates. "Gobal conceded a lot agreeing to that," she commented. "He wanted you fired, Lipton hired and Janice dropped."

"You were very persuasive then."

Again, she shook her head. "No." She sat up carefully and leveled her gaze at him. "Janice gets this on her own. Or she doesn't. I can't influence the decision. It wouldn't be fair to her."

"You..." he said quietly. "Are better than I."

Eyeing him with aggravation, so much of her body screaming to go in there and demand Janice take the position over the less-qualified Lipton, Melinda nevertheless kept her own counsel. She resented him for putting Janice, her, and the board, in this position. She remained pensively silent until Cuthridge moved away, getting lost in his own thoughts.

## **Chapter 14**

Janice realized, as they crossed the threshold to the conference room that the unassuming young man, who had said he was here to see a Mr. Gobal, was the other candidate--the board's candidate--for Cuthridge's position. The realization made her edgy and she scanned the nine unfamiliar faces seated around the table.

"Welcome." He offered introductions. "This is Doctor Janice Covington and Dr. Theodore Lipton." The man at the head of the table stood and walked around toward them.

"Please call me Ted," Lipton suggested, firmly taking Smith's offered hand.

"I'm Dr. Jonathan Smith," he introduced himself, and offered his hand to Janice. She took it, feeling a light squeeze and smiled into dust-brown eyes.

"Thank you for seeing us, Dr. Smith."

Stepping back, Smith turned to make a gesture taking in the whole of the room's occupants. "Our pleasure, Doctor." He indicated the man who sat in the chair to his right. "May I introduce the rest? Mister Harold Gobal."

Gobal stood briefly and nodded to both, but then quickly sat down before either could offer their hand. Instead he took his spectacles off his nose and cleaned them distractedly.

Janice followed Smith's movements as he continued around the table. He now stood behind a woman with a warm smile and bright gray eyes. The eyes twinkled and the smile gave the older face a very young look. "Mrs. Cassidy Zeigmacht," he introduced them, his voice warm.

"Glad to meet you both," Cassidy Zeigmacht said in a voice that was both strong and

soothing. Janice caught Gobal casting Mrs. Zeigmacht an aggrieved look. The older woman cast one right back. Interesting, the blonde thought.

Then her attention was drawn around to others. Smith moved further down. "Mrs. Rachel Dumont. Mr. Tyler Jameson."

"A pleasure to meet you," Jameson said, half-rising from his chair to shake both Lipton's and Janice's hands.

Finally, Smith moved around to the man who appeared the oldest of those at the table. With a warm hand on the gray-haired man's shoulder, Smith introduced, "Professor Emeritus of English, Doctor Beauregard Collier."

Such a strong voice, Janice thought, remembering the phone call. "Dr. Collier," Janice greeted warmly.

The older gentleman stood, taking her hand with 19th century grace and bending over it smartly. "A pleasure," he offered. Then he offered Lipton a firm handshake. "Dr. Lipton, thank you for coming." He looked back to her and stepped back. "We appreciate both of you coming out on such short notice."

Janice smiled, truly charmed. "The unexpected is what makes life exciting, sir." She realized, as he smiled, that somehow she had said exactly the right thing.

Smith interceded and introduced the remaining board members. "You are here because we have decided to conduct new interviews... for both of you."

Lipton settled into an empty chair at the far end. "This is highly irregular," he remarked, but laced his fingers together on the table in front of him.

"What would you like to ask?" Janice exchanged brief glances with Zeigmacht and Smith. She recognized the abrasive reaction not quite concealed in Gobal's face. A shot of adrenaline straightened her spine. *He wants proof*, she thought. *Well then I'll give him proof.*

"Which of you would like to go first?"

Dr. Lipton inquired, "What exactly are we going to do?"

Zeigmacht regarded him for a moment. "We are giving each of you one hour to teach us on the topic of your choice. A demonstration of your talents if you will."

"A lecture? Without any preparation at all?" Lipton said it, but Janice also had thought the surprised comment.

Cassidy Zeigmacht nodded. "Well?"

Lipton looked from Zeigmacht over to Gobal and then to Janice's face. He seemed to decide gallantry in this case forced him to put his foot forward first. "Any topic at all?"

Smith nodded.

"I will go first," he said finally.

Janice settled back. "If you're certain?"

His dusty blonde hair shifted slightly on his ruddy cheeks. "Of course." He pushed to his feet and all eyes watched him examine the room then take up pacing before a portable chalk board. His head was down, his hands clasped behind his back as he thought quickly.

Finally he looked up, stopped and announced, "I will discuss the impact of the Norwegian migrations to the Danelaw on Celtic culture."

Having conversed with him at length in the waiting area about a tangent to this topic, the condition of Danelaw archaeological finds, Janice realized the topic for what it had to be: an abridged version of his doctoral thesis. She began to examine quietly what she would choose.

The position they were both trying for was in British history. So the topic would probably

be most appreciated if it was keyed to the island nation's extensive history. Thankfully, its longevity meant that, at one time or another, almost every other culture on the European continent had affected, or been affected by, Britain.

With half her attention, she listened as he laid out key names and dates outlining his premise and was impressed with his level of detail on such short notice. In the analysis portion, he drew the threads together into a surprising, but supported theory on early British government and jurisprudence influences by the Danelaw examples.

As he was drawing his analysis to a close, Janice noted a perfect opportunity for a question and almost forgot herself, leaning forward to speak. She glanced at the others and dug her hands into her thighs.

President Smith raised a hand quietly. It took Dr. Lipton only a moment to notice and he asked, "Yes?"

"Wasn't the matter of restitution developed prior to this period?"

Without skipping a beat, Lipton nodded. "Yes. However, Danegeld was the first structured "fine" arrangement in the Isles." He looked around and caught sight of a clock. "Are there other questions?"

Collier and Gobal leaned together for a moment, Janice, and likely Lipton, wondering what was said.

Just then Collier pulled back and noted, "Excellent presentation, Dr. Lipton. And informative. Thank you."

"Yes, sir." He set the chalk down and then dusted his palms on his trousers. "Excuse me please?"

Gobal nodded. "Of course."

Janice stood as Lipton exited the conference room.

"Dr. Covington?" Gobal studied her for a long moment as she returned a measured look of her own.

"Yes, sir?" Again, she felt a ramrod straightening in her back. She walked up to the chalkboard and continued to think about her topic, debating the pros and cons of her choice as she methodically erased Lipton's work.

*The angry mob assembled in the tavern barely let her through; she pushed and shoved diving through openings as people jostled to get a look at the object of their hatred. She broke into the open space in front of them sparing not a glance at their victim as she spun and raised her hands to ward them off. The faces were worn, tired, angry, sad even, dark and light eyes trying to drill right past her. They looked to her for an explanation. The air was smoky, filled with the acrid scent of burning wood and the musty smell of wet peat.*

Janice blinked. Her confidence surged and she took a sure step, bringing herself around to focus on the faces of the university board members. She cast her gaze on each one creating a moment of eye contact. Several backs straightened.

Then she started to speak. "Today's discussion is town life during the Norman and Saxon conflict for overlordship of Britannia--Britain." She sketched several names, dates and places on the board.

"Commonly and somewhat incorrectly called 'The War of the Roses', the period was characterized by a fracturing of the masses, led by propaganda on a scale not seen before. Every city had an alliance with one House or the other. Neutrality was not an option. What then did a city gain from allegiance?" She directed everyone's attention to her lists.

On each side of the board she listed the same five words: trade, labor, protection, religion and education. At the top of each list she wrote the family name of each house: Lancaster and York.

Stepping back she engaged Tyler Jameson first. "Mr. Jameson, what do you think of when you look at these five categories?"

Jameson seemed a little surprised to be directly addressed, but she smiled and gamely he ventured, "Each group had a different way to answer those questions?"

"Exactly." She then gestured toward Cassidy Zeigmacht. "You're on the Raleigh city council, ma'am. How do you answer the first question for those who live here?"

Zeigmacht leaned forward and commented, "That's business, economy. We have a system of supports, taxes, regulations for fair business, that sort of thing."

"Does everyone on the council address the problem the same way?"

Here Cassidy chuckled. "Hardly. Folks like Harold... businessmen... want as little input from us as possible. But consumers should be protected from shiesters."

"Good point," Smith interjected. He turned to Janice. "What does this have to do with the topic?"

"Everything." She spent the next few minutes detailing each leader's positions and systems for dealing with each concern. Gradually she saw her point getting across.

Jameson at one point murmured the words she was writing under one column, having picked up on the 'opposition' theme.

"Right, Mr. Jameson," she encouraged again. "Now..." She turned back to the group. "Choose your leader."

The board balked, but she called them each by name and had them select. Five to four, Lancaster edged York.

Then she pointed out where, as they sat at the table, a York supporter sat next to a Lancaster supporter.

She shook her head. "If you can't come to an agreement, neither leader will protect the group. Now, decide."

She watched Harold Gobal frown. "Mr. Gobal? You're for York, correct? Mrs. Dumont is not. Convince her to your point of view."

"Go ahead, Harold," Zeigmacht, who had chosen Lancaster, needled him. The man laid out his reasons for choosing as he had, and Rachel Dumont countered two of the statements, using the knowledge sketched on the board.

Several others got the idea and began debating among themselves. Janice circled the table, answering questions and clarifying one House's position or the other. She refrained from claiming a position of her own. "This is your exercise," she pointed out with a smile.

After ten minutes, she called a halt. "Now, that's it. You have an army marching to your gates," she put a hand on the table. "What's your decision?" she challenged.

The group had not reached a consensus and looked distinctly bothered by the prospect. Gobal asked, "Which army is it?" His face was hot and his voice strained.

She stepped back and smiled the smile of a cat who had just snared the canary. "It won't matter. Those who disagree will be put to death. Those who agree will be suspect. What have you done to protect yourself or your family, Mr. Gobal?"

There were gasps around the table.

"But all the choices--?" Collier countered.

"Now you can see the life of the lower classes in Britain and how it wasn't a person that

ruled England, but a rivalry. The mindset from this extended conflict led to what?"

Zeigmacht ventured a guess. "A weakening of the ruling class?"

"Well, its absolute power at least." Janice nodded. "What would rise in its place? Society abhors a vacuum."

"Self-sustaining towns!" Jameson excitedly got to his feet.

"Cause and effect. Yes. Is it any wonder at all that within another generation the House of Commons strengthened in Britain's government?"

She stepped back from the table and glanced up at the clock. "I seem to have run over. Any questions?" She felt a sudden rush of lassitude as she studied the quiet faces around the table, most absorbing what she had said. The lapse in concentration made her lean on the back of a nearby chair.

The board members finally exchanged looks. Gobal seemed uncharacteristically subdued.

Zeigmacht was pushing to her feet, and the action drew Janice's attention. "May I be the first to say I am very impressed, Doctor Covington." She chuckled. "I haven't had such a good debate in weeks."

"My condolences," Janice chuckled in reply as Cassidy's hand closed over her. "A good debate is healthy. That's been true for centuries."

Smith nodded, as he also came to his feet. "Human nature hasn't changed much in a thousand years?"

"That, sir, is a lesson very few students grasp quickly. Congratulations."

Gobal and Collier stood. She turned to face them and her smile evaporated. Neither man was smiling. "Sirs?"

"Your lesson was... enlightening, Dr. Covington." The gravity in Collier's voice drew all the board members' eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor," Smith smoothly interjected. "Could you wait outside?"

Numbly she nodded. "Yes, sir. Of course." A pit of unease formed in her stomach. Maybe she had been too unconventional for them.

*You did the right thing. You were yourself.* The voice in a soothing feminine tone brought her up short at the door. She hadn't thought she'd spoken aloud. She turned, with her hand on the knob, looking for someone, perhaps Mrs. Dumont, over her shoulder. No one was near. Must be nerves, she thought, quickly exiting into the corridor.

