

~ I Never Knew ~

by KG MacGregor

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Disclaimers: Melinda Pappas, Janice Covington, et al. are the property of...somebody else. This week, I think they belong to Barry Diller. Had they been my characters, you'd have seen a lot more of them!

This is an alternative tale; alternative to the bland same old-same old that fills our TV screens night after night, week after week, year after year. This story features a pair of women who fall in love and act on it. If you're underage, come back later. If it's illegal where you live, then get the hell out of there and bring the lesbian books with you! No sense in wasting good fiction.

Thanks to Tami, my beta reader extraordinaire; and to Archaeobard and Vdub, who also gave it a read; as did my Sweetcakes, who cleans up after me in the grammar department.

Now on with the story!

Chapter 1

Partners! Melinda Pappas was almost giddy with excitement as she handed the archaeologist the bulky box of digging tools. That the two of them would team up to explore the history of the Warrior Princess and her companion Gabrielle was beyond anything she could have imagined when she set out for Macedonia 17 days ago. But here she was: *partners* with the illustrious Dr. Janice Covington!

The tall Southerner had never been an important part of anything in her whole life. Even her own father, who had trained her meticulously in the ancient syntax, had never truly taken her seriously, always keeping her on the periphery of his most significant archaeological work. Now she and this exciting archaeologist were going to step out of their fathers' shadows and make names for themselves. She checked her enthusiasm, lest Dr. Covington think her silly or immature.

"Hand me that one next." Covington gestured to another box of trowels and brushes as the two women continued to stack things on the bed of the rickety truck. At week's end, they would break camp and set out for Athens, a two-day journey across the rugged desert and mountain terrain. There, they would return all of their rented equipment and arrange transport back to the States. With the war creeping westward, it was getting more and more difficult to stay in Europe.

Besides, they'd finally gotten what they came for. The decades-old search for the Xena Scrolls

had culminated in what the blonde archaeologist was already calling the find of the century.

And we're partners!

Partners! Holy crap! Did I just agree to that? Janice Covington worked alone. Alone, she answered to no one when she wanted-no, needed-to follow a hunch. Alone, she could guarantee against ethical lapses like those of her father. And alone, she never had to worry that someone would get close enough to discover the things about herself that she kept hidden. And now, for some reason she simply couldn't fathom, she and this woman were *partners!*

"Do you want the spades loose like this, or should we tie them together so they don't end up scattered to kingdom come and all?" Melinda had stopped when she reached the untidy pile.

"Uh, we'll tie them. We always tie them." In fact, it had never occurred to her that the digging implements-the spades, the picks, and the long-handled shovels-would travel much better if they were bound together. But it was a good idea and she'd have thought of it eventually.

Who was this woman? Was she truly the bumbling, naïve southern belle that she appeared to be on the surface? Or was she in fact the Warrior Princess herself? Had Janice not seen the metamorphosis with her own eyes, she would never have believed it. For a few miraculous moments, Melinda Pappas had been Xena!

The three adventurers watched as the hand of Ares disappeared beneath the heavy door. Exchanging looks of disbelief, they sat crumpled in the stairwell for a long moment gathering their wits, each secretly afraid they had imagined the whole incident.

"We're going to need a cover story. If we told people what really happened in there, they'd cart us all off to the insane asylum," the archaeologist started.

"What exactly did happen?" Mel asked. She had sort of blanked out for a few minutes there.

"Are you kidding? You turned into Xena!" Jack explained excitedly. "You were flipping and kicking and...."

"He's right, Mel." Janice noted the woman's skeptical expression. "It seems you're a descendant of the Warrior Princess. And I'm related to Gabrielle, the one who wrote the scrolls." Disappointed at first to hear Ares describe her ancestor as an 'irritating blonde,' she was immensely relieved to hear from Xena herself that Gabrielle had been much more than a sidekick.

"That's right. I remember some of it now." What she remembered most was the feeling of familiarity with Janice, and the overwhelming need to protect her from danger inside the tomb.

Together, the threesome devised a cover story to keep secret the miraculous events. It wouldn't do at all for someone evil to learn that the all-powerful God of War lurked

within these confines.

And now we're partners!

Janice suppressed a groan. What had she gotten herself into?

Both women looked about for any more supplies they could easily load tonight. At last, all that remained on the ground was Melinda's brass-trimmed trunk, and if the Southerner's current attire was any indication, Janice shuddered to think what lay inside. Grasping the handle on one end, she waited for her taller *partner* to lift the other side. Together, they hobbled toward the archaeologist's tent, the weight of the trunk bearing down upon the shorter of the two.

"You can stow your gear in here for the next few days," Janice grunted, dropping her end unceremoniously as they entered the tent that housed a simple cot and a small desk. "I'll move my things over to the supply tent."

"I...I don't mind sharing..." Mel stammered. *Of course, Dr. Covington might mind.* She hadn't considered that. "I mean...well, if you don't mind, that is. 'Course, you'd probably just...well, I'm sure you'd rather have your own space and all...." She trailed off, suddenly embarrassed about invading the woman's privacy.

"Well, I...", Janice faltered, taken completely off guard by the offer. Usually the only woman on the dig site, Janice had always had her own tent. Except for that time in Italy when she'd shared with Eileen.... "Uh, I guess we could share. Sure." *Holy crap! I did it again!*

Lying in her tent at night, she could hear the occasional laughter and conversation from the men in the neighboring tents. Though loathe to admit it, Janice Covington got lonely sometimes. It might be fun to have somebody to talk to at the end of the day. It was only for a few nights anyway. On the other hand, would everyone in the camp really accept it as the innocuous pairing it was? Or would they gossip? It was perfectly normal that the only two women in the camp would share a tent. All the men shared tents.... Janice was obsessing and she knew it.

"Uh, we usually have a senior staff meeting at the end of the day in the main tent, you know, just to sort of recap the day and lay out what we're going to do tomorrow. We should probably head over there."

Janice just invited me to the senior staff meeting! Now more determined than ever to fit into her new role, Melinda concluded that she should at least look the part. It was important to her that she show these people-these respected archaeological scholars-that she deserved to be in their midst. "Could you give me just a few minutes to freshen up? I promise I won't be long."

"I'll give her two days, three at the most," Warren proclaimed derisively, tossing his two-dollar bet on the small card table in the dining tent. Professor Warren Anderson was Janice's senior aide on the dig, appointed by Columbia University in New York City to guard their substantial investment in this expedition after Janice's father had been killed in a cave-in almost two years ago. Warren had first joined Janice at the accident site in northern Greece, where Amazon carvings had suggested that Xena had gone north. He and Janice worked well together; their steady progress and scientific standards over the last two years had won them the extension for this site in Macedonia.

Warren was tired of camp life, eager to head back to New York where he could regale pretty women with his adventures. Covington was a cold fish.

Janice looked from Warren to their student assistant, Mickey. At 24 years old, the kid had won this plum job with his impressive thesis on excavations in desert climates. After only one more year of coursework Stateside and a dissertation, Mickey would earn his doctorate. With this dig on his résumé, he would most certainly land a teaching position at a major university.

"What do you say, Mick?" Warren prodded. "You think Miss South Carolina is going to stick around here? I bet she high-tails it out of here before her first bath."

"I say she sticks it out till we head home," he finally answered, matching the two bills on the table. Mickey thought it was kind of rude to be talking about the nice lady this way, but it was clear that his professor expected him to play the game.

Both men looked at Janice for her bet.

"You know, Warren? She might be tougher than you give her credit for." *After all, the woman was Xena, right? Surely, you can't descend from the Warrior Princess and be a wimp. Can you?*

"So you in or out?" the professor persisted.

Grudgingly, Janice dug in her pocket for her last two dollars. She really liked Warren's work, but she didn't much like Warren. His views on women were about as archaic as the stuff they dug up. In his heart of hearts, he was convinced that the eventual translations of the scrolls would prove that the Warrior Princess was in fact, a Warrior Prince.

Still, Janice wasn't about to go soft on Melinda Pappas in front of this boor. That, and a rumor here or there, and the next thing she knew, she'd be marked as a pervert and cut off from the university coffers. "Fine! Four days." Even as she followed suit, the archaeologist felt a pang of guilt for betting against the woman she had already accepted as a partner. But the paltry wager had saved face, and it was worth a hell of a lot more than two dollars to be wrong on this one.

Outside the door to the dining tent, Melinda blew out a quiet breath of disappointment. Apparently, Dr. Covington wasn't serious about their partnership after all. Even if she proved them wrong-and she would-that lack of confidence would likely undermine their working together.

Clearing her throat, the newest member of the team parted the flaps and hesitantly entered the dimly lit enclosure.

"Melinda!" Janice nervously positioned herself in front of the table as Warren discreetly gathered the six bills. "You look...different." A lot different, in fact. Gone was the fashionable suit, comically incongruous in a setting like this one. In its place were khaki work pants, sensible brown shoes, a white broadcloth shirt, and a woolen navy pea coat. Janice thought she looked sensational.

"Yeah, well," the tall woman blushed under the obvious scrutiny of her three new comrades, pushing her glasses up higher on her nose as she dipped her head. "With those split seams on my skirt, I was practically indecent."

Yeah, Janice had noticed those long silky thighs. *Stop that!*

"Besides, my outfit wasn't exactly appropriate for the camp. I just like to dress up when I travel and all."

'And all' was Melinda's way of letting you know that she'd finished her sentence, Janice noticed. It was...cute. Lots of things about Melinda Pappas were cute. *Stop that!*

Warren eyed the scruffy shoes and suddenly realized he was going to lose the bet. Obviously, Miss Pappas had done this before.

In fact, this was Melinda's fourth dig, having worked the trenches on her father's sites in Mexico, Spain, and Egypt. She liked the physical part of archaeology, but chose to study linguistics instead because she had a natural gift. By concentrating on the ancient languages, she could be close to both.

"So, I uh..." Melinda didn't need to finish her sentence, as three sets of eyes grew wide at the sudden appearance from inside her coat of a bottle of Southern Comfort.

"I'll get the glasses," Mickey offered eagerly.

"Hoo-boy! Welcome to our humble home, Miss Pappas!" Warren proclaimed, pulling out a metal folding chair from the square table.

"Please, call me Mel," she answered, taking the proffered seat.

"You know what's good with Southern Comfort? A cigar!" Janice grinned and turned toward the exit. "Want me to grab you one Mel?" she offered politely. The otherwise beautiful face contorted and the archaeologist had her answer. "Back in a jiff!"

She's alright! Janice thought as she rummaged in the dark for the pouch containing her cheroots. Brushing her hands across the brown satchel, she was once again overwhelmed, totally in awe of

their remarkable discovery. Slipping the buckle free, she reached inside to feel the crusty parchments. They were soft, like silk almost...and cotton...and leather. "What the hell?"

Quickly, the archaeologist scrambled across the tent for the kerosene lantern. Seconds later, she was tearing inside the brown leather bag, tossing out work pants, a man's shirt, a sweater, a wallet. A wallet! "Jack Fucking Kleinman! That moron!" She was pretty sure that the switch had been unintentional. Kleinman was too big a klutz to pull off something like that on purpose, and even a total fool would have taken his own wallet.

Janice crammed his belongings back inside the bag. The imbecile had been gone less than two hours, and was probably already holed up for the night in Traca. Storming from the tent, she tossed the leather satchel onto the front seat of the old truck and slid behind the wheel. If she hurried, she could catch the bumbling idiot before he did something careless and lost the scrolls forever!

"Is that the truck I hear?" Warren parted the canvas and looked out. "Covington's leaving."

"Maybe she's going for more cigars," offered Mel, knowing the nearest town was almost two hours away.

"Wherever she's going, she sure is in a hurry!" Mickey added, peering past the professor. The truck's taillights disappeared in the darkened dust.

I probably should have at least told them where I was going, the archaeologist admitted to herself as she barreled down the bumpy road. But she knew she didn't have time to waste. A random pothole sent the truck bouncing, and she was quite glad they'd tied up those digging tools.

Janice knew she could save almost a half hour by taking the cutoff up ahead. In the wet season, it was impassable, but it hadn't rained in months. Still, the ruts made it a rough ride, but who was here to complain? Veering off, she forged directly over the mountain, just missing sight of the caravan that was headed toward the camp.

"Here she comes back," Mickey shouted as all three of them poured out of the tent.

"Well, if that's her, she's brought the cavalry," Melinda observed.

Three sets of headlights turned into three unfamiliar vehicles, as two trucks and a long sleek car drew to a stop in the center of the camp. They were government vehicles, each bearing an official looking emblem on the driver's and passenger's door.

"It's Gigov, the antiquities inspector," Warren stated. "He's been out here a couple of times."