She was still absorbing the various expressions on the members' faces, trying to judge her chances, when a hand slid over her crossed forearms. The sensation made her jump.

"Relax, Janice."

"Oh. Mel, don't do that." Her head shot up and her gaze fell into inquisitive blue eyes. Taking a deep breath she let it out slowly. "I'm all right." She looked past the brunette's shoulder and saw Cuthridge leaning against a wall, hands in his pockets.

On an opposite wall, Lipton stood a little straighter but he too leaned with one hand against the wall, head down. Patting Mel's hand, Janice pulled away and crossed to him, watching his head come up as he heard her approach.

"Dr. Covington."

"Dr. Lipton." She realized he looked as drained as she felt. Even though it had been an hour since his lecture. She tossed a thumb over her shoulder. "They're deliberating." She offered her hand out. "You did an excellent job," she complimented. "They made an excellent choice."

He shrugged. "I heard you too." He shook his head. "They really were involved."

"Might have been a little too radical," she countered, looking at the imposing double doors.

"It was engaging."

Melinda came up as Cuthridge crossed from the other side. "I'm sure both of you did an excellent job," she said.

The doors to the conference room opened. Cuthridge, from his vantage, was able to see it first, though they all turned in the silence. "Looks like we're about to find out the decision."

## Chapter 15

"Melinda, we need you for a few minutes. Before the rest. Please?"

President Smith moved to grasp the door behind her allowing her to enter ahead of him. She moved, but stopped when his hand landed on her shoulder. Glancing up, she caught a barely noticeable shake of his head, and then he dropped his hand and she moved into the conference room.

Melinda scanned the other faces in the room trying to get a feel for the next several minutes. Gobal looked like he had a bad case of indigestion, his face remote and pensive. Even the usually smiling Cassidy looked unapproachable. The widow looked vaguely sick, though she spared a faint smile as Melinda pulled out the empty chair and sat next to her.

"I want this settled." Collier turned to Smith. "We still have an issue with Dr. Cuthridge. I recommend immediate dismissal."

"Not a reprimand?" Cassidy was still disturbed.

When Smith cast his glance to Melinda, she realized that they had waited until they could also have her input, since she had removed herself from the candidate selection process. Trouble was she didn't feel much more objective about Cuthridge at this point either. Perhaps she could delay the discussion for a few minutes. "Has a decision been reached about who will fill the position?"

Smith nodded, tapping his pencil against a pad. "Covington will be given the Pappas chair."

Despite the swell of pride in her partner for impressing the board and beating the odds, Melinda had to ask it, even as she wanted to cut out her tongue for tempting Fate this blatantly. "You're justifying his actions?"

Smith shook his head. "We are very impressed with the young doctor and believe she will be the better asset for the university."

Melinda glanced at Gobal and saw his frown, brief though it was. "A majority decision?"

Cassidy laid her hand over Melinda's. "We thought you would be pleased."

Mel withdrew her hand. God, Janice, forgive me. She stood and tried to explain her position. "It's... not about me. It's about what's best for this institution." She took a deep breath. "My father spent twenty five years here, as part of the fabric of this community. The one thing he always held in high regard was personal integrity. Honesty and compassion were paramount, for his students and for his colleagues. These were uppermost in his mind every day. That's why he had the trusts established. That's why I took his place on a dozen voluntary boards. I didn't do it to enhance any agenda or myself. I didn't do it because it would allow me to put my friends in high places. I did it... to honor my father's memory and the work he devoted his life to." She looked back at the board. "So if you chose Janice Covington for any reason other than she was absolutely the best candidate for the position, I will ask you to drop it now."

"Everyone here admired your father a great deal. We are trying to honor him with this choice." Collier gestured. "Melinda, sit down. We honestly found your friend's impromptu lecture

engaging, dynamic, and filled with all the sorts of things your father would have exactly admired. She's the candidate we want."

Finally Smith cleared his throat. "Now, what do we do about Cuthridge? We had a motion for dismissal. Discussion?"

This portion, prelude to a voice vote, was familiar. Melinda shifted from emotion to logic and listened to the arguments on both sides.

"He leaves for sabbatical in January," Rachel Dumont began. "It seems pointless..."

"Dr. Cuthridge has show a flagrant disregard for our procedures." Collier shook his head.

"But Dr. Covington was the better choice," Tyler Jameson mused. "He was right."

"Irrelevant," Collier retorted. "Procedures are established. He broke them."

"Dr. Collier, you were a professor once," Rachel reasoned once more.

"Which is exactly why I want him out. Dr. Covington can cover his classes and assume her full duties in the spring semester. Otherwise he sets a precedent others will exploit."

"You sound like the faculty is just poised for a reason to overthrow us, Beau," Cassidy admonished. "Certainly this doesn't warrant Gestapo tactics. A written reprimand should suffice. He's an academic, not a revolutionary. He got carried away with his desire to serve his students."

Melinda shook her head. "I don't believe he got carried away. Dr. Cuthridge knew what he was doing, and that it was not just unorthodox, but wrong."

Cassidy studied her for a long moment. "You had a discussion with him? You know this for a fact?"

"We... had words. It took some effort to convince him to bring himself to President Smith." She removed her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose delicately, trying to ease the tension she was feeling. Replacing her glasses, she realized everyone was waiting for her to continue. She looked at Smith. "He spoke with you. That is what prompted this meeting, isn't it?"

Smith nodded. "I thought the fairest resolution would be to bring everyone back together and make the decisions as a group. Cuthridge understood he would be reprimanded in some fashion. Perhaps it only remains for us to decide the manner of it."

Melinda agreed. "All right. What options are available?"

"Written reprimand certainly." Melinda thought it was Mr. Terrence Johns, the board's least vocal member, who offered that. She thought it perfectly in tune with his unobtrusive nature that he would prefer to avoid a panel in front of the faculty board.

"What about his sabbatical? Can we take it away? Or alter it somehow?" This suggestion came from Gobal.

"Perhaps if he goes without funding..." Collier nodded at his own idea. "That would send perhaps the strongest message."

Mrs. Dumont nodded. "I can see that."

"All right. Then I move for an end to discussion. I call for a vote." Mrs. Zeigmacht watched Melinda shift in her seat.

Smith nodded. "Anyone second?"

"I second," she said, her voice sounding small in the brief silence that had fallen. *Janice, I hope you'll understand.*

"The choices for reprimand are written censure, or a non-paid sabbatical," Smith picked up the thread, his eyes a little surprised. He called each person by name.

Mr. Gobal: "Non-paid sabbatical."

Dr. Collier: "No pay."

Mrs. Dumont: "Censure."

Mr. Jameson: "Pass." He looked significantly toward Melinda.

Mr. Johns: "Censure."

Mrs. Zeigmacht: "Written censure." Melinda watched Cassidy frown noticeably before leaning back once more.

Miss Pappas: "Non-paid sabbatical." She weathered the surprised expressions with her gaze fixed only on Smith, who had addressed her.

"Mr. Jameson? Have you made a decision?" Smith prompted the young man in a voice Melinda realized held hope that he wouldn't be responsible for having to break a tie.

"I vote for... the sabbatical option." He cast a confused look at Melinda but then returned his eyes to Smith. "Sir."

Cassidy interjected. "Hopefully, Dr. Cuthridge will be inclined to explain himself before he leaves. It bothers me that we don't really have his reasons, just hearsay."

"All right. Well, let's give the news. Send in Doctors Covington and Lipton," Smith said.

Harold Gobal stepped to the door and called the two inside. They settled into chairs opposite one another at the end of the table, quiet and pensive. Smith then directed his attention to Dr. Collier, the older man briefly taking a steadying moment to straighten his clothes as he stood.

"We could use a person as both adjunct and to fill the endowed chair. The history department is among our most popular studies areas. However the fact is the money is not there for both positions." He gestured to Melinda, who dropped her eyes briefly. "Thanks to the Pappas Fund we have an endowed chair. The recipient has very specific requirements, in leadership, experience, publication, and supervision of student research." He circled around behind his chair, bracing his hands on the straight back's top edge. His gaze bored into Janice and he took a deep breath. "It is very unusual, but this board has decided -- by majority decision -- to award the post to you, Dr. Covington."

Janice gasped, then stifled herself with a hand across her mouth, studying faces in rapid succession. Melinda could easily discern the excitement dancing in Janice's eyes. She felt her heart squeeze in empathy.

"Thank you, Dr. Smith. I hope to serve this institution well."

"Dr. Lipton, your application and resume will remain on file. If we have another opening, we would like to retain you for consideration."

Drawing his dark blonde brows together, Lipton pushed to his feet. With exceptional dignity, Melinda realized, he nodded his head. "That is your decision."

"Thank you both for your time today."

Taking that as their cue to leave, Janice and Ted Lipton walked out together.

"Call Cuthridge in." Mrs. Dumont, closest to the entry, stood quietly and summoned the British professor with a gesture as she briefly held the door.

The academician entered and stood silently at the end of the table, his hands laced calmly before him.

The university president looked from Collier to Rachel Dumont then to Cassidy Zeigmacht on his left. Then he began. "Dr. Cuthridge, through your actions, we have been brought to this pass. The rules of this institution exist for a reason." He looked away from the professor and glanced at Cassidy. "Some of us would appreciate an explanation of your actions before judgment is passed."

Basil began quietly. "I have served this university and its students for fifteen years. Perhaps I could claim loss of my faculties. Perhaps you would even believe it."

He paused. "A member of your own body reminded me that I should have come to you in the beginning. I did not." He glanced briefly up to Smith. "Had I been included in the search for my replacement, perhaps my decisions would have been different."

Gobal challenged. "Would you do this again?"

"Harold!" Rachel Dumont's exclamation briefly drew everyone's eyes away from Cuthridge.

"No," the businessman stormed, identifying Cuthridge with a resolute finger. "Would you do such a thing again, sir?"

There was a calm forthrightness to his reply when the professor finally spoke. "Sir, I can honestly say I doubt that such a situation will ever arise again." He looked at Smith. "What is the board's decision?"

Requested directly, Smith did not dissemble. Melinda could see Cuthridge nodding even as the decision was voiced. "By majority decision Dr. Cuthridge, you are hereby granted your sabbatical period to begin immediately... without pay."

Silence seeped into every corner of the room before Cuthridge cleared his throat and thanked them. "I appreciate your fairness."

"This meeting is adjourned."

The room's occupants rose almost at once. Melinda paused as Cuthridge approached. He offered her his hand. "Miss Pappas."

"Doctor." His hand warmed hers. She had not realized how chilled she had become over the stress. Removing her hand, she watched him walk out. His shoulders moved strongly under his jacket. A man at peace with his decisions, he lifted his hat from the tabletop and settled it on his head with economy. Mel looked away only as the door clicked shut behind him.

She resettled her coat over her shoulders only to look up and see Mrs. Zeigmacht and Tyler Jameson both approaching.

"Melinda?" Cassidy's concern was evident. Melinda instead shook her head and backed up from the table.

"I'm all right, Mrs. Z."

"Miss Melinda?"

"Yes?" Mel did not feel quite like dealing with Tyler, but schooled her expression to politeness.

"Despite everything, I have to say I was surprised by your vote."

She settled her hat carefully before answering. "He knew what he was doing," she said, meaning Cuthridge.

He nodded. After a moment, Tyler asked, "Would you, and Dr. Covington, consider attending our dinner party on Sunday? We can... welcome her properly to the community."

If she'll still want to speak to me, Melinda thought. "All right, Tyler. I will ask her."

"Thank you." He grasped her hand and then dropped it, turning and leaving Cassidy alone with Melinda.

The older woman stood between Melinda and the door. "Yes, ma'am?" she asked politely.

"You have much integrity for one so young," the widow complimented quietly. "This town's future would benefit a great deal."

Melinda shook her head, realizing the older woman was back to encouraging her to spread political wings. "Not right now. I couldn't divide my attention anymore."