"What do you reckon he wants?" Melinda asked. Southerners said 'reckon' a lot.

"I guess we'll find out." The professor walked to meet Gigov as he exited the auto. "Inspector! Good to see you again. As you can see, we're wrapping up here. We'd planned to stop into your office later in the week."

"Where's Covington?"

"She, uh...had to run an errand." Mickey spoke up, hoping he was right. What other explanation was there for Janice leaving so suddenly?

"Very well. I had a report of foul play. I was told that one of your workers was murdered," he stated crisply.

"That's right," Warren answered grimly. "We had an unwelcome visitor in the camp earlier today, a man by the name of Smythe. We think he was responsible for the killing, trying to scare off the others."

"Then I suppose I should ask the constable to have a word with this Smythe." He gestured toward the first truck, presumably the constable's. "Do you know where he is?"

"Uh..." Of the three of them, only Melinda knew the true fate of Smythe and his goons. "Unfortunately, he met with an accident. He was killed in a cave-in."

Gigov approached the tall woman, at once appreciating her dark features and clear blue eyes. "And you are...?"

"Melinda Pappas, Dr. Covington's partner," the woman announced proudly.

"Partner? I wasn't aware that Dr. Covington had taken on a partner."

"Well, see, that's because it just happened today. I'm a translator, and she needed somebody to help her open the tomb, and then to translate the scrolls."

"Tomb? Scrolls?"

"Yeah, you see, we figured out how to unlock the tomb," she began, recalling carefully the

details of their cover story. "So we went down inside and Smythe and his men must have followed us. Then we got separated and the part they were in collapsed. We got out another way."

"I see. So the place where they were just...happened to collapse?" Gigov was growing skeptical of the tale.

"Weeeelllll, not exactly. You see, we had to use a little dynamite to open up one of the passageways, and we must have blown out one of the support beams, and that caused a cave-in. So it was an accident; we didn't even know they were there until we found them crushed in the chamber." *At least they're crushed now.*

"I see." This woman asked him often if he could see, so he wanted to assure her that he could. "So how do we get inside this tomb?"

"Weeeelllll, now there's the bad news. See, we were trying to open up one last door so we could check out this little chamber. But Jack, he's a friend of ours from New Jersey, he accidentally put too much dynamite by the door, and it brought the whole thing down. Kaboom!" Animated hand gestures accompanied the telling of the tall tale.

"Kaboom?"

"Kaboom."

"It seems as if this... Jack...was not exactly an expert in the use of dynamite."

"You can say that again," Melinda nodded conspiratorially.

Why would he need to say it again? "Now you mentioned something about scrolls?"

"Oh yes! That's the best part! We found a couple of dozen of the Xena scrolls!" Mel was excited to give the news of the scrolls. "I've done a preliminary examination and they're the real McCoy!"

The Macedonian had no idea what a McCoy was, but he assumed that meant the scrolls were authentic antiquities. "And where are these scrolls?"

"I'll get 'em," the Southerner offered helpfully. Hastily, she dashed into the tent to retrieve the brown satchel. Dr. Covington had put it beside the cot...or was it beside the desk? Melinda's anxiety grew as she realized the scrolls were gone...and so was Dr. Covington!

"Uh-oh," Warren muttered to Mickey as Mel returned empty-handed.

"They seem to be gone." Immediately, she observed the look of incredulity on the faces of her comrades, especially Anderson.

"I knew it! She's a chip off the old block after all!" The professor shook his head with disgust.

"She is not!" Mel snapped. "Now don't you go getting yourself in a tizzy! Dr. Covington must have taken them with her for safekeeping. I'm sure she'll bring them back."

"So what you're saying, Miss Pappas, is that Dr. Covington has *temporarily* absconded with several of our national treasures," the inspector concluded.

"That's right. I mean, no. She hasn't absconded. I'm sure she'll be back." Melinda knew it in her heart.

Gigov wasn't sure at all. The whole story was too...pat. Turning back to the waiting constable and his police crew, he gave the order. "I want this camp torn apart piece by piece. And I want these three arrested!"

Jack Kleinman was awfully glad he hadn't changed clothes, as respect for his uniform was all that kept him from being pummeled senseless and tossed into the street. On the other hand, had he stopped to change into his street clothes, he'd have discovered that he wasn't carrying his wallet and a change of clothes. Instead, his satchel held a couple of dozen ancient scrolls, priceless in some circles, but worthless here in the tavern...which was closing in about a half an hour. Twice, the bartender had come to collect his tab, and twice, he had simply ordered yet another drink. He knew that his stall tactic was only postponing the inevitable. He was contemplating how he might slip out, when to his tremendous relief, a familiar face burst through the door.

"Janice! You wouldn't believe how glad I am to..." A hand flew forward and tweaked his nose...hard! "Ow! It was an accident," Kleinman whined as he rubbed his aching snout.

"You imbecile!" Janice threw his leather pouch to the floor while simultaneously snatching the one at his feet. A quick check calmed her racing heart. The scrolls were safe.

"Sorry! But everything's there. I didn't touch 'em, I swear."

"Lucky for you," she scowled, trying hard to sound menacing, but failing miserably. Despite her annoyance with the twit, she knew that his masquerade as Jacques Serre, an officer in the French Foreign Legion, was an honest attempt to fight the Nazis in any small way he could, given his 4-F draft status. That effort was to be commended-even if he was an idiot! With the pouch she came for in her hand, Janice turned back toward the door. "So...take care of yourself, okay?"

"Yeah, you too." Jack was having second thoughts about striking out on his own, especially since

he couldn't seem to get the beautiful, blue-eyed Southerner off his mind. "Say, I was thinking...."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe I should hang out with you guys a while after all. You know, protect you in case any more of those goons show up. I'm pretty good with a gun myself, you know," he bragged.

Ugh! He'd probably end up shooting himself or one of us. Still, he was a nice guy, and for the week or so, they'd need all the help they could get to pack up their camp and ready their things for the trip home.

"Suit yourself." It wouldn't do to appear too eager.

Happily, Jack paid the thwarted bartender, who had been looking forward all night to tossing his scrawny butt into the street. With the archaeologist's help, the motorcycle was loaded into the back of the truck for the trip back to camp.

"I knew she couldn't be trusted." Warren had gone on and on ever since they'd been herded into the back of the constable's truck. Now he paced the cell they shared. "Her old man gave us all a bad name, and now she's just made it worse." What bothered him most was the fact that his own sabbatical was marred—at the least it was now fruitless; at the most, criminal.

"Professor Anderson, I think you're making a mistake here. Dr. Covington would never just run off with the scrolls and leave us all high and dry." The more she defended the archaeologist, the stronger her own convictions became.

"How would you know? You just got here today," he challenged.

"That's just it! I do know. I know it in here!" Melinda pointed to her own heart. "She's not her father!" *And I'm not mine!* Her own father would never have raised his voice to someone who might influence future funding. Groveling was more Melvin Pappas' style—that and offering his daughter's company as enticement.

"She's right, Warren," Mickey joined in. "I don't think Janice would do something like that."

"Then she's pulled the wool over your eyes too, but not mine! I warned them all at Columbia not to let some woman take over this project, especially when I found out who her old man was. He ranted for years about the Xena Scrolls. I doubt they're even real. She's probably gone off to sell them before somebody finds out. I tell you, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Angrily, the

professor stalked across the cell.

"Well, if that's true, then I'll assume your father was an insufferable jackass as well," Melinda curtly replied.

Mickey squeezed his lips together tightly to suppress a grin. Warren Anderson was indeed full of himself, but with his ties to the university that funded this expedition, neither he nor Janice wanted to cross him. But this lady! This lady had spirit!

"Where the hell is everybody?" Janice wondered aloud as they pulled the truck into a darkened camp. A few campfires remained down by the dozen or so workers' tents, but the main area was completely deserted. Even though it was after midnight, Mikahl, the foreman, should have stationed guards near the tent that housed the artifacts.

Slowly, the pair emerged from the truck, watchful of any sign of trouble. Janice gestured toward Warren and Mickey's tent, and Jack walked quietly to check it out. At the same time, she pulled back the flap on her own tent-empty. Frantically tossing the cot aside, she discovered that the safe she'd buried underneath was gone.

"Where do you think they went?" Jack asked as she emerged, her face showing obvious distress.

Janice nodded toward the other truck. "They didn't go anywhere. They were taken." And so was all the money she needed to pay the workers and arrange for everyone's transport back to the States.

This was probably the work of Smythe's cronies. No doubt, the men whom she'd run off with the Gatling gun earlier in the day had gone back for reinforcements. The only thing to do at this point was to report the disappearance to the authorities in Traca and engage their help in finding the crew. She'd worry about the money later; right now, Melinda was in danger. Oh, and so were Warren and Mickey.

The sun was peeking over the eastern horizon when the blonde woman finally pulled the truck back into the deserted camp. Warren and Mickey were asleep under a tarpaulin in the back; Jack and Melinda rode silently beside her in the cab, nodding off against one another from time to

time. *Figures she'd be sweet on this idiot!* He was obviously smitten with her. But then again, who wouldn't be?

Gigov had been angered about being roused from his sleep by the insistent archaeologist, but even he was relieved that the new partner's story of the scrolls had been true. Although hesitant to part with this extraordinary piece of his country's heritage, he knew from his friends in Western Europe that nothing would be safe from Nazi plunder. Reluctantly, he gave permission for Covington to take the scrolls to New York; in return, she promised to arrange a visit for him to the States to see them showcased in whichever museum won the right of display. She wasn't sure exactly how she was going to do that, but she would worry about it later.

For the life of her, Janice couldn't imagine why Melinda was so angry at Warren. When the threesome had walked out of the cell in Traca, the tension in the air could have been cut with a knife. Hopefully, he hadn't behaved inappropriately toward her, but who could blame a guy for making a pass at a woman like that? Neither of them would talk about it, so Janice spent the two-hour drive back trying to figure out how she would get the story out of Mickey.

The more pressing issue now was the safe. It was definitely gone, and all three of the staff who had been arrested swore that Gigov hadn't taken it. That left only the foreman, a local that Janice had hired to manage the work crew. A quick search of the workers' tents confirmed that he was gone. The three thousand dollars that she'd set back was a lifetime salary for a guy like Mikahl, and she was willing to bet that he was gone for good. When they broke camp, Janice would have almost 40 workers lining up for their final wages of \$25 each. And it would take almost a thousand to get Warren, Mickey and herself back to the States. She hoped that Melinda wouldn't expect to be paid, and that she'd brought enough cash to get herself back to South Carolina.

The frustrated archaeologist climbed a small hill at the edge of the camp and sat down against a boulder, looking out across the flat plain to the west. Anger at her father-then at herself-bubbled to the surface as Janice first gave credence to what must have been the same desperation Harry Covington had felt each time he needed a way to finance further work in search of the scrolls. If she started out for Athens tomorrow, she could cut a deal that would get her out of this mess-she could sell *just one* of the scrolls to Marcus Stanos, the antiquities smuggler Harry had turned to for years. No one but she and Melinda had actually counted how many there were, and though it shamed her, she could always insist that there was one less. If she could manage not to appear desperate, a single scroll might fetch as much as....

"Dr. Covington?" The Southerner had climbed the hill and was standing just behind the chest-high boulder, not really wanting to invade the woman's privacy, but needing to talk. "Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something in private if you've got a minute."

Janice sighed deeply. This was probably about Warren making a pass, as if she could actually do something about that kind of thing. "What is it, Mel?"

"Well, it's just that I've been thinking about us being partners and all, and it seems like I'm kind of a Johnny-come-lately. You know what I mean?"

The archaeologist had no idea where this was going. "A Johnny-come-lately," she nodded.

"See, I was figuring that you've got two years and probably a lot of your own money tied up in this expedition already, and I thought that, well...you know, that just didn't seem right."

"What doesn't seem right?"

"Well, I mean since you've done all this work already, it wouldn't be fair for me to just join in at the end and share all the credit. So I was thinking maybe I should...I don't know quite how this would work...but I should contribute something to the partnership."

"Contribute something?"

"That's right. I can't imagine what it's all worth to you, but I've been thinking, and I was sort of hoping that you'd let me analyze the structure of the ancient syntax in the scrolls for my dissertation."

"Your dissertation?" Janice suddenly realized that she hadn't yet formed an original sentence, instead parroting Mel's last words.

"Yeah, you see, that's all I have left for my doctorate in linguistics, and if I'm a partner and all, I could start analyzing how Gabrielle went about writing the stories down, and that'd be one way to start spreading the word about the scrolls, at least in the scholarly circles, you know?"