Zeigmacht patted her arm. "I know, dear. But I will keep trying." She laughed low and

stepped aside, letting Melinda pass finally. "I'll see you, and Dr. Covington, at the Jameson party."

Smiling carefully, Melinda turned away. "I look forward to it," she offered dryly, knowing that the widow really was not going to give up. Melinda's actions today had only strengthened the older woman's arguments about her innate traits carrying over to elected office. She sighed and left the conference room.

Immediately her eyes scanned for a familiar blonde head. Her heart sank when she saw Janice and Dr. Cuthridge's heads bent close together. Tension lines were clearly visible in the tanned face. He was talking and from the storm cloud gathering in Janice's features, Melinda knew he was imparting the board's decision.

Melinda wondered if she would be painted favorably or unfavorably in the professor's retelling. After her decisiveness inside the board room, she discovered her lack of desire to discern the answer to her question unsettling and waited until Cuthridge had moved off, heading for the exit stairs, before she moved forward to join Janice.

*Why couldn't her heart and her head agree on what was right?*

## Chapter 16

"Will you be leaving town immediately?" Cuthridge nodded. "It might be best."

"I still need to get those notes on Cromwell from you," she reminded him.

"I haven't forgotten." Basil's eyes met hers briefly and she knew he saw the disturbance in them. "Relax. You're in. Everything turned out the way it should."

"You were effectively suspended. You couldn't have meant for that to happen?" He slowly shook his head. Janice nodded tightly. "All right. Though... please don't leave town without saying goodbye."

He did smile then. "I promise." With a display of gravity, he shook her hand and turned on his heel, walking away.

Janice bit her lip, watching him go. Then she felt a presence at her back. Turning around, she faced Rachel Dumont who offered her a dainty hand. "Doctor Covington, please accept my congratulations."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Dumont. I will endeavor to remain true to the faith you have all placed in me."

"Of course you will, dear." Janice nodded as the older woman left her side to accept Mr. Gobal's escort to her automobile.

Doctor Collier walked up quietly, having separated from Gobal as he left with Mrs. Dumont. "Dr. Covington, you were really quite engaging."

"Anything to keep my students' interest, sir." She smiled and was pleased to see his face crack just the smallest of smiles in return.

"Just so. Just so," he murmured, walking away.

Amused by his reaction, she looked away from him and smiled amusedly, finding herself caught in penetrating gray eyes. "Mrs. Zeigmacht," she greeted gently. She wondered if her barely contained laugh had been observed.

"So you're Melinda's European friend," the older woman mused. Somehow on some level, she realized Cassidy Zeigmacht also had overheard Collier and reacted similarly herself. There was a dancing light in her eyes that drew Janice into a familiar circle of warmth.

The sensation relaxed her. "Actually I'm from Philadelphia. My work took me to Europe."

But I'm afraid I've been out of Philadelphia circles for some time." Mrs. Zeigmacht's gray eyes shaded lighter and widened in question. Janice elaborated. "I suffered wanderlust early. My first dig... outside of my grandmother's rose garden... was a Celtic dig two miles northeast of Surrey, England in '29."

"You are quite a find, Dr. Covington."

The quip made Janice chuckle softly. "Thank you." She accepted the woman's hand gently and then followed a few steps as the older woman left.

Melinda finally approached. The brunette seemed a bit shell-shocked, she assessed, noting the careful set of her shoulders and the way her eyes scanned Janice. The blonde took the burden of the silence between them and spoke first. "Hi."

"Hello." There was a strain to the single word. Then Melinda inhaled sharply. "Are you ready to leave?"

Janice didn't have an opportunity to respond. The young man Tyler Jameson--Janice hoped she remembered correctly--stopped alongside them. "Dr. Covington, I... was amazed at your energetic presentation."

"Thank you, Mr. Jameson."

"Please, call me Tyler. Melinda and I, after all, are friends."

She caught his adoring glance over to her partner. "Yes, of course. Mist--Tyler. Please call me Janice."

Tearing his eyes from Melinda, Jameson beamed at her. "Could I presumptuously invite you to my family home? We are having a dinner party on Sunday afternoon."

"Melinda?" Janice saw her friend nod tightly. "I'm honored by the invitation. Thank you."

His face lit up, transforming a serious rather plain face into one with handsome bright features. His brown eyes danced and his hand came up quickly to shake hers. "I look forward to it. Cocktails begin at four o'clock."

Janice was caught up in his enthusiasm and offered a warm smile of her own back before he strode away, a perceptible bounce to his step as he shrugged into his overcoat and tugged on his cap as he pushed out the door.

"Looks like you made another friend." Melinda's voice broke the silence behind her. "We'll probably want to go shopping tomorrow for something for you to wear."

Janice shrugged into her borrowed coat and felt the absence of her hat strongly as she watched Melinda press her own onto her head. "Yes. Time for me to dress the part."

Out on the sidewalk the mid-afternoon sun and breeze conspired to whip her hair and dance colorful leaves around them both. "Mel?" Janice asked as they both settled into the car.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Yes, of course. I'm fine."

Janice was skeptical. "Are you upset that they cut off Dr. Cuthridge?"

About to put the key in the ignition, Melinda stopped and turned to Janice. Her blue eyes were troubled, but her tone was certain. "No. It was the right thing to do."

"You sound like you mean that." Janice tried to bite back her disappointment. She had hoped that Melinda had not voted with the majority.

"I do."

Janice considered the possible arguments. "I know he went around the rules, but don't you agree that a professor deserves some input into his replacement?"

Organizing her thoughts, Melinda set the car in motion. "Whether I do or not wasn't the point. People can't just go around the rules any time they feel like it."

Pursing her lips in dismay, Janice countered, "So would you have rather they just selected Dr. Lipton? Not have conducted the second interviews at all?"

This reaction was exactly what Melinda had feared when she spoke up in the meeting. "Janice, please... understand that I am happy that the board appointed you to the position. I saw Lipton's file. I found him lacking. Objectively. But the objective was procedurally obtaining a replacement for a professor leaving on sabbatical. I'm very angry that Cuthridge didn't see how much his actions could have endangered your reputation." She spared a glance at Janice, who had turned away and leaned against the passenger window, watching the scenery pass.

Working out the issues in her mind the archaeologist knew that she could never really blame anyone, least of all Melinda, who had, as she said, operated objectively. It was one of the brunette's qualities Janice liked most. She knew she got too emotional on occasions herself. She inhaled and let it out slowly.

"I wouldn't have blamed you if I didn't get the job," Janice said finally, turning her gaze to study Mel, who focused only ahead while driving down the road. "In fact, because you challenged things, I have the security of knowing that I really did earn this myself." She slid her hand down Melinda's arm until she lightly clasped the back of the long fingers curled around the gearshift. "That means everything to me."

The brunette's expression, blue eyes unwavering and a muscle twitching in her cheek, did not change. Janice leaned across the space and brushed her lips over Mel's cheek. She brushed her fingers over the other woman's jaw. "I love you. Every noble inch of you." The expected blush pleased Janice immensely. At least the brunette wasn't moping any longer.

She patted Mel's hand before she settled back into the seat once more. "So... were you ever going to tell me Tyler Jameson is sweet on you?"

"We weren't talking about Tyler."

"I figured it was time for a change in subject." Janice shook her head. Continuing mildly, she ruminated, "He seems like a nice fellow."

"I suppose." Melinda's tone was restrained, almost bored.

Janice could tell she was holding something back. "All right. So tell me. How many times has he asked to marry you?"

The brunette shook her head. "Not counting the years we were in grade school? Probably a dozen."

With it said so bluntly, Janice couldn't help it. She laughed. "Why didn't you ever say yes? He absolutely adores you."

"Because I don't love him. He's just a friend."

"It's nice to have friends."

Sharing smiles, the two women rode the rest of the way to Beaufort Oaks in silence.

\* \* \*

Janice leaned on the upper porch railing watching the moonlight reflect on the lake ripples, pondering everything that had transformed her life that day. The full moon made her think of full days to come and hopeful expectations. She smiled, lingering over the new joys to come. Students who would look to her for guidance, divining the paths of history through the writings of those who

lived it, books, papers, conversations. *Life is certainly better when those things were included*, she thought.

A light dinner of soup and sandwiches sat happily on her stomach. Footsteps sounded behind her and she glanced over her sweater-wrapped shoulders. "Hi."

"Are you coming inside?" Melinda, bundled with a down blanket over her shoulders, leaned on the doorway, studying her. "It's getting cold."

Janice squeezed the railing and stretched her shoulders and back muscles with catlike content. "Soon. I... You know this is the first time I've really set down roots in any place?"

Melinda grasped her around the waist from behind, letting the smaller woman absorb the warmth. "Well you did it."

Janice turned and wrapped her arms around the other woman's waist, dropping her head into the soft chest and inhaling deeply. "Yeah, I did."

Breathing into the fragrant blonde hair, Melinda tugged her toward the door. "Come on. I have chocolate and milk about to scald on the stove."

Wrapped around each other they retreated inside the house and down to the kitchen.

The clouds shifted in front of the moon as two shadows moved across the lawn toward the lake.

\* \* \*

Errands on Friday brought Janice and Melinda into the heart of downtown Raleigh, on the other side from the university campus. First she opened a small account at the bank.

The bank manager, a Mr. Thomas Willoughby by the placard next to his door, stepped out of his office when his secretary informed him, "Miss Pappas has business, sir."

He gestured the two young women, Miss Pappas whom he knew and the slight blonde whom he did not, into his office. "How may I be of service to you today, Miss Pappas?" He fingered the inside lapel of his double-breasted brown suit and studied the taller of the two women, an almost cherubic smile on his plump face.

Melinda passed over a set of papers then gestured to her left. "This is Doctor Janice Covington, newly appointed to the Pappas chair at the university. I would like to see that the fund disbursements begin."

"Everything meets the requirements, I presume?" He settled a pair of wire-frames on his nose and glanced at the papers.

"Yes, sir. The board approved her yesterday. She will have to begin immediately since another professor is departing on sabbatical. Will there be any problems?"

He studied the papers and gestured. "Anything for you, my dear." He paused and looked up at the slender blonde, who seemed terribly young for such a vaunted position, but among the papers in his hands was her resume, quite impressive. "Welcome to Raleigh, Mi-- Doctor Covington."

"Thank you." Janice accepted his offered hand graciously and settled back once again into her seat.

"Let's take care of the applications." He fished in his desk for a set of forms. "I'll need your residence, both where you will make your home and at the university, phone numbers as well. We'll open the account with the first scheduled transfer from the Pappas fund." He stood after passing her the papers. "I shall return in few moments."

Janice accepted a pen and then, with careful intent, scanned the documents and began filling

in the requested information. *Janice Amelia Covington*. Birthdate: *April 29, 1913*. Birthplace: *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*. Mother's Maiden name: *Franklin*. Occupation: *Professor*. Workplace: *North Carolina University, Raleigh*. She paused at the home residence address.

"Melinda, are

you sure you want me to use Beaufort Oaks?"

The brunette answered with assurance. "I am positive, Janice... Unless you want to move out, I'd like you to stay."

So the blonde wrote in the plantation's route address and telephone number, before sitting back and awaiting Mr. Willoughby's return. They didn't have long to wait. Bearing another set of papers Willoughby returned only after another minute or two. "Miss Pappas, these are the disbursement authorizations. You'll have to sign them before we can transfer any funds to the active account."

"Certainly." He showed her where and with a brief controlled flourish, Melinda signed. He turned to Janice. "Miss--Doctor?" He paused in embarrassment.

She smiled pleasantly, quick to ease his discomfort. "It's all right, Mr. Willoughby. I'm not offended. You may call me Miss. Even Janice will do."

"Thank you," he replied. He pointed out the home address on the paperwork she had completed. "Is this address correct?"

"Yes, sir." She held his gaze with a deprecating smile. "Miss Pappas was kind enough to let me stay with her and her mother until I find someplace on my own."