"The scholarly circles?" *Damn it!* She did it again.

"Right, so that the people that matter will respect our work, and who knows, maybe even give us more funding down the road."

I will make my own sentence. I will make my own sentence. "Okay, I think that's a good way for you to contribute to the partnership." No matter how she got out of this mess, she'd still need someone to do the translations. And who knows? If Janice coached her on what to say, Melinda might be just the one to schmooze the financiers. "Was there something else?"

"Well, like I was saying, it just doesn't seem right that I should swoop in at the last minute after you've done all this hard work by yourself. You need to be compensated."

"Compensated?" *Stop that!*

"So I was thinking maybe I should give you...I don't know...five thousand dollars for my half of the partnership."

"Five thousand dollars!" The hell with parroting; Janice had to be sure she heard right.

"Yeah...unless that's not enough. I could give you more if you don't think that's enough." Melinda had quite a bit left from her parents' estate, and there was always the big house in

Columbia.

"Five thousand dollars!"

"Right. Then we'd be equal partners, fifty-fifty."

Partners? Yes, they were partners. Relief washed over the archaeologist as she recognized the implications of what Melinda was saying. *Yes! We're partners!*

"Uh...I suppose...sure, I think five thousand dollars would be enough." That would pay the workers, get them all home, and give her something to live on back in New York while she scrounged for more funding.

"But I'll have to get some of it wired here from my bank in South Carolina. I've got about a thousand dollars sewn into the lining of my trunk." The latter part she whispered, in case the rocks and bushes had ears.

At that instant, Janice wanted badly to reach out and kiss the beautiful woman full on the lips! In fact, had it been anyone else in the universe, she might have done just that. Something stopped her short, though; perhaps the knowledge that she'd like it very much, and not just as an exuberant way of saying thanks.

Melinda was thrilled to see the happy look on the blonde woman's face, especially since she was the one who had put it there. They had all noticed the archaeologist's rising anxiety when she first realized that Mikahl had taken the safe. The Southerner knew from her father's expeditions that you always held back enough cash to pay the workers on the last day and get everybody home. With the safe gone, Janice would have to ask for more money from the university, and such a bail-out would be detrimental to her reputation as an expedition leader. If they were going to do great things, this dig had to be a roaring success. "But I've got one condition."

Janice's ear-to-ear grin immediately faded. Everybody had conditions. "What's that?"

"You're not to be taking any more bets against your partner. We're on the same team now, Dr. Covington." Gradually, the Southerner's lips turned up in a knowing smile.

"Never again, Mel. I promise." And she meant it.

Chapter 2

Janice waved up at the smiling figure in the third floor window. Though the Southerner had laid it on thick about the inhospitable snow in New York, she had moved her desk to the bay window

where she could watch the giant flakes come down.

The archaeologist was infinitely pleased that Melinda had agreed to stay here in New York to work on the scrolls.

"So...how do you reckon we should try to work this, partner?" Melinda waited anxiously for Janice to deliver the blow as their luggage was unloaded from the ocean liner. She'd worked hard in Macedonia as they folded up the dig site, and had already begun to translate one of the stories. Still, now that they were finally home from the dig with the Xena Scrolls in hand, she figured that the archaeologist would sever this budding partnership, no longer willing to humor her presence.

"I don't know...maybe we should try to copy the scrolls. That way, you'd have a set to work on, and I could start to get the originals ready for display." And Melinda would have to stick around for at least...another three or four weeks, if Janice could find a way to drag it out.

"I suppose that would work." Her father had done that-pushed her to the side with tasks she could do on her own. It wasn't what she'd hoped for with Janice, but she'd make the most of it. At least she'd get to spend two or three more weeks with the interesting archaeologist, longer if she could find a way to drag it out.

"Great! So I guess we should try to find you a nice hotel for your extended visit amongst us damnable Yankees." Janice was immensely pleased with herself for coming up with that idea of copying the scrolls. She'd been thinking since they left Liverpool about how she might keep Mel from rushing back to South Carolina.

"You know, Dr. Covington, I'm starting to think that not all Yankees are so damnable after all." Especially not this charismatic one in front of her! "So where do you usually stay when you're here?"

"I, uh...I'll probably find an apartment, I guess. Nothing fancy, just a place to sleep and work." Luckily, she had almost three thousand dollars left over from Melinda's generous offer. If she were frugal, that would keep her for a year or more.

"Well if that's all you need, maybe you should just come with me to South Carolina. I have a big old house...." Instantly embarrassed by her own forwardness, Melinda's mind raced ahead to how she'd handle the awkward refusal. She almost missed the blonde woman's response.

"Or you could just stay in New York." Janice had no idea who was talking, but the words seemed to be coming out of her mouth.

"Stay in New York?"

"Yeah, I mean....," she stammered nervously. "If you were here, we could work on the scrolls together, and maybe even find somebody to finance the next dig."

"You mean like partners?"

"Yeah, that's what we are, isn't it?"

That was three months ago. Shortly after their triumphant return, the archaeologist had been rewarded for her find with a guest lecturer post at Columbia University, a job she relished as a platform to spread the first official word on the ancient Warrior Princess and her deeds. Warren Anderson was now her boss, having been promoted to department head upon their return; and Mickey was granted a fellowship that would cover all of his expenses through graduation. Once word of their amazing find got out, the Metropolitan Museum of Art had negotiated aggressively for the right to display the artifacts, considering the ancient parchments both an historical and literary contribution.

Eager to make headway on the translation, Melinda suggested that they share an apartment, so they would have more time to work. To her delightful surprise, Janice agreed. In just a short time, they'd become pretty comfortable with each other.

But not so comfortable that Janice felt safe about divulging her most private secret.

Over the blonde woman's objections, Melinda held out for the swank two-bedroom apartment just off Central Park West on 73rd Street. The archaeologist was accustomed to more humble digs, but her southern companion insisted that "humble digs were for digs." While in the States, they would balance that with more luxurious surroundings.

"Mmmm, something smells good," Janice observed, greeting the linguist with a broad smile. With Stateside rationing just underway, the women were living mostly on Melinda's wonderful biscuits, jam, cheese, white beans, and the occasional miscellaneous vegetable and a small piece of pork or beef.

"That's because the market had onions today. Everything smells good when you cook it with onions," Melinda explained. Janice was clueless in the kitchen.

"What are we having?"

"I got some potatoes and a little piece of sausage."

"Sausage?" Janice was salivating already. They ate meat only once or twice a week.

"Just a small piece. But today I was able to get something even better than that." In a familiar manner that was uniquely Mel, the tall woman grabbed Janice's hand to lead her into the yellow kitchen, where the high glass cabinets revealed their colorful Fiesta ware and a sparse supply of dry goods.

"Coffee!"

Janice was coming apart without her morning fix. Melinda liked coffee too, but she didn't mind drinking tea so that her partner could have the precious brew to herself. It pleased her immensely to make the smaller woman happy.

"Why don't you go change and I'll set the table?" Melinda offered. She had noticed soon after Janice started her work at the university the archaeologist's discomfort as she headed out each day, dressed in a simple A-line skirt, which she usually wore with a sweater, low-heeled pumps, and a calf-length overcoat. When she returned home in the early evening, she'd immediately swap her skirt for slacks, which were growing in popularity among women but not yet accepted in the workplace. Janice insisted that the problem with skirts was that they weren't warm enough—they were three blocks from the station for the Broadway Line, plenty of time to get chilled to the bone in this weather—but Melinda suspected it was more than that. Even before it had turned bitterly cold, the archaeologist seemed ill at ease any time she donned more feminine attire.

Moments later, the hungry blonde returned to the kitchen, now more comfortably dressed in slacks, dark socks, and men's lace-up shoes. When Mel offered to do their laundry every couple of weeks, she thought first to decline, nervous because her slacks and shirts bore labels from the boys department of a men's store. But if Melinda had found it peculiar, she'd never said a word. Janice was prepared to say that it was difficult to find her size in women's wear; she had a cover story for almost every contingency in her secret life. These days, Janice's secret life was so secret that even she had forgotten what it was like.

"How's the dissertation coming?"

"Pretty good. I sent what I had to my professor in South Carolina. I'll probably have to make a trip down there soon to talk with the committee about the next step." She scooped the seasoned mixture into a bowl and placed it on the table.

"What! You'd leave this lovely weather?"

"Very funny. I don't know how you Yankees stand it here."

"Eh, we just keep it that way so you guys won't get comfortable and stay."

"Well now that's mighty inhospitable of you, Dr. Covington. But I warned you already not to bet against me. You remember that?" The blue-eyed woman arched an intimidating brow.

"I do, Miss Pappas, and I took it to heart." She grinned at her partner, enjoying the friendly banter. "And I know that if I goad you enough, you'll stick around just to prove me wrong."

Janice's admission warmed her immensely. Melinda had worried a lot at first that she was imposing on her new friend, but she didn't really want to give up even a minute of their time together. They spent a lot of evenings working together on the scrolls, and it seemed as though Janice had put her personal life on hold. Jack came over from Hoboken to visit both of them a few times, but Janice never even mentioned any other friends, and she hadn't dated anyone at all.

On the other hand, Melinda didn't feel lonely herself. Jack had been persistent in asking her to go out with him, but each time, she declined. In fact, she was more than content with the company of the fascinating archaeologist.

"So did you finish that scroll about the Amazons?" Janice asked, cutting the small sausage into tiny morsels so it would last longer.

"Oh, I almost forgot! You'll never believe this! Guess who became an Amazon princess!"

"Come on, Mel. Why should it surprise me that Xena would lead a tribe of women warriors?"

"Because I'm not talking about Xena; I'm talking about Gabrielle!" she answered with a satisfied smirk. "You, my Yankee friend, are a descendant of royalty."

"Royalty?"

"That's right. It's a wonderful story. Just don't expect me to start calling you Queen Janice," she winked, "at least not in public."

The archaeologist blushed as her thoughts wandered....

After dinner, the women moved into the living room in front of the fireplace. It was here that the two had really gotten to know each other, unwinding at the end of the day with a cognac, and for Janice, a cigar. Melinda had scolded her friend at first for her foul habit, but relented to allow it inside their apartment when the weather turned cold.

Melinda lounged in one of two wingback chairs while her partner sat on the floor, her back against the other. Both stared quietly into the fire until the Southerner broke the companionable silence. "Did you always want to be an archaeologist, Janice?"

The blonde puffed thoughtfully on the cigar. "Yeah, I think I did. I mean, from the time I was about three-when my mom left-I followed Pop everywhere he went. He'd show me all the maps, and the books that made little passing references to Xena. I guess I got bitten the same way he did."

"But what if there hadn't been any stories in your family about Xena? Do you still think you'd have done this kind of work?"

Melinda's question was intriguing, not just because it made her have to think about her motivations, but because most of the women Janice knew didn't understand her interest in the ancient world, and didn't seem to want to.

"You know, I really like the hard work, when you fall into your bed at night knowing you've put in an honest day. And I like the part of it that's like a puzzle, where you have to figure things out and follow hunches. It's really fascinating to think that you're seeing the world through the eyes

of someone who lived two thousand years ago."

And I like that I can be myself when I'm on a dig. Far away from the judgment of others, Janice liked the woman she could be when she was in camp. The work pants, the lace-up boots, and the leather jacket were like a second skin, and she had worn her father's dusty brown fedora ever since the day he died at the Amazon site in northern Greece. Women who dressed like this in the States were ridiculed as bull dykes; they were denied access to prestigious jobs, and were shunned by those who could offer funding for her expeditions. Unless she played the game, all of her important work would be dismissed.

"I guess the real answer is that I always wanted to be just like my father," she answered honestly. "So I guess we have that in common, eh?"

Melinda continued to stare into the fire as though she hadn't heard her friend's remark.

"Mel?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about what you said." She took a sip of the Rémy Martin, still not making eye contact with Janice. "I never really wanted to be like my father."

"You're kidding, right? I mean, you learned ancient Greek, you've been all over the world on expeditions."

"It was different for me, Janice," she said wistfully. "Don't get me wrong; I really love this kind of work. But I studied the languages and went on the digs in spite of my father, not because of him."

The revelation stunned the archaeologist, and she waited patiently for Melinda to elaborate. But the explanation was not forthcoming. Reluctant to push her friend, they sat quietly gazing at the dying embers until finally the Southerner stood and announced that she was going to bed.

Janice paced the platform at Grand Central Station. Two weeks ago, she and Melinda had shared a long tight hug in this very spot, neither looking forward to their time apart. Janice relished the physical closeness of that embrace, mentally chastising herself for the feelings that were growing inside her every day. It wouldn't do to let her heart go there. Theirs was a partnership and a friendship, nothing more. Melinda would be horrified if she knew of her increasingly prurient thoughts.

But she was powerless to resist this growing attraction. Something had clicked inside her-and she would remember this for the rest of her life-the very moment Melinda had come into their dining

tent that first night after changing from her suit into clothes more befitting a dig site. The Southerner must have known they would think her silly for showing up in her stylish outfit; still, she wanted to look nice, and she was determined to be herself, irrespective of what others thought. Janice envied that conviction.

Over the last few months, the archaeologist had gotten a better look at who Melinda was. Obviously, she was kind, sweet, and smart. She was deceptively capable, not easily defeated when she set her mind to something. But Janice saw something else about the Southerner that set her apart from most of the people she had known. Melinda seemed to accept her just as she was: the men's clothes, the cigars, and the fact that she never dated or talked about men. Even though she hadn't exactly been open about herself, Janice had every reason to hope that her friend would be tolerant of her lifestyle-if she ever got up the nerve to say anything.

The Southerner was due back tonight on the eight o'clock train. It had been a lonely time at the Central Park West apartment, but the blonde had taken the opportunity to indulge in her secret life for the first time since they'd returned from Macedonia.

Janice created her secret life 12 years ago. That was the year Eileen Murphy had signed on as Harry's assistant at a dig in northeastern Italy. Janice was sixteen that summer, and found herself hopelessly drawn to the confident, intelligent, hard-working woman with whom she'd shared a tent. When Eileen returned to the States to marry her fiancé, Harry had written off Janice's despondency as simple loneliness. In truth, she had been heartbroken, aching so as she recognized the romantic and sexual feelings for what they were.

When she returned to New York to start college at NYU two years later, the young student quietly ventured into Greenwich Village, where rumor had it there was a club just for women. Such a place-if the rumors were true-might provide an enclave for understanding who she was and what she wanted out of life. TJ's was on 11th street-a smoky dive, replete with a bar, some tables, and a phonograph and small dance floor. There, she was befriended by TJ herself, the bar's masculine owner, and her more feminine partner Marge.

The archaeology student really envied TJ, who seemed to live much of her life without pretense. Not so, though, according to the bartender, who claimed instead that she lived the ultimate pretense. When she and Marge were out in public, she simply pretended to be a man. The masculine clothing, slickened hair with a man's hat, and the manly gait fooled practically everyone. Janice wanted to be free to be herself, and who she was was not a man. Though she felt more comfortable in men's attire, she was simply a woman who wanted the company of other women.

Little by little, Janice opened up to the pair, talking about the fears and doubts this sort of life invariably wrought. Gradually, she came to accept that this was who she was-she could no more change it than she could become a man.

It was great to see TJ and Marge again.

Dressed in her slacks and leather jacket, Janice tucked her hair up inside the fedora. Taking TJ's cue, she thought it was best if the casual observer on the subway simply

thought she was a man.

"So tell us more about this Melinda. Is she...?" TJ waggled her palm, the universal symbol for homosexuality.

"No! She's my business partner and my friend. Nothing more."

"But you wish it were more," Marge stated it as though it were an established fact.

"Where did you get that idea?" Janice was indignant.

"Just that the last time we saw you, you couldn't stop talking about the...what was it?"

"The Xena Scrolls," TJ supplied the words.

"Right. And now you've actually found them, but all you've been talking about tonight is your new partner from South Carolina. So what does she look like?"

Defeated, Janice caved. If she couldn't talk to TJ and Marge, who else was there? "She's gorgeous. She's tall, with the bluest eyes you ever saw, and the most beautiful long black hair. But it's not just how she looks." Janice took a sip of her beer, thinking about how Melinda had touched her in so many ways. "Melinda's really sweet and kind, and she's one of the smartest people I've ever met. She's got this quiet strength that's easy to underestimate. I've never really known anyone like her."

Marge nodded. That certainly sounded like love to her. "Have you told her about Donna?"

Janice grimaced and turned red at the mere mention of the woman's name. "No, I haven't. And thank you very much for making sure I didn't forget that particular humiliation."

She'd met Donna Walker at 22, during her graduate years at NYU. It started out like any other friendship, but soon, both women seemed to seek time alone together. One night after final exams in Janice's small apartment, they celebrated with a few beers and confessed their feelings to one another, culminating in what was for each their very first sexual experience. Both were thrilled to have found another to share this secret life, and soon after, they moved in together under the auspices of saving on expenses. Two years later, Janice begged the history major to come along with her to spend the summer on one of Harry's sites in Turkey, but she declined. When Janice returned, Donna's things were gone from their apartment.

"Maybe you should talk to her, Janice, at least let her know about this part of you. If she's as nice as you say she is, it shouldn't bother her," Marge coaxed. And if this Melinda were going to be upset by all of this, better it happen now than later, when Janice was too far gone on her.

"I don't know, Marge. What if it makes her all...I don't know...weird? It's just not worth it."

"But what if she feels the same way?"

Janice blinked. That thought was incomprehensible. "Trust me, she doesn't. She isn't like us."

It was surely best not to rock the boat. Melinda hadn't remarked at all about the men's clothing, and they'd never really talked much about their personal lives. Besides, since she and Melinda had moved in together, her secret life hadn't been all that important anyway.

Slowly, the train from the south Atlantic seaboard pulled into the station, and before Janice ever spotted her tall partner, she'd been scooped up again in a mighty hug, this one putting their last embrace to shame. "I can't believe how much I missed this place," Melinda gushed. It wasn't the place she'd missed, though. It was her friend.

"Then I'm happy to report that it missed you too," Janice teased, grasping one of the suitcases and three of the five hatboxes a porter had set beside her friend. "What's all this?"

"Well, you see, I figured the weather would be warming up soon, and I might want to get out and spend some time working at the museum and all."

"Uh, Mel...how do I break this to you? The museum does not require women to wear hats."

"Silly, a lady has to have a hat to go with her outfit," the tall woman admonished.

"I don't have hats for any of my outfits," Janice retorted, still teasing her friend. If Melinda had brought back a hundred hats, she'd have gladly carried them all back to the apartment they shared.

"Well someone with hair as pretty as yours should never cover their head," she answered back, immediately blushing at having said something so personal.

She thinks my hair is pretty? Janice too found herself blushing at the compliment. "Oh, you're just sweet talking me so I'll help you carry all these boxes." *Pretty good recovery*, she congratulated herself.

"So is it working?" *Pretty good recovery*, she congratulated herself.

Together, the women gathered the luggage, heading up the stairs and outside to a waiting taxi.

"Did you get a lot done on your dissertation?" Janice was impressed with the progress her friend was making in analyzing Gabrielle's syntax.

"Actually, it went better than I hoped. Of course, with Daddy gone now, no one else there really understands a word of the ancient Greek, so I could write gibberish if I wanted to," she chuckled. "But I got most of it approved. I just have to make a few revisions and go back in a month or so to defend it to my committee."

"Then I'll have to start calling you Dr. Pappas?"

"Why, I think I'd like that." A blue eye winked, and Janice nearly swooned.

The next few weeks passed quickly, especially for Melinda, who was working late into the night to finish her manuscript, and to type an extra copy. Over Janice's objections, she lugged the heavy Royal typewriter each night into a nook in the small kitchen to avoid keeping the archaeologist awake with the constant hammering on the keys.

"You need your sleep. You have to be sharp for your class," Melinda argued.

"And you're burning the candle at both ends, Mel. Look at you. All day you work on the translations; all night you're at the typewriter. I bet you never even ate lunch."

Melinda frowned and looked at her feet.

"Did you?"

"I didn't think about it." The Southerner waved her long arms in an empty gesture.

"Right, and pretty soon, you're going to get sick because you didn't take care of yourself," Janice scolded. "Now get your coat."

"But Janice, I need to finish-."

"No! You need to eat. We're going out, and I'm buying. So get your coat."

An hour later, Melinda was exceedingly glad that she had acquiesced. They'd walked several blocks to Alfredo's on 68th Street near the river, both ordering heaping plates of spaghetti with tomato sauce. The family-owned restaurant was a neighborhood favorite, its candlelight and red and white checkered tablecloths creating an atmosphere that was warm and cozy. Some might even call it romantic.

Both women were relaxed, now on their second bottle of Chianti.

"So then what happened?"

Melinda continued to giggle as she told the story. "So this other woman, this Princess Diana, came up to Gabrielle in the woods. Gabrielle, of course, thought it was Xena, and she couldn't figure out why she was acting so silly when the bad guy jumped them." The Southerner again dissolved into a fit of laughter.

"That's hilarious!" *God, this woman was beautiful when she laughed.* "And the whole time, the real Xena was in the castle."

"Right, and when she and Diana's true love-not her betrothed, but his brother Philaemon-were fighting the bad guys, Xena had to make Philaemon think he was the one beating everybody up!"

"Can you imagine how funny that would have been to actually see?"

Mel's hand stopped Janice from pouring more wine.

"I think I've had enough, thank you very much."

"You mean I have to drink the rest of this by myself?" Janice held up the last half bottle.

"That's right. Too bad for you that tomorrow isn't Saturday." Melinda knew that Janice relished sleeping in on the weekends.

"Just promise not to let me fall into a gutter on the way home," she grinned, pouring the last of the wine into her glass.

"Now don't I usually take good care of you, Janice?" She reached across the narrow table and took her partner's hand. The busy archaeologist seemed to need somebody to take care of her, and Melinda didn't mind it one bit. In fact, she enjoyed many of her everyday tasks-cooking, cleaning, and especially the translations-because she knew she was doing them for Janice as well as herself.

Janice looked down at the long graceful hand that covered her own. Before she could stop herself, she turned her hand over, trailing her fingers through the open palm in a sensual exchange. "Yes, and I like it very much," she answered, her voice just above a whisper.

Melinda was momentarily stunned by the action, but not because it was unwelcome. On the contrary, Janice's touch sent shivers up her arm and into her chest. Instinctively, she pulled her hand back, embarrassed at what she knew was an improper inference.

Janice, retreating also as though she'd been burned, was at once horrified at her own impulsive gesture. It was bad enough that she'd made a direct overture to the object of her desires. What was worse was Melinda's disgusted response. *What the hell do I do now?*

"And because you take such good care of me, I'm glad you let me bring you out for dinner for a change. But I think it's time we headed back home. I have a full day of work tomorrow." Janice slid out of the small booth and retrieved her coat. She would simply downplay the whole thing, acting as if it never occurred at all.

Melinda too stood and pulled on her coat. "And I thank you for dinner, Dr. Covington. And if I'm not too drunk-thanks to your plying me with three glasses of Italian wine-I believe I have some more typing to do tonight."

Together, the women walked home, chatting casually about the other scroll Melinda had been working on. Each hoped that the hand touching incident had actually received minimal notice by the other. However, nothing could be further from the truth, as both women silently pondered the exchange.

Janice's thoughts wandered to how familiar they had become with each other in the months they'd been living together. She always enjoyed the casual way Melinda touched her, taking her hand or arm to show her something in another room, or rubbing her hands and shoulders briskly to warm them when she came in from the cold. On those few occasions when they'd shared a hug, Janice knew that Melinda's affection was genuine. When they had walked to the restaurant this evening, Melinda had hooked their arms together, something they could do as friends, so long as they both wore skirts. But clearly, after her impulsive display, the translator was avoiding that closeness now.

Melinda's thoughts went too to the comfortable closeness they'd shared since returning from Macedonia, especially as they'd talk late into the night about the bond they could see growing between Xena and Gabrielle through their travels together. She had been pleasantly surprised to find that Janice was warm and approachable. When they first met, she couldn't imagine that the swashbuckling adventurer who had rescued her from the goons in Macedonia was the same woman who had gripped her hand so tightly as their plane lifted off from Lisbon on its way to Liverpool. From that point on, Melinda had felt welcome to offer the occasional hug, hand squeeze, or pat on the forearm. However, she was still confused about her own reaction to what had transpired in the restaurant. She wished she hadn't pulled her hand away, but it was too late to do anything about that now. And with Janice burrowing her hands into her pockets, her offer of an arm would probably be unwelcome.

In the days following what was silently referred to as the "hand touching incident" both women had grown inexplicably ill at ease in the other one's presence. They consciously avoided any physical contact at all, and couldn't even seem to find comfortable ground just to talk.

Janice was angry at herself for the slip. She mustn't drink again around Melinda-it was too risky.

Every day, it was growing more difficult to keep her feelings in check. Over and over she had reasoned that it was a simple friendly hand touch, and that she was getting herself worked up about nothing. Still, Melinda's withdrawal from her was unmistakable. It was probably only a matter of time before the Southerner decided to move out, especially now that their work together was almost finished. With that thought, her sullen mood dipped even lower.