He cast a quick glance at Melinda, who said nothing, remaining still and meeting his gaze evenly. Looking away from the brunette, he returned his gaze to the blonde. "If everything is in order, perhaps you would appreciate a few draft notes as an advance?"

Janice nodded. "I do have a bit of shopping to do," she answered. "Recent travels have depleted my personal funds."

"Then right this way, Miss Covington." He held the door for her and Melinda, who stood quickly and followed behind. The clicking of adding machines and quiet voices at the furthest teller station were the only noises in the entire bank lobby. Willoughby led them to the second teller station and pushed through a single sheet. "Miss Covington will need drafts on her account, Miss Hillyard."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Willoughby." The young woman behind the glass and bars looked up from beneath tidily restrained brown curls at her employer as well as her new customers.

Leaving the women together, Willoughby retreated once again to his office. The simple frame door clicked shut.

"Miss Covington?"

"Yes." The blonde drew her attention back to the teller. "Twenty dollars please." The amount would certainly buy her at least a pair of blouses and a skirt, as well as new shoes and a small proper dressing hat. And it would leave just enough for her to treat Melinda to a modest lunch.

"I'll leave you at the store, since I have another errand to run," Melinda said as they stepped once more into the sunshine and breeze, Janice carefully tucking her new funds away.

"Meet me at the lunch counter in Woolworth's in about an hour?" Janice inquired, gesturing to the small drugstore across the street.

Leaving Janice in the aisles at the clothier, Melinda quickly walked across the street to the corner grocer. By chance since the other woman was retrieving dinner for her family that evening, Melinda met up with Maryann Smith, the university president's wife, and brought her for lunch.

After introductions and orders, Maryann welcomed Janice to the university family. "Have you had an opportunity to meet anyone else?"

"Mr. Jameson invited us... both, to the dinner party Sunday evening. Will you be attending, ma'am?" Janice asked, sipping her strawberry fizz.

"Young Mr. Jameson did indeed extend the invitation to my husband and I." Maryann seemed pleased. "I'm surprised, Melinda. Generally you don't go for such affairs."

"I thought Janice would enjoy making some friends in Raleigh," Melinda answered noncommittally.

"Tyler is quite nice," Janice mused. "I haven't had an opportunity to learn anything about his parents however. Mrs. Smith?"

"The Jamesons are old Raleigh stock; one of the founding families. The family plantation is on the north side of town. At one time I think Beaufort Oaks and Juniper Plantation marched along the same boundary. But time has whittled away at both." She smiled over to Melinda. "Today a small family couldn't possibly manage the old vast holdings. Juniper was originally more than five hundred acres. A good deal of it is now housing and community centers. About one hundred acres is still retained and worked for the family business, tobacco."

"I thought Tyler was a banker," Janice questioned. "He's head accountant for the company, Jameson Lights."

Janice nodded. "Is the dinner party business or pleasure?"

"With Tyler's father, Justin, everything is business, but Millicent is a remarkable hostess, so most people forgive Justin's enthusiastic if occasionally boorish conversation."

Janice laughed and sipped at her fizz. Melinda remarked, "I know. Just to get Mr. Jameson to be quiet the last time I visited, I agreed to a total of sixteen shares in Jameson stock. Millicent's crepes are addictive," she chuckled. "When my father would go... he had a way of talking Mr. Jameson around to everything but tobacco. It was the most amazing thing. If Mr. Jameson was going to be at a party, or a meeting, or a gathering of any kind, my father was frequently invited too, just to keep the man in check."

"Your father was quite remarkable," Maryann agreed. "You must tell me about your adventure in Europe."

Melinda shrugged. "Not much to tell really. Dr. Covington had written, requesting my father's assistance with several translations. He was..." Janice watched Melinda swallow calmly holding back her emotions, still considerably raw when it came to the man she had adored. "Not available. So I went in his place." If she finished a little too brightly, neither Janice nor Maryann saw fit to comment.

"I must say it came as quite a shock, dear. But you are home now, in one piece. Was the war dreadful?"

"Thankfully the Germans had not fully invaded any of the areas where we traveled. But the situation... was quite uncertain, even at the best of times."

Janice looked up to catch Maryann's delicate shiver as she reacted to Melinda's sparse information. Then she found the older woman's pale eyes on her own face. "Will you be returning to Europe any time soon?"

The blonde shook her head. "With my new position, I won't have to... at least for a short time. Besides, it would be unsafe. While I'm not afraid of a little danger, I am not foolhardy." She looked around, at the view of the street afforded by the drugstore's full-length front windows. "Raleigh is a nice place. And the university will keep me quite busy."

"Certainly you will be looking for your own place shortly. I can direct you to any number of tenement homes near the campus," Maryann offered helpfully.

"I have made arrangements for Janice to remain at Beaufort Oaks," Melinda interjected. "She has agreed to help me go through my father's papers and construct the last few years of his research." She paused and sipped her fizz. "He seemed very close to a breakthrough. I hope to publish his work for him." She nodded to Janice who smiled back briefly. "It'll be easier for us to work together if she is close at hand."

Maryann lifted her napkin and patted her lips daintily. "I suppose I can see that. Your mother still lives with you?"

"She is out of town at the moment," Melinda commented.

"Oh, I hadn't heard." The president's wife regarded Mel and Janice for a brief moment, then nodded. "Do pass along my fond regards when you hear from her next." She glanced at her watch. "Oh my, I have another appointment." She looked to Janice as she stood. "I hope you find your new position enjoyable, Miss... Doctor Covington."

"Thank you, Mrs. Smith. Please extend my thanks to your husband."

"From both of us," Melinda added with a smile.

The older woman discreetly straightened her clothing, slipped her arms into her coat and nodded to both women. "I will do that. Good day to you both."

## Chapter 17

The two-story house rose out of the mists of afternoon rain and wind like a mountain on the Moorish plains in Spain. And just as incongruously. The glistening white granite shot skyward, almost glowing because of the effects of the winter thunderstorm.

Thunder sounded and the claw-like tendrils of a thick bolt of lightning hit something in the lower hinterlands behind the house. Janice jumped a bit in surprise as Melinda pulled up to the top of the curved drive and turned off the engine. The blonde pulled her gaze from where the lightning had exploded and rested it on the brunette gathering her umbrella and purse from the seat. Through the gathering steam on the windows, Janice saw two hunched figures bearing umbrellas move quickly from the house, one to each side of the car.

"Are you sure we should've left Vida to come home to an empty house on a night like this?" Janice had seen few storms blow up more quickly or with such ferocity.

Knowing that it was more Janice's nerves about the coming party than a worry over the housekeeper, Melinda patted the blonde's forearm reassuringly. "Beaufort, and Vida, will be fine. So will Juniper. Come on. Once we are inside you'll never hear the storm." Mel slipped out her door and bent against the wind and rain with the careful hand of a servant guiding her back.

Janice took a deep breath and fidgeted with her left heel as she opened the door. Immediately an umbrella sheltered the opening and she found a hand thrust into her face. A male voice, soft and thin offered, "C'mon, miss. I'll take you inside."

There was no sense that he might wish to hurry. Despite the fact that he was likely getting very soaked, the man carefully helped her out of the car, waited as she closed the door and then led her up the walk to the wide-covered porch leading to the huge front entrance. The umbrella was lowered away from both of them and she looked up into dark eyes over a welcoming smile. "Thank you."

"You go right on in, Miss. The folks are expecting you." He turned and she realized he had

been posted outside the door, specifically tasked with bringing guests up from their cars.

Melinda's escort too, moved away to the left of the doorway, shaking out the umbrella in his hands. His gaze briefly caught Janice's and she smiled her appreciation of his efforts. Then she nudged at the door, where it was opened by another servant, and entered the house.

She caught sight of Melinda in the process of slipping off her long beige raincoat, into the hands of another servant, a young woman, who settled the coat over a small set of hooks inside a closet door. "We'll dry that for you, miss," the woman said, looking at Janice as she turned back from the closet.

Melinda turned around, lightly settling her hair as she removed her blue broad, soft brim hat. The dinner dress's long skirt swirled around her ankles and the long navy blue sleeves hugged her arms to the wrist.

Janice slid her arms from her coat, and laid it over the young dark woman's outstretched arm. "Thank you," she said. "Your hat too?"

The blonde touched her head, having almost forgotten the white linen hat covering her hair. The round top was encircled with a paisley scarf, tied off to the right side where it sloped down over her ear. Now she unpinned it from her styled blonde curls, and handed it over.

Melinda, who waited for the few seconds it took for this, gestured. "Sounds like everyone's in the ballroom." As Janice stepped up to her, she leaned close and commented, "You should wear dresses more often."

Green glanced up into blue and Janice picked nervously at the simple sheer forest green gown. "I haven't worn a skirt in ages," she whispered back with a wry expression.

Then suddenly Tyler Jameson and an unfamiliar woman were striding quickly up to both of them. "Doctor Covington. Melinda, I'm so glad you could make it." Tyler greeted them and stepped back, cupping his arms around the smaller older woman at his side. "Melinda, of course you know my mother. Mother, this is Dr. Janice Covington, a new professor in the history department at the university. Dr. Covington, this is my mother, Millicent Randall Jameson."

Janice reached for the offered hand and took it lightly, mindful that this was a woman, not a male colleague. She met light brown eyes set in a face elegantly aged with smooth cheeks and a dimple in her chin, but laugh lines around her lips and creases at the corners of her eyes. "Good evening, Mrs. Jameson." She caught the sight of the grand staircase rising mammoth to the second floor with its baroque style railings and its polished cherrywood steps amid clean whitewash paint. "You have a lovely home. Thank you very much for the invitation."

"We are always interested in welcoming the new arrivals in town," Mrs. Jameson responded with a formal air. "Please, come into the ballroom and meet the rest of the guests. Dinner will be announced in an hour."

"Thank you," Janice responded sincerely, finding herself between Tyler and Millicent with Melinda on Tyler's right arm. They passed under an archway and Janice flicked her eyes over the interior, shying away for the moment from the curious looks and taking in the grand architecture of the room, while she settled her nerves.

Immense, with a ceiling easily the home's full two stories high, its open walls and ceiling to floor windows were draped with green brocade and thin linen inlays. The wall held electrical sconces, casting a soft glow along the walls. Glancing up she took a single step back in reaction.

Three massive chandeliers dominated the space; two were composed of seven gradually smaller circle layers of glass prisms and the center one held eight circles of prisms. The fixtures were affixed directly into the ceiling, but the lowest prism circles dangled more than four feet.

*Well, so much for my nerves,* Janice thought, feeling the flutter she had managed to calm charge to renewed life. She brought her eyes down and smiled at Mrs. Jameson who had remained quiet. The woman's patient smile indicated that she was very used to, and very pleased by, new guests' reactions to the room. "What beautiful fixtures," Janice offered quietly, with intense sincerity.

She succeeded in causing the matron to blush faintly. Then Mrs. Jameson offered a muted, "Thank you."

Tyler and his mother led the two women over to a cluster of guests already mingling with drinks in hand. As he released Melinda's arm, he asked, "Could I retrieve something for you ladies? Mother, another? Mel, may I suggest the Rothschild?"

Janice waited for Melinda to request, determined to make her own choice the same. "All right," the brunette responded, looking to Mrs. Jameson.

"I'll have the same," Janice added.

"Two it is, then. Mother?"

Millicent Jameson passed over her small empty glass. "And a refill for me," she told her son. "I'll handle the introductions," she added.

"Yes, ma'am." Tyler smartly turned away and Janice tracked his progress through the busy throng toward a table near the north side of the room, overseen by two servants in green and yellow wool uniforms.

"This way," Millicent lightly touched Janice's arm, drawing the blonde's attention back. Melinda walked a step behind as the matron of the house took it upon herself to bring the newest resident of Raleigh into the society in which she lived. She moved around young blacks, male and female, circulating with platters of hors d'oeuvre. Politely she snatched a cracker with liver pate and nibbled.

Melinda watched and accepted greetings from those who offered them after they were introduced to her blonde partner. Her smile brightened when Cassidy Zeigmacht grandly shook Janice's hand and welcomed her to Raleigh. Cassidy was in full "city councilwoman" mode, and politely took over Janice's introductions as the doorbell sounded, announcing another guest that Millicent excused herself to greet.

Eyes narrowing, Melinda caught an impertinent glance from Josh Dumont, a twenty year old with a trim mustache and thick dark hair, a lock draped down over blue eyes that sparkled with an air of mischief. A friend of Tyler's, he was a devilishly handsome young man with few prospects. The Dumonts' youngest son, he had neither interest in university or work, preferring his days filled with horses and spirits. He had been after Melinda's father for the last years of his life to reopen the Beaufort Oaks stables to a breeding program.

Now however it was obvious horses were the furthest thing from his mind. He studied Janice with intensity, obviously taken by her looks in the fine dress and carefully pinned hair. Then, it wasn't anything that Melinda could put her finger on, but when Cassidy introduced Janice as "Doctor Covington," she saw his lip curl slightly and he resumed conversation with others nearby as soon as they passed.

Others, she was relieved, accepted the academic aspect of her partner with more aplomb. While few were educated highly enough to converse with Janice on her area of expertise, these, mostly other professors and their wives, were accepting of her. She was doubly grateful for Cassidy's presence during introductions as they made their way around to the businessmen of the community, among whom Mr. Justin Jameson chatted amiably.

"Imports are going to drive the honest man out of business," he said as the trio of women appeared at the outside of the clutch.

"Prices going down, Justin, are good for the consumer," Cassidy interjected. Absently she drew a finger sandwich from a passing tray.

The crowd fell silent instantly. "Ah, Cassidy. Who have you here?" He spotted Melinda immediately. "Gracious, Melinda, you're back in town." He clasped the young woman's hands. "Is your mother about?"

"Not at the present, sir," Melinda stepped back, bringing Jameson's attention to her smaller partner. "May I introduce Doctor Janice Covington?"

"Doctor, eh? Well, well. Come here, girl. What's about you?" Justin chuckled and then smiled as Janice stepped forward. "Nice look about you. So, what brings you to Raleigh?"

Janice seemed to take his measure in the moment before he took her hand. "I thought I would see this part of the country for a while, sir."

"A traveler then? Where's your family from?"

"Philadelphia." She looked over briefly at Melinda, who nodded encouragement. "Miss Pappas and I met during her business in Europe."

"Business? Melinda?"

"Yes, sir." The brunette confirmed his look toward her with a nod. "By profession I am an archaeologist. Miss Pappas ventured out to one of my excavations."

"Oh dear. What about the war?" Shocked looks from the men's wives fell on Melinda, who ducked her head charmingly. Janice recaptured their attention.

"We managed to return before it caught up to us," she assured the group. Changing the subject somewhat and deflecting the several disapproving looks cast toward Melinda, Janice squared her gaze on Justin Jameson. "I don't believe you'll have much competition from imports soon, sir. Europe is quite caught up."

"What do you know about the war?" The question was asked in a tone that strongly suggested that it wasn't a proper topic for a lady.

Janice caught the intonation and merely shrugged in reply. "Only as much as you, I expect." Sage nods among the men and the women's pursed lips told Melinda that Janice had answered mildly enough.

Cassidy caught Melinda's eye and the brunette was almost embarrassed by the smile the older woman flashed. She was quite a fan of shaking up the establishment. Melinda did not agree, but her associations with Janice were gradually changing her mind about a lot of things.

A small dark woman in a prim white apron and hunter green short-skirted dress stepped into a doorway to the south. A tall man appeared next to her, his uniformed right arm draped with several pristine white linens. "Dinner is served," he announced in a deep, carrying voice. Janice recognized him as the man who had escorted Melinda inside the house when they first arrived.

In the press of people as the guests flowed toward the doorway, Janice lost track of Melinda. Each guest dipped their hands in the bowl the young woman carried and dried their fingers on the towels. Janice scanned the group, noticing Tyler near the front and the Colliers behind her. She did a quick count in the confusion. Approximately fifty people were about to partake at the "small" dinner party.

*If this is small, I can't imagine large.* She had already forgotten half the names of those to whom she had been introduced. She wondered where everyone would fit.

She paused in the doorway drying her hands on the towel. The dining room could seat

probably one hundred cozily. At present however round tables were scattered across the open space giving each diner considerable room at tables set for six guests each. She guessed that a larger dinner party would simply take place in both the dining room and the ballroom. Incredible.

Two chandeliers, which matched the three in the ballroom in style, if not size, basked the room in a softer glow. Where the ballroom had been fully illuminated, the dining room's lighting was couched for gentlest effect. Despite its sheer size there was an intimate feeling about the room. Dark paneling rose four feet up the walls, and then a light diffusing antique white paint colored the walls up to where carved porticos ringed the juncture of wall and ceiling all along the edges of the room. The chairs were highly polished Carolina oak, the lighter brown beautifully stark against the hunter green tablecloths.

Janice spotted her partner when she saw Tyler move alongside Melinda. The son of the hosts guided the brunette to a table at the far end. Janice then noticed the nameplates elegantly handwritten and propped at the various table settings. A young man with jet-black hair and a carefully trimmed mustache approached her. "Miss Covington, may I help you find your seat?"

"I'm sorry, so many names," she began, shaking her head.

"Ah, no matter, certainly we'll know each other by the end of the evening. Josh Dumont," he supplied, offering his elbow.

The young man led her toward a table almost against the exterior wall where she found her place. With a tug, he settled her in the chair and seated himself in one opposite her. She decided not to notice his quick switch of plates, from one in his hand and the one actually at his seat. She kept her gaze focused past him watching Melinda settling in at the head table, conversing quietly with Mrs. Jameson on her left.

"May I provide you with anything?" he asked her.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered distracted, as he stood and hurried off as a businessman in a gray single-breasted suit and his wife in a blue flower print dress, arrived at the table. "Good evening," she offered.

"Jean and Margaret Faille," he said in a voice lightly accented with French.

"Janice Covington," she responded.

"Welcome to Raleigh." He reached across the table, and she offered up her hand carefully. He pressed his lips to the back of her knuckles. "I am astonished to see such a beautiful woman without escort." He accepted his wife's hand on his arm.

"I have a friend here," she explained. "The Pappas family has graciously extended their hospitality."

"Will you be in town long?"

"I have accepted a teaching position at the university for the spring term," Janice answered simply. Margaret's eyes flicked over her in an assessing way.

"You are an academic?" Margaret settled her napkin in her lap as she asked.

"Yes. History." Janice picked up her water glass and sipped.

"We have only just ourselves arrived in Raleigh." Jean acknowledged. "I work with Monsieur Dumont," he nodded to a gentleman at the next table where Janice recognized Rachel Dumont beside him. "He invited us this evening."

"I was given to believe that this was a small dinner party," the blonde admitted. "Certainly doesn't seem like there is anyone left in town."

Jean chuckled. "I too was overwhelmed at first."

Josh Dumont returned at that moment, lowering himself into the seat he had chosen with a

flourish. "Hello, Jean. Mrs. Faille."

"Monsieur Josh. I did not know you would be here."

He shrugged. "Tyler invited me to go hunting in the morning. Suggested I take in the dinner to start." He cocked a half smile at each of the older couple and then had to stand even as his gaze fell once more on Janice. Two new arrivals had, by politeness, forced both Jean and Josh to their feet.

Janice looked up to see another couple in their middle years, well matched in looks, from the gentleman's black suit to the woman's scoop-necked black dress, overlaid with a single strand of pearls.

"Constance and Bertram Season," the gentleman of the couple introduced them.

The others offered their names as well. Just as the Seasons were seated, Janice cast a last glance up at the head table, hoping to catch Melinda's eye with a smile. Though simply dressed in a blue cinch-waist dress, the brunette was easily the visual focal point at the head table seated between Millicent Jameson and Tyler. On Millicent's left, Justin stood. "A toast," he offered.

"A toast," echoed in the room as other men stood.

"To family and friends."

"Friends!" echoed throughout the dining room.

At her table, Janice offered, "To new friends," which generated warm responding smiles. Then glasses clinked and everyone settled again as the servants circulated. The first of the meal's four courses was set before each person. Janice glanced down. Leek soup, she thought, then tasted it and smiled.

It was early in the main course, Janice having just tasted her sautéed veal, when there was an interruption at the main table. A servant bent close to Mrs. Jameson, next to Melinda. Melinda's eyes widened as her head came up and abruptly she caught Janice's eyes across the room. The brunette excused herself with a word to Millicent and the servant escorted her from the dining hall. Janice's eyes went wide around her forkful of veal and she lowered it slowly back to her plate.

"Is the food all right, dear?" Mrs. Faille asked gently.

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. Would you excuse me, please?" She dusted her hands on her napkin and tossed it on the table as she stood.

"I'll escort you," Josh offered.

"Thank you." Janice was more concerned by the expression she had seen crossing Melinda's face than she was with the propriety of being escorted by the single young man, when it would have been more appropriate to have one of the married gentlemen take her from the room.

She put it from her mind though as she left the room on Josh's arm and they scanned quickly down the main hallway. A light from behind a mostly closed door caught her attention. "Over there."

She pushed open the door and found Melinda standing with her back to them and a uniformed policeman reaching for her shoulder.

"What happened?"

Melinda turned; instantly Janice saw something was terribly wrong. The sky blue of the brunette's eyes held turmoil, darkened with unspoken worry. "Janice?"

The blonde broke from Josh's side and grasped Mel's hand, feeling the cool chill of the skin. The brunette was badly scared. She squeezed the long fingers gently and posed her question directly to the officer. "I'm a guest of Miss Pappas. Could you tell me what happened?"

"We found a vehicle registered in Miss Pappas's name at the train station. The glass had been broken and there was evidence of a struggle in the front seat. When they called it in to the

station house, we called at the house." He looked to Melinda. "Your maid told us you had left a note saying that you should be here."

"You thought that Melinda had been hurt?"

"The car was hers. Certainly it was broken into."

Melinda shuddered. "But it wasn't me." She met Janice's eyes and the blonde felt Melinda's tightening grip; reassuringly she squeezed back, but Melinda's voice was still weak. "It had to be Mother."

"What's this?" Josh stepped forward. "Something happen to your mother, Melinda?"

The officer answered him. "We're not certain. Was your mother planning to go out of town, Miss Pappas?"

"She left the house Wednesday morning, but didn't tell me her destination," Melinda admitted.

Janice scanned the badge of the officer on his lapel. "Officer Donner, could you take Miss Pappas and myself to examine the car?"

"Certainly it isn't a place for a lady, miss."

She turned to the son of their hostess. "Where's a phone?"

Melinda grasped Janice's arm. "Mel, I'm just going to call Vida."

Familiar with the study layout, Josh helpfully pulled the telephone from a drawer in the study's room-dominating oak desk. Everyone waited with carefully held breath as Janice dialed the house then gave a relieved grin when Vida answered the phone. "Vida, goodness. It's all right. Yes. We're both safe. No. We're going there now."

Melinda's voice was distant, carefully controlled. "Tell her to lock the house."

Janice nodded. "Yes, Vida. Please. We'll be there as soon as possible."

Josh looked from the brunette to the blonde, to the officer. "Will you be leaving?"

Janice nodded. "Please convey our apologies to the Jamesons." She grasped Josh's hand. "Please don't give any details except that she was called home. Until we know more it seems premature to alarm anyone unnecessarily."

Janice watched Melinda's carefully constructed mien begin to crack as the brunette drew in a shaky breath. Damn. "Let's go." Before she can't hold in the worry anymore. Knowing Melinda needed her Janice kept tight control on her own reaction. *Where the hell was Melinda's mother and what had happened at the train station?*

"Of course," Josh responded, compelled by the strength in her voice. "Please let us know if we should do anything."