Melinda was baffled at how something so little and seemingly innocuous could impact her feelings so much. Why had she reacted that way? And why did things seem so uncomfortable all of a sudden? Unable to reconcile this awkwardness with her still-strong feelings of affection toward her friend and partner, she just buried herself deeper into her work. She was due to leave Monday for South Carolina. This time, she would stay almost a month, first to defend her dissertation to the graduate school, then to receive her degree in April's commencement ceremonies. Hopefully, everything would be back to normal when she returned.

"I wish you could come with me this time." Melinda found her partner staring out the bay window at the driving rain that had ruined her plans to be out of the house all day.

The skeptical blonde read the invitation as the Southerner's usual politeness. If Jack the Ripper came to their home, Mel would ask him to stay for dinner.

"Thanks, Mel. But you know I have my class, and then I need to finish the documentation on the scrolls so the exhibit can open on time." The big event was now only two months away.

"I know, but I just wish...." She trailed off. It was unfair to pressure her partner, given that she had so much to do.

"What, Mel?" That came out more brusquely than she'd intended. "Really, what do you wish?" she asked, this time more gently.

Melinda sighed, slumping onto the sofa. "It's just that everyone there will have someone in the crowd waiting to hear their name called. I just wish that someone I cared about would be there too."

Someone you care about? Only moments ago in Janice's mind, the Southerner was packing to move out. "And you want me to come because I'm somebody you care about?"

Melinda nodded sadly.

"Then I'll come." She wasn't sure how she'd swing it, but she would.

"You will?"

"Yes, I will—at least for the graduation part. When a person works as hard as you have to accomplish something, she deserves to have someone she cares about see it." Janice really liked saying that. *Someone she cares about!*

Melinda's eyes grew wide with excitement. Janice is coming to South Carolina!

"I can't come with you, but I promise I'll be there for commencement. And I'll need to hurry right back," she warned.

"Janice! Are you serious? I'll be hurrying right back with you! We both have to get ready for the opening."

"And you'll be Dr. Pappas by then," Janice grinned.

"That's right, Dr. Covington and Dr. Pappas...."

"Discoverers of the Xena Scrolls!"

The awkwardness of the past week completely forgotten, Melinda leapt from the sofa and grabbed the archaeologist around the waist, twirling her twice before squeezing her hard in what was a very long and welcome hug. "Thank you, Janice. I can't tell you what it'll mean to me to have you there."

The women returned from South Carolina a month later with a singular focus: introducing the world to Xena the Warrior Princess. With Janice's classes over for the summer and Melinda now finished with her doctorate, the pair worked every day at the museum finalizing the details for the exhibit's opening. Their evenings were their own, and they easily slipped back into the familiar friendship. Sometimes, they meandered through Central Park on their way home. Other nights, like tonight, they'd just relax, dragging chairs to the bay window to watch the people walk by on the street below.

Now that the scrolls were officially translated, the women talked more about the nuances of the stories, observing that the growing relationship between the warrior and the bard had been the key to putting the tales in their proper order. The last story was the most dramatic, one in which it appeared that Gabrielle had actually died; but Xena had blown new breath into her lungs and jarred her back to consciousness.

"Wouldn't it be something to have that kind of adventure in our lives, Mel?"

"Well, I'm all for adventure, but if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not have to bring you back from the dead."

"Point taken. But wouldn't you love the chance to do something daring, something most people wouldn't even try?"

Melinda chuckled at her partner. "Sounds like you're getting restless, Dr. Covington. You tired of this easy life already?"

"Maybe a little. I mean I know that the teaching and the museum stuff is all part of archaeology too. But there's nothing in the world like turning the dirt until you find something nobody has seen in two thousand years. Or knowing that what you find might change the way we look at history."

Listening to Janice talk, Melinda acknowledged to herself that the archaeologist was just about the most intriguing person she'd ever known, but it wasn't just her interesting work or history of adventure. Everything about her was fascinating.

The small blonde was an enigma of sorts, friendly and engaging, but with no close friends. Melinda was confident though that Janice considered her a friend, as she freely gave her encouragement and praise, and even expressed gratitude for their friendship. In fact, the Southerner always felt pretty good about herself when she was around Janice, better than she'd ever felt.

"Too bad Europe isn't safe right now," Mel lamented, wishing they could just pick up and go again.

"Yeah, and there isn't much money out there for expeditions like ours. I'm surprised the museum sprang for this exhibit. But if the right people see what we found, who knows?"

"What do you mean 'the right people'?"

"You know, the rich people who like to see their names on a plaque, or over the door to a wing. It's very fashionable to be associated with art or historical things."

Mel knew too well who some of these people were. They had been her father's cronies, and recognition wasn't all they had wanted. She shuddered at the memory.

As they talked into the night, the apartment grew dark, and Janice finally got to the bottom of the story about Melinda's relationship with her father. When her mother died tragically in a car accident soon after Mel's fourteenth birthday, Melvin Pappas began grooming his daughter as his hostess for the university's visiting dignitaries. With Melinda's beautiful looks and southern charm, the dean hoped to find favor with the university's board of governors, and more importantly, to win funding for his archaeological expeditions.

It was on a dig in Egypt that Melinda finally lost all respect for the man. He had asked her to befriend the financier, Lewis Freeman, and later scolded her when Freeman complained that she wasn't being "friendly" enough. They'd had it out-long overdue, she thought-and she returned home immediately. Six months later, Melvin came home to South Carolina, consumed with a ravenous cancer that made his final three months a literal hell on earth. Melinda sat dutifully at his bedside until he drew his final breath. To this day, she had not shed a tear for her loss.

As the Southerner told the unbelievable tale, Janice found herself growing increasingly angry at the man she had long respected as a Nobel Prize-winning scholar, and for his collaboration with her father. Not many people cared to be associated with Harry Covington, the grave robber. Still, she couldn't imagine what kind of bastard would offer his own daughter's virtue to win favor with a financier, and she'd said so.

But Melinda had answered her outrage with the confession that her virtue hadn't exactly been at stake.

"Is that so?" Janice asked, trying to sound casual, though she was suddenly attacked by a violent wave of nausea. Not wanting at all to hear about the first person who had touched this wonderful woman, she was powerless to resist the voyeuristic allure.

"Yeah," Melinda answered, now with uncharacteristic shyness. "When I was nineteen, we had a guest at the university, Etienne Gerard."

"As in the French composer Etienne Gerard?" Janice interrupted.

"The same," Melinda nodded. "Anyway, he came to a party at our home and he was so handsome and sophisticated. He charmed me all evening, and then asked me to accompany him back to his hotel. I was...inexperienced in these matters. A woman at nineteen is easily fooled." The proud Southerner lowered her head in shame, more because she'd been so naïve than because she'd given over her virtue so willingly.

Janice sensed her friend's need for support, and reached across the space between their chairs to place a comforting hand on the woman's knee. Fear gripped her as she forced herself to ask the question. "Did he...take advantage of you?"

"No, he didn't...at least not in the way I think you mean. I was quite...willing. I just sort of got swept up by how romantic it was and all. It...sort of made me feel like a real woman, and there I was the next day, on cloud nine because someone as suave as Etienne Gerard had chosen me. And then that night after his concert at the university, he showed up at the chancellor's party with some blonde on his arm."

The archaeologist could hear the embarrassment in her friend's words. It was bad enough when your first experience ended in a relationship gone awry; it was unimaginable to learn that it hadn't been a relationship at all, but an exploitation. What was totally unfathomable to Janice was that anyone would not recognize the magnitude of such a gift from this gentle and trusting soul. As they sat there in the waning light, she realized her ache for the chance to show Melinda what real love was all about.

"So that's my story. Have you ever...you know?" Melinda asked. Surely, her worldly friend was much more confident and discriminating than she had been.

"I, uh..." *What the hell do I say to that?* She could simply tell her friend that she'd never been

with a man. Though it was the truth, it would still feel like a deception.

Noting the woman's hesitation, Melinda wished she hadn't asked such an intimate question of her friend, who was always so guarded about personal matters. "That's alright, Janice. You don't have to tell me. I understand."

"No, I...should. I want to." Without meeting her friend's gaze, Janice searched for the words, hoping desperately that she wouldn't regret sharing her most private self. "I was in love once. We lived together for two years here in New York while I was in school."

Melinda listened raptly, misreading Janice's apprehension as sadness, presumably because things had ended badly. As her friend had done only moments ago, she reached out and rested her hand just above the blonde woman's knee.

Janice focused on the grip, the feel of Melinda's fingers against her leg; it would be the true gauge of her friend's response.

"Her name was Donna, and she left me to marry a banker in Long Island."

Her name was Donna.... Melinda shuddered with emotion as it all became very clear. Janice wasn't an enigma at all. She was a lesbian, and she had hidden her very essence for months, in spite of the deep friendship they shared.

"I...should have told you sooner, Melinda." The tears were building, not for shame, but in anticipation of the rejection that was coming. "I'm sorry."

"Shhh, it's alright." Her long fingers squeezed Janice's thigh in a determined show of unwavering support. Melinda then left her chair to kneel beside her friend, gently wrapping her arms around the trembling shoulders.

Whimpers gave way to sobs, and Janice burrowed her face into the neck of her friend. They were tears of relief.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Chapter 3

"I feel ridiculous."

"Nonsense! You look fabulous."

Janice had squeezed into a brand new dark green satin dress, form-fitting to accentuate the curve of her hip, tapering to mid-calf to make her seem taller than her five feet, four inches. Melinda had worked on her straight blonde hair, sweeping it into a stunning French twist.

"Not me. If anyone looks fabulous, it's you!"

She was certainly right about that. Melinda's dress was deep red, similarly styled, but with an angular collar that showed off her slender neck and prominent collarbones.

In the week since their revealing talk, the women had drawn closer. Janice truly seemed more relaxed, while Mel-if it were possible-was even more polite and caring. She had prodded Janice to explain what it felt like to be in love.

"It's like...I don't know...you just want to spend every minute with that person. You want their opinion on everything. And you want to...well, you know...be close."

"Yeah, I guess I know," Melinda answered. But she didn't really. Being with Etienne Gerard sure hadn't been anything like that. And since they'd talked the other night, she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be "close" to another woman. Especially to a woman like Janice, who was pretty, and smart, and interesting....

"The best thing about love is that you don't choose it. It chooses you, and that's kind of...magical. And it just adds a glow to everything." Janice smiled. She really didn't think of Donna that way at all anymore, but it was impossible to discount the feelings that had been very real at one time.

"So I guess that's why so many people are waiting to fall in love. It hasn't chosen them yet." How on earth could a person stop loving somebody like Janice? It was certainly her loss, Melinda concluded, suddenly glad that Donna was no longer in her friend's life.

"Here, you need this." Melinda drew from her jewelry box a simple strand of pearls and draped them around her partner's neck. "I won't do another thing," she pleaded, hoping Janice would leave them in place.

"I feel like your dress-up doll," the archaeologist grouched.

"It's just for one night. I promise, we'll come straight home."

"Do I have to wear high heels?" she asked sheepishly.

"No, but your pumps could use a good polish."

That was a reasonable compromise, Janice thought. Tonight was the most important night of their professional partnership-the unveiling of the Xena Scrolls exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. First was the traditional cocktail party, then an introduction by the museum luminary who was hosting the event. Janice would say a few words-mostly thanking the museum

and Columbia University-and would introduce those individuals who had played a critical role in the discovery and preparation: Melinda Pappas, Warren Anderson, Mickey Davis, and all the way from Macedonia, antiquities authority Anton Gigov. Attendees would then be free to peruse the exhibit.

The evening was the pinnacle of their progress, a night that historians would be challenged to understand how a single woman warrior and her bard friend had so impacted ancient Greece. But it was another sort of pinnacle for Janice and Mel.

Tomorrow, they were officially out of work.

"Absolutely stunning! There just isn't another word for it!" Like the champagne, praise for the exhibit poured freely all evening. Janice and the entire crew basked warmly in the limelight, all hoping that their association with this successful debut would translate into a thirst for more. They were ready for their next quest-well, at least everyone but Warren Anderson. He'd had enough.

Janice and Mel had positioned themselves at separate points along the exhibit so they could field questions about the ancient parchments, enclosed in glass cases to protect them from humidity and the prying hands of curious museum-goers. The crowd had dwindled to just a couple of dozen patrons, most now talking among themselves. Melinda glanced across the room at her partner, who really looked beautiful, and seemed to be holding up well in her elegant attire. Just as the tall woman started to make her way to Janice's side, she was interrupted by two distinguished looking men and a stylish woman who appeared to be in her late forties.