The two women and the officer met Tyler in the hallway. "Melinda?"

"We're sorry, Tyler," Janice interjected. "But something has come up at the house." She grasped her coat and then Melinda's out of the closet, settling both arms quickly into the sleeves before assisting the brunette with hers. The officer, a little at loose ends, held both women's hats. Janice watched Melinda mechanically pin hers on but forwent her own, simply grabbing the brim and turning to the door.

The two young men watched, wrapped up in silent thoughts, as the officer exited first, followed by Melinda, who leaned against the hand Janice settled low on her back. Tyler nodded to Josh and the two men returned to the dining room. In silent accord, they made their excuses and departed as well.

## Chapter 18

Melinda's mind raced. Janice guided her through the lighter rain to the passenger side of her car. Through the mist, the brunette studied the officer walking to his patrol car.

"I'll lead you," he called back.

"Right behind you," Janice answered, settling behind the vehicle's driving wheel. She reached across Mel, who was bracing against the dashboard straining to look through the falling rain. She checked that the brunette's door was snugly shut. "Ready?" she asked, touching Mel's cheek after snapping up the keys from Mel's purse on her lap.

The brunette nodded tightly, stiffening her chin, but her blue eyes shined with moisture. "Let's go."

Janice turned the key and listened as the engine sputtered to life and then settled to an idle. She set the wipers in motion and turned on the headlamps before swinging the car out onto the road. Flooring the gas pedal she caught up quickly to the officer's black sedan.

Only vaguely remembering the route to the train depot, not having needed to make the trip since arriving almost three weeks earlier, Janice judiciously kept the other car in sight. Melinda's car was unfamiliar in her grip, but she managed to correct twice when the wheels slipped on the slick roads.

Melinda remained silent for the entire ride, intently leaning forward and bracing her right hand on the dashboard. Her blue eyes darted back and forth trying to penetrate the mist and rain to see through the evening darkness.

There were two other automobiles in the depot parking lot when Janice pulled the car to a stop. Melinda was out the door almost before the engine completely fell silent. Tucking the keys into her sleeve, Janice followed her quickly.

"We found the car over here," Officer Donner said. "After we saw the signs of struggle we thought you," he cast a glance at Melinda. "We thought you were hurt. The station called your home. Your woman--" Here he checked his pad. "Vida... she said that Mrs. Pappas had gone out of town and that you were at the Jamesons."

"Did you find anything in the car?" Janice asked as they rounded the building corner. She looked up and immediately saw the damaged vehicle. Its driver window was smashed; the glass shards glittering with rain and moonlight were scattered over the ground.

"Our men found nothing. A bit of... blood," he looked to Melinda apologetically. "We aren't sure who it belongs to."

Janice scanned the ground around the car. When Melinda started forward, she crouched and held up a stalling hand. "No." Intently, she searched the dirt and pebbles. The rain and dark were making it difficult to... Yes. "I need a light," she uttered with sharp command.

Taking a long step backward she grabbed a hand lamp from another officer.

"What did you find?" Donner asked.

"There are prints in the dirt," she explained. "The rain doesn't make it very clear, but..." She flared her light toward him for a moment. "Bring me the officers who examined the car."

He turned around and jogged to the other patrol cars and the two milling officers.

Melinda moved, watching where she planted her feet as she came alongside the blonde. "Janice?"

"I'm stalling." The archaeologist admitted, with that intuitive glint in her eye, and shook her head. "There are prints, but it's useless, Mel. Your mother was dragged out of her car." She illuminated a path gouged in the mud. "She didn't go willingly. Or consciously." Shining the light

inside the broken window, she went on quietly, "The glove box is open. Were the car's registration papers in there?"

Melinda pushed both hands through her hair. "So why haven't we had a ransom note, or something?"

"Too recent. Doesn't look like this happened any earlier than maybe noon." She looked up at the station house. "If we could find out which train your mother came in on, we'd have a pretty good idea how long they've had her." She leveled her eyes on Melinda and asked seriously, "Would she hold up under any types of interrogation?"

Mel pursed her lips and shook her head.

To boost her partner's flagging spirits, Janice quipped, "Don't worry. She giving them the tongue-lashing."

Melinda sniffled but quirked a wan smile. "All right. So where did they take her?"

"Depends on if they thought she knew what they wanted to know, or if they intend to use her to get to you." Janice considered what she had just said. "They probably headed for the house in either case."

"Oh, God," Melinda suddenly remembered. "Vida's there too."

With sharp determination coloring her words, Janice flashed the light up into her face and then Mel's. "We're going to get them both back, Mel."

The Raleigh officers jogged up. Janice scanned their shoes and made a quick show of singling out a set of depressions and the narrow trench. "She was dragged to another vehicle and driven somewhere."

"We should get you back to the house for a ransom call," Donner suggested to Melinda. "I'll have one of my men go with you."

Janice needed to separate from the brunette. Only a multiple direction approach could possibly hope to get them out of this. "Mel, I'll drive your car back. You and the officers can go on ahead. I want to stop in and talk with the stationmaster first." She circled quickly around the building, as if to go inside, but instead raced to Melinda's car and drove off, the sound covered by the grinding engine of an arriving train.

By the time, Mel and Officer Donner reached the parking lot; Janice and the car were out of sight.

\* \* \*

Having just returned from her impromptu vacation granted by Miss Melinda, Vida remembered thinking that she should have called ahead. She had been young once herself and would not wish to surprise the misses, who had no doubt grown comfortable in the quiet of the big house.

But the house had been empty when she arrived. Not even the front porch bulb had been left on. Once inside she made her way to the kitchen, put a serving of leftover soup on the stove over a low flame before the phone ring had drawn her back to the main hall.

It had been an officer from the town police. A car with Pappas registration had been found at the train station. Did she know where Miss Pappas was? She told him that Miss Pappas, and her houseguest Miss Covington had planned to attend a dinner party at Juniper Hall with the Jamesons.

Returning to her soup, she was just sitting down with a bowl of it, when the telephone rang again. Miss Janice asked if everything was all right and told her that they were going to the train station first, but would be home as quickly as possible.

She had gone, as instructed, to secure the front door.

When she returned to the kitchen, a man was just stepping inside. His weapon came up instantly to train on a point in the middle of her chest.

"You are the only one in the house?" he demanded, his voice colored with a mild accent, very similar to the light accent of Mrs. Zeigmacht, who had occasionally dropped in on Melinda for tea. Miss Melinda probably could be more specific, but Vida was alarmed only that the man did not appear to be American.

She obeyed the waving gun and moved away from the stove to the kitchen table, gingerly sitting down as she tried to both keep the gun in sight and avoid looking at it. The weapon made her very upset, she acknowledged, wondering what he intended.

"Are you alone?" He repeated, wagging the barrel from side to side for emphasis.

Vida was not accustomed to lying and not given to bravado, she shook her head. "I am alone."

The man's partner, or perhaps only one of them, entered the kitchen, in time to hear her admission.

"You had better speak the truth," he warned her. His accent was very mild compared to the younger man. His blonde hair was considerably thicker, and his blue eyes narrowed on her face. He turned to his partner. "Keep her under wraps. I'm going to check the rest of the house."

A moment later the soup she had left on boiled over, hissing and spitting. The young fellow with the gun tried to grab for the pot, burning his hand on the short metal handle. "Fix it!" he ordered, roaring a bit from the pain.

Vida told him there was ice in the box for his hand as she carefully cleaned up the stove top.

She was rinsing the sponge at the sink when the leader returned and confirmed her earlier statement. "Far as we can tell there isn't anybody around except her." He followed the direction of his own pointing finger and studied her for a long silent minute while her stomach flip-flopped. "When will they return?" he asked.

Her eyes widened in alarm. She sincerely wished that Janice had not told her they were on their way. To stall, she asked, "What do you want with them?"

He checked the chambers of his gun methodically, snapping the cylinder and spinning it. She jumped unconsciously at the implied threat. "They have information that would damage the people I work for. I'm here to see they don't give it to anyone else."

"How..." Her voice was weak. She swallowed and tried again. "How do you plan to do that?"

"Don't you worry about that. Just cooperate and you'll be fine."

Vida kept her face impassive. She had not heard either Miss Melinda or Miss Janice talk about any information. She heard, then, as did her captors, a burst of sudden noise from the front of the house.

She was roughly grabbed by the shoulders and shoved ahead of the two men as they moved quickly to investigate the situation.

A female voice protested, "I don't know about anything!"

The leader quickly raised his hand, ordering the other to hold back with Vida. He rounded the corner into the sitting room alone.

"She says she doesn't know." Another male voice, with the same foreign accent almost completely obscuring his words, spoke up.

"Not this Pappas, you idiot."

"She was the one on the train."

Vida wished the man with his hands wrapped around her upper arms would be curious

enough about the exchange between his companions to enter the room himself. She wanted to know what was going on. The woman they held had to be Mrs. Pappas. She had known Brenda went to visit her sister in Boston, since she left Vida a note to that effect. But the original note had indicated "a couple of weeks."

She wondered what had caused Mrs. Pappas to shorten the trip. Additionally, Vida wanted to see if their captors had caused her any injuries.

There was suddenly no more time to think about it. Automobile lights outside passed through the front curtains and the sound of an engine cutting out caught everyone's attention.

Her captor prodded her forward.

The leader ordered him back. "Tie her to the kitchen chair and then get back here." He pulled aside the curtain as she was dragged away. One glance was all she managed to exchange with Brenda Pappas. But it was enough to send her heart racing again.

The matron had been liberally spattered with mud and had bruises and cuts on her face and hands. The long sleeve of Mrs. Pappas's brown flounced traveling dress had been half torn down her arm.

She found herself tied with her own apron to the chair. Before she could protest he was gone, checking his ammunition as he disappeared.

A flicker just out of her line of sight caught her attention. As she turned her head to take in the whole area, the rear door opened slowly.

A hand-held lamp led in first, the darkness beyond obscuring the bearer as the projected beam blinded Vida.

She fought only briefly against the urge to scream, her mouth opened. Squeezing her eyes shut she sucked in her breath.

## Chapter 19

From her position next to the wind-blown trees shaped over the rear porch, Janice scanned the house up to the second floor, judging distance and route, considering what she was about to do. After speeding away from the train station, Janice had decided that a direct approach on Beaufort Oaks would be unwise, probably hurting far too many people in the process. So she tucked the car off the lane leading up to the house, hiding it among the oaks and bushes lining the rock-paved drive.

She had lost her shoes in a rain-formed mud hole around the side of the house, where it appeared a tree had recently been cut out by the gardening staff. Now, barefoot, chilled and wet, she had only a few minutes before Melinda would be arriving with the Raleigh officers.

Before then she intended to have as much knowledge as possible about the situation inside the house. She had seen a small lamp in the sitting room shining in the front window, and the kitchen light was also on. She heard movement near the door when she first crept onto the porch and pressed her ear to the frame, careful to keep her body out of the line of sight.

Grasping the wood of the trellis, she planted her feet and started up, hand over hand and moving her feet carefully from juncture to juncture. She blinked against the rainwater that poured off the house's eaves and down into the collar of her raincoat.

The weight of the wet fabric dragged on her shoulders. *God, I am really out of shape*, she thought as the activity already produced a burning sensation in her muscles. *Either that or Vida's cooking is really packing on the pounds*. Finally the railing which circled the second floor

balcony was within a short reach. She would have to throw her body toward it a little, and trust her reflexes, but she had no other choice.

Taking a deep breath, she threw her upper body to the left and reached out for the posts holding up the railing. Her left fist closed around one, but her right missed. Panting lightly she calmed herself while dangling precariously, feet on the trellis and one hand on the balcony. With effort she rotated her body enough to bring her right hand to the railing.

"Miss Covington, what are you doing?"

The calm voice in the silence startled her, sounding far too loud. Jerking, she almost lost her grip. Swinging, since she did lose her footing, Janice looked down the length of her body to see her dinner company from the Jamesons', Josh Dumont, dismounting from a dark horse, and staring up at her.

The horse's breath puffed from its nostrils in little clouds of mist. Janice however tore her eyes from the obviously winded horse and twisted so she could see Josh's smiling, curious face. "Dumont? What--are you doing here?" She hissed loudly enough for her voice to carry. "Get out of sight!"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No, I haven't." Bracing her arms she turned her attention away from him for a moment, her left arm protesting the lengthy responsibility of suspending her weight. Janice pulled her body over the railing and landed with a muted thud on the floor of the balcony. Taking a cleansing breath, she leaned back over the railing. "Josh, there are some very dangerous people inside."

"All the more reason Tyler and I rode over to help," he countered.

"Tyler is here?" She rubbed her hand over her face feeling suddenly an age older than the young man who seemed to see this as nothing more than a hunting lark. "Where is he? And keep your voice down," she hissed in warning.

"Out front. I'm sure he's met up with Melinda and Officer Donner by now."

Janice started calculating, emboldened by the implied number of people suddenly on the grounds, then shook her head. Unless she found out exactly what was the situation inside there was little point in trying to plan an approach, no matter how many people they had outside. "Stay put." She injected as much command as she could into the hissed whisper. "I'm going to check inside." She had a thought though. "Here's my light." She dropped her handlamp into the wet grass. "Do you have an iron?"

"A what?"

"A gun, sidearm. Something that fires bullets?" She knew she was being sarcastic, but damn it the situation didn't need more unpredictable elements added to the mix.

His smile in response sent a shiver of dread up her spine. Reaching back into his mount's saddlebag he withdrew a Colt .45. The moonlight on the well-polished barrel illuminated the revolver's distinctive lines.

"Is it loaded?" He nodded. "Toss it up." He glanced toward the doorway.

"No!" she barked, then gentled her voice. "There are probably hostages. Josh, I'm trying not to get anyone hurt here. Just toss it up."

He pulled back on his arm and released the weapon in an easy arc toward her. Snapping it out of the air, feeling its cool metal solid form fit into her palm, Janice nodded down to him. "Now, stay by the door. But out of sight."

Armed now, Janice ducked through the doorway off the balcony, emerging into the dark

second floor hallway. Carefully she shut the door and focused on sounds she heard of those also in the house.

There were voices downstairs. Separating the different speakers, she counted the number of unique voices. There were ... three voices in the kitchen. She heard a rough German accent in a deep young male voice. Then a nervous feminine voice with the careful lilt that could only be Vida Brown, the Pappas housekeeper. A third voice had little accent, was gruff, deeper and threatening. She edged from listening over the opening to the back stairs until she stood over the front stairs, now listening to the exchanges in the front sitting room.

"Where are the plans?" A male voice demanded.

A low, feminine voice answered sharply, "I don't know anything about that."

Surprised by the realization that this was Brenda, the older Pappas woman's voice was so reminiscent of Melinda's that for a split second Janice thought Melinda was inside the house. The blonde winced when she heard the slap of a hand contacting flesh. But Brenda did not react aloud.

Hefting the gun, the archaeologist took a single step forward, onto the steps going down, then recalled her sense and stepped back up. The voices from the kitchen shifted, and Janice crouched down, trying to get a look into the entry hall as the voices converged on those in the sitting room.

With all the sounds now at the front of the house, Janice moved cat-like down the backstairs and entered the kitchen, crossing to the back door and hurriedly unlatching it, letting herself out. Careful to make it close soundlessly behind her, she nearly vaulted out of her skin when a pair of hands fell to her shoulders and spun her around. With supreme effort she smothered her startled oath.

Pressing his face close to hers as he pulled her toward the bushes, Josh asked, "How many?"

"Four. All in the front room."

"All right," he said. "You go around and tell Melinda and Tyler." He tried to reclaim his gun from her hands.

She wouldn't relinquish it. "No. I have a better chance."

"But you're a woman," he countered. Though the words were stated simply, Janice felt an implied insult in them and recoiled.

She put on her most winsome smile and tucked her hands, with the gun, demurely behind her back. "Exactly." She transformed again, putting the steely glint she had offered to Smythe's men it seemed a lifetime ago in Macedonia. It made Josh take a step back. "Tell Mel to act like she's just come in from a date. The less we sound like we have a mini-army out here, the less likely they will be to shoot first."

As they stood up together, Janice gripped Josh's hand suddenly forcing him to understand her. She would not put anyone in danger here; he was not to do anything stupid. "They have both Melinda's mother and Vida, the house maid, as hostages. It's the safest way."

A smile born of the faint beginnings of admiration touched his lips then Josh nodded. "Here," he handed over the lamp and ran off into the darkness, to find Melinda and Tyler.

Janice trained her weapon and the small hand lamp on the door. She watched the light in the window and waited for a good moment to make her move. Tuning her ears to the sounds of the night, she filtered out the distracting pounding of her heart, and tried to catch an indication that Melinda and Tyler were going in the front door.

Tyler Jameson trotted down the tree-lined drive and came alongside Melinda in the passenger seat of Donner's patrol car. He dismounted, holding his stallion's reins as she rolled

down the window quickly.

"Tyler, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see how you were. How'd it go at the train station?"

"We found the car. Not much else," she temporized, worried that his presence would cause problems if there was anyone in the house.

He leaned into the window slightly. "Where's your friend, Dr. Covington?"

"Master Jameson, you should head home," Donner injected.

"I'd rather stay and help Miss Pappas if possible," Tyler responded easily.

Melinda studied the house further up the road. "Can you tell if there is anyone inside?"

"Josh went around back to see. I saw your lights and came here first."

She looked over to the officer. "Well, we'd better find out what he discovered."

Donner proceeded to the edge of the drive but his headlamps illuminated the front walk before he turned them off. Cutting the engine, he got out as Melinda did the same and Tyler quickly led his horse up from behind. "I don't like involving more people in this, Miss Melinda." Then he caught a motion around the west side of the house; a figure burst through the bushes and stumbled onto the rock surface of the drive.

Donner pulled his gun from his holster, and aimed it, all in the same space of a moment it took for him to identify Josh Dumont and for the young man to drop to his knees, arms raised in the air.

"Don't shoot!" Dumont hissed in the silence. "It'll draw attention."

"So there are people inside?" Jameson stepped forward. Donner jerked his head and allowed Tyler Jameson to grab his friend's wrist and yank him to his feet.

"Four. Two women hostages." Dumont looked to Melinda. "Your mother and the maid."

Donner ordered them to fall back again into the darkness. "Now you three stay here. I'm going to call for backup." He reached into his patrol car and lifted up the radio speaker.

"That'll take too long. They have to know someone is already out here." Dumont objected.

"Janice has already been inside. She thinks there's a way to distract them, and get the drop on them."

Donner looked at him in surprise. "Miss Covington is here?"

Dumont ignored him for the moment and spoke to Melinda. "She thinks you can pretend to come in from a date, and the less threatening appearance will prevent them from shooting."

Josh Dumont and Tyler Jameson had known Melinda Pappas for many years and she had not seemed very different from a dozen other young society-reared women, given to dancing at parties and mingling with the other women talking of inconsequential things. But the look that crossed Melinda's smooth features now reminded them that she had also spent a lot of time off to the side, alone, observing the groups with hawk-like acuity. Her azure eyes turned icy, going more gray than blue and she narrowed her gaze first on Dumont then the house.

"All right. Here's what we're going to do."

"Miss Pappas, I can't support this."

"Fine. Then don't. Call for backup, but I have to go in." She leveled her gaze on Tyler Jameson now. "Escort me up there."

"You seem rather certain. Is there something you know about this, Miss Pappas?"

Melinda looked back at the officer. "Those are Nazis that have my mother, Officer Donner."

"Nazis? Damn.... darn... oh Hell's bells Miss Pappas..." Donner backed away from his car and wielded his weapon again. She grabbed it firmly in her hand, reaching to the side so the barrel pointed to the ground.

"Just call for more officers," she interrupted tolerantly.

"Yes, ma'am." He backed up to his car and watched as the young couple walked casually to the front steps.

*Time for an act*, she thought, turning to the slender affable man beside her as she fished through her purse for her keys. "Thank you for driving me home," she said, a little loudly. Her ears caught a bit of rapid-fire conversation behind the door.

"My pleasure, Miss Melinda," Tyler took a deep breath and fell easily into his role. "Can I help you?"

"No, I'll be fine." She fit the key into the lock and started to turn the knob.

"If you're certain..." He stepped toward the hinge side of the door.

"Yes." The door pushed open. Reaching around the corner, Melinda reached for the front entry light switch. Another hand reached it first and a massive fist closed around her wrist, dragging her forward.

"Well, well." Melinda cast her eyes to her right and found Tyler in the firm grips of another man and then returned her eyes to the older blue-eyed blonde with his fingers bruising her wrist that he held above her head.

"Who are you?" she asked, putting a tremble into her voice.

"I'm hurt you don't remember me." He turned his head to the side and she noticed the long scabbed over gash from the corner of his right eye down across the meat of his cheek and a gouge in his cheek. Cutting right to the point, he settled the gun in the soft skin of her throat. "Now, why don't you tell me where the papers are, hmmm?" She swallowed, feeling the barrel slide along the outside of her larynx. "If you don't I'll kill everything in this house and find it myself. Then how will you tell your government about the little secret?" He poked her in the throat making her reflexively gag. "I could just blow your throat out. That'll make sure you never talk."

"I told you on the train that we lost everything in the plane crash," Melinda reasoned. "I don't have anything else."

"Where's the coat?" Melinda's face screwed up in confusion. "That ratty old bomber jacket your blonde friend seemed so fond of. Where is it? I know it made it into the country."

"The coat? We had the papers in the suitcase."

"Blane is a smart one. We tortured it out of him when we told him we had shot down your plane. He wanted nothing more than to drown in drink. So we let him. The papers in the suitcase were not the important ones."

Janice, Melinda thought. Janice wore that coat everywhere. Had she known the leather contained more than the halves of the chakram? Was this man speaking the truth?

The brunette didn't have another moment to think. A sharp scream interrupted the tableau.

She kicked free as her captor spun in alarm. Through the narrow line of sight afforded by his moving body, Melinda saw a blur of blonde and green dive through the kitchen. And suddenly the scream stopped.

The two men holding them, and a third which had been in the sitting room, all pulled their guns and dragged Tyler and herself toward the kitchen, using the two women as shields.

Tyler, bless him, pulled free, by tripping himself on the phone's cord as they passed the small table where it sat. As the man fell, and his captor tripped over him, Melinda ducked her head and threw an elbow backward into a tense stomach. The gun barrel flashed into her peripheral vision and she smashed her fist down across his wrist, causing the weapon to drop to the floor and skitter across until it hit a wall and discharged.

Janice swung around the open doorway from the kitchen at the sound and led with her weapon into the confines of the hallway. She fired once, the bullet rasping past Melinda's shoulder and embedding with a gurgle in the throat of the man falling over Tyler Jameson's prone body. Melinda dropped to the side and tried to keep the gun on the floor in her sights.

"In the sitting room!" she yelled to Janice as she finally closed her hand over the gun handle and pointed it at the looming figure of her captor. The downed man next to her groaned as Tyler rolled him over and restrained him. A flash of motion and she fired on reflex. Heavily the dead man fell forward, bleeding from a chest wound as he collapsed, still struggling for the gun he'd managed to grab in his fist before she fired. The strength of his fight finally ebbed and Melinda tugged the revolver and herself away from the limp body.

Dazedly she struggled to her feet and leaned hard against the wall. She hadn't lost her own consciousness this time. With that startling realization, she dropped the gun and looked down at the man who had attacked her at the university, and whom now, she had killed.

Tyler grabbed up the gun and charged after Janice, who had disappeared into the sitting room. Melinda edged there now, having neither heard shots nor signs that either Janice or the Nazi holding her mother had come to physical blows.