"Good evening, Dr. Pappas. May we have a word with you please, in private?"

"Of course, but if it's about the scrolls, we really should invite Dr. Covington to join us."

"It actually isn't. Well, not directly, at least," the older gentleman explained. "Please allow me to make the introductions. I'm Dr. Simon Andrews, and this is my colleague, Dr. Franklin Hardwick. We're from the anthropology department of Boston University. And this is Mrs. Agatha Morehouse, the mother of one of our students."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Melinda replied, politely offering her hand to each.

"Dr. Pappas, we've had...an incident of sorts on one of our recent anthropological expeditions. About six months ago, Dr. Hardwick and two other men were injured and-"

"My daughter's missing," the woman interrupted. "She was taken by a group of savage women in

the jungle."

"Oh, my! I'm so sorry to hear that," the Southerner said, immediately taking the frantic woman's hands into her own. "But I'm afraid I don't understand how I can help."

"These women spoke Greek...ancient Greek," Hardwick explained. "Dr. Pappas, a young woman is missing, and probably in danger. We're mounting another expedition to the site along the Amazon River in South America. We'd like you to join us."

Melinda processed the key details: A group of women-savages, the girl's mother had called them-living in South America, speaking ancient Greek. They could only be.... No, that was impossible!

"Please," the mother pleaded. "If you could just go and talk to them. Find my daughter and bring her back."

"I'm going to lead the expedition myself this time," Andrews continued. "We're preparing to leave in three days. We really need you to go with us, please."

If her hunch was right, it was a mistake for Dr. Andrews to venture into the jungle. Though she didn't know how it could be, she was certain that the women were Amazons.

"I'll go, Dr. Andrews, but under one condition: Dr. Covington should lead the expedition."

"Why?" Hardwick was taken aback. "Dr. Covington is an archaeologist. We're not looking for relics here."

"No, Dr. Hardwick, but I'm willing to bet that the women you encountered were protecting their territory from men." Melinda led them excitedly to the tenth scroll, the story of Xena and Gabrielle's first encounter with the Amazons. "If they spoke Greek, chances are they're descended from the Amazons. And only women will be able to get close."

The professors read the translation carefully. As in the story, the women in South America had attacked their party from the trees. But Mrs. Morehouse wasn't convinced.

"If it's men they hate, why would they take my daughter?"

"That's just it," Melinda explained. "They would never have taken a man. Maybe they wanted her to join them. Or maybe they thought she was in danger. But either way, I'm pretty sure that they wouldn't hurt her."

"Oh, I hope you're right. Please say you'll go?"

Melinda looked at the professors for their answer.

"Dr. Pappas, do you think you can persuade Dr. Covington to go?"

Melinda smiled knowingly. "Once she hears this, I'm not sure I could persuade her not to."

The women spent the next three days hurriedly making the necessary preparations for their trip. Mrs. Morehouse had taken care of all of the travel arrangements, including two days by boat from Miami to Belém, Brazil, and a short-and for Janice Covington, terrifying-flight along the Amazon river to Lucienta, a small town in southeastern Colombia.

From there, the party drove another two hundred miles, until the road simply disappeared in the thick vegetation. In all, the trip from New York had taken seven days, but once at the jungle's edge, everyone was eager to forge ahead without rest.

"This is where we stayed the last night," Hardwick declared as the party spilled from the jungle into a small clearing. A pit that remained blackened from a campfire stood in the midst of a thick layer of lush ground covering.

"Then this will be our base camp," the archaeologist announced. "It probably isn't safe for the men to go any further."

Janice had put together a small recovery party, including Hardwick, who had mapped the trail to the site where Jennifer Morehouse was taken; Andrews, who as head of the anthropology department felt responsible to the girl's mother; and Mickey Davis, who Janice knew would work hard and follow orders. The missing student's mother was financing the mission, and had also insisted on coming along.

Agatha Morehouse had a toughness about her that could easily go unnoticed in a city environment. Melinda had learned that the woman's late father was an anthropologist as well, trekking with his family through east Africa in study of the agricultural tribes. Though she had married a wealthy man and lived in luxury for many years, her youth was not forgotten. Moving through the thick jungle over the last three days, all were tired from lugging their heavy packs, but Agatha had pulled her weight.

"So what's the plan?" Andrews asked, dropping his pack near the fire pit.

"Mel and I will head out first thing tomorrow, alone. The rest of you should wait here. If Hardwick's map is right, we'll move into the tribe's territory about noon. I'd say if we aren't back here in three days, you should head back the way we came." Why they might not return was left unsaid.

The group had gathered around to hear the simple instructions, dropping their respective packs in

a heap. Melinda felt a flutter of anticipation, even more than the constant excitement she had felt ever since they had left New York. Tomorrow, they would meet real living Amazons!

"So I think we should get the camp set up, get something to eat-"

"I'm going with you," Agatha interrupted. It was not a question.

Janice had expected this. "Mrs. Morehouse, I know you're worried about your daughter, but I think it's best if Melinda and I go alone. We just don't know what we're going to find."

"I'm not afraid of these savages, Dr. Covington. The only thing that truly frightens me is the idea of losing Jennifer. Since I lost my husband, my daughter is the only thing in the world that matters to me. Now I promise that I'll do exactly as you say, but I need this," she pleaded with determination. "Can you understand that?"

Janice tried to put herself in the anguished mother's position. She herself knew that she wouldn't take no for an answer had it been Melinda who was taken. The fact was she trusted Agatha Morehouse more than she trusted either of the two professors, who seemed more intent on revenge against the captors.

"Alright," she agreed. "But I need for you to understand something, all of you." Janice looked each team member in the eye as she continued. "From what Melinda and I have learned about the Amazons, they are not savages. They're territorial for their own preservation, and they distrust men. But they don't attack just for the sake of aggression. If we encounter them, we have to show them respect."

"Pardon my bluntness, Dr. Covington, but you weren't there," Hardwick interjected condescendingly. "Three of us-myself included-were injured by these women, and I assure you, it was completely unprovoked." That wasn't exactly true, he knew. Actually, they had panicked when they were confronted, and someone in their party had shot one of the warriors. This time, he and Andrews had brought along the firepower they would need to meet force with force.

"I'm not disputing that, Hardwick, but they must have felt threatened. We don't want things to escalate, so it's best if we approach them calmly, even if Mel and I have to surrender." Janice held Agatha's gaze until the woman nodded her agreement.

Only Mickey got a restful sleep that night, the others too excited about what the next day would bring. Janice and Mel talked quietly long into the night, planning how they would greet the warriors, and more importantly, how they would negotiate the release of Jennifer Morehouse.

Just after dawn, the three women slipped ahead into the jungle, carrying only a day's worth of supplies, hoping to be back in camp by day's end.

Unfortunately, the professors had other plans.

"No, you've got to believe me! Dr. Covington knows what she's doing," Mickey pleaded with the

two professors, who had tucked away two pistols each as they readied themselves to follow into the jungle.

"She might know her way around a dig site, son, but this is different," Andrews reasoned. "These women are dangerous."

"I tell you, Dr. Covington has dealt with dangerous people before. If she thought she needed a gun, she'd have taken one. Somebody's going to get hurt."

"Well, it isn't going to be one of us this time," Hardwick sneered. Angrily, he grabbed his supplies and stormed off in pursuit of the women.

"Listen, Mick," Andrews continued. "Like Covington said, if we're not back in three days, you need to turn back." With those final words, he too disappeared into the jungle.

"They're here," Melinda whispered, grabbing Janice's shoulder to halt her advance.

"How can you tell?" Agatha asked. She had neither seen nor heard a sign of the warriors in the jungle.

"I just can. Drop your pack...now!"

Immediately, all three women slid their small packs to the ground and assumed the position they had practiced. Feet apart, each clasped her hands high above her head and waited. In only moments, half a dozen of the women warriors descended on vines from high in the trees, encircling the threesome with authority.

"We mean you no harm," Melinda announced, invoking the ancient Greek dialect. For the longest moment, no one answered, and the translator feared that Hardwick was mistaken about the language of the tribe.

My god, these are real Amazons! The significance of the discovery of the ancient warriors in modern times was not lost on Janice. That they had preserved their culture for over two thousand years was miraculous.

The taller of the warriors moved to the front of the circle, now facing the three women. In her hand was a spear; the others were armed with knives.

"We're looking for Jennifer Morehouse," Melinda continued.

"Why do you seek our warrior?" the Amazon scout finally asked.

"Because her mother is with us, and she's worried for her safety."

"She is safe with us. She is an Amazon. Do you wish also to join our tribe?"

Join your tribe? "Is that what Jennifer has done? Has she joined your mighty tribe?" Pride was universal, Melinda reasoned.

"What's she saying, Mel?" Janice asked impatiently.

"Not now, Janice!"

"You will come to our village," the leader stated.

Cautiously, two of the warriors stepped forward to collect the packs that lay on the ground. Just as they did, a shot rang out as a bullet struck the canteen that dangled from the strap on Janice's pack.

"No!" Melinda screamed, jumping at once in front of group's leader. Another shot, and she fell hard against the warrior's chest, dragging her to the floor of the jungle as a crimson stain grew rapidly from her side.

"Hold your fire!" Janice turned and found her voice as the two professors burst through the jungle, pistols drawn. At that instant, a knife found its mark in Hardwick's shoulder and he slumped to the ground in pain. Before he could react, Andrews was kicked from behind and thrown face down.

Weapons now drawn and ready, the Amazons surrounded the two men, who grudgingly dropped their pistols to the ground.

"Melinda, tell them we surrender," Janice shouted. The order wasn't answered. "Melinda!"

"They've taken her," Agatha said. "The same way they took Jennifer. But I...I think she was shot."

Janice spun around in horror to find the still shaking green leaves dripping with blood. "Shot? Are you sure?"

Agatha nodded, her face an anguished mirror of Janice's.

Before any of them realized it, the warriors were gone, as quickly and as quietly as they had appeared. Hardwick moaned in agony as he carefully extricated the small knife from his shoulder, pressing a handkerchief against the wound. "So what do you think now, Dr. Covington? I told you they were savages."

In a flash, Janice was in his face, pushing him hard up against a tree. She might have to kill him. "You did this! I told you to stay put! You'd better hope to god Melinda's alright, or I'm going to hold you personally responsible," she growled.

"She's right, Hardwick," Andrews admitted. "This was our fault. We should have waited in camp." Sighing at his own bad judgment, the professor turned back to Janice. "So what do we do now?"

"Now all of you will go back to camp and wait. I'm going after Mel."

"And Jennifer?" Agatha pleaded.

Janice nodded grimly. "And Jennifer."

Janice left her pack and started into the jungle with only the small knife in hand. She would need it to slice through the thick vegetation. In only a few feet, the warriors' trail was gone. Still, she persevered along the map's course, knowing that she was getting deeper and deeper into Amazon territory. After four hours of driving through the dense jungle, she stopped to rest against a fallen log. She was so tired....

Seconds later, she stood again, miraculously rejuvenated from only a moment's rest. Looking about, the muscular blonde snagged a long vine and began a rapid ascent to the lower branches of jungle's canopy. She could make better time up here, not having to slash her way through the underbrush. Some skills, once learned, were never forgotten.

Stealthily, the Amazon queen moved through the trees, at last coming upon the small village. From her vantage point high above, she could see a half dozen huts of various sizes, one of which she presumed was that of the healer. She had her answer when a young woman emerged with a shallow pan of bloody cloths. The queen slid silently from the tree and boldly entered the bustling camp, getting almost as far as the healer's hut before she was stopped by several crossed spears.

"I'm Gabrielle, of the Greek Amazons. I want to see your queen," she announced in the ancient language, her dialect very close to their own.

Two guards emerged from the large central hut, and soon, a regal warrior stood before her. "I am Dreva, Queen of the New World Amazons. How is it that a Greek Amazon stands in our midst?"

"I am an ancient spirit traveler," Gabrielle explained, hoping that these modern day warriors continued to practice the rituals of their ancestors.

The queen studied the small woman before her. She was dressed in the clothing of the men who had threatened them. When their spirits traveled, so did their Amazon attire.

"From where has your spirit traveled?"

"I am from the ancient world, more than two thousand summers ago. I stand before you in the body of my descendant. She lives in these times, and has been sent to meet you," Gabrielle explained to the skeptical faces of Dreva and her tribe. "She and her colleagues are in search of a missing woman, a Jennifer Morehouse, your newest warrior. But first, I must ask to see the dark-haired woman. She is a descendant of Xena, the Warrior Princess of Amphipolis."

That certainly got their attention, as the warriors murmured the name amongst themselves.