With Tyler's arrival, the man turned his gun from its sights on Janice to line up with Jameson's head. He had his left arm wrapped around Melinda's mother in a choking hold that the older woman could not find the strength to challenge. Melinda saw red as her mother's face paled and started to turn blue.

Janice never once lowered her weapon. From this angle, Melinda couldn't tell what part of his mostly shielded anatomy Janice had the gun sights on.

"Your partners are dead," Janice warned him, the youngest of the three men who had taken over the house. "Drop the gun or I'll make you as dead as they are."

Brenda Pappas went limp from lack of oxygen and probably quite a bit of fear. Janice caught the instant the body sagged and the young man lost control of her weight. As he released the tension in his arms for the briefest of moments and Brenda sagged faster, Janice fired.

The bullet pierced his chest where only a split second before, Brenda's head had rested. His gun canted upward and the reflex in his hands discharged his gun into the ceiling. The plaster scattered down on top of him. He fell backward, buried under a small section of collapsed ceiling, staring up into the second floor unseeing.

"Lord's mercy!" Vida's voice erupted from behind Melinda and the brunette turned to catch the dark woman as she fell faint.

Across the room, Janice dropped her gun and caught Brenda before the woman's body could, in her faint, also hit the floor.

Tyler collected his wits and went to check on the pinned man. Checking for a pulse he found none, and rolled back on his heels. "He's dead." He looked toward Melinda who cradled Vida in her arms, and then to Janice, who held Brenda Pappas in hers. "That was some amazing shooting. Do you two do this often?"

Despite her stomach churning badly enough to almost bring up her dinner, Janice started to chuckle then bubbled into an honest laugh as she met Melinda's eyes. "It's over."

"It's only over for now. Unless we get the paper they wanted to the government."

"What paper?"

"When was the last time you checked the pockets of your leather jacket?"

The blonde shrugged. "Why?"

"Seems that Blane had more plans. And he put them in it."

"Damn." She looked up, embarrassed by her own outburst, then realized with relief that Tyler had stepped out of the room. "When will people ever deal straight with us?"

Melinda did not have an answer for that, and was trying to formulate a response when Officer Donner and Tyler and Josh entered the sitting room. Behind Donner two other Raleigh officers followed. All the men surveyed the damage, shock passing over their rugged faces. "Miss Pappas, what happened here?"

Since the gun was far from her hands because of her sudden drop to catch Vida, Melinda decided to keep the details simple. "The ceiling collapsed," she answered. "I had been planning to have it fixed." The brunette could see Janice trying to smother a laugh against her mother's shoulder. And finally Melinda smiled as she saw her mother start to stir. "If you'll collect those men, officer, I should move my mother and maid to someplace more comfortable."

Tyler helped Donner clear the debris from atop the man in the sitting room, while the other two officers and Josh removed the bodies from the hall. Janice was watching the balancing act of Tyler and Donner when she felt the body in her arms wake up.

Her voice soft, if not exactly lighthearted, Janice asked, "Mrs. Pappas, are you all right?"

Blue eyes of a shade that almost exactly matched Melinda's blinked several times so that Janice's heart squeezed, remembering a time she had held an injured Mel in her arms. Finally Brenda tested her voice. "Is it over?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's over." Janice rubbed lightly on Brenda's back as she helped the woman sit up carefully. "Does anything hurt? I tried to make sure you weren't, but... it all happened rather fast."

Brenda examined her arms and legs and mentally cataloged her aches and pains. "No. I... I think I'm all right. Sore, but..."

"Mother?"

Blue eyes met across the room where Melinda was helping a quiet, but awake Vida also sit up. "Melinda."

"I'm sorry that they hurt you, Mother."

Brenda saw that she really was. And turned her head to study Janice as if she were ticking over several options in her mind. Finally the older woman offered, "You saved my life. Thank you."

Green eyes started to shine and a weak smile formed on thin lips. "You're welcome."

## Chapter 20

Josh shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around the evening's events. He pushed his hands through his hair remembering the scene in the Pappas home only a few moments past.

Melinda Pappas. God, he had known her for years. Most of their lives actually.

He ashamedly remembered himself at fifteen, standing over his bicycle with a dozen other boys, each challenging the others to go jump Wreck Ravine, a rocky slope and chasm out at the county rock quarry.

*Stodious, bookish Melinda, who had nonetheless been a regular on the edge of their group, had told them -- well, in particular, she told Tyler Jameson, the one Josh had been pushing the hardest with the dare -- that the whole situation was just far too dangerous.*

*So, in his most spiteful young voice, Josh had called her a name. "Oh, go ahead and listen to the mouse, Tybaby," he squeaked. "Melinda Mouse knows everything, doesn't she?"*

*The other boys joined the chorus. "Tybaby! Melinda Mouse! Baby! Mouse!" And the*

*brunette girl, who was so slim for her rapidly growing body, had just quickly tucked her book back under her elbow and walked away, shoulders stiff, flinching each time an insult landed on her ears.*

Tyler Jameson had suffered for months of teasing after that because he had followed her away while Josh Dumont had just stood there and laughed until the tears rolled down his face.

Melinda had certainly grown up. Tyler had a beauty in this young woman that his mother wanted him to marry. Also very certainly she was no longer a mouse, Josh acknowledged. Vividly he recalled the revolver in her palm, wisps of smoke drifting from the barrel as she came to her feet.

It was a long way from the easy-to-tease young girl, and Josh wondered how he had missed seeing the change, though he suspected some of it had to have been caused in Europe on that spur-of-the-moment trip to meet up with the enigmatic blonde Doctor Covington.

The blonde was certainly no empty-headed society simpleton. Advanced degrees both in history and the social sciences. A levelheaded seriousness that suggested every day of her ten years experience at European archaeological sites. At least according to her resume, Jameson had said.

"Mr. Dumont?"

He turned around as Officer Donner walked up. "Yes, sir?"

"Do you have any idea what went on here tonight?"

The blonde man amiably shrugged. "Not a clue. Certainly was unusual." The officer started walking, so out of courtesy, Josh found himself walking back to the house as well.

"Miss Pappas?" Donner said as they entered the sitting room.

"Yes?"

"The men are in custody. It's rather late now, but would you and Miss Covington, and your mother, please come down to the station tomorrow and give our detectives your statements?"

"Of course," she responded.

Josh found himself watching Janice help Melinda settle the maid and Melinda's mother quietly on the couch.

Tyler appeared at the kitchen doorway with glasses of what looked and smelled to be lemonade, its pungent scent cloying the air. Josh stepped aside and let him pass.

As his brown-haired friend circulated with the refreshing drinks, Josh noticed that Covington moved with a forthrightness that seemed a little out of place on one only a few years older than himself and a woman to boot. However, each action was followed with a last moment hesitation or self-correction that seemed to be a bow to conventions she was constantly forgetting.

He remained by the doorway as Melinda changed places with Janice, the blonde murmuring something in the brunette's ear that sent the blue eyes wide with a nod.

He watched Covington shift his borrowed gun from her left to right hands as she walked directly toward him without really looking up at him. "Thanks," he said, reaching for the gun barrel.

She moved it to her other hand, not an exaggerated keep-away but a definitely subtle, I'm keeping this for the moment. She explained, "I'm going to check something upstairs."

"I'll go with you," he found himself offering as her green eyes finally swept up and caught his.

Again he watched her start to say something, trip herself to silence and then close her mouth. She paused and then finally nodded. "All right." Stepping over to the stair, she led him up. "I just came up to... get a coat," she said as she crossing onto the second floor landing.

He waited in the corridor as Janice entered one of the bedrooms. She went immediately to a fir armoire and swung one door wide. What she pulled out however was the last thing he would have considered. A beaten up, certainly dirt-laden leather jacket, partially faded in a patchwork's haphazard pattern, it looked just a little too big to be her personal property.

However, she was not putting it on. She threw the coat on the bed and started patting it down searching pockets methodically, starting at the collar and moving out over the yoke and arms.

She paused inside at a point along the inside of the back. Abruptly she manipulated the leather and even he heard the sound that sounded like paper crinkling. He heard a very unladylike curse word and wondered where she had picked it up. With force she pulled at the lining and separated it.

"I can't believe this!" Janice sounded exasperated and angry.

"What is it?" he ventured to ask.

She spun brandishing a single sheet of paper folded in her palm. "Why couldn't he do as we expected? Just once, once, something should go the way it's supposed to. That's the law of averages or something, isn't it?" She cast a quizzical glance toward him.

"What is it?" he asked again.

Studying the paper, she mused over the contents. "I can't make heads or tails of this." She grabbed the coat, fisted her hand around the paper, and pushed past him to return to the corridor.

Intrigued he followed her back down the stairs.

"Found it," Janice announced once again waving the paper as she rounded the corner back into the sitting room.

"Incredible," Melinda moaned, shaking her dark head and closing her eyes.

"What is that?" Tyler asked, reaching for the paper from where he sat on a chair, opposite a tiny loveseat where Melinda had decided to perch.

Again Janice kept the paper to herself.

"That's what I'd like to know." Josh looked to Melinda. "Would you care to explain? We did both just put our lives on the line apparently for this... whatever it is."

Janice and Melinda exchanged long communicating looks. Finally Janice nodded and Melinda spoke. Everyone remained spellbound. Vida bit her lip and Mrs. Pappas rubbed her glass across her cheeks at the details of the mess in Casablanca. Josh and Tyler shuddered at the recollection of the escape from the downed plane. Melinda told the tale, but Janice offered clarifications, as she divulged the details of their European adventure.

Melinda was illustrating a point in the air with her hands when Janice took the space on the loveseat next to the brunette. They shared a warm look as they sat together.

When they were finished, Brenda reached over and patted Melinda's knee soothingly. "I'm glad you're home." Janice felt the older woman's eyes slide to her. The ice flinting the blue was gone. But the older woman didn't say anything more. It was another thanks more silent and more solemn, as Brenda seemed to come to terms with everything, including Janice.

The house was at long last quiet. Melinda crawled into bed after talking with her mother for the duration of the time it took Janice to settle Vida in the guest room.

"She's... not what I expected," Brenda said uneasily.

"Thank you, Mother." Long fingers intertwined. "Get some rest, I'll see you in the morning."

"Those boys were quite helpful tonight?" Brenda asked. "Yes, I sent them home with some of Vida's leftovers."

The older woman chuckled. "An old custom."

## Home Front by Lara Zielinsky

Melinda felt her cheeks warm. "Another lifetime ago," she murmured. "But appropriate, I think."

Now as she rolled onto her side, studying the open doorway into Janice's room through the bathroom, Melinda wondered where Janice planned to sleep.

The gunshot fired by the man Janice shot collapsed the ceiling which had been her bedroom's floor.

"Hi."

The voice came from the door and Melinda rolled her head toward it. "Is everything settled?"

"Yes."

"All right." Without additional words, Janice closed the door, setting the lock quietly, and Melinda raised the sheet and blanket invitingly.

"So... next stop Washington?" she asked as Janice crawled into bed, snuggling her smaller body into the curves of Melinda's.

Janice's hands drifted over Melinda's face in the moonlit darkness. "I want a single week of peace and quiet. We'll go after the holidays are over. Most of Washington is about to break for the holiday season anyway."

"Holidays?"

"Yes, you know. Thanksgiving. Christmas. New Year's." Janice's voice was low, teasing. Irresistible. So Melinda covered those quirked lips with a kiss. Deep sensuous and lingering, she nipped and sucked with abandon that pleasantly surprised her as well as Janice.

"Certainly has been an interesting couple of weeks at home," she said. "Makes me think we had it all wrong. Travel isn't the only adventure."

Janice rolled atop her longer, larger companion, settling one of her thighs between Melinda's. "No, it certainly isn't." She bent her head, briefly tasted Melinda's lips and then trailed kisses down the woman's torso, beginning a more intimate adventure.

**THE END**