"She is badly injured. Our healer has removed the fire rock, but she is taken with fever," Dreva explained.

"I want to see her."

The queen nodded, and the warriors dropped their spears, opening a path to the healer's hut.

Once inside, Gabrielle gestured for the other occupants to leave, taking a seat alongside the pallet where the injured woman lay. "Melinda? Melinda, can you hear me?"

The Southerner opened her eyes and tried to focus. She had been struggling to remain conscious, afraid that if she succumbed to sleep, she would never again wake up.

"You're hurt badly, but you'll be alright if you'll let us help."

Surely, she was dreaming. Janice was here beside her, but she was speaking ancient Greek. "Janice?" she asked weakly.

"It's Gabrielle. I'm sort of borrowing Janice for a while, like Xena borrowed you in Macedonia. Remember?"

Melinda nodded weakly.

"Listen, Melinda. You need to quit fighting so hard to stay awake. I want you to let Xena take over again. She heals very quickly, and you'll be better soon. Can you do that?" Gabrielle stroked the wet hair back from her forehead. "Can you just let go?"

"Yes...." Gabrielle had given her permission to sleep.

The blonde bent close to the bed, whispering a few final words to the feverish woman. In only moments, the tall woman relaxed, and the Warrior Princess took over, immediately beginning to heal.

The spirit queen emerged from the hut, confident now that the linguist would recover. "I want to see your newest warrior. Our descendants have come to take her home."

Queen Dreva stiffened, in both stature and resolve. "The warrior Jenna is an Amazon. This is her home now."

"If that is her choice, then I agree that this is her home. But if she is held against her will, it is right to release her to me."

Following a nod from the queen, a tall, powerfully-built woman with long red hair stepped forward. "I am Jenna, and this is now my home."

Gabrielle eyed the warrior with respect. "Come with me, please," she commanded. Gabrielle turned and walked back inside the healer's hut, falling to the floor in a heap, physically and emotionally drained. A sideways glance confirmed her hopes: Melinda looked better already.

Wow! Janice hadn't been fully cognizant, but she knew without a doubt that Gabrielle had come alive within her. She'd left behind a residual strength that truly surprised the already self-confident archaeologist. The Amazon queen had indeed been a force.

"I won't go back with you," the tall warrior stated adamantly, though in a language Janice didn't understand.

"Are you Jennifer Morehouse?" As she talked, Janice crawled to her friend's bedside.

"You speak English?"

"Yes, of course. Are you alright?"

The baffled warrior nodded. "Why wouldn't I be alright? I wasn't in the scouting party."

"I'm Janice Covington, and this is Melinda Pappas. The university sent us to find you." Gently, she brushed the back of her fingers against Melinda's cheek.

"So that bit about Gabrielle, the Greek Amazon, was just a trick?" The indignant warrior gripped her knife.

"No! I...was Gabrielle." That fact was simply overwhelming. "But she's gone now. I'm not even sure what all she said. Jennifer, your mother sent us."

The warrior's eyes grew large. "My mother is with you? Was she hurt?"

"No, she's fine. But she's worried about you. We were told you were taken by savages," Janice explained. "But I can see that isn't the case at all."

"Thank goodness you can see it. Obviously, no one else can."

"Tell me what happened."

"I was with the expedition, with Professor Hardwick and the others. When we entered the Amazon's territory, the scouting party came down from the trees and surrounded us. A couple of

the men in our group pulled guns, and one of the warriors was shot-Shona. I thought I could help her, so I went after them."

"Just like that? Weren't you scared?"

"I know I should have been. It's weird, but I wasn't. It's like I knew they wouldn't hurt me. And I was carrying the medical kit. So I followed them. It's a good thing I did, too. They'd never seen a bullet before, and didn't know that you have to take it out."

"Well, they certainly learn fast." Janice looked again at the sleeping woman. Lifting the blanket to check her wound, she blushed at the realization that Melinda was naked, and quickly dropped it back into place.

"Anyway, I helped them, and they gave me food, and a place to sleep. I've been learning how they live."

"So is this an anthropological exercise? You're living here to study them?"

"At first, that's what it was. But you wouldn't believe the way they live. They're strong, and they're so noble. Everybody in the village works for the good of the others. Everybody is accepted."

"How many Amazons are here?"

"About seventy-five. As near as I can tell, that's been pretty stable for about a hundred and twenty years."

Janice marveled again at the discovery of this isolated tribe.

"Look, Jennifer, you've studied anthropology. These women are speaking ancient Greek. That means they're probably direct descendants of Gabrielle's tribe. Surely you must realize how amazing this is."

"Believe me, I do. But it isn't a study for me anymore, Miss...."

"Call me Janice."

"Janice. Call me Jenna, please. It's my Amazon name. Look, this is my home now. I don't want to go back."

"Jenna, your mother isn't just going to go home and forget about you."

"Trust me, it's better this way."

"Now how is that possible? I've spent the last ten days listening to her talk about you. She put together this whole trip. She said you were the most important thing in the world to her."

The warrior sat dejectedly on the floor opposite the archaeologist.

"That's because she doesn't know who her daughter really is."

"What do you mean? Who are you, Jenna?"

"When I was in Boston, I was...like a prisoner. But here, I can be myself in a way no one back there understands. And here, it's normal."

"Normal? You mean...." Recognition dawned on the archaeologist. Jennifer Morehouse-Jenna now-was like her. And she'd come all the way to South America to be herself.

"Here I'm free to love who I want. And for me, it is my queen, Dreva."

"I understand, Jenna. Believe me, I do. And if you feel that you need to stay here, then you should. But you owe it to your mother to tell her why."

"Janice?"

The archaeologist luxuriated in the soft pelts. It must be the weekend; otherwise, her alarm would have already jarred her from sleep.

Lifting up the blanket on one side, Melinda peeked under the bandage at her injury. There was a dark red scar on her side where the bullet had entered, but the wound itself was now completely sealed with no sign of infection. Janice was lying next to her, a comforting hand and cheek on her shoulder...her naked shoulder. "Janice?"

Still mostly asleep, the blonde head lifted up and met the beautiful blue eyes of the Southerner. "Morning, Mel," she sighed, dropping her cheek again to cuddle. *Cuddle?*

Janice was...cuddling?

"Melinda!" Suddenly aware of her position, the archaeologist shot up, accidentally pulling with her the light blanket that covered the still-reclining translator. Staring right back at her were the two most perfect breasts she'd ever seen!

The best news for Janice was that without her glasses, Melinda couldn't actually see the dropping jaw and the wide green eyes. But the woman's red face was unmistakable, and the Southerner quickly brought her arms up to cover herself.

"Sorry," Janice mumbled, spreading the blanket back across her friend's chest. She'd try nonchalance. "Uh, how do you feel, Mel?"

"Much better, thank you. My wound is mostly healed, I think."

"You're kidding! Melinda, you were shot yesterday! You can't be healed already."

"But see, Xena kind of took over, and she heals real fast," she explained, lifting the blanket discreetly to show the wound. Melinda strained to remember everything. "And Janice, you were Gabrielle!"

"Yeah, so I heard." She smiled down at her partner. "And we're in an honest-to-god Amazon village, Mel. Not only that, I think they're descended from Gabrielle's tribe."

Janice went to the door of the hut and gestured for food. Returning, she took a seat cross-legged on a mat opposite her friend. "Jennifer isn't coming back with us. She says this is her new home, and that she's happy. She's, uh...also in love with the Amazon queen."

It was clear to Melinda that Janice approved of the student's decision to stay, and with that last bit of information, the Southerner understood completely as well. "What'll we tell her mother?"

"I've asked her to come back to camp with us, and to tell her mother herself. She's agreed, but we're not going anywhere until you're well."

"You're not going to believe this, but I think I'm practically well now."

The door opened and an Amazon entered with a tray of fruit and meat. Janice smiled her thanks as the warrior set the food on the floor between them.

"Janice, would you happen to know where my clothes are?"

The blonde woman blushed, recalling the earlier image that would now be forever emblazoned in her memory. The jury was still out on whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"I'll see," she answered, scrambling back to the door, where a warrior waited. Her purpose was either to serve them or to guard them-Janice wasn't sure which, but it didn't matter. They had brought food when she asked. Now she touched her shirt and pointed back inside, then her pants, again pointing back inside. The warrior immediately ran to another hut, returning with Melinda's freshly laundered clothes.

"This is a pretty nice hotel if you ask me," the blonde quipped. "I probably should have taken mine off and left them by the door last night." *And then we both would have been....* Turning her back, she nibbled on a banana while her friend dressed.

"Janice, we can't squander this opportunity. We need to learn as much as we can. If they're

descended from Gabrielle's tribe, it's possible they might even know where we could find more scrolls."

"Gosh, I bet you're right, Mel! They seemed to know who Xena was, so the stories have probably been passed down."

Eager to learn more, the women ate quickly and exited the hut. The tall woman walked gingerly, but was otherwise past her ordeal.

"May we see your queen?" Melinda asked in the ancient language.

The Amazon smiled to see the injured woman up and about. "Please, follow me."

For the first time, the women had the opportunity to look around the village. There were six large structures-including the healer's hut-facing the center of the village, and dozens of smaller huts on the perimeter.

"Look, Mel." Janice nodded in the direction of a sleek panther lazily stretching in the sun in front of the queen's hut.

"Oh, my! Isn't it beautiful!"

Queen Dreva and her entourage emerged from what appeared to be the dining hut, the evidence a plume of smoke rising from the back.

"Gabrielle. I see that your mate has recovered. "

Hearing the name, the archaeologist replied, "Uh, I'm Janice now."

Melinda quickly translated and explained Janice's words, but not those of the queen. "Queen Dreva, my name is Melinda Pappas, and I am ever so grateful for the care you've provided. And for the hospitality you've shown my *friend* and me." She emphasized the word that she felt best described her relationship to her partner. "We would like very much to hear all about your mighty tribe, and how you came to live in the jungle of the New World."

"And I look forward to telling our story. But please, let's go where we can be comfortable."

The small party followed a path through the jungle, stopping finally in a clearing alongside a deep blue pool. A regal chaise had been placed at the end of the clearing, the surrounding sand an inviting cushion for all others. Dreva took her seat, and one by one, the others followed suit. Janice smiled at Jenna, who remained standing behind her beloved queen.

Melinda and Janice listened raptly at the New World Amazons' fascinating tale. After a vicious battle in ancient Greece, the tribe dwindled to near extinction. To preserve their race, they chose to abandon their warrior ways, migrating in search of peaceful hunting grounds to the Ivory Coast of Africa. After almost two thousand years of peaceful coexistence with surrounding

tribes, many of the Amazons-along with other African tribes-were captured by slave traders and taken to the New World. When their ship wrecked in the Caribbean, the women escaped and quickly made their way into the jungle. Taking to the trees, they were able to outrun their captors, eventually settling deep in the jungle along the river that now bore their name. With cooperation from the families in other jungle villages, the Amazons had held steady at about four score warriors for over 200 years.

"Ask her about the scrolls, Mel," Janice prodded impatiently.

Melinda nodded and addressed the queen. "The ancient Amazon queen Gabrielle, my friend's ancestor, traveled with Xena the Warrior Princess, and wrote down her stories on scrolls. We discovered several of these scrolls near your ancient homeland, and believe there are many more."

"Scrolls? You mean parchments?" the queen asked, nodding to Jenna in a silent command. The warrior obediently departed.

"Yes, they were parchments," Melinda clarified.

"It was Queen Gabrielle who encouraged the Amazon tribes to record their history on parchments. To this day, we continue. In fact, we shall note your visit, and the spirit travel of our ancient queen," Dreva said reverently.

The partners' eyes grew wide when Jenna suddenly returned to stand beside her queen, delivering what was unmistakably a primitive scroll, profoundly similar to the ones they had found in the tomb.

"This parchment is one of our most treasured possessions, as it tells the story of the great Amazon battle." Dreva held out the parchment for inspection.

"Janice, look! It's Gabrielle's hand!"

"Queen Gabrielle led the battle against the evil Bellerophon, losing many warriors, but preserving the tribe from complete annihilation. The parchment is worn and faded, but it is one of only a few remembrances of our heritage. That it survived the Amazon trials of the ages is itself a miracle."

Melinda and Janice were awed by the appearance of the ancient scroll. That it too was clearly written by Gabrielle was all the encouragement they needed to continue their search.

Queen Dreva rolled up the parchment and extended it to their guests. "Melinda Pappas, I owe you a debt that I cannot repay. You saved my life when you protected me from the fire rock. The warrior Jenna has explained to me your desire to introduce the world to the history of Xena the Warrior Princess. To show my thanks, and to ensure the history of the Amazons is not lost to the world, I would like to offer this scroll to you, so that you might also honor Gabrielle, the great Amazon queen."

"Janice, she's giving us the scroll!" Melinda was almost overcome with the significance of the gift. "She wants us to tell the world about Gabrielle, just like we're telling them about Xena."

"Tell her, Mel. Tell her how proud we'll be to do that."

"I think you should wait here. Mel and I will go on ahead to the camp and bring your mother back here, where you can talk alone."

Jenna nodded anxiously. She hoped these women were right about her mom. But if they weren't it wouldn't make any difference. She was going back into the jungle.

The professors kept a wide berth of the two returning women, Andrews feeling as though he'd caused enough trouble, and Hardwick still concerned about Covington's threat.

The older woman's face fell as she realized that her daughter was not with them. Without a word to the others, Janice deposited Mel in the small tent to rest, and took Agatha's arm, leading her from the camp back into the jungle.

An hour later, the exhausted archaeologist crawled into the tent, stretching out on her blanket alongside the translator. "You feeling okay?"

Melinda nodded. "I'm good, but I'm tired. It's really amazing how fast Xena could heal, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but we shouldn't be surprised. Gabrielle wrote about it in the scrolls."

Gabrielle. Melinda almost couldn't believe that she'd actually met the bard, if only briefly. She'd never forget her whispered words as she lingered on the brink of sleep.

"So what do you think will happen with Agatha and Jenna?"

"I don't know. They sure were glad to see each other. I guess it's going to depend on what kind of person Agatha is, because Jenna isn't going to change," Janice stated with conviction.

Melinda understood where her partner was coming from, and rolled onto her side to face the woman. "Nor should she have to."

Janice smiled warmly. She could not have asked for a better, more understanding friend. And with every day that passed, her heart longed for it to be more.

"This sure has been an amazing expedition, Melinda. Gabrielle and Xena both appeared, we met modern day Amazons, and they're descended from the very ones we've already studied. Do you realize that this means there are probably even more scrolls in Africa!"

"Are you already planning our next trip?"

"Well, that depends. Will you be coming along, Dr. Pappas? Because it just wouldn't be any fun without you." She winked at the Southerner, who was warmed to her bones.

Chapter 4

The women had been back in New York for almost a month, still basking in the recent success of their museum exhibit and South American rescue mission. Though they had returned without Jennifer Morehouse, her mother was satisfied that she was both safe and happy. And the university was off the hook for losing a student on an anthropological outing.

Despite their accomplishments, Janice found herself growing sadder by the day. She and Mel had talked at length about using the money from the sale of Mel's South Carolina home to field their own search for scrolls in Africa, but such self-funded expeditions were much less accepted, the findings often disputed as not credible. So here she was, stuck in New York, out of work, and on top of everything else, a prisoner of unrequited love.

"Janice, how would you like to-?" Melinda eyed the archaeologist, dressed tonight in her slacks and men's shoes, her hair tucked up under the fedora. "You're going out?"

Janice nodded, unable to meet her partner's eye. "I thought I'd go to TJ's. You know, see some friends, have a few beers, maybe...I don't know, talk with somebody...or something." She had told Melinda a while back all about the club down in the Village.

"I see." Panic gripped the tall woman as she realized what her friend was saying. The "or something" part had her especially worried. Janice was hoping for a romantic encounter, which meant.... "Well, then...I suppose I should tell you to have a nice time." Her icy tone, however, did not convey that sentiment.

Janice was taken aback by the response; it was clear that Melinda wasn't happy about her going out. So it was alright for her to be a lesbian, as long as she didn't act like one. Well that was too bad. If Melinda couldn't handle seeing who Janice really was, then maybe it was best for them to go their separate ways.

Even as that thought entered her head, it sickened her, and Janice almost changed her mind about going to the Village. "Look, maybe I won't...." *Idiot!* "I won't be out late. This way, you can

have a little peace and quiet for a change to read or listen to the radio."

Melinda nodded, but without conviction. She didn't want peace and quiet; she wanted to be with Janice.

"Have you given any thought at all to just coming right out with it?" Marge sat across from the solemn blonde in a high-backed booth. Janice wasn't here to have a good time; she was here to drown her sorrows.

"That's ridiculous! She doesn't feel that way," Janice groaned.

"How do you know?"

"Because I think the whole idea of me being a lesbian just makes her...I don't know, uncomfortable; like it's okay and all, but deep down she wishes I wasn't. I could tell tonight that she was annoyed with me for even wanting to come down here."

"And you assume that's because she disapproves. What if she was just upset because you didn't ask her to come too?"

Janice waved that suggestion off. "That's just ludicrous."

"You keep saying that, but what if she's sitting at home right now wondering why you aren't interested in her?" Marge looked up to see a new face enter the bar, a beautiful woman, tall and feminine. "Look, I'm going to go see if TJ needs a hand. You should think about what I said, my friend."

Janice stared at her near empty mug. *What am I doing here? I should just go home.* A simple night at home with Mel as her friend was worth more than any possibility that loomed in a place like this. She was barely aware of a figure sliding into the booth on the other side.

As soon as the blonde woman had walked out of the apartment tonight, Melinda began pacing, knowing it was time to face her fears. Janice wasn't going to wait while she slowly eased herself into this. Hopefully, Gabrielle had been right...or the Southerner would leave here with a brand new Most Humiliating Night of Her Life.

"Janice?"

Startled by the familiar voice, the blonde woman looked up. "Mel?" Now this was confusing. "Is everything alright?" If Melinda didn't answer, it was undoubtedly because Janice was now

imagining things.

"Everything's fine, Janice." *Except that my heart's about to jump out of my chest.*

Janice's first thought was that Melinda had come to tell her that she shouldn't be in a place like this. "So...."

"Look, I'm sorry I was so...snippy about you leaving tonight. I was...it's just...well, I was sort of hurt that you didn't ask me to come with you and all. I mean, we seem to enjoy the other things we do," she explained nervously. "When we're together, that is."

"So you wanted to come here with me?"

Melinda nodded, still anxious about how Janice might react to what she needed to say.

"I was thinking about what you told me about this place, how women met each other here and talked...and danced together. It sounded like a place you'd go if you were looking for...romance." Melinda reached across the dark table and took the smaller woman's hands, nervously rubbing her thumbs across the top. "And that's why I followed you here...because I was hoping that I might find...romance."

Janice gulped, not yet letting herself completely believe this was happening. "Romance?"

"That's right. But only with you, Janice Covington. I want romance only with you."

The feel of Melinda's hands around hers, the waiting blue eyes across the table, and the word "romance" all swirled around the darkened table, finally settling into Janice's consciousness.

"But I thought...."

"Do you want romance with me, Janice?" Melinda really needed an answer soon.

"God, Melinda. I want that more than anything," the blonde finally gushed, grinning stupidly.

The Southerner smiled in return, turning her hands underneath the smaller pair to trail her fingers through the open palms. Gabrielle's whispered words came back to her.

"You should trust what your heart told you in the tomb, Melinda. You and Janice belong together."

Melinda had been overwhelmed by the sensations in Macedonia. At first, she'd rationalized it as Xena being protective of her companion; but when the feelings persisted long after the

archaeologist was no longer in danger, she knew they were her own and not those of the ancient warrior. Before they ever reached New York, Melinda Pappas found herself drawn to Janice Covington, just the way she always thought she would feel when she someday fell in love. Had the ancient bard not given her the push, she might never have found the nerve to act on her desires.

"Melinda, are you sure about this? Two women together...it's not a very easy life."

"It doesn't matter, Janice. Like you said, I haven't chosen this; it's chosen me. And what I feel about you is magical."

Janice couldn't believe that her dreams were coming true. Melinda Pappas was feeling the very same magic that she felt. "So you want romance, do you?"

The Southerner nodded.

"Will you...dance with me, Mel?" Tossing the fedora onto the table, Janice stood.

Melinda took the offered hand and followed the blonde woman to the small dance floor, folding smoothly into their first romantic embrace. "I like this, how you feel next to me," she murmured, drawing close enough to mold their bodies together as they swayed to the soft ballad.

Janice sighed dreamily. "You have no idea what you do to me, Dr. Pappas."

"That's where you're wrong, Dr. Covington. I have every idea."

The Southerner woke to find herself buried beneath her new lover, long blonde hair splayed across her naked breasts. Both were drenched in sweat, as their cries of pleasure in the night had made it necessary to reach above the bed and close the window, despite the summer heat.

What an incredible night it had been! Their first kiss-a mutual melting the moment they had entered the privacy of their apartment-signaled the fiery night of passion that would follow. In fact, the women had hardly broken physical contact since the moment Melinda had reached across the table at TJ's, their hands, mouths and bodies staking claim to every inch of the other.

Janice had pulled from her a series of heated explosions, joyous sensations that were previously unknown. In turn, she had followed her partner's lead, bringing Janice to climax again and again. *Why on earth had they waited so long to do this?*

The small body stirred against her, triggering an automatic tightening of Melinda's long arms

around her lover's back. Delivering a kiss to the blonde crown, Melinda whispered again the words she'd spoken the night before when her lover had entered her for the first time. "I never knew love could be like this, Janice."

"At least we're going to find out what this is all about," Melinda said as the women walked nervously to the executive offices on the second floor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The summons to a private meeting with the museum's director had come out of the blue, a full three months after the Xena Scrolls exhibit had debuted.

"Why do I feel like we're being led to the gallows?" Janice asked grimly.

Ever since the letter from Hardin Winslow, Esq. had arrived by courier last week, they'd speculated about the possibilities. Why would a lawyer be involved in their dealings with the museum...unless, of course, they were about to be sued for something? *But what?*

Janice approached the receptionist, a woman she'd met a few times in the course of her work at the museum. "Hello, Mrs. Malvern? You may not remember me, but-."

"Dr. Covington! Of course, I remember you. I was so glad to see your name on the schedule today." She was suspiciously enthusiastic, Janice thought. "And Dr. Pappas. It's so good to see you both."

Without hesitation, the partners were led into the museum executive's formal office, where director Arthur Kerrigan waited with an older man, presumably the attorney. From the look on Kerrigan's face, he too was in the dark about the nature of this meeting.

"Good afternoon, ladies. Thank you for coming." The director's tone was serious. "Dr. Covington, Dr. Pappas, this is Hardin Winslow."

Janice and Melinda both shook the balding man's hand and settled together on a davenport, across from where the men had each taken a wingback chair.

"Thank you very much for meeting me today. I have brought three letters from my client; one for you, Mr. Kerrigan, one for Drs. Covington and Pappas, and one for myself. I have no more idea than either of you as to the nature of these letters, but my client's wish is to have them opened and read simultaneously." Winslow distributed the letters and resumed his seat. "So if all parties are ready...."

With trepidation, the mysterious letters were opened, and the four recipients began to read.

Dear Dr. Covington and Dr. Pappas,

The gentleman who has delivered these documents to you and Mr. Kerrigan is my longtime attorney, Hardin Winslow. In a few moments, he will faint and fall from his chair as he reads what I have done.

In the months since I've returned from the Brazilian jungle, I have thought often of the two of you, and your brave hand in the mission to find my daughter. I am in awe of your quest for knowledge, and especially for the hunger you have shown for the story of your ancestors. It is my wish that you should fulfill that longing.

Your courage and character led me to the one thing in my life that has meaning, and Boston is a very lonely place without her. I have decided to return to Brazil, where I will live out my years among the Amazons, alongside my daughter and-perhaps someday-my granddaughters.

As I will not have use for the estate of my late husband...

Across from where the women sat on the davenport, Winslow hit the floor, out cold.

...I have asked that the entire fortune be liquidated. After my own estate is settled, the balance-approximately 1.2 million dollars-is to be delivered to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the expressed purpose of funding your search for more of the Xena Scrolls. Hopefully, they will also reveal more about the history of the Amazons. I wish you many years of adventure and success, and encourage you to pay us a visit again someday to our village deep in the jungle.

Sincerely,

Agatha S. Morehouse

"It appears we're going to Africa, Dr. Pappas."

"Indeed it does, Dr. Covington. I suppose we should go home and get your hat."

Janice stood, offering her hand to a smiling Arthur Kerrigan. "Will you, uh...?" She gestured to the crumpled man on the floor.

"Oh, don't worry about him. I'm sure he'll come to in a few minutes. Ladies, let me say on behalf of the museum that we're looking forward to another historic display."

"So are we, Mr. Kerrigan. So are we."

The End.

Thanks for reading. Drop me a note if you want. Feedback is always welcome:

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And while you're at it, a quick note of thanks to the webmaster who hosted it would be nice, too.

